

Balance and privilege

By [Peter W. Marty](#)

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You can tell a lot about people by what they hang on their walls. If it's someone with an office, it gets even more interesting. In my office at the church I serve, I do not have any diplomas hanging. No awards. No trophies or medals either—not that I ever won any. Not even my ordination certificate is on the wall. I figure that if I or anyone else has to look at some framed document to see or remember my orders before God, I'm in trouble.

Among some interesting pictures and sculptures—you'll have to see them sometime—I have a construction level mounted on the wall. It's actually very precious to me. A contractor in my congregation named Rudy gave it to me as a symbol of the need to keep life in balance. He knows I have enjoyed construction in the past. So here is this Stanley level from the 1880s, crafted of beautiful cherry wood and brass. There is also, of course, the little bubble inside, which keeps reminding me that I mounted it about 1/8 inch off level.

I can't be the only one needing balance in my life. Every day something is out of whack in every soul's scheduling or decision-making. It has to be, given life's many pressures. This 24-inch chunk of lumber on my wall is my daily conscience check.

Reflecting on this week's Old Testament reading makes me look at this level with new eyes. I am beginning to think it is staring me in the face not just to highlight my many challenges to the balanced life. (My wife would be happy to point those out to you.) My level from Rudy is also staring at me to point out the dreadful imbalance that exists between the privilege of my own life and the struggling needs of others. Its gorgeous cherry is tipped in my favor and against the favor of so many people who get stepped on by my way of life. And this gap is a lot more than 1/8 inch.

Amos spoke of scales weighted in favor of the well-to-do and of God holding a plumb line to measure crooked lives. I have this level on my wall telling me to get inside

the skin of those harmed by my privileged life. I am an unwitting participant in far too much systemic injustice, more than I'd like to believe. Every system, societal practice, purchase and piece of legislation that benefits me at the expense of the dignity of some other human being is wrong.

I remember Tim Wise once saying that there are a whole lot of us who were born on third base yet think we hit a triple. That's good. Maybe next week I'll have to put up a picture of a baseball diamond, right next to Rudy's level. There is space on the wall.

Additional lectionary columns by Marty appear in the July 13 issue of the Century —click [here](#) to subscribe.