

Life with Daddy

By Katherine England

This essay was given at Eugene England's memorial service held at the Provo Tabernacle on 25 August 2001. It was published in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published following the passing of Eugene England.

Originally published: *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 21–24.

ALTHOUGH I AM convinced Daddy loved me best, I have five siblings who are equally convinced they are Daddy's favorite. So I am honored to represent my four sisters and brother today as we remember life with Daddy.

One of my earliest memories of my father was when I was about five. We were visiting his parents in Salt Lake City, and my siblings and I were trying to sleep in the dark basement bedrooms. But I could hear loud voices through the ceiling above me. They were raised voices, and opinionated. Adults in intense discussion can sound scary to a child. From the voice intonations and decibel levels, I was sure everybody was angry with one another. Shortly, I heard laughter, and, comforted, I fell asleep. In the morning, there seemed to be no anger between my parents and grandparents. It was my first experience with something that would be common in our family—passionate discussion without harboring bad feelings. When we moved to Palo Alto, my siblings and I would sit on the stairs listening to my parents' weekly study group. Again I heard animated voices, shared ideas, testimonies, insights, and opinions. As we grew, we children became part of this powerful dialogue. Sunday dinners became litmus tests for potential boyfriends or girlfriends. Some of our guests felt empowered by the discussions and joined in. Others ran away. We married the ones who stayed. To this day, a heated, open, and spirited discussion is my favorite form of exercise.

But I'm jumping ahead. Childhood with Daddy was unique. Yes, we went to Disneyland—once. Living in Palo Alto in the '60s, however, provided ample opportunities for even more amazing field trips on which Daddy taught us the importance of love, compassion, and human kindness. We visited museums, were pulled from school to participate in peace marches and moratoriums. My baptism gift was not the *Monkees* album I had asked for but a trip to San Francisco to see Nureyev in a ballet. We visited national parks and made countless trips across the hot Nevada desert to Utah for general conference and to visit family. We never stayed in motels. Dad would drive late into the night and then pull into a small town such as Winnemucca where we would sleep in the town park until the sprinklers came on early in the morning or the police woke us up with flashlights, or we would sleep at a rest stop. One time, we woke to find ourselves in a cemetery.

Daddy embraced what the '60s offered. Like many others in his generation, he felt liberated and challenged by the decade. I remember Daddy pulling me out of

school once to drive up to San Francisco to take food to the American Indians who were occupying Alcatraz in protest of broken treaties. Daddy loved listening to the Beatles, Joan Baez, and Simon & Garfunkel. He also loved Nat King Cole, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and opera.

Our father taught us all to fish. We spent endless, sunburned hours on a boat, bait fishing at Strawberry Reservoir. Later, Daddy embraced the higher art of fly fishing. A few years ago, he began to teach each of his grandchildren how to fly fish by taking them to a magic fishing spot called Monte Cristo. Fishing was an intimate activity we all shared with him. I can still hear Daddy instructing me: “ten o’clock, two o’clock. . . .”

Favorite bedtime stories Daddy told us were about the gallant Sir Gawain, who beheads the Green Knight, or the heroic Beowulf, who fearlessly chops off the monster Grendel’s arm. Thanks to Daddy, we had great nightmares! We heard story versions of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, as well as stories of growing up on a farm in Idaho and running the combine with Grandpa.

Even while he worked on his doctorate, served in the university ward bishopric, and started *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Daddy found time for us. My sister Becky remembers that she never felt Daddy wasn’t there for us or with us. He was big to us. He always knew the answer, challenged us with important questions, had a story, or was ready to delight us with an adventure. Jane remembers getting strength from his wisdom, grace, humor, and patience.

His view of the world has inspired us as we’ve grown up to take on the world as adults. Four of us six served missions. We have chosen lifestyles and jobs that embrace the humanities we were raised to love. We have become artists, editors, writers, community and global activists, and teachers. We have married good people in the temple. But even as adults, we experienced Daddy as larger-than-life and let him lead us on adventure after adventure. We knew that if we stuck with Dad, something extraordinary was bound to happen. From witnessing the assassination attempt on the Pope’s life, to meeting the Polish ambassador when he thanked Daddy for his Food for Poland campaign, to sneaking vodka to the box office manager of the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow as thanks for getting us tickets to a sold-out performance, to walking backwards into the exit of a sold-out Picasso exhibit in Venice, to finagling the best seats to the best theaters in London, Daddy always seemed to be front and center to what was happening—on stage or in the world.

Daddy was like that in his life; he didn’t hold back—he was a full participant. He loved his life. I am convinced he woke up every morning and thought, “I am the luckiest man alive,” and then he went out and did amazing and extraordinary things that most of us only dream about. Some of us don’t even dare to dream a life as full and amazing as his. There was nothing he set out to do that he didn’t do. And he never complained. He never said, “I’m too tired,” “I’m frustrated,” or “I can’t do that.” He just did it all and loved every minute of it.

Living a powerful life has its rewards, but there are also drawbacks. Often there were unkind or untrue rumors or stones spread about Daddy. Once, we even got a brick thrown through our front window. But the payoffs, the payoffs for Daddy and those he influenced, were incredible. Daddy changed lives. That’s what I heard most when people first heard he was my father: “Your father changed my life.” What an honor, what a compliment—to change a life! Something he said in a lecture, a conversation, a Sunday School class, or an essay had helped them to understand

God or their religion in a way that inspired them, moved them to action. A woman in my parents' ward told me the other day that after a lesson Daddy had taught ten years ago, she volunteered the next day to make and deliver twenty-five lunches every Monday to homeless people. Some even said he had "saved" their lives.

I KNOW FEW people who lived their religion more honestly than Daddy did. Not only was he committed to following the rules of his religion—and he testified profoundly of its doctrines—but he really lived a life of forgiveness, love, peace, and absolute integrity. My most valuable lessons on the pure love of Christ came not from his lectures and writings but from watching Daddy interact with people every day. He truly loved everybody, even people who didn't like him. And people responded in kind. We received a call this week from John, an English Muslim who rents rooms to Gene once a year for study abroad. When he heard of my father's death, he wept and called him a brother. About a month ago, we received a letter from a husband thanking Daddy for having influenced his wife in her poetry several years ago when she had been a student. Now a published poet in *BYU Studies*, this woman was sure my father was too busy to read a letter from her, but the husband was so moved by the way poetry gave his wife joy that he had to write to express gratitude for his influence. We have dozens of letters from parents whose children had been transformed by a semester of study abroad with our father.

Daddy was a peacemaker. If he ever had a conflict with somebody, his first reaction was always to look immediately at himself to see what might be adjusted to bring about a meeting of the minds. He didn't spend his life proving he was right. He simply started a dialogue and learned from whomever he was conversing with. Even when Daddy was forced to leave BYU after twenty-one years of dedicated, faithful teaching, he chose not to be bitter. Several of us closest to my dad, however, resented those who had shoved him out or given him grief while there. We badmouthed those we saw as his enemies. He tolerated our gripe sessions, but he never joined them or added fuel to the fire. Some of us even believed that our father must have held some hidden resentment, and we blamed last year's mysterious depression on this suppressed anger. How wrong we were! Finally, we realized our dad had truly forgiven those who had wronged him. He chose to accept their rejection of him rather than fight it. Inspired by Lowell Bennion's example when he had been dismissed from the University of Utah's Institute of Religion, Daddy moved on with his life and created a new space for himself at Utah Valley State College where he could once again make a difference.

Daddy loved the humanities. I think he believed that literature was how God best spoke with his children. Dad intertwined his love of the gospel with his love of literature. He quoted Melville and Shakespeare in his Gospel Doctrine class and cited the Book of Mormon in his literature class. To him, it was all the word of God.

NOW, I THINK it is important to do what is innately a child's right and responsibility—to point out a parent's shortcomings. There are many misconceptions of Daddy that we children feel should be set straight. For example, many people think Eugene England was an academic, when in reality, he was a sports junkie. He would call from a plane in flight to ask my cousin Loretta to tape the Wimbledon Finals so he wouldn't miss them. He would record San Francisco 49er games and make his poor sons-in-law watch them over and over with him. He'd get just as

excited at every play as if it were the first time he'd seen it.

Some people think he was an intelligent man, even a genius. Here are a few moments, indelibly recorded in the Book of Life, which we now include as evidence to the contrary:

- “Hey, we can wire this house ourselves. Look, I bought a book that can teach us everything!”
- To a new son-in-law: “Of course we can make it over Squaw Peak in a couple of hours. We’ll be back in time for dinner.” (My husband and brothers-in-law fell for that one only once.)
- “Yeah, it’s muddy, but I think the moving van will make it.”
- “It’s 6 a.m. Time for scripture study!”
- Here’s a zinger: “Bishops of singles wards should be empowered to match members of the ward together in what would be good couples for marriage.”

And worst of all were his insights on the men that Daddy thought his daughters should be interested in dating! I’ll spare you the grisly details.

Much of the credit for Daddy’s seemingly amazing ability to get things done really belongs to those who responded to his repeated requests—dare we say, “badgering”? We’d feel great about coming through on some essential assignment, only to find out that we had really just been part of his redundancy plan—he had entrusted several of us with the same task, only to eventually do the job himself.

By far, the biggest misconception about Daddy was that he was at odds with or critical of the Church. In many ways, our family was about as orthodox as they come. We faithfully had Family Home Evening every Monday, scripture reading every morning, long family prayers—on our knees—morning and evening. And we never shopped or traveled on Sunday. We never heard Daddy swear or even raise his voice in anger. He spent his life serving the Church and the people in it.

Never, never in my entire life, even in intimate discussions, did I ever hear him say a single unkind, critical, or derogatory remark about any Church leader—or any person ever. Many people looked up to my father, but he never looked down on anyone.

DADDY TAUGHT, LOVED, learned, and enjoyed life. Then he got sick. About a year ago, he began to be depressed. We were all alarmed. Daddy had never been depressed before. He slept a lot. He lost weight. He sought help everywhere he could to fight this strange feeling. He became more and more intimate in his conversations and teaching. He was a little raw. It was confusing to those who knew and loved him. He wasn’t as funny, nor did he take the same joy in things as before. Robert Kirby articles that would usually have had him on the floor laughing brought only a smile.

When our father collapsed in February and neurosurgeons removed the tumor and cysts from his brain, we hoped the cancer was gone, since the doctors could find no primary source for it. Daddy then got better, then worse, then better. We hoped, and Mom tried everything. Jennifer and Jane moved home to help care for him, and Jody, Mark, and Rebecca came often to help. Daddy was massaged, washed, blessed, fed, read to, sung to, touched, caressed, and loved as much as a human being can possibly be loved. He made friends with the nurses and physical therapists, remembered their names, always thanked them for their care. He was

gracious, kind, and uncomplaining. He turned to Mom for everything, and, as always in our lives, we learned from him, and it was an honor to serve him.

The last week of his life was almost surreal. We orbited through the house silently, picking at food that had been left by concerned neighbors and friends. I will never forget Mary Bradford coming and crawling up on the bed and covering my father's unresponsive face with kisses and crying, "Oh, my eternal brother." Daddy's good friend Doug Thayer visited daily. Flowers and notes were left on the doorstep, as if by elves. As my father lost his ability to speak, Jane read almost all of Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety* to him. Unwilling to leave his presence, we slept on the floor and chairs in his room. Finally, beyond tears and unable to speak, we were silent.

THIS IS A memorial service I thought I would not attend for another twenty-five years, when my father would have been his father's age when he died—ninety-three. But it is now. Daddy was buried last week in a simple pine box built by his son Mark and carried by his sister, children, sons-in-law, and grandchildren to his grave under a cherry tree. My mother shoveled the first dirt. The graveside service was simple, dignified, and inclusive—just the way Daddy lived his life.

My father allowed that every person was of an extraordinary nature, full of possibilities, and that through love and gentle persuasion, these possibilities could be realized in all of us. When someone leaves us, we always feel the unsettling uncertainty of when or if we will be together again. I am content not knowing where my father is now. It doesn't matter, for wherever he is, he is having the time of his life.

© 2010 Eugene England Foundation. All rights reserved.

How to cite this essay: Katherine England, "Life with Daddy," *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 21–24.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact www.eugeneengland.org website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.