

A POPE STORY: HOW ONE PERSON BROUGHT DOWN THE BERLIN WALL

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I'M GOING TO tell you a story. It is not meant to be historically factual with the accuracy expected of a research paper, although it is about actual events. It is a story from my recollections. It's about Pope John Paul, and my father, Gene England, and the Berlin Wall. There are many people who were heavily involved in the events of this story, but I will focus on the actions of a few of them. When I think about the events from this story, especially during recent years, I see it as a movie. One of those independent films, made by someone who found out about a series of events that made a big difference in the world, and is inspired to present them to a wide audience. If it had been made 10 to 15 years ago, Robert Redford could have played my dad. But even he might be getting too old for that part now. So if you want to picture this story in your mind as an indie film while I am telling it, feel free.

In the fall of 1980, Dad was teaching at BYU. In November he was asked to be a last-minute replacement for one of the directors of the January Study Abroad program to London. We were all excited. This would be our first trip to London, and we knew we would be able to also travel all over Europe. Dad talked to the group in the orientation meetings about the opportunity this trip was to learn and experience history and art and culture on such a level that our lives would never be the same again. He said we could see it as a nice little extended sightseeing trip that included classwork and tests to get through, or it could be time of enlightenment about ourselves, the world and the difference we could make in it. Then he set about doing all he could to make that happen.

Dad had long taught and followed active non-violent resistance to conflict. He was concerned with the prevalent attitude among the superpowers to use the massive buildup of military arms as a solution for supposedly keeping the peace. The main reason he saw as to why this would never work was the teachings of Christ, and the lessons of the cycles of violence and destruction that occur throughout the Book of Mormon. He did not like the way the Soviet Union was using force in Afghanistan nor in Poland against the striking Solidarity Union. One of his solutions to the tense relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was a massive exchange program. 100,000 of their college graduates switch with 100,000 U.S. college graduates for at least two years. Let them experience life with their perceived enemies, and learn to see that we have more in common than not. Since there was no sign that either government was interested in sponsoring this, he decided to do what he could. He started making arrangements for one of the week long excursion trips to be to the Soviet Union.

He had also been impressed with the way Pope John Paul had inspired such amazing events in Poland. In spite of the pressure from the communist government to remove religion from the citizens' lives, there had been overwhelming response to his leadership when he was a cardinal there in Poland. They even built a huge cathedral, most of it by members of the steel workers union that was now the core of Solidarity. Now that he was Pope, John Paul had called on his followers who were suffering under tighter restrictions from a government trying to exert more control, to not allow circumstances to determine who they knew themselves to be. He asked them to stand tall, and live the lives they were capable of, not stooping to violence, weakness or destruction. Dad was impressed with the non-violent activism of Solidarity, and he was concerned that it was not receiving the support from other countries, especially the U.S. that could help it survive. He felt that supporting movements like this would be more effective in overcoming communism than

providing guns and training to rebels in Afghanistan. I remember talking to him about it at the time. He shook his head a little, with this look of almost sad bewilderment. He said, "We are giving the rebels in Afghanistan terrible weapons and training them to use them against the Soviets. Their leaders see our society as their enemy as well. Can't our leaders see that we're training them to keep using violence to get their way, even after the Soviets are gone. It is dangerous to make alliances through violence." I think he could see that we, as a country, could suffer for those kinds of mistakes in ways we couldn't imagine.

He did want to go to Poland. I don't know what he thought he might be able to do, or who he might be able to see, but he wanted to try to get there. We were going to be traveling around Europe on the trains for about 6 weeks in the spring, and he tried to get visas that would allow us to go in to Poland during that time. But Poland was closed tighter than ever, and we were unable to get the needed papers. I don't think dad ever gave up trying to figure out how he might get in there. Maybe "accidentally, on purpose" getting on the wrong train, or asking for a ride from someone who might mistakenly drive him across the border. This could be the action-figure part of the movie, maybe a James Bond type of dream sequence. But I think dad knew that not even his look of innocent surprise, and sincere, "I'm sorry, I had no idea I was in the wrong country" could keep him out of jail if he were caught. So he had to settle for bending as many rules as he could while we were in the Soviet Union.

We rode the train in to Italy the first part of May. We were staying at youth hostels in Florence and Venice before going to Rome. We were trying to cram as much art, architecture and Italian Ice Cream as we could in to our heads during the short time we had in each city. Rome was sunny, hot, packed with people, very noisy and full of things to see. We planned to spend our last day in Rome at the Vatican. I remember standing with Dad as close as we could get to Michelangelo's *Pieta*. It was one of his favorite pieces of art. He loved the almost overwhelming expression of grace and courage in Mary. We knew we would have time to listen to the Pope give his weekly address before we caught the train to Switzerland. Everyone gathered in the oval of the piazza, surrounded by the colonnades designed by Bernini, with the long rows of columns that seem to embrace those gathering in front of St. Peter's. We stayed in a group next to the huge pillar in the center of the Piazza. Dad said he was going to try to get closer to the cathedral and told us he would meet us by the pillar. I decided to stay with the students. There are times when I am up to going with dad when he wants to get a little closer, because there is practically a guarantee that something will happen. But the crowds were packed tightly along the carpeted route that the Pope would be taking, and I didn't think it likely we would get much closer. Most of the students sat around the pillar, resting from a long day of walking. I climbed up on top of one of the short columns that surrounded the pillar so I could see the whole square and have a good view of the Pope.

As the Pope rode in, I was moved by both the adulation of the crowd for him as they cried out to him, and the love he showed to them. The Jeep moved slowly through the crowd. He stood and touched many of the hands reaching out to him. He was facing in toward the cathedral as the jeep circled through the masses. Then, instead of continuing up to the building, it circled around again, this time John Paul faced out, toward the columns, reaching out to those on the other side of the carpet path. As he neared the end of this circuit, I heard several sharp popping sounds come from the right side of the crowd. Then screams, the jeep suddenly sped away. I couldn't see the Pope anymore. It looked as though several men had climbed on the car. A single man had run out of the crowd to the right, with a number of people running after him. When he got to the rows of columns, he stopped and turned, yelling something so loud I could hear it distinctly over the noise

of the crowd. Then he disappeared as people surrounded him. They seemed so angry, I wondered if they were capable of tearing him apart.

This happened so fast, in a matter of seconds. I looked down at the others in the group sitting on the steps below me. "I think someone shot the Pope." We waited together as the impact of what had happened hit us and others in the crowd. Some of the crowd was dispersing, but much of it seemed to move in together towards the front of St. Paul's, as if waiting to hear some reassurance about their beloved Pope. I remember a group of nuns moving past us, holding on to each other and weeping. Then there was an announcement booming out from speakers around the square. The Pope was still alive, and there was a plea for prayers for him. It also asked for prayers for others in the crowd who had been injured. The voice led those who wished to in saying the rosary. One of my sisters noticed that dad still had not joined us, and wouldn't it be weird if he were one of those injured? We realized that with dad's tendency to be where the most unusual or exciting thing was happening, that was not so unlikely. Then he was there with us, a look of puzzled pain on his face, as if he were trying to understand something. "Dad, did you see?" "Yes, I was there, his hand was just about to touch mine." Dad reached his hand out, as though he were seeing it again. We could see red on his finger. He looked at it, a little frown on his face. "Dad, your finger is bleeding." "Yes, the bullet went by my head and clipped my finger." I looked at the right side of his face and saw it was red, as though his right temple had received a sun burn. The reality of the event seemed to be taking some time to settle on all of us. We walked through the city to the train station. There were sirens and police cars speeding through the streets. We stopped by a police car where some officers were listening to their radio. Dad asked them questions, using the few Italian words he knew. They weren't able to tell us any news about the Pope.

We took the train to Geneva, Switzerland. We went to the Mission home there to stay with our friends, Connie and Dave Bennion. The next morning, Dave brought back a European news magazine. This picture was on the cover:

Eugene England in crowd at the May 1981 attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square. The would-be assassin's bullet nicked England's finger as it whisked past his ear.



The reality hit full force. Dad wrote a piece for the *Deseret News* and called it in to their then-columnist, Clifton Jolley. He then started talking to people more about the effect this could have, not just on the Catholic Church, but also on the Solidarity Movement, and their non-violent resistance. He was also trying to find out about the would-be assassin. Why did this man do this? Was he acting on the orders of groups afraid of the Pope's leadership?

Not long after we returned home to Provo, Dad and Mom held a meeting with us kids. They

had decided to start an organization to gather donations of food and goods to send to people in Poland. They wanted to do what they could to support any non-violent resistance to resolve conflict. They asked us to support them and help them. It was an opportunity to create the possibility of peace and choice in the world. It all began with us choosing to start Food For Poland.

IT WAS AFTER this that I think Dad developed the ability to alter time. He continued to teach and carry on with all of his jobs at BYU. He still worked on a number of boards, committees, and writer's groups. He had demanding callings. He had a family who needed him. I now realize two of the main reasons he was able to make something happen in the midst of all this:

First and foremost – he had my mom. She was his essential partner in all things, and she is the one who made things work. I don't think any one will ever completely know how much each of them relied on the other for the life they created together. It was truly a partnership.

The second reason – He brought his commitment to everything and everyone in his world that was important to him, and he invited all of us to be a part of it. He asked his family, his friends and colleagues, students and ward members, neighbors who lived next door and those who lived on the other side of the world. Everyone he came in contact with was invited to participate. So he wasn't trying to apportion a certain part of each day out to each of the important parts of his life. It all overlapped in a big interactive community. Yes, there were plenty of times that many of us just wanted dad to have a simple commitment-free life to share with us. But then he wouldn't be Dad.

So many people and circumstances told him not to do this. He didn't have time, he had other obligations and very valid commitments, he didn't have money or connections to start a charitable organization, it was not his place as a professor at an LDS university in a conservative town to be gathering and sending donations to striking union workers, most of them Catholic, who lived in a communist country on the other side of the world, some even called him a traitor. He even got a death threat. But I think the most difficult reason people gave him as to why he shouldn't do this was: "It won't make any difference. No matter what you do, it won't change anything." It must have been discouraging. Dad continued on.

So things started to happen. We created a letterhead and sent out mailings. Booths at BYU and other campuses helped raise a small army of volunteers. Dad talked with everyone he knew who could help him with all the things he did not know: organization questions, tax-free status, sponsorship, how could he make contact with national celebrities who were of Polish descent, can we get television coverage donated, how do we store donations until they are shipped, how do we ship them, how do we know they will go to the people they are meant for? What kind of donations do they need; how long will they need them; how much do they need?

I won't take time to tell how everything happened. I will just touch on a few things.

- Dad got a hold of phone numbers for the leaders of Solidarity. Lech Walesa was the head of Solidarity, and he was arrested in December 1981 when martial law was imposed on Poland. I remember Dad asking me to be on the extension when he made a phone call to the Solidarity's vice president. Dad was asking what they needed. He said, "Milk for the children. The children do not have food. And soap." I wondered why they would need soap if they were starving. Dad said, "Can you imagine how hard it would be to go into meetings to negotiate with oppressive government leaders who had the power to keep you from getting milk for your

children, and you had to go smelling bad and in dirty clothes because you had no soap. It is another way the government is chipping away at their dignity.”

- Dad kept calling people until he had connections all over the country. Donations were made of all kinds and all sizes. Dad helped arrange unprecedented cooperation between the LDS and Catholic churches. Missionaries and parishioners gathered to help load goods for shipment. All of this helped develop the current Humanitarian Services Department. We were able to send a representative with airlift shipments to guarantee they were received by Solidarity. Governor Matheson declared a Statewide Fast day for Poland, asking people to donate to Food for Poland from the money saved on meals during that fast.
- More donations and shipments. The Solidarity Union continued to strike, and survive. In October 1983, Lech Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. Solidarity was making a difference in the world. Economic conditions eventually forced the Jaruzelski regime to negotiate. That led to parliamentary elections, and the establishment of a non-communist government.
- November 1989 – The Berlin Wall came down, without guns, without bombs. With celebration on both sides of the wall.

PEOPLE HAVE TOLD me how unusual Dad was, a person with so many inherent abilities to do all the amazing things he did. The world would never see another like him. I used to agree.

A few years ago, however, I saw that I was using that as an excuse as to why I might not make much of a difference in the world, or to my family, or community. I just wasn't born with the right stuff, like Dad was. The problem is that excuse does not give me the life I want. I saw Dad struggle with circumstances and ignorance and obstacles and failure and weakness. Things didn't just come easy or fall into place for him. There were no extraordinary genes in this extraordinary man. He came with pretty much the same equipment for success or failure that all of us do. He consciously set out to create himself as someone who makes a difference in the world. I am fortunate to have been one of the people who was able to see and experience some of this with him. What he learned to do, any of us can learn to do. True, the world will never see another like him. The world will also never see another like me or any of you. We are each that unique in what we can choose to offer.

There are many morals to this story, here is one: You are most powerful when you create reasons to do things, and you know you created the reasons. Dad could have listened to any of the reasons that were given to him—no time, money, obligations, loyalties, you can't, it won't work, it's not your place. Instead he chose to make up his own, and it was a reason that was bigger than anything he came up against. Let's call that reason World Peace. The power to create a reason that big is the power to tear down walls.

Who is the one person who tore down the Berlin Wall? It is Pope John Paul, it is Lech Walesa, it is my dad, my mom, my sisters and brother and I. It is each person in Solidarity, each person who donated, or fasted, or prayed, or took a stand. The wall was not brought down by millions of people. It is brought down by one person, hundreds, thousands, millions of times.