

Papa

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My father-in-law died recently. It was sad and unexpected. His heart was not doing that well, but the doctors thought he would be fine if he just got a pacemaker. "No rush," the doctor told Dad, "wait until you're off jury duty and then we'll get the pacemaker implanted." Dad had been serving on a jury during the previous five weeks. Every day he came home weary but alert and with very strong opinions about the whole judicial process.

"I think I'll wear a suit tomorrow, Mary," he told my mother-in-law. "I don't want them to think I'm an old retired stick-in-the-mud who doesn't know anything."

Nothing was further from the truth. I remember meeting Dad more than eighteen years ago when Alan, his son, and I became engaged. He intimidated me. "Have you read *Gathering of Saints* by Stegner?" he asked me as he began talking about the Mormon pioneers.

"No," I'd admitted.

"You've heard of Wallace Stegner, haven't you?"

"No," I answered again, feeling sheepish, stupid, and totally illiterate. He often asked me questions using words I didn't know, talked about people I'd never heard of, and repeated quotes from books I'd never read. He seemed gruff and stern and had a strong opinion on every conceivable subject. "He thinks I'm totally ignorant and naive, and wonders what his son sees in me," I told myself.

It was only a year after Alan and I were married that our first daughter was born. My father-in-law was none-too-pleased to know his youngest son was becoming a father before his college career was over. "A baby? You're still a baby yourself! What will you do about graduate school? How are you going to support your family?" When Heidi was born, Papa, as the grandchildren called him, and Grandma Mary

surprised us by flying in from Chicago for our graduation. Alan and I both graduated from BYU with one-month-old Heidi in our arms. I was still quite nervous to be around Papa and dreaded being left alone in a room with him.

Nevertheless, I noticed that despite all his previous lectures, he seemed proud of his new little granddaughter. He even seemed proud of her parents, who even though they had had a child, still managed to do "the important thing" and graduate from college.

As little Heidi grew month by month we slowly became concerned about her development. When she was five months old we had a diagnosis. Specialists at Primary Children's Hospital concluded that Heidi had cerebral palsy, a small brain. Later we also discovered that she was deaf. No words can explain the sorrow Alan and I felt at finding out our perfect little girl wouldn't be living a normal life. I was also afraid of how others might treat her. I thought Heidi would be a great disappointment to her grandfather.

Shortly after Heidi's diagnosis, Alan and I packed our things and moved to Lafayette, Indiana. Alan was going to attend graduate school at Purdue. Lafayette was only two and a half hours away from where Alan's parents lived in Chicago. We often drove to visit them on weekends. As Heidi grew, her body became even more crippled. It became hard to hold her, feed her, and communicate with her which scared off many people who didn't quite know how to talk to or interact with Heidi. They would often pat her like a dog and move on. It was surprising to me that Heidi didn't scare off Papa. When he wasn't fighting rush-hour traffic in Chicago or putting in long hours as a top engineer at General Electric, he spent hours feeding and holding his little granddaughter. When Alan finally graduated from Purdue, Papa insisted that he and Grandma Mary would

watch Heidi while Alan and I went to Ohio where Alan interviewed for jobs, and we looked for a place to live.

As I watched my father-in-law, who was often impatient and curt with people, continually reach out to his granddaughter, I began to discover that underneath his tough exterior, Papa had a very tender heart. Over the years I slowly began to lose my fears of being around him. I can remember in those early days worrying when I was left alone with him. What could I say? What on earth did we have in common? I was nervous and tongue-tied and the few things I did feel educated about seemed to slip from my brain whenever he was around. I timidly began to ask him questions. "No, I've never read Plato," I would admit, "but what did you learn? What did you like about him?" I discovered that talking with Papa was like having my own private social studies teacher.

One time, after we had talked about Lincoln, he mailed me his favorite book of Lincoln quotes—not to borrow, but to have. When we started a garden, Alan's father mailed us his two favorite books on the subject, well-marked and underlined. All these and many more books and videos sit on my shelves today. Papa didn't just go out and buy you a book. He gave you one of his, one that he had read and loved. He gave you a part of himself.

Whenever I could, I would read these books he sent. They and the conversations I had with him opened a window of curiosity in me that helped keep me going through the long hard days of caring for my daughter. Gradually I even became brave enough to voice my own opinions to Papa and would debate historical and political issues with him. We debated the pros and cons of Bill Clinton each time we met until he died. Alan had known about my fears, noticed the change, and asked me once if I was still nervous to be left alone with his father.

"No," I laughed, "we start on one subject in the morning after you leave for work and keep with it all day."

Over the years we began to depend on the extra help Papa and my mother-in-law gave us.

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Heidi was often twelve years old than birthdays. I drive her wheel couldn't speak, shakes and nods her wheelchair, some of her mo her through a t Her daily are t gy. Alan's father we have time a year he made th for the summer deck, watch the Grandmother in took Papa up o to be nearer m regular, compli touched my hea would offer. Ins Mom would fly Heidi and her s and I went off had funded.

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Sondra Sumsia
Ann Arbor, MI

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Beckie Weinheimer-Kearl loves the ocean. She can see it from the sunny window where she sits and reads in the afternoons. She has two living daughters, ages fifteen and eleven, who she adores. She and her husband take weekly six to ten mile walks along the ocean, eat at a restaurant half way, browse in Borders Book store, and then go home. She began writing two years ago, has sold articles to Church magazines, Sunstone, and non-LDS publications and is currently working on a middle grade novel.



When Heidi got an electric wheelchair, Papa flew out and designed a lightweight metal ramp to transport her and her chair into our van. My in-laws came when we moved to a more accessible home in Kentucky. By this time Papa had retired and they had moved to Utah. They drove a load of redwood in their pickup truck across the country. They spent two weeks during a very hot, humid August building a ramp with the wood. It criss-crossed down our hilly backyard to the woods and tree-house Alan had built for our children. The ramp made the tree house accessible for Heidi in her wheelchair. It became the gathering place for all the neighborhood children, and because of this ramp, Heidi could join the other kids in many childhood adventures.

Heidi was often ill and by the time she was twelve years old, she had had more surgeries than birthdays. By this time she had learned to drive her wheelchair by herself (sort of). She couldn't speak, but through her eyes, head shakes and nods and following her around in her wheelchair, we had learned to understand some of her thoughts and desires. We had fed her through a tube in her stomach for years. Her daily care took much of our time and energy. Alan's father was always very concerned that we have time alone, away from Heidi. Each year he made the me offer, "Let us keep Heidi for the summer at our cabin. She can sit on the deck, watch the birds, and swing with her Grandmother in the porch swing." We never took Papa up on his offer, feeling Heidi needed to be nearer medical facilities and kept on her regular, complicated routine at home. It always touched my heart deeply, though, that he would offer. Instead, at least once a year, he and Mom would fly out to our home and stay with Heidi and her sisters for several days while Alan and I went off on a trip by ourselves that they had funded.

Four years ago, Heidi died at age twelve. We decided to have her buried near Papa and Grandma's cabin in Bear Lake Valley. After the service the family came to the cabin for dinner. In the midst of all these people, Papa pulled Alan and me aside and told us about one of his favorite movies, *Zorba the Greek*. It was a movie neither Alan nor I had seen. Papa told us about an incident in the film involving Zorba, the main character. Zorba had taken care of an older, feeble woman and protected her from village scavengers. Zorba and his friend were with the woman when she died. Instantly the news spread and the villagers, who had waited like vultures outside her room, came in and stripped her room bare of everything. Zorba ignored them. He walked out, leaving the dead woman in her bed. His friend followed him and asked, "Zorba, what about a funeral?"

Zorba replied, "There will be no funeral."

"Why?" his friend asked.

Zorba explained that the woman was French and the police wouldn't bury her.

"That's dreadful," his friend said.

"Why?" Zorba asked. "She's dead. It makes no difference."

If this experience with Papa had happened in those early days, I might have concluded that my father-in-law was indeed heartless. How could anyone tell us this story after we had just buried our precious daughter? Now, however, I knew him better. I knew Heidi hadn't been a disappointment to him like I had once feared. I knew he loved Heidi. So I continued to listen as he explained, "What good could Zorba do for the woman now? She was dead. He took care of her while she was alive. That's when it had mattered."

In my extreme grief, I understood what he was saying and how wise he was. We could do

nothing for Heidi now. If we hadn't done it when she was alive, it was too late. I knew I hadn't been a perfect mother. I realized, though, that I had loved my daughter with all my heart and fought for her survival and quality of life every day that she lived. Now, Papa was telling me, I could quit fighting. She was dead. It's four years later, and Papa's words of advice—"She's dead"—still ring in my mind, and make me weep.

After we got word from Grandma that Papa had died, we drove all day to attend the funeral. Papa had never mentioned to anyone at court during his jury duty that he wasn't in the best of health. One day he wore a heart monitor during the courtroom proceedings. The judge noticed it and pulled him aside. "In this type of case we can go with as few as nine jurors, Mr. Kearl. Go home and get that pacemaker. You are relieved of your duties here." That night Dad came home and couldn't sleep well. This wasn't unusual. He often napped in the afternoons and read late into the night. When my mother-in-law woke up, she found Papa had died at the kitchen table with two books open and his glasses still on.

As we drove, I sighed to myself and thought, he died with no pain, no nursing home that he dreaded so much, and with his mind fully alert to the last. Tears flowed freely, as I thought about Papa. Papa, the man I had once been so afraid of. Papa the man who had taught a young, naive woman so many things. Papa, the man who loved and cared for his granddaughter. How grateful I was that I learned to appreciate him while he was alive because as Zorba the Greek and Papa would say, "He's dead." ♦

Something Ordinary

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I was in a carpool that got its picture on the front page of the *Detroit Free Press* "Lifestyle" section. We were there simply because we carpooled and somebody's boss knew somebody at the paper. It was a great picture; two pictures, I recall, and one of them was big. I was thrilled on the day it came out. It was my 15 seconds of fame, and to tell the truth, it was a kick.¹

There were four or five of us in that carpool, depending on the day. We were all new law school graduates and all working for judges in Detroit. We spent almost two hours a day together for the better part of two years. I got to know those folks well. Steve and I liked working together, and we talked shop on tough cases. Susan clucked over me as I lumbered through my second pregnancy. Holly and I argued about everything—even irrigation. And then there was Dave. I remember Dave for a few reasons. He ate out at fancy restaurants every night. He bought a used orange Saab,²

and he made a comment that I still think about.

Emerging exuberant from the courthouse one evening, Dave described a fascinating case his judge was trying. I don't actually remember the case, though it could have been the one where mothers and girlfriends transported cocaine by strapping bags of it all over their bodies. Whatever the case, it had a high element of human drama.

"Wouldn't it be great to be a judge!" Dave exclaimed. "What could be more interesting? Wouldn't you like to be a judge, Sondra?"

"I don't think so. I don't think I would want the responsibility."

"Yes, but it brings you in touch with the little people."

"Little people?"

"You know, ordinary people with ordinary lives. The kind of people you and I and people

like us don't have contact with."

I wondered at that moment just who Dave thought I was. I also wondered who he thought he was. I recognized the statement as a blatant claim of elevated class and personal superiority. I found it offensive. But part of me was flattered by the implication that I had status and position. Part of me wanted what he said to be true.

His comment came at a moment in my life when my illusions about the world and my place in it were slipping away. I had been raised to value status and financial remuneration of professional work. Yet after graduating from law school, I had felt weary and confused. I was grateful for my degree. Because of it, I felt slightly prepared for the exigencies of life. But I found much legal work unpleasant. I was in debt for my schooling. My husband was relying on me to support us so that he could finish his own education. I had made commitments to employers. We wanted children. I looked to the future and anticipated rightly that the years ahead would be harder than the years past.

We had our first baby. I went back to work when he was six weeks old. It broke my heart.