

Eternal Companions

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Grandpa smoked. I don't recall learning this any more than I learned that he was a tall, bald, Mormon farmer. Some things just are; always were; always will be; could not be otherwise.

But nonetheless, Grandpa's habit caused my mother and her sisters no end of angst. Because of their behaviour when together, I still associate cigarettes with whispering and tears. Tobacco was a terrible sin. Worse even than tea or coffee. Almost as bad as unmarried sex.

Smoking made Grandpa sick. He died when I was 11. Emphysema. He was in his 60s. It was a sad funeral in an overflowing church. But I came away with the immensely relieving sense that somehow Grandpa had been forgiven for his sins – even the smoking – and would be in the Celestial Kingdom waiting for us if we were spiritual enough to get there.

I was near the tail end of around 50 grandchildren, and was one of the few who lived more than an hour from Grandpa and Grandma. We visited the farm occasionally – maybe twenty times during the part of those eleven years I have some chance of remembering.

Grandpa was a stern shadow during those visits - always coming or going in dark, faded, dusty clothes with a serious look and purposeful speed. His face was weather-burned to match his clothes. When he took off his hat to come indoors, the contrast between his white dome and dark face was shocking. I don't recall ever seeing him stand straight. Endless tractor hours did that. His land demanded a lot of care in exchange for its meagre output. And God had only blessed him with one son – his oldest. Grandpa was grateful for the order, at least. A string of girls followed. My mother was the last of five. Grandpa was so disappointed when he heard her sex that he left without saying a word. Mom was named several days later, almost as an after thought.

Running a farm with laughing girls for help was more than hard. They constantly broke his equipment. I never heard any of them speak a harsh word about him. They called him "Daddy". It is not possible for a human being to put more tenderness into one word than Grandpa's daughters did when they said that one.

The only real money maker Grandpa ever had was a small feedlot. It did well for a few years. Because of the prevailing west wind, virtually all feed lots in the area were located due west of the nearest human dwellings. However, the farm's configuration made it impractical to put the feedlot anywhere but on the north side of the house, and financial necessity mandated a feedlot. So north, or

even northwest winds, made life eye-wateringly fragrant. This was particularly common during the fall, winter and early spring making long hours indoors even more difficult to endure. Grandpa's family knew better than to complain. Many others who noted this incident of life on Grandpa's farm heard him say, "Smells like money".

One day in the final stages of preparing a big family dinner Grandma decided that she needed one more chicken. This was Grandpa's job. I went with him and watched in horror as he grabbed a squawking chicken, held it down with his foot and deftly chopped off its head. He told me that it was after me when it starting flopping around. I was maybe three or four and spent a good part of the next hour beneath my mother's broad skirt, wrapped around her leg.

Oddly, I can't remember the sound of Grandpa's voice or ever seeing him smile, but have a clear image of him walking through the spindly crab apple orchard behind Grandma's house ("Grandpa's farm", but "Grandma's house"). He was far enough away that the wind erased his companion smoke wisp. I see him slightly stooped in his farm hat, silhouetted at dusk against the dying cottonwood stand planted on the west side of the homestead as a windbreak for the gardens and orchard. Those withered old things created tender life on their leeward side.

Grandma was not the "How are you sweetie?" type either. Scraping a living out of a dry-land farm and cow-calf operation on Canada's Southern Alberta prairie made tough people. Winter temperatures often hit -30 Celcius and during the summer pushed the top of the thermometer. Lots of wind. Almost no rain. If crops didn't fail, markets did. A joke I heard countless times while growing up in various forms was, "What will ya do if ya win the lottery Joe?" Says Joe, "Oh, likely farm til its gone".

Grandma lived near hordes of her grandkids. More than a dozen were right next door; more than 30 within 15 minutes. We were more like a plague of locusts for her than some kind of treat. She moved fast and demanded order. If you got in her way or broke a rule she gave you reason to remember the experience.

Grandma married a man named George within a few years of Grandpa's death. They didn't have a real wedding or discuss their plans with anyone. They just went down to the Town Hall, had their marriage formalized in the simplest possible way, and moved in together. I am not sure which followed which, and never wondered until writing this.

Mom's explanation of Grandma's remarriage was a touch red-faced. And her sisters clucked just a bit about why Grandma "needed" to do this. She was, after all, going to be in the Celestial Kingdom with Grandpa. This was another fact that it would be silly to state – like announcing that the Sun was for sure going to rise tomorrow. So a meantime marriage to someone else seemed – well – kind of dirty.

Grandma's marriage to George was only "temporal" (which I learned meant "only for this life"). But "(sigh) Grandpa George would keep Grandma company until she could be with Grandpa again", and she would perform a similar service for George since he was a widower. This was one of those "enduring to the end" things and Grandma needed a little help to endure. That suggested a weakness. Grandma could have simply waited for God to reunite her with Grandpa.

There was some purposeful vagueness around whether George's first wife was waiting for him in the Celestial Kingdom, and whether he was going there himself. George was not as spiritual a man as Grandpa was remembered to be. But oddly, Grandpa George made Grandma happier than anyone could remember. This ensured his eventual acceptance into our family. And after a time, there was no more discussion, or even hinting, about the Celestial Kingdom relative to Grandma, Grandpa or George.

When Grandma and George married he was in his late 70s or early 80s. They lived in Grandma's little white house on one of those distinctively wide Mormon pioneer streets "in town". Those tiny-house rimmed boulevards looked as out of place as clown shoes – or like another set of houses should be built up the middle of each street. Grandma moved in there from the farm after Grandpa died. The house always smelled like old people - distant decay covered by mothballs.

Grandma had a number of odd, and strongly held, beliefs such as that vacuums wore out carpets. She swept her linoleum and carpets and lost patience quickly with grandsons who suggested that this didn't make sense. She owned a quick head turn and tone of voice that warned even the most obtuse against bringing the issue up again.

George didn't have a lot to say when company was over or while he was at family events. He was almost deaf and rather than make people repeat themselves, he smiled a lot. But when drawn into conversation with a loud enough question, he usually had something funny or interesting to say. And Grandma looked more at peace during these times than any others I recall.

I moved to Grandpa and Grandma's farm, then run by my uncle, for a year of high school. This gave me a chance to get to know Grandma, and since Grandpa George was her companion then, I got to know him too.

Most Wednesdays I would go from basketball practise after school over to Grandma's for dinner so that I wouldn't have to go all the way out to the farm and then come back in for "Mutual", as Young Mens was then called. And after Mutual I would often return to Grandma's house to spend the night. This reduced the irritating financial and other burdens an extra teenage presence imposed on

my uncle and his wife. Even through my well-above average adolescent stupor I could feel the tension I caused in their home.

My uncle simply said “yes” when asked to assume the duty of helping his youngest sister reform her wayward son. This put my aunt in a tough spot, so she often bit (or at least tried to bite) her tongue while doing her best to cope with this challenge on top of running a farm household, dealing with her own five children who were still at home, and managing her roles as grandmother and Bishop’s wife. Having me out of the house one night a week worked well for everyone.

Having dinner, bedding down (often after a cup of Postum or herbal tea) and eating breakfast with Grandma by herself exposed me to a different woman than the one I had known only as the general at huge family gatherings. She was stern - no surprises there - and surprisingly well-informed.

To my amazement, my Grandma was also an irreverent non-conformist. As different news items came up, she would tell me without apology which family members and towns-people she approved of, which she did not and why. What she said made surprising sense given that she was an adult. Grandma was critical of local church leaders (in small ways), politicians (in big ways), and even (gasp) my high school basketball coach.

Grandma knew how to tell jokes and laugh at them. She was learning to paint pictures but had to be cajoled into showing me what she was working on. Two of her paintings are now among my prized possessions. She comforted me in my trials with certain family members and people at church and school, and told me stories about similar challenges she had faced. And I learned a bit from her (but not nearly as much as I now wish I had) about what it was like to farm during the early part of the 1900s in Southern Alberta with pioneer excitement to dull the pain of back-breaking labour, and then fall in love, get married and raise a family of five famously laughter prone sisters and one brother on almost nothing through the Great Depression.

George tended not to participate in these conversations because as Grandma regularly reminded me in an unusually gentle tone, “He can’t hardly hear a thing”. Once when I came home in the middle of the night courtesy of some long-after Mutual goofing around, I saw George shuffling blindly toward me through the dark house in his underwear, headed toward the bathroom. “Good night George”, I said. He continued without acknowledging me and then jumped higher than I thought possible when I had to get out of his way a few steps later. He really was deaf.

Most days George drove the 10 highway minutes that separated town from the farm he had carved out of the prairie and passed on to his sons. He “helped out” there. I am not sure how much he got done as opposed to being in the way. He

was amazingly fit. Well into his 80s George could beat all of the strongest cousins on my side of the family at arm wrestling. He was a diminutive, good-humoured, bull of a man. "Forearms like fence-posts" we used to say while bragging to our friends about the last time we had seen George, with a faint smile, put down the arm of one of our strongest, reddest-faced, cousins. This became a right of passage of sorts – being strong enough to think you could take Grandpa George and then being publicly humiliated. But as George aged his became one of the several vehicles for which everyone else in town looked.

George's driving habits were well-known. He went to the farm every morning and later "uptown" (as opposed to "downtown", where other people went) to meet his friends at the Coffee Shop. I did not wonder until recently where you get "uptown" and "downtown" when one side of one block holds all a town's commercial establishments. But that is how it was. Kind of like Grandpa smoked. Things just are.

In any event, George was so short that he could barely see over the dash board of his car. He often drove on the wrong side of the road and took baffling routes to get from point A to B. But I doubt that being taller would have made much difference. Grandma once pressed him into service to drive me several blocks to a game or meeting of some kind, and from then on I made sure I had an alibi whenever she offered this. Driving with George took more courage than I had. Grandma never drove with him. George was at that stage of life where the merger of time and space that Einstein talks about becomes real.

The rules of the road around town for people like George were clear. His license should by law have been taken away long before, but people in town knew each other so well that they exercised remarkable constraint regarding this issue. And they know their turns will come. So, if you hit George while he was driving or he hit you, it was your fault – kind of like touching a hot stove and getting burned. You could see George coming and it was your responsibility to give him a wide berth, even if that meant turning into someone's driveway or parking in the ditch for a few seconds.

Eventually George passed away. And then Grandma. We mourned them each in turn, and were grateful for the way in which they brightened each others' lives and provided a foundation in so many ways for ours. It was not until today that I realized that though I was a faithful Mormon when Grandma died, I never thought of her as joining Grandpa. Nor did I picture her with George. My mind suppressed the hard question of to whom Grandma belonged in the Mormon eternity.

I had the chance to be with one of my cousins a few nights ago and talked about some of these things for the first time in many years. She had forgotten that I had the chance to get to know Grandma in the relatively intimate way I did. After a

few stories, she asked me if Grandma drank “her tea” when I stayed at her house.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, shock registering all over my face. “Her tea? She drank tea?”

“Sure”, said my cousin. “Mom told us that she tried to quit for years – kind of like Grandpa with smoking – but she just couldn’t. It had a real hold on her. I can’t believe you didn’t know about this. All the other cousins do. And you lived with her? I used to see her tea pot and bags just sitting there on the counter.”

I was stunned.

“I suppose you didn’t notice that Grandpa George drank coffee.”

My expression provided the answer.

“Yup”, she said. “He had his coffee making equipment along with Grandma’s tea brewing stuff there at the house. And he went to the Coffee Shop pretty much every day to have a cup or two with his friends.”

I had never wondered until that moment – over 30 years since I regularly saw Grandma and Grandpa George – what he might have been doing every day in the only coffee shop in town other than visiting with his Jack or non-Mormon farmer friends. There were a few Japanese Buddhists and one Catholic around town. In fact, I had not wondered how a “coffee shop” managed to stay in business in a town that was 90+% Mormon. I assumed, without ever thinking about it, that they must sell a lot of stuff other than coffee.

Grandpa, Grandma and George were all from a generation of Mormons I know a lot about as a result of the reading I have done during the past three years. Their habits were formed during a time before the degree of uniform behaviour now required of Mormons came into effect, including the strict observance of the Word of Wisdom (no tobacco, coffee or tea, but eat all the sugar you want ...). It must have been stressful for them as their community’s behavioural standards first changed and then became more rigid.

I knew that Grandpa had his “problem”. But Grandma and George? It had never occurred to me that they were anything other than standard issue Mormons, though I knew that George did not take church too seriously.

What fascinated me the most is that when the rest of the family knew about Grandma’s tea habit that she would go out of her way to hide it from me. She knew I was heterodox, and perhaps that is what motivated her. But I spent many evenings and mornings with her during that year, and I liked tea. I had starting drinking it a year or two before and if Grandma had offered me a cup I would

have happily joined her. She must have put her stuff, and George's, away each of the many times I came over.

As is the case with so many other aspects of my Mormon life, as I think about my experience with Grandpa, Grandma and George, and what their lives must have been like, I regret that we did not celebrate much more than we did.

We appreciated George but not as we should have. What a blessing he was for Grandma. They fell in love! They made each other riotously happy for a time, as lovers do. And they helped each other find deep contentment for many years.

And I don't know much about Grandpa, but I do know about the life he and Grandma shared together. It brimmed with hardship. While I wish he could have remained with her and enjoyed their declining years, since that was not possible we should have had the biggest party we could afford when Grandma and George fell in love. Instead, they snuck off to formalize their relationship, and then kept their heads down while people whispered.

What a shame it is that Grandma could not have shared with me how she dealt with the conflict between the way she chose to live and what her religious community attempted to make her do. Given how non-conformist she was in other ways, it does not surprise me that she cut against the grain with regard to the Word of Wisdom while holding a Temple recommend the whole time. How much guilt did that cause her? How did she rationalize saying what she must have to get that recommend year after year? "Do you keep the Word of Wisdom?" "Yes" is the only satisfactory answer if you want a Temple recommend.

It is clear why Grandma did this - no recommend meant not being at grandkids' weddings. But how did she do it? Did the Bishop turn a blind eye because he knew how hard the rule changes made it for people like her? No Bishop I know would do that.

So many interesting questions. But now as then, these subjects are verboten. It would be surprising if she talked about them with anyone.

Grandma was a smart, strong willed lady. I would have benefited from her perspective with regard to these things and many others of the soul. And I now feel more kinship with her than ever. My saltiness and insistence on charting my own course likely find some of their genetic roots in her.

George, as far as I know, did not consistently hold a temple recommend and simply lived his life as he saw fit. He attended church regularly though. I was not close enough to have expected him to confide his deepest feelings in me, but would have been grateful were he prepared to do this.

It makes me ache to think of these fine people in the last years of heroic pioneer lives feeling censure from family and community members as a result of big things like falling in love and making each other immensely happy, and little things like drinking coffee and tea. And now that I see Grandpa in context as well, his smoking was nothing. He is a shadow in my life instead of a laughing grandfather at least in part because of the guilt that habit produced in him. He felt unclean.

Guilt within the Mormon and other conservative religious communities has long been a stifling burden for many people. One of my friends, Joe Staples, is a talented writer who recently finished his PhD at the University of Arizona. He once shared with me the following poem.

"In one of his lucid hours, I could see a great anger come over him. He would not look at me or anyone else in the room, and seemed to wish we would all just go away. I asked him, 'Are you angry?'

'Yes.'

'Because you're still here?'

'Yes.'

'Do you pray?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Don't want to.'

It was a surprise to me that my father, who had always seemed very prayerful and spiritually minded, would refuse to pray as Death approached. I wanted him to be faithful; I needed him to be heroic and stare Death down while telling his Heavenly Father that he was coming home. And that was my greatest betrayal; at the moment of his quintessential humanity, I asked him to be more than human.

Nearly ten years later I look back on the final week of his life, seeking to atone for the small injustices I perpetrated at his most vulnerable. He lived and died under the immense weight of a guilt he was never able to set aside. He was a better man than most, and far better than he believed himself to be.

But I stand now by the riverside, Dad, and am here to lay down my heavy load. Let me take yours, too, and lay it in the cool shade of the trees. We

carried our loads a long time - picked them up from those who bore us. But we'll lay them down and carry instead my laughing children. We'll study guilt no more; we'll fish in the stream and sail paper boats and watch the grasses wave in the current. This atonement, too, flows both ways."
(Joe P. Staples, Personal Correspondence, March 19, 2003)

As we harmonize our lives with reality, counterproductive guilt will bother us less and we will become more attuned to an inner voice that we have trained to warn us of self deception, approaching danger, and the opportunity to do good.

I now celebrate these grandparents lives – all three of them. The respected biologist Ursula Goodenough quotes her father as saying that “Life is like a coral reef. We each leave behind the best, the strongest deposit we can so that the reef can grow. But what’s important is the reef.”

These were wonderful reef builders and having first experienced them in person and now seeing more of them in light of my life to this point, I choose to build my little bit of the reef differently than they built theirs. My children and loved ones will know of my inner most feelings – my loves, hates, struggles, triumphs and failures. They will know what I value and why I live as I do. I wish to free them to explore their world in the broadest possible context, decide what they value, and have the greatest possible chance to bring that into being. So I will share, as well as I am able, the context I see.

I want my children to be content with their place in the reef; to enjoy life’s miracle while it lasts; to learn to pay more attention to the tiny part of the miracle that is before them, moment by moment; and think less about those parts of the future that are beyond their influence. I aspire to all of this myself as well.

I find in my grandparents’ lives many positive lessons, and at least one that is both negative and profoundly important. That is, I will not allow the innocent ignorance of my social group and their beliefs with regard to an improbable future after death to leach the color out of the wonderful picture life continually paints and lays before me. I will, rather, immerse myself in life; revel in it; encourage it to seep into my every pore, and make of me what it will.

Life is so much more than I imagined.