

## I N M E M O R I A M

## D. BRENT COLLETTE

*Edited by Alison Takenaka, Ethan Cannon, and April Carlson*



*D. Brent Collette was the director of the Institute of Religion at the University of California at Berkeley for fifteen years. He died 8 November 2000 after suffering an aneurysm while driving home from teaching his final class. Despite long-standing medical challenges—he was one of the longest surviving kidney transplant recipients—his courage and strength, and his devotion to truth and joy continue to bless the lives of those who knew him.*

**B**RENT COLLETTE WAS an extraordinary educator, mentor, and friend to hundreds of LDS students. Any Latter-day Saint who chooses to attend Berkeley is bound to be somewhat peculiar in most Church circles. Besides being a top-tier research institution, Berkeley has an extremist political tradition that sets it apart from more straight-laced academic peers, and the fervor of its free-speech history permeates the very air the students breathe. It's hard to be at Cal without becoming an activist brandishing sentiments like "question authority," and "subvert the dominant paradigm." And when that critical activism turns toward Mormon doctrine, policy, and culture, it takes an uncommon brand of faithful intellectual to direct that passion toward faithful ends. As one long-time friend and Church Educational System colleague observed: "In CES, there are some who are either great scholars or great teachers, but you very seldom meet one who can be both as effectively, or who can reach as many different kinds of people, as Brent could."

Brent, with his quick wit and disarming charm, had a way of earning the trust, respect, and friendship of the bright minds (and sharp tongues) attracted to the Berkeley arena. His brain seemingly housed an intricate catalog of student profiles. Whether we were permanent fixtures or periodic floaters at the Institute, Brent used this knowledge to approach us on every level he could, every chance he got. He knew us one on one, one step at a time—often one battle at a time—guiding us through a lively labyrinth of prickly issues, continually asking us if we were truly happy in life.

Brent's love of learning, his love for us, and his love of God were so wide and so

deep that with him, many of us found the first haven the Church had ever afforded. His "open door" policy was also an "open mind" and "open heart" policy. We learned to transform skepticism to testimony, and with him no topic was impossible . . . or too dangerous . . . or unworthy of discussion. Excerpts from the *Ensign* to *SUNSTONE* to the Dead Sea Scrolls were welcome in our Friday Forum discussions. Even when our debates escalated to heated irreverence on topics that (we realize in retrospect) meant the world to him, Brent would smile through his spectacles and pose an "Okay, but is it possible that . . . could be true?" question. It was hard to feel bitter or defensive toward this man in his omnipresent jogging suit who never devalued our intelligence, never condemned our fragile faith, but simply invited us to engage in a bit of self-examination and learn to laugh at our own foibles. To him inquiry was the means to belief, not a threat to it; and any evidence of moral goodness qualified for his maxim: "All things that rise, converge."

His remarkable achievements came in the face of a potentially debilitating medical history. But instead of framing his life in terms of his physical frailties, Brent chose to live in the now and to love as if now would never end. This stubborn self-determinism was portrayed in a eulogy published in the *Oakland Tribune* newspaper by Paul Cobb, a local minister and friend of Brent's. In his tribute, Cobb noted: "D. Brent Collette lived every day with full exuberance and joy because he treated each day, each experience and each person he met as if it were his last. . . . He was the embodiment of the wise saying "it's not how long you live, but rather, how you live long."

—ALISON TAKENAKA

**B**RENT worked hard to make the Berkeley Institute building a gathering place for the LDS students at Cal. During my freshman year, as the institute building was being renovated, classes were held in the "dungeon" storage room, but since there was no place for students to mingle, I developed only superficial relationships with other LDS students. After my mission, when the building work was complete, I made many strong friendships at the Institute, and it was the first time in my life that I felt I truly fit in at church and that I had a large circle of friends with whom I had much in common, including the gospel. Brent fostered such closeness through his love of the building (formerly owned by the Hearst family). He delighted in giving guided tours and proclaiming, "Welcome to Zion!" He added other inviting touches, such as a pool table carefully leveled on the basement floor and a gas fireplace that dried off many students during the rainy season. His unorthodox policies of distributing the building security code to allow students to meet after hours and allowing students to write papers on the Institute computer worked wonderfully, as generation after generation of students made friends, built testimonies, and often found spouses at the Institute building.

Brent's love of the gospel extended from the smallest details to the largest visions of eternity imaginable by the mortal mind, and his teaching spanned that spectrum. A typical Book of Mormon class consisted of ten minutes of small talk and introduction, a forty-five minute detailed discussion on one or two verses near the start of the chapter, then a five-minute race to finish the chapter so we could move on the next week. He could discuss a single verse for hours because he always related everything to the big picture; he constantly explained that we are on earth to develop godlike character and that we will be judged on the kind of person we become. He warned against the checklist approach to the gospel, where success is marked not by whom we've become but by an accounting of completed and uncompleted gospel tasks. This holistic model of

mortality's purpose has guided my actions in all spheres of my life, especially affecting how I approach my family, Church callings, and other personal relationships.

—ETHAN CANNON

I CAN'T think of a more pivotal moment in my spiritual development than my first Institute class. As I walked to class, I wondered how a religion of flannel-board Primary stories and weepy Girl's Camp testimony meetings would fit into my new life at Berkeley. That day we studied the words of the Old Testament, and the archaic language—well worn and fitting—comforted me. Then, to my surprise, as if by virtue of our meeting on campus, the probing questions began to fly. Ideas were challenged and scrutinized, and I felt pushed to define my beliefs and reconsider my operating assumptions. Suddenly the distance between the flannel-board stories of my childhood and my new college environment seemed smaller. Here was a place where asking questions about religion could strengthen belief. My faith began to grow that day—faith that I could question and examine the doctrines of the gospel closely, and that I would only be brought closer to God for the endeavor.

On one occasion, Brent bought me lunch at the grill on Sproul Plaza (origin of the free speech movement). Surrounded by the usual noonday ruckus of preaching and pamphleteering, I was touched by the kindness of a teacher, and I felt God's love. Brent fashioned a little island of spirituality in the tempest of politics, religion, and philosophy, and I knew I had found a friend. That moment was a rev-

elation: here was a member of a religious establishment, a bishop and an Institute director who was not afraid of truth or of any questions I might ask. From that moment, I knew there was a place for my testimony at Berkeley. Many Mormons cite their mission as the period of their most intense spiritual development. I too served an honorable mission and loved the experience, but woven into my daily thoughts, grounding my identity, directing the pattern of my behavior, is my Berkeley experience. And through it all, Brent Collette was the guiding light pointing to Christ.

In Berkeley's secular context, no professor specifically referred to gospel principles in their lectures, but connections happened all the same, and Brent was always there to hear my latest epiphany and to prod me to shore up my ideas with empirical or spiritual evidence. But never once in all of my arguing, testing, and growing did he tell me that I was wrong—that I should think differently. He let me find my own way.

—APRIL CARLSON

I FEEL like I didn't know Brent well enough to merit the love I felt from him. He would always greet me like a long lost friend. He never walked up to me without being ecstatic to see me. He would drop everything to talk to me (even if he was preparing a lesson).

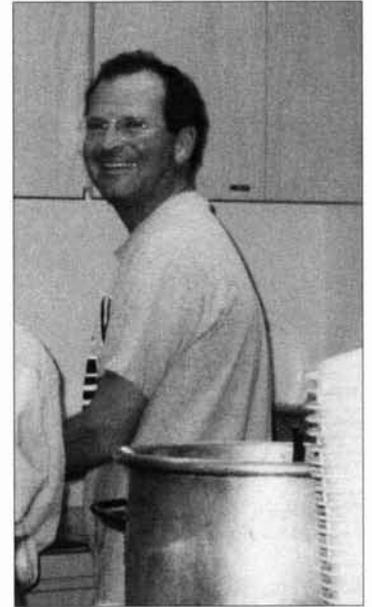
He couldn't go too many moments without having fun. He taught us to see loss as a way to appreciate things better. We are grieving for lost opportunities, but I know there will be opportunities for further discussions with him.

If he were here now, he would tell us to proceed "with vim and vigor!"

—DAVID JENSON

DURING my years as an undergraduate at Berkeley from 1986 to 1991, I barely kept a toe in the Church.

*Brent  
delighted  
in giving  
Institute  
tours and  
proclaiming,  
"Welcome to  
Zion!"*



But that one little toe had a lot to do with Brent. Sometimes I came to Brent's classes a little shyly because I wasn't sure how I felt about the Church. Sometimes I came a little defiantly because I wasn't sure how I felt about the Church. Brent always remembered my name, welcomed me, handled my questions gracefully, never pushed too hard but never watered things down too much either. I felt completely safe and accepted with him—never judged, only invited.

Because of this atmosphere at the Institute building, I found I came there as a refuge between classes even when I wasn't attending Church services. And it was there I ultimately jump-started a profound conversion process in my final months before graduation. In fact, Brent was one of the most influential people in those crucial months of conversion that brought me back into faith and fellowship and sent me on a mission. And when he learned that I hadn't known to attend a temple preparation class before I received my endowments, he kindly and patiently took me aside for an hour. Because he knew me and my longstanding struggles with gender issues, Brent prepared me for certain moments that helped make my first experience in the temple a positive and spiritual one.

I fondly remember his sweet temperament and sense of humor, his insights on the spiritual nature of light, his compassionate, intelligent handling of any question, his ability to bring groups of incredibly diverse people (liberals and conservatives, middle-aged housewives and students) together to new insights on well-worn scriptural passages, his enthusiasm for open inquiry, his unwavering faith, and his personal stories

### Famous Brentisms

- *Love doesn't just happen, love is a choice; you choose who you love.*
- *What's the take-home message?*
- *But tell me—are you happy?*
- *Good is not wasted.*
- *All things that rise, converge.*
- *You can't give love away fast enough because the Savior always sends love in return.*
- *Put this on page one of your journal.*
- *All truth is light, and light emanates from Christ through the Holy Spirit.*
- *Proceed with vim and vigor!*
- *"Light cleaves to light . . ."*



Brent Collette and Charlotte Schuyler

*Not exactly "parents," but they made the Institute feel like a home.*

shared sparingly and meaningfully. He filled us with love and light and Christlike radiance and helped us believe it was possible to blend intellect with faith, humor with spirituality, and individuality with obedience.

He is one of the few people I can think of who was ready to meet his Maker. I imagine it was a very loving reunion.

—TANIA N. RANDS

**B**RENT had an enormous zest for life and what always seemed like unbounded energy. When you talked to him, he would focus it all on you like you were the most important thing in his world at that moment.

—GWYN STORDAHL WRIGHT

**I** ALWAYS picture Brent riding his bike across campus or carrying a load way too heavy for him, looking always a little lost or confused but progressing with great vigor and joy as if he were untouchable by the woes of the world around him and ready to share thoughts about "light cleaving to light."

—DAN COATES

**B**RENT once commented to me that "Orthodoxy does not require duplication, just compatibility." I have never forgotten that simple yet profound statement. While, to some, Brent may have seemed a little "unorthodox" in his mannerisms and attitudes, his life and teachings were in total harmony with the great truths of the gospel. Brent lived by the maxim that "All truth is light, and light emanates from Christ through the Holy Spirit." Our great challenge here on this earth is to seek after and find that "light" which brings us closer to our Heavenly Father and helps us make our own lives com-

patible with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

—ERIC D. OLSON

**I** LOVED Brother Collette for his intelligence and for the insights he brought to my understanding of the gospel. But more than that, I loved him for the joy he got from interacting with us. The Institute was like a home, and he and Charlotte Schuyler weren't exactly "parents," but they were definitely partners in making the Institute what it was. When the Institute was being renovated and

almost done, I remember going through with him and some other students, and he was so proud to show the place off. He wanted us to all feel part of it—and we really did. Institute classes were good, but great discussions could happen any place because Brother Collette would come out to say hello and get interested in what we were talking about.

I remember his asking why it was that more often women married men who weren't spiritually to their par than happened the other way around. He didn't think it was right for women to do that.

I remember how much he loved his wife and children, and how he talked about them. I remember his saying how lucky he was to be the director of the Berkeley Institute and how he didn't want to go anywhere else.

—MONICA HENDRICKS

**B**RENT put his whole life into this Institute program—into us—and we all felt it. While going to school, I would talk to him every day for at least two hours. He was my mentor through theologically challenging times. He helped me to sound out concerns, to inquire and challenge and explore while still holding to the truths of the gospel. He would guide me, and when he knew I was ready for a challenge, he would raise new questions for me. I felt the interest he had in my life. Many of my regrets are for all of the things I still want to learn from him, all the questions I still want to ask him.

—GERALD JONES (the younger)

**I** ATTENDED class only once a month, and it seemed that I went to class and Adam and Eve were in the Garden. Then the next month, they were still in the Garden.

—NIEN PING

**I** MET Brent when I was just coming back to the Church. I loved hearing him teach us about the gospel. His catch phrases like, "You can't give love away fast enough, because the Savior always sends love in return," and "Put this on page one of your journal" are now little blessings.

—CRYSTAL COE

**I** REMEMBER we had an evening Forum speaker once whom Brent wanted very much to hear. The event was well attended and the speaker began—but no Brent. At one point, I left to use the restroom and found Brent in his office, poking at the prepared dinner while he listened to a mentally ill (and perhaps drunk) sometime member of the Church sing one Primary song after another. Brent had sacrificed his opportunity to hear this speaker so the rest of us could enjoy the message in peace. Whenever the straggly singer made a move to go explore the rest of the building, Brent coaxed him to stay, gamely requesting another song and expressing vast appreciation for the one just completed. He spent probably two hours in this unenviable position. I think it is telling that I no longer remember the speaker's message or even who he was, but I do remember Brent's self-sacrificing act of love that night.

I used to cringe when someone would ask a difficult gospel-related question in a Sunday School or Institute class, and it took me some time before I realized why: I secretly feared the gospel would not hold up to such scrutiny. I was afraid that talking about certain aspects of the Church would expose flaws that would "ruin it" for those who hadn't seen the same discrepancies, like asking technical questions about Santa Claus in front of a child. Brent changed all that for me, not by knowing all the answers—though he did have an amazing wealth of knowledge that included Near Eastern studies, physics, philosophy, and comparative religion—but by constantly searching for answers himself. Without ever veering in the least from the standard doctrines of the gospel, he was constantly studying the scriptures and many other sources, asking provocative questions of his students and coming up with theories which he tested out on us. These theories always linked true gospel principles in ways that made the whole gospel make more sense to me. And though we all took turns deflating a few of his balloons (usually with less tact than he steered us around our own misguided ideas, I'm afraid), he always took such revisions in stride and was quick to dismiss anything shown to be false. He held fast to anything that was true, and when two true





