

## NONSTANDARD DEVIATIONS

## DAD, IT'S NOT A KEY RING!

By Michael Nielsen

THE PHONE CALL came out of the blue, a complete surprise. The voice on the other end was familiar, but she didn't usually telephone us. She was pregnant and couldn't keep the baby. The father's solution was to offer his credit card to pay for an abortion. Her solution: Would we adopt the baby when it was born? She's a longtime family friend whose mother has known my wife, Sheila, longer than I have. She decided to ask us to care for her child because she likes the way we've raised our daughter, Kelly, who is a competent, inquisitive, and caring sixteen-year-old. Her hope is that we will do the same for this child. Sheila and I asked her a few more questions and quickly confirmed with each other that we were thinking along the same lines. "Yes!" we said. And with that call, the most recent phase in my adventure with fatherhood began.

One of my favorite passages regarding fatherhood comes from the Gospel of Mark—Mark Twain, that is: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."<sup>1</sup> I think Twain was right that fathers *do* learn a thing or two along the way. And the arrival of our new son, Paul Soren Nielsen, has caused me to wonder afresh about some of the life lessons I've learned most joyfully from my fatherhood journey.

*Expect the unexpected.* I first learned this bit of wisdom when our daughter, Kelly, kicked me for the first time—smack in the back—while we were sleeping. She wasn't yet born; Sheila and I were snuggled together on our air mattresses. (We were poverty-stricken graduate students with no furniture.) Suddenly, Kelly kicked hard enough to wake me. It was the first time I had felt her move. "Do it again!" I foolishly told Sheila, as though she controlled the kicking going on within her womb. The jolt of Kelly's kick and

my ridiculous request were warnings that I should be ready for many more unexpected things to come—and that I often might want to think past my first reactions to those surprises.

*Love hurts—literally.* I thought that I loved Sheila before Kelly was born, but whatever I had felt then was just a shadow of what was to come. I'll spare you the gruesome details of a long and difficult delivery and simply say that I really wondered if she would survive. *Really* wondered. Were it not for medical advances, there's no doubt I would have lost both my wife and child during that ordeal. I have sometimes said, only half-jokingly, that there is a reason we had one child during the first sixteen years of our marriage. The difficulty of Kelly's delivery, and the very real terror I felt at the possibility of losing both Sheila and Kelly, is probably the main reason why we've had a small family. Holding her hand through that experience taught me more about love and sacrifice than I had ever known before.

*Experts aren't always right.* The delivery room doctors and nurses had something of a bet going on when Kelly was born. We did not yet know the baby's sex, but they told us they had a sure-fire way of predicting whether it was a boy or a girl. As the baby entered the world, they said they would be able to predict its sex based on the shape of the ears. As Kelly's head emerged, they told us we were having a boy. Then, as her large shoulders appeared, they spiced up their forecast with the claim that our boy would play linebacker on a football team. They were almost right. Our then-eleven-pound, six-ounce baby girl now plays trumpet during half-time shows at football games.

*Patience is a two-way street.* A friend once gave a sacrament meeting talk on patience, introducing it with the somewhat-clichéd line, "I prayed for patience. God gave me kids." It's a fun statement, and true, but only half complete, I think. Children do teach

parents patience. Yet, I'll bet that if we asked our children if they have to be patient with us, they'd vote unanimously in the affirmative. Family members all teach one another patience, and it can be one of the more challenging lessons to learn as we try to balance the needs and desires of many people living under one roof.

*Look for the humor—or, at least, the irony.* Sheila and I have often remarked that we paid for our daughter Kelly with student loans. When we moved to Illinois for graduate school, we had enough money for either a year's worth of insurance or a month's worth of food plus the books we'd need for the coming semester. Being fond of eating, dedicated to our studies, and optimistic, we opted for food and books. But, like all best-laid plans, ours met reality, and soon Kelly became known in our private musings as "The Pre-existing Condition." We financed the nearly week-long hospital stay with student loans and have just this year finished paying them off. We now can officially consider Kelly to be paid for *just in time to begin paying the attorney's fees for Paul's adoption!* I can only hope that Paul is "paid for" before he turns sixteen!

*My child is not me.* We all know the stereotypical Little League father who is living vicariously through his child, trying to achieve the glow of athletic prowess by proxy. I have learned that this is not a good mode of living. In my case, the dream wasn't baseball, but my hope that my child would have certain interests or be involved in particular activities quickly showed itself to be misplaced. I now realize that I help my children most when I allow them the room, as Joseph Campbell says, to follow their own bliss. Each of us needs to live our own life, not someone else's.

*I don't know everything.* Actually, I have learned that I often know very little. One of the more laughable demonstrations of this fact came when Sheila told me she had a surprise and then showed me what I thought was an unusual-looking key ring. It took some coaxing from Sheila and my teenage daughter before I realized that it was a home pregnancy kit and that the plus sign did not mean a new car was on the way.

*I am not in control.* A couple of months later, I was brutally reminded that I am not in control and don't always get what I want. It is quite a psychological distance to move from being a nearly-in-our-forties couple with a teenager to expecting a second child. Still, excitement built quickly as we adjusted to the idea of childproofing, late-night feedings, diapers, and all the other joys of parenting a



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baby. Our excitement turned to grief, however, when this pregnancy ended early, ironically on a Thanksgiving Day. No, I am *not* in control. I am merely an actor. Sometimes I can ad lib my lines, but someone else has written the script.

*Power and authority do not equal action or smarts.* Through our adoption of Paul, I have begun to understand what Winston Churchill said about bureaucratic governmental agencies: "So they go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent."<sup>2</sup> This I have learned in the context of the ICPC, the Interstate Compact for Placement of Children, which oversees adoptions occurring between agencies in two states. To a humble non-specialist like me, ICPC actions at times seem not only contrary to its charter, but even illogical, inefficient, and contradictory. One branch of the ICPC required things that the other said were unnecessary; the left hand barely communicated with the right. Although Sheila was with Paul and his birth mother from the moment he was born and the judge granted us custody three days later, bureaucratic prowess conspired to make it so Paul was nearly one month old before he and Sheila came home.

*We need to worry about the world we bring our children into and work to make it better.* Can a person be a parent without worrying about our world? I have worried about small things and large ones. This summer, I worried about how Kelly would enjoy being away at camp for two months. In truth, I was worrying for myself; she was far more ready for the experience than I was. Now that we are rearing Paul, I worry about new things. For example, I worry about a culture in which boys are glorified for athletics and discouraged from academics. As one small illustration of the problem, I recently asked my class of thirty students how many of their high school's valedictorians had been male. Not one hand went up. Not a single student's high school had had a male valedictorian. During Academic Honors Night at Kelly's school, boys seldom went to the platform to receive awards. I'm worried as a parent and as a member of this culture. I must be on guard about the subtle messages my children receive, and I must take steps to send better ones.

*Trusting each other is a risk worth taking.* The most powerful lessons I have learned



The Neilsens and friend, Christmas 2003 (l to r): Michael, Santa, Paul, Kelly, and Sheila

about trust have come in my interactions with my daughter. One of them happened when we moved from Illinois to Georgia. Driving our U-Haul into Atlanta, we rounded a bend only to see traffic stopped ahead. Traveling at 55 miles per hour downhill in a tightly packed truck, I honestly doubted we'd be able to avoid crashing into the rear of the traffic jam, and I said something to that effect. I had both feet on the brake, practically standing on it. Six-year-old Kelly, sitting next to me, patted my knee, and said, "It's okay, daddy, we'll stop." I'm not sure whether she trusted me, God, or something else in that moment, but fortunately she was right. She's right about many things, and I've come to trust her judgment on a wide array of topics, from clothing to grammar. But on a deeper level, we trust each other with hopes and dreams, acting as confidante and friend as well as parent and child. Trust requires dependency, something that we as adults are sometimes reluctant to admit. In many ways, trust also is something that our Mormon culture, with its emphasis on self-reliance, does not always encourage. We would be better off if we confessed more often to each other our many dependencies and interdependencies.

*The first will be last, and the last will be first.* Placing others before ourselves brings greater happiness than does looking out for number one. This maxim is never more true than in the case of parents caring for a baby. But it also remains true as parents chauffeur a child to and from school or church and all the many other places and events that dominate the life of a child and teenager. Of course, after years of this kind of first being last, we eventually change places with our children. At some future point, our children adjust their schedules around us as we need help going to doctor's offices, the store, and all of the other places elderly people might need help getting to.

*Life is beautiful.* Through my children's eyes, I have been reminded again and again

that life is magical. In the eyes of a child, the world can be a truly wonderful place. Bugs crawl across the sidewalk. Sunsets glow brightly in the sky. White rice and brown rice have different textures. Ceiling fans are fascinating. The beauty of everyday things is revealed through our children's eyes. It is good to be reminded often of such things.

*Even the smallest of creatures can teach love.* During the past few months, I have gazed into my new son's eyes, and I have wondered many things. Most of all, I have

wondered if he knows what love is and the ways he has given love to me. Can infants understand love when they don't yet know how to feed themselves? Analytically, I suspect not. But I do think that we don't always have to be an expert in something in order to teach it to others. Love is a case in point. Whether or not they knew it at the time, my babies, Kelly and Paul, have taught me love beyond my wildest dreams. What else can account for the feelings we parents have when, awakened from a deep slumber, we stumble to the crib to pick up a child and are greeted with a grin from ear to ear. Because they symbolize love's bonds, those smiles make the interruption worth it.

*Love is selfless.* This message has come to me in small and large ways. The little things that we do for one another evidence the way love intertwines with selflessness. I am awed by the woman who called us one night a year ago to offer her unborn child in an amazing act of selflessness. Words can't describe the beauty of what she did. There is no way to repay her, except to be the best father I can possibly be.

**K**ING Benjamin said that everyone affiliated with raising children should "... teach [them] to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ... teach them to love one another and to serve one another" (Mos. 4:15). It seems to me that when we are really paying attention, much more than one-directional teaching is going on. Jesus invited the children to come to him. These are just a few reasons I believe we should do the same. ☺

#### NOTES

1. This saying has been attributed to Twain, but is still unconfirmed. See <<http://www.twainquotes.com/father.html>>.

2. Winston Churchill, statement made on 12 Nov. 1936, *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, Tony Augarde, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).