

TOUCHSTONES

Letters Home

MY MISSION PRESIDENT, Sanfred W. Elieson, told us to write home every week. For the most part, I did. English-speaking Texas was a single mission when I served there, and after three months training in the Oak Cliffs section of Dallas, I was sent to Odessa, in west Texas, the oil-workers' counterpart to the Midlands of George H. W. Bush. I not only wrote home every week and wrote a weekly report to President Elieson, I also wrote to several girls—nowadays we'd call them young women, but since I was still a boy all through my mission, I thought of them as girls and wrote to them as girls.

Because I was still awkward in my dealings with girls, I acted like an adolescent around them, even in letters. On one hot, dry, flat August Monday morning in Odessa, for reasons best left to the imagination, I wrote one of those letters to one of those girls, a Valerie, in yellow marker. I wrote the letter on white, lined paper, so I could see the letters as I wrote, and I could still read them even after I'd finished. On both sides of the leaf. Valerie was a friend I'd met at BYU, a California girl I was writing to; at the time, my romantic interests lay elsewhere. We'd met in David Yarn's Philosophy 101 class, where I'd tried to convince her that I was a solipsist and she was an unattainable desire I'd thought up to torment myself. She didn't

believe that, but she thought that I did. It was a mark of our friendship that we still studied together after that. But, as I later learned, the yellow-marker letter seriously strained that friendship.

Valerie actually managed to read it and answered it in an aggravated reply, asking if I intended to write to her that way for the rest of my mission. As I recall, my yellow-marker letter was a poetic riff on the isolation and flatness of west Texas, a witty way for a clever young poet to address the fact that Texas was even more barren, flat, and unprofitable than Utah. I considered the letter not so much an attempt to communicate as the communication of that attempt.

I'll never be able to confirm that, or anything else about the letter, because Valerie burned it along with all the others I'd sent her, thinking I was trying to drive her away. After we were married, nearly four years later, she told me she'd burned the letters and had been surprised when I wrote to her again. I had written her as a friend, and had intended to charm, rather than harm. She had resumed the correspondence only on condition that I use no marker.

WHEN OUR CHILDREN were all living at home, Valerie created a family log (instead of a diary, which would have centered on her). When, years later, our children started to

leave home, first for school and missions, then for work and marriage, we both wrote to them, and they answered. By then we had a computer and could process the letters before printing and mailing them. Valerie always erased her letters from the computer once printed, not wanting to clutter the hard drive. If I got to the computer before she erased them, I'd save them.

By then I'd lived with Valerie long enough to know that her letters were sparkling, clever accounts of what was going on in our lives. I liked to read them for several reasons, but the primary one was her voice—the same voice that had sustained me as a missionary. It was bright, witty, interested in each child, concerned with what concerned them, and though I gave as my reason for reading the letters that I could know what I didn't need to cover in my own letter, my real motive was to read what she had written.

When we started to use email, that all changed. With our family's dispersal to New York, Washington, California, Korea, and Illinois, she conceived a new family log, one of all the emails we wrote to keep in touch. It became her project to keep and edit the emails into a narrative of our diaspora. She is still the energy for that keeping in touch, still the one writing freely and happily to let our children know what we're doing, still the one finding clever ways to look at our lives. Thanks to her, we have a home for our letters, our letters home.

DENNIS CLARK
Orem, Utah

SEARCHING THROUGH THE boxes of papers, memorabilia, and photographs my mother had lovingly collected for each family member, I serendipitously picked up a box of letters bearing 1960s postmarks from several Florida cities. I can no longer recall what I was looking for in the basement that day, though I'm sure it had to do with my upcoming two-year leave for Massachusetts. Time was rapidly approaching for my departure to the MTC, and I had begun packing up my few possessions. Realizing what the box contained, I carried my father's mission letters up to my disheveled bedroom.

Stuffing two suitcases for a twenty-four-month hiatus brought on an odd feeling of anxiety that morning, something foreign to me. However, it was more than just the dread of quitting my worldly pursuits—music, education, and books—cold-turkey. Looking at the neatly packed luggage, with my new shirts, new ties, new suits, even a new set of scriptures, I wondered if there could be room

TOUCHSTONES is a SUNSTONE section that debuted in the December 2005 issue. It was inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. SUNSTONE reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to SUNSTONE, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. Electronic submissions can be sent via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: allen@sunstoneonline.com. Due to space limitations, submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces. Please submit right away for upcoming topics.

Upcoming Topics: { THE WARD
POSSESSIONS
FAMILY DINNER



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for anything old, anything me, anything McDonald, anything Idaho.

Reading through the mission letters that afternoon calmed my uneasiness. While I remember my father telling stories of his days in Florida, the letters provided unfiltered access to life in the mission field. Always addressed “Dear Mom and Dad,” the correspondence told of many rejections, struggles with companions, thoughts of home, the kindness of members, and a constant plea that more people would write.

A letter dated April 1964 from Gainesville recounted the excitement of meeting and teaching that sought-after “golden contact,” one who immediately responded to the message. The man gave “the most wonderful prayers that I have ever heard a contact give; he asked the Lord to help him to be worthy of baptism (sic) and of the true church,” wrote the energized missionary. Throughout its five pages, the letter convinced readers, even if thirty years distant, of the joys in bringing souls to Christ. I tucked the letter into one of my suitcases.

I carried that letter with me every day of my mission. A little worse for the wear, my father’s modern day epistle provided great comfort, encouragement, and a little bit of home

whenever I needed it most. When my younger brother left for the plains of South Dakota a few years later, it went with him as well.

DYLAN J. McDONALD
Sacramento, California

AFTER I FOUND my birth mother’s phone number, I decided to write her a letter rather than call, thinking I might stumble less over my words. Looking back, I don’t remember a word I wrote, only the feeling that I tried to approach the topic subtly, rather than accusing her of giving birth to me and then giving me up.

She called two days later, the instant she got the letter. My husband, who I hadn’t told about my secret search for my birth mother, answered the phone. He had no idea who she was. When he questioned her, she hung up quickly. I called later that night. From miles away, all I could tell was that this wasn’t the best moment for her to discuss things with me. During intermittent conversations over the next few months, I gradually understood that while my adoption was the ace in the hand I had been dealt, for her, feeling that she needed to give me up was worse than any bad card she could have received. It represented being thrown out of the game at

the age of twenty. She said the time when she relinquished me was so painful that she had mentally blanked out most events so they seemed almost like dreams to her now. Yet moments later, she said she clearly remembered torn emotions as she had signed the paper allowing me to be adopted.

I sought warmth and bonding; she granted me crumbs. She didn’t have to tell me that I was her deep, dark secret. Our conversations felt furtive and stolen. I sensed she was oddly flattered by my attention, yet her mood could turn cold mid-sentence. Sounding wistful, she said that my birth father looked handsome in white and that her own father had once published articles in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Yet if I asked a “wrong” question—such as wanting to know my grandfather’s name—oops, I stepped on a land mine—she would clam up, turn icy, or say she had to get off the phone.

She said she would tell her three children about me someday, “when they are grown.” Still unwilling to accept her reluctance, I continued to call and write every few months or years. My gestures were met with pained endurance from which I pried rare bits of enlightening information. Her father had survived diphtheria. She had never missed a

day of school. Five years after we first talked, she phoned to say she was now forty-seven and menopausal and I could expect the same thing around that age. She shared a few tidbits about her children, and actually gave a story I had published to her teenage son, saying it had been written by “a friend.” As time slid by, I reasoned she held tight control against opening up with me as a sort of retribution for the helplessness and lack of options she had felt when giving me up. I sensed that maybe I wasn’t getting to know the real person—that somewhere inside her was a friendly, outgoing soul who was more like me.

Eventually, I grew weary of trying to court her friendship. My occasional letters and phone calls tapered off such that we were in contact only a handful of times during the twenty years after we first spoke. Feeling spontaneous love for my own four children only made her iciness more of a mystery. But I never gave up hope.

CAROLYN CAMPBELL
Salt Lake City, Utah

PEOPLE WHO KNEW me were surprised to learn that I wasn’t going to Ricks College (now BYU-Idaho) with a classmate or friend from home but rather was going alone. Although I am a homebody and knew even before I left Bountiful, Utah, that I would be terribly homesick, I believed it would be a great adventure to meet new people, and I had confidence I would be able to get along with any roommates assigned to my apartment.

My parents and grandmother drove to Rexburg to drop me off. It was very emotional for all of us as they deposited me and the pile of belongings I had so carefully collected during the previous months. I cried as they drove away. None of the other five girls had arrived yet, so after drying my eyes, I waited hopefully—how could there not be one or two girls I would have a lot in common with?

Within a few hours, our apartment had six total tenants—all but me from California—and a couple of them who knew each other already. As the days went by, I felt more and more isolated and bewildered by my roommates’ behavior. While one other girl and I got up each morning to attend class (I had missionary prep at 8:00), the others slept in and rarely, if ever, went to class. I had trouble understanding how the girls could steal bottles of ketchup from the local restaurant, or buy a pair of pants, wear them on a date, and then return them for cash. Each day while I was in class, my roommates puttered around the apartment, rearranging furniture and trying on clothes from all the closets. I never knew what new position my bed or other belongings would be in when I returned, and I worried about my things being looked through and possibly taken while I was out for so many hours. Their behavior went against my values, which had been formed through eighteen years of Primary and Young Women’s teachings. While one of the girls spoke several times about her wonderful experience serving two

weeks with the missionary sisters in her local ward shortly before coming to school, she and my other roommates attended church only once during our months together.

It was the week that my roommates attended that my student ward Relief Society president noticed me. After the meetings (I had been crying homesick tears through much of sacrament meeting), that dear president asked about my well-being and remarked how different I was from my roommates. Knowing that she cared and had taken the time to talk to me, I felt better. In those few words, she voiced the feelings of loneliness I had been experiencing.

I don’t know if the two girls who visited me shortly after that Sunday had been assigned by our Relief Society president or if they had likewise been moved by the Spirit to reach out to me. But I won’t forget the day Donna Davis and Robin Troumbley knocked on my door and handed me a card. They introduced themselves and said they lived a few doors down. They left after letting me know I was welcome to visit their place any time. In the privacy of my room I opened the card, which said, “Whenever you’re in a jam, just give me a call, and I’ll come running with the bread and peanut butter.”

It was a silly card with silly lines, but my entire Ricks experience changed from then on. I moved in with Donna and Robin the next semester. At last I was “home.”

LORRI WOTHERSPOON
Tooele, Utah

The Sunstone Education Foundation is pleased to announce:

THE 2007 R. L. “BUZZ” CAPENER MEMORIAL WRITING CONTEST IN COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites submissions of papers to the R. L. “Buzz” Capener Memorial Writing Contest in Comparative Religious Studies.

The contest originates in the conviction that the study of Mormon theology and doctrine can greatly benefit from examination in a comparative context with other Christian and non-Christian traditions. The contest encourages entries that bring LDS concepts and practices into discussion with the worldviews, doctrines, and rituals of other faiths, trusting that the comparative act will enrich the understanding of each. Papers should exhibit sound scholarship but also be accessible to a broad, non-specialist readership.

The papers, without author identification, will be judged by qualified scholars of Mormonism and religious studies. The winners will be invited to give their papers at the 2007 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, held 8–11 August, and their papers will be published in a future issue of SUNSTONE magazine. Only the winners will be notified personally of the results. After the judging is complete, all non-winning entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

The contest is sponsored by the family of R. L. “Buzz” Capener to honor the memory of his life of faith, acceptance of diversity, and the pursuit of truth.

PRIZES: A total of \$1,000.00 will be awarded:
\$750.00 for the best submission
\$250 for the runner-up

RULES:

1. Only one entry may be submitted by any author or team of authors. Four copies must be postmarked or reach the Sunstone offices before or on **30 APRIL 2007**. Entries will not be returned.
2. Each entry must be 8,000 words or fewer (exclusive of footnotes). Entries must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper, paginated, and stapled in the upper left corner. Author names should not appear on any page of the entry.

3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the essay’s title and the author’s (or authors’) name, address, telephone number, and email address. Each cover letter must be signed and attest that the entry is the person or team’s work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, will not be submitted to other forums until after the contest, and that, if the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights.

4. Winners will be selected by anonymous evaluations supplied by judges appointed by the Sunstone Education Foundation and the R. L. “Buzz” Capener Memorial Writing Contest organizing committee. Sunstone will announce the winners at www.sunstoneonline.com and in SUNSTONE magazine.

FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH THESE RULES WILL RESULT IN DISQUALIFICATION.



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