

TO THE BISHOP WHO CONDUCTED MY FATHER'S FUNERAL SERVICE YESTERDAY¹

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As part of your opening welcome over the pulpit, you announced to us that filming and photography were not allowed in the chapel. We had just gathered there in front of my father's closed casket after the family prayer in other still-sacred space in the church house. Both I and Sofia—Lloyd's grandchild, my oldest, the one with the tripod and camera set up to make a visual record of the event at Grandma's request—received your words not as welcome but as unworthiness. You could not have known that Sofia had not been in a Latter-day Saint chapel for years, that other messages of unworthiness and unwelcome had sent them seeking elsewhere. You also likely did not know of the new widow's request to her grandchildren to honor their grandfather based on particular talents. Sofia's is film. In either case, you should not have to know to respect the grief bare before you. Despite your prohibition, I turned from my pew and nodded at Sofia to keep going.

Then, after the hymn and prayer, were you so focused on our disobedience in not packing up the camera—and others not turning off their myriad phones—that you somehow missed my reading of the obituary across that same pulpit? Did your heart not hear how “Lloyd's spirit, breath, and body unbundled in excruciatingly slow motion over the past five bedridden weeks and the decade before”; how our souls craved every positive memory, every possible record,

1. Winner of the 2019 Eugene England Essay Contest.

the slightest glimmer of hope against the violence his Alzheimer's, his depression, and his hearing loss had inflicted on our family? Did you misapprehend the gaps in the family gathered before you, the absent grandchildren scattered around the world—New Zealand, Japan, Virginia—who could not possibly be in attendance?

As I finished reading the obituary and stepped shakily down from the stand, you returned again to the pulpit and stopped the service. Your words demanded obedience: No recording. No photography. No filming. Not in the chapel. My already-battered heart exploded in disbelief. Sofia leapt up from the left, tears streaming, to protest. Loud across the hushed chapel, I barked at my child to sit down, then turned to look up at you. I spoke. "We are doing it. We filmed at my mother-in-law's funeral in the chapel. We are recording now." I sank into my seat between my oldest sister and my husband, scarlet and shamed that your insistence required my open, loud defiance in front of the entire congregation. A man in a plaid shirt and jeans strode up from the back, past my sobbing Sofia, and counseled with you across the front balustrade. When I thanked him later, I learned he is a high councilor in your stake who shared with you a recent message from the stake president. Yes, the rule is no recording in chapels, but there are times to let it go.

Sofia told me later that it was good that I ordered them to sit down. After quickly editing out the vulgarities, they would have roared, "My grandmother asked me to photograph. Hers is the only authority I recognize." My second brother told me something I missed in the confrontational moment; that you too were looking at my mother when you stopped the funeral, shaking your head "No," as if to both recognize her matriarchal authority and subvert it to your priesthood in the same instance. She stayed silent, her gaze low on her hands.

To have a funeral service in an LDS chapel, the Church requires the home ward bishop or one of his counselors to conduct. But, given the geographical nature of LDS congregations, yours was not the home ward of either of my parents when my father died. We had moved him

to the Veterans Affairs home in Payson in January when his deluded violence made it no longer safe for my mother to care for him alone. She moved to independent living apartments in east Provo in July. Post-move boundary changes in southwest Provo meant that their marital home ended up in your ward, but neither of them had ever actually worshipped under your ecclesiastical stewardship. Thank you for your expansive interpretation of ward membership and the hours you gave on a Friday afternoon to conduct a funeral outside the formal responsibilities of your calling. I am grateful you followed the counsel of plaid-shirt-and-jeans man and allowed my father's funeral services to proceed with Sofia's camera clicking and multiple phones recording. At the same time, I so desperately needed you to respect the collective authority of our familial grief, to honor the unworthiness of our sinful mite of film and photography, and to empower my newly widowed mother, rather than conceding only to patriarchy. I needed you to see us.



The perversity of that confrontation in the chapel distills my relationship with my father and the institutional Church. One evening last November, I took a tentative step towards him as he stood in his living room. With the brutal honesty that Alzheimer's delusions afforded him and unimpeded by normal inhibitions, he screamed truth: "You terrify me." He staggered backwards, cowering, hunched against the terror I, his second daughter, invoked. When people ask me if Alzheimer's changed his personality, I say no. Dementia took dark slivers of his character—fear, insecurity, misogyny—then replicated and refined them to a purity that gradually, then completely, overwhelmed the good. Close to a decade before his death, he had become so vicious with me that my husband suggested I never see him again as I drove us home one Sunday night, devastated again after yet another fraught dinner at my parents' house.

In the waning days of my father's life, my mother first asked me to write and deliver his obituary at the funeral. I told her no. "He didn't much like me," I explained painfully when she queried by phone the refusal I sent in an insomniac email at 3:00 am. "Oh, Tig," she implored, calling me by a childhood nickname. "He loved you. He was so proud of you. You have done so much for him. You have been there more than any of the kids." My gut clenched. "That may be," I grimaced. "Perhaps he loved me, but he did not like me. I was not what he wanted. I am a girl. I was not submissive. I would not do what he asked." I launched into all my failures to please and obey him across the years, the ways I disrespected the patriarchal authority to which he clung, both before and after the creeping loss of Alzheimer's.

In his worldview, my talents—on a girl—were both threatening and invisible. He invited a visiting son-in-law and grandsons to the university where he taught, but left me—his only child with a graduate degree approximating his PhD—out, convinced I would not be interested. Because money and management were male domains, he took my attorney-husband aside in private to ask him to be the executor of my parents' estate, leaving attorney-me standing with my mother in the kitchen. He pushed back, hard, on my plans for a mission, a priesthood responsibility.

After my older sister also said no to writing and delivering the obituary for her own reasons distant from mine, I relented, acquiescing to duty as I have so often done over so many years. On the day of his death, I sat on the sunless rumped bed of a budget hotel room in Guadalajara, Mexico, where I had flown for a conference on migration and family separation. For five hours, I wrote and rewrote, crying and writing, while my mind darted between English and the Spanish necessary for my next presentation. I dug through the life story that my mother had cajoled from him and transcribed into hard copy, searching for the evanescent goodness of which I had lost hold. He was Dr. Wigglestein concocting special drinks for his children from random items in the fridge, telling stories to his grandchildren while he rubbed their feet. He saw prophecy

in common words, in his friend Bob Comisford's dark joke about car accidents. He drove, the only one who would, in a blinding snowstorm in the middle of the night to rescue Cheuk Chan, stuck with a broken car at the top of a pass between Beaver and Fillmore, Utah. He was the Gospel Doctrine teacher in the Seattle 3rd Ward who rolled a car tire into the room and put it on a folding metal chair in front of the class. He used words rather than the razor strap he suffered as a child when one of his children, throwing lit matches out a second-story bedroom window, started the shake roof on fire in the split-level on Jonquil Avenue.

When I finished with his life story, I read the tributes that began to appear on Facebook and the mortuary website. He taught his young nephews Jacob and Gordon how to tie their shoes; with each success, he moved the boys up a cool basement step towards the sunny kitchen in his parents' home in Mansfield, Ohio. The eight-year-olds in his Primary class in the Lafayette Ward were the best prepared ever for baptism. He inspired countless university students in speech and language pathology, acting as a surrogate father to many who doubted themselves. I wrote the obituary, knowing deep down that my visibility in the task, my step towards him outside patriarchal order, would have threatened, terrified him still.

In a similar manner, I, and women like me, seem to threaten the Church. That foreboding is constrained, in force and frequency, to those rare moments when we, schooled so deeply in duty and obedience, gather enough gumption to step forward out of institutional invisibility, as I did when I spoke loud across the hushed chapel at my father's funeral, as Sofia did when they left the camera up. Unlike my father, however, the institutional Church does not flinch or cower, or even speak the terror visible daughters can invoke. When people ask me if I have changed, I say yes. I could recount my lived decades of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the exquisite detail that scrupulosity demands: early morning seminary, mission, temple marriage, childbirth and miscarriage, scripture reading, volumes filled with journal writing, fasting, prayer, and monthly testimony

bearing. I am not sure what more I could have done, believed, or been over the course of my extant decades to demonstrate my faith, to recoup the self that was gendered, silenced, and undercut by that first endowment session in the Dallas Temple in July 1985.

What I am is not what the Church appears to want or need. Such talents—on a girl—are invisible, largely unusable. Our status as women is auxiliary, unnecessary to the core administrative and spiritual functioning of the institutional Church. My invisibility is neither theoretical nor abstract, but reverberates as chronic pain, gut wrenching at times, and sharpened now by no ward calling for fifteen months. Like the young women of the Church, I can recite the theme: “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love him.” “That may be,” my heart responds, “but it is not clear, to me at least, that He likes us.”