

The Uncommon Touch: Brief Moments with N. Eldon Tanner

I was a sophomore at BYU in 1953 when my parents called one Sunday from Calgary to tell me what we had already anticipated: that a new stake had been formed there. My father had been “Mr. Mormon” in Calgary, and my facile assumption that he would be the stake’s first president was shattered when mom said, with warm pride, that dad was first counselor. Family loyalty bristled as I asked, “Well, who’s the president?” “N. Eldon Tanner,” dad replied. Though in my eyes there could be none more worthy than my father for the task, I learned from his reply that he saw in his president one vastly more qualified. Dad’s few words let me know that my father, who had been my mentor and director would now sit as disciple at the feet of his acknowledged superior. I took notice of President Tanner from that time onward.

I was never close enough to President Tanner to be a Boswell to his Johnson. The public greatness of the man reflected by his biographers and eulogists I know only as legend. What is writ large in my memory of that leader are the smaller qualities of character which I saw as he dealt with concern and caring for me and those I love.

To him I was not merely Charles’s youngest daughter, to be called to do the stake jobs no one wanted, to keep track of at BYU while ideological wars waged in her mind, to interview for a mission when she didn’t manage to marry that nice young gentile. I’m aware that churchmen perform those offices of friendship for each other’s children. But President Tanner devoted as much thought and attention to my closest friend whose family, she often reminded me, “were nobodies in the Church.” He stood by her, concerned, as she worked her way through instruction from a Catholic priest to acceptance of a call to the LDS Swiss Mission. One Christmas Jo and I were both in Europe, where he presided as European Mission president. He and Sister Tanner — I’m not sure at whose initiation — salvaged us from a lonely celebration, Jo in Paris, I in London, to join them at Leatherhead, their home in England. I wonder now if our calm quiet talk around their fireplace in any way compensated for the invitation to Majorca which they had declined. Jo might have stayed longer with Mormonism had she continued to have President Tanner’s

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wisdom to match her own wide-ranging mind. I remember his unthreatened response to my own inquisitive wandering: "It's not that other philosophies are evil. They seek the same good we do. It is simply that Mormonism has gone further toward the goal." To souls sick of "straight and narrow" platitudes, his "anything virtuous and lovely" breadth was ambrosial.

President Tanner's political and ecclesiastical loyalty transcended the "my-country-right-or-wrong" mentality. Though he always sat on the Government side of the House, he assumed the integrity and acknowledged the value of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition. After the destruction of the Coalville Tabernacle, I went with a group of preservation-minded Latter-day Saints to visit him in his office as counselor to President Lee. His warmth osmosed through his Canadian reserve, and I felt comfortable, even knowing that we were coming as critics of the Church to one of its chief officers. "Sit here, Maureen," he invited. He gestured to the red leather-covered chair, newly upholstered at obvious cost, and treasured because it had been in the Council Room of the Temple. President Tanner listened attentively to our pleas. He refrained from faulting our establishment of Cornerstone, an organization with the avowed purpose of lobbying Church administrators for the preservation of historic Mormon buildings. Then, business over, he patted the red leather chair. "I think I'm a preservationist at heart, myself." It does not surprise me that he had part in the very expensive restorations of the Promised Valley Playhouse and the Capitol Theater, or that the Alberta Temple is still untouched despite the recent wave of temple remodelings.

Questions of Church policy might well have been routine for President Tanner — matters to be resolved in his pattern of, as he told me long ago, gathering the data available, considering all sides, and then deciding. "But President Tanner," I protested, "what if, after you've decided, some more evidence comes to bear?" "The decision still stands, Maureen," he replied firmly. "I don't have time to make decisions twice." Only as I grow in perspective do I see the greater value of the process over the product.

But one question once proved too difficult, and President Tanner had the humility to acknowledge the paradoxical in what seems a straightforward faith. While he was serving the Calgary Stake as its president, he was also serving Canada as president of Trans-Canada Pipeline. That service required him to be away much of the time, and the administrative responsibility for the stake, then in process of building its stake center, fell to my father. Dad's hours were long as he kept up with the stake work, at the same time establishing himself in his own new real estate and development business. The cost to him was heavy, both in health and money. Weighted with heavy debt, but even more with the concomitant question, Dad let slip his worry: "Eldon, I've done what I should. I've sought the kingdom of heaven first. And 'all these things' have not been added. I am deeper in debt than I think I can handle. Why has the Lord not come through?" No sermon, no cheap optimism from his president. Just the compassion of a friend, acknowledging the unknowable: "I know, Charles, I know. And I don't know why."

When last I saw President Tanner and Sister Tanner, it was at a luncheon a month before his death. Despite long acquaintance I was hesitant to approach. "How are you, President Tanner?" "Well enough for an old man," he responded. I wanted to shout my fury at a human fate which so cripples the housing of a still productive mind, to proclaim my anger that he should have to endure his body's burden. Instead I turned to Sister Tanner with the little visitings women do and left President Tanner in his quiet stoicism to teach me one last lesson in greatness.