

The More We Get Together

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I WAS TIRED OF STUDYING. My eyes red and blurry, I strolled the fifth floor of the BYU library looking for someone fun to meet. (Yes, I was scamming.) One woman in the southwest wing caught my eye: a cute brunette with a bob. No ring. Studious. I grabbed a few books off a nearby shelf and sat in the carrel next to her. She was drinking a Big Gulp. I wrote a note and slid it into her carrel without looking up: "Don't you know it's against the rules to have food in the library! You'll attract bugs (like me)."

A few minutes later she passed a note back. "So sorry. I'll give you a swig of caffeine if you don't fink on me."

I wrote again: "No thanks. Instead, rendezvous with me tomorrow, 11 a.m., Cougar Eat. Bring gummy bears." I placed it in her carrel as I left to go get my real books. When I got back she was gone. A note on my desk said: "Can't make it. Got class then. Another time, okay? —Holly"

I'd struck out.

A few days later I was going down the library steps when this same brunette passed me going up. Hmmm. Always in the library, I thought. That's a good sign.

"Hey, Holly!" I called up after her. "I never did get those gummy bears."

She came down to the landing and we chatted, exchanging the usual information: first name, major, hometown. When I told her I was from Fresno, she started on the next game BYU strangers play: "Do You Know?"

"You're from Fresno?" Holly said. "I've got relatives there. Do you know the Fogs?"

The Fogs? Baffling. In a flash the mystery unraveled. "Holly!" I said. "So *you're* Holly Armstrong?"

She nodded, amazed I knew her last name.

"No way!" I laughed. "You'll never guess who's been scamming on you: It's me, your very own cousin. I'm Brian Fogg."

She laughed. We hugged. Of all people in the library that night, I somehow ended up scamming on my own second cousin, Holly Arm-

strong, a relative I hadn't seen since we were in diapers; she never came to the big Armstrong family reunions.

After the initial rush of recognition, Holly and I started talking again, asking questions about each other but in an entirely different way: quickly, without guard, without posturing to impress. We didn't care what the other thought—we had to like each other; we were family; we were flesh and blood.

The Armstrong clan Holly and I belong to has maintained extraordinary bonds. Each year about 300 relatives from my mother's family gather for a reunion that lasts a whole weekend. All these relatives and more—perhaps a total of 500—descended from the prolific loins of my great grandparents, Jode and Susie Armstrong. It was their parents who'd sailed to America and walked the plains for the gospel's sake. Jode and Susie were among the first generation born in the West. They grew up in something like a cowboy movie, living on the range, worrying about Indians, taming the frontier.

Last August, as usual, I gathered with my Armstrong relatives, now in the all-too-tame West: Rexburg, Idaho. As we were eating our Saturday picnic in the groomed city park, I saw my cousin Holly—now married, but still very cute—walking down the sloping grass. Since that night in the library two years ago, I could never see her on campus without smiling. But to find Holly at our reunion in Rexburg surprised me. Leaving my lunch, I went over to greet her.

"What brings you here?" I said.

"I've come to see the action. My mother says this is the last reunion," Holly said.

"The last one?"

"Yeah, they're going to disband after this year," she said. "And I'd like to say that I've come to at least one of these things."

End the reunions? I'd heard nothing about this.

The Armstrong reunions started over sixty years ago. After my great grandfather died, his wife, Susie, started gathering her nine children (and an ever-growing herd of grandchildren) each year on his August birthday. Even after Susie died, the family kept gathering. I knew my great grandparents, Susie and Jode, only from a portrait taken in their later years. Susie looked like a typical grandmother, plump, matronly, her hair pulled up in a bun. The photo showed Jode smiling beside her; he was shiny bald with bushy tufts of hair over each ear and a thick moustache.

Family folklore says my great-grandparents met as children. One day when eleven-year-old Susie was walking to church, Jode began pelting her with snowballs—a bit more dramatic than scamming in the library. Susie later agreed to be his girl, but their paths parted over the years.

Jode had other sweethearts, while rumors at the time claimed that Susie married a polygamist in Salt Lake. Finally, in 1888, they met at a party and began courting again. That summer found them both working as ranch hands on opposite sides of southern Utah's Summit Valley. Susie writes in her history:

I did my courting on the mountains. My sweetheart would come up for the weekend with an extra horse for me. . . . Nothing pleased me more than riding through the forests of quaking aspen and pine while breathing the pure mountain air.

Jode loved riding his horse close to mine and taking the pins from my heavy dark hair, letting it fall down my back, over the saddle and onto the horse's back. He loved to see it floating out behind me in the breeze.

We would ride to the top of a high ridge, where the wind always blew a gale, and look over the valley, a patchwork quilt of green, yellow, and brown. Streams glistened in the sun, looking like silver threads running through the pattern.

We rested and drank from a cold spring, while our horses drank in noisy gulps and cropped the long timber grass. We gathered violets that dipped their faces in the brook.

That summer we fell in love and made our plans. We carved our initials on the smooth surface of a quaking aspen—J. A. and S. D.—encircled by a heart (*History of Susannah Dalley*).

In the years that followed, the heart Jode and Susie carved together soon included nine children. Although the family never really had a place they could call home—they dryfarmed in the summer and moved some place new each winter to find work—they were bound together by love, laughter, music, and the teachings of Jesus Christ. They were Mormon gypsies.

Eventually, Jode and Susie's children—including my grandfather—married and left home. Their families scattered over the entire West, but each August they gathered. First, the reunions were at Susie's home on Butler Island, a strip of land surrounded by the Snake River. When Susie moved, the reunions moved with her, first to Birch Creek and then to Johnson's Fort.

The earliest reunions I remember were at the Alpine 4-H Camp on the border of Wyoming and Idaho. On Saturday we'd play baseball, climb to the mountain top, or search the woods for huckleberries. I remember sleeping in log cabins filled with bunk beds and cousins, ringing the dinner bell that echoed through the valley, eating camp food from metal trays, performing skits for what seemed innumerable clansmen, and learning the songs my grandpa had sung as a child. On Sunday we'd worship together. A great-uncle would preside; an aunt would lead the music. My cousins would bless and pass the sacrament. So many of the Armstrong clan would want to sing in the choir that people had to be en-

couraged to stay in the audience.

The original family members kept coming to Alpine as long as they could. My sick grandfather would make the trip each year, even when he was just a faint heartbeat away from death. He and his siblings sat in overstuffed burgundy chairs that lined the log walls of the lodge. This was the weekend they lived for all year. Sitting in their places of honor, the original family members watched their posterity sing and dance and bear testimony of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, the reunions at Alpine usually overlapped with my August birthday, and my own celebration often got overlooked. However, one year I was glad I'd been born near my great-grandfather's birthday—that was the year I turned twelve and received the priesthood in a log cabin at Alpine 4-H Camp, not in some cinderblock stake center. That Sunday morning my father and my uncles gathered around me. The hands of a surgeon, two lawyers, a businessman, a farmer, and a chemist overlapped on my head. The weight was solid, reassuring, but most notable was something else: the warmth of their hands. It wasn't a spiritual burning, just a comforting glow, like the way I feel snug in bed under a goose-down blanket. Their bodies encircling me, welcoming me into the brotherhood—I wanted their power and protection to never leave. Soon, they said amen and lifted their hands; I was ordained. I stood and hugged my father. I then shook my uncles' hands in turn, all the way around the circle. My mother broke through to pull me close to her, wiping her cheeks with her palm. "I'm so proud of you," she said. Just a few hours later I passed the sacrament for the first time, sharing the emblems of Jesus with my cousins and aunts and uncles.

Because my ancestors built log cabins in frontier Utah, reuniting their descendants each year in the rustic Alpine 4-H Camp seemed right. However, as I entered college the reunions changed. We stopped going to Alpine. Too many mosquitos. Too far away. Too primitive. Too hard on the remaining original family members. We moved to Ricks College, a convenient place—maybe too convenient. The dorms all had clean sheets. We ate cafeteria food that was actually pretty good. The auditorium had a real stage. The sacrament trays were provided, along with cups and hymnbooks. Slick. Polished. Tidy. Sterile.

I found out that Holly was right about ending the Armstrong reunion forever. After we settled back into the Rexburg park tables with our desert, Cousin Dee, who had planned the reunion this year, said Uncle Cliff had an important announcement. Uncle Cliff was my grandfather's youngest brother, now the oldest living patriarch. He took the mike, shuffled in place, and examined the concrete for a long time. He then looked over the audience and began to speak: "Seeing that this will be the last

year for this reunion, I'd just like to take the opportunity to thank all of you for supporting the family gatherings up until now. Yes, as some of you have heard, from now on we will dispense with this reunion. We've had wonderful times together, all these years at Alpine and now at Ricks College."

The pavilion started buzzing: "End the reunions?" "But this is a tradition!" "What will happen to the family?"

Uncle Cliff continued: "Dee got such a poor response this year. Only seventy-two people signed up in advance. We figure about 300 could show, but there won't be enough food for everyone. The arrangements were impossible to make with the Ricks College folks. Judging by this year and the past few years—the slow response and all the family members missing—we just don't think there is enough interest to continue."

One aunt with big hair stood up. "Can't we vote on this?"

Uncle Cliff ignored her: "Even though we won't meet, all of us, like this again, I want to encourage each of the families to continue with their own reunions. Keep your families close. That's how Mom and Dad would have wanted it."

As Uncle Cliff talked on and on about the problems in arranging the reunions and the waning support, I watched my mom and her sisters circulating throughout the pavilion, lobbying family members, talking to Clare and Annette, to Kara and Larry, all her cousins. No one was listening to Uncle Cliff anymore; everyone was talking among themselves.

Although I couldn't imagine a summer without the big Armstrong reunion, I knew Uncle Cliff was right: the reunions were on a steady decline, becoming less interesting, more mechanical. Uncle Cliff's decision seemed a natural result of the last decade. Many who still attended each year came only out of obligation, often wondering on the long drive home if the hassles were worth the rewards.

Besides, there was something ominously scriptural in the reunions dissolving after the fourth generation. The Lord's promise to early Saints, including Jode and Susie, seemed fulfilled: "Thou shalt be rewarded for thy righteousness; and also thy children and thy children's children unto the third and fourth generation" (D&C 98:30). I'd read this often and wondered about its implications. It seemed a blessing given to those early Saints, like Jode and Susie, for their endurance and faithfulness. My ancestors scrimped to send Jode's father on a mission; then Jode himself left the family to preach; finally, each son served as long as family finances would allow. I couldn't deny it: the promise was fulfilled; we had been rewarded with a large family firmly rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Even though a few Armstrongs have strayed from the church, the overwhelming majority have been faithful members—though not Mor-

mon aristocracy; not Smiths, Kimballs, or Pratts; our ancestors' names are never mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants. Since the early days of the church, the Armstrongs had been simple members who paid tithing, attended church, and sent fathers, brothers, and sons on missions. That's the Armstrong tradition.

At each reunion the family missionary map, something like those found in wardhouses, shows our heritage of missionary service. At last count we had eighty-five pins in the map, representing eighty-five missionaries since Great-grandpa Jode. His descendents have now preached the gospel in twenty-nine countries. Of course, it would be hard for any Armstrong boy not to serve a mission after seeing that map every summer. My decision to go was easy. I saw all my cousins go. It posed no financial hardship on my family; in fact, because my mission cost just one hundred dollars a month, my parents once wrote me (joking, I hope): "Can't you arrange to stay in Peru a little longer? We've saved so much money with you gone."

However, membership in such a faithful family is not without price. At times I wished I could divorce myself from Armstrong expectations. One summer when I lived in France, I watched my friends drink wine until sunrise and then share bedrooms with their girlfriends; I stayed sober and slept alone. At other times in my life, especially when my intellectual arrogance overshadowed my faith, I could find no logical reason for attending church, but I still knotted up my tie and gathered with the Saints. Even when church leaders wielded what I thought were severe scepters of unrighteous dominion, I swallowed hard and bowed my head.

Through all of this, the Armstrong tradition has helped me to endure—and even to repent—until I regained my spiritual sea legs. Family pressure to keep the commandments, to stay faithful, to follow the Brethren—all that fits me like a bulky lifejacket: often an inconvenience, but in critical moments my only hope. When my soul is running as wild as the wind, I've often thought it unfair that breaking from the church would also mean breaking from my family, my heritage, my roots. However, in calmer moments I believe the connection between family and gospel is more than a tradition passed down by pioneer ancestors: living family standards in this life will allow me to live with family members in the next.

In the past, family support systems have helped keep me faithful—that much is sure—but after Uncle Cliff's announcement to end the reunions, I worried what this would mean for my children and my children's children. Had we really reached the limits of the scriptural promise? Was the entropy of a fifth-generation family too strong to hold a center? Should our large family tree break itself into nine branches, each

branch planting itself in new fields?

Our smaller branch of the Armstrong family had already started gathering ten years earlier. The tradition of my first cousins is to camp for a whole week together: we hike the trails of Wyoming, set up tents in the Tetons, watch young cousins splash on the shores of Bear Lake; we water-ski and sing. For a few days of the week, we men fill our backpacks and head for the mountains, leaving the women at camp. Male bonding, without help from Iron John. My father, my brothers, and I bring high-tech tents and freeze-dried food. My farm cousins usually sleep under the stars and carry backpacks I can't budge, although my mouth waters when they eat fresh peaches and canned spaghetti.

In the evenings we sing cowboy songs and tell jokes around the campfire. The last night on the trail is always a testimony meeting. A few years ago as we gathered around the fire, one cousin—a returned missionary—explained his suffering from straying off the gospel path. He'd been excommunicated. His light was gone, he said. He felt so lost. He longed for the day when his priesthood blessings would be restored. To me his words taught more than a chapel full of priest advisors ever could. Turn back, he said, as soon as possible. Even now, each time before I stray too far, I recall my cousin's face flashing, the wet streaks shining on his cheeks, his eyes staring into the fire, his voice warning. And I turn back.

Those week-long camping trips and fire-in-the-belly hikes bonded our smaller branch of the family together, but it was the bigger Armstrong reunions that gave me a sense of belonging to the Restoration, of gospel heritage. Even though the smaller reunions helped chart my course, they never seemed to anchor me in the enduring tradition of my pioneer ancestors. If the bigger Armstrong reunion died, I felt a part of me would die too.

In response to her brother Cliff's announcement, Aunt Mary made her slow shuffle-walk to the front of the pavilion. Mary, eighty-five years old and the youngest of the original family, jokingly wrested the microphone from Cliff's hand. She held the mike close to her lips: "I'm not going to stop coming to these reunions. You'll have to hope I die before next summer. I remember my parents telling us never to stop gathering the family. Never. Never. If we did, they promised to haunt us."

Everyone laughed.

My mother stood up, saying we'd come to the reunion for fun, not to complain about who didn't register on time or who didn't come this year. "So let's sing!" she said.

"Yes, that's right. Let's all sing," Aunt Mary echoed with a smile.

Typical Armstrongs, I thought. When all else failed the Armstrongs

would sing. Indians got you down? Sing. Lose the crop on the dry farm? Sing. Have to move the family for the tenth year running? Sing—then sing some more. My mother started us off with a tune that seemed all too appropriate: “The More We Get Together, the Happier We’ll Be.” Other traditional songs followed: “Springtime in the Rockies,” “Barnacle Bill the Sailor,” “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen.” For me these songs rang with bright memories of Alpine 4-H Camp; older relatives probably thought of Butler Island, Birch Creek, or Johnson’s Fort.

The young Armstrong cousins had long since left the pavilion, bored by what seemed a tedious family council. Throughout the discussion I watched them play crack-the-whip in the park. When we started to sing, the kids returned to join us. My cheerleading sister and her cousins stepped forward to add a new song to the tradition. During their rap tune, they chose family members to come up and dance. Because there’re only two kinds of Armstrongs—clowns and hams—no one declined. Even old Uncle Cliff got into the act:

Hey, Uncle Cliff, you’re a real cool cat.
 Ya got a lot of this and a lot of that.
 So stand right here and shake your rear,
 And show us how to do the chiga cheer.
 Bam boom!
 Chiga chiga, chiga chiga.
 Bam boom!
 Chiga chiga, chiga chiga.

Uncle Cliff stood up and shook his rear, pointing his finger up and down in rhythm like a creaky John Travolta. I enjoyed the show, yes, but I also saw the significance of our playing together; I saw how the young Armstrong generation was overriding authority to help rescue the family reunion. The dynamics of the moment reminded me of another story, one a BYU botany professor told me: Years ago BYU officials decided to get rid of some cottonwoods on Maeser Hill. Grounds crew workers cut a strip of bark off each tree, six inches wide, around the circumference. This girdling would eventually starve the trees to death. When the neighborhood kids saw that the trees were girdled, they set out to save them. They cut fresh branches from the trees and built bridges over the bare spots; these branches would keep the tree alive until the bark grew back. The trees lived.

As we Armstrongs sang and laughed together under the pavilion, I knew our family reunion would also live—at least one more year. Uncle Cliff, the family patriarch, was so outnumbered he finally changed his mind. Stopping the reunions was no longer the issue; our job now was to make the extended family stronger through better reunions—more fun,

more economical, more heritage-based.

I paid careful attention to how we grew our bark back; I might need to know for future reference. Throughout the picnic, the evening entertainment, and the dance, we Armstrongs talked. We identified what was important to us: Did we want to keep the traditional variety show? How should we exchange family histories? What can we do for the younger kids? We eventually formed a reunion committee with a president, past-president, and incoming-president. Also on that committee were representatives from each of the nine families, as well as two spokespeople for each generation. They made plans well into the night.

The next morning at church the committee presented tentative reunion plans for family approval. No firm conclusions, just a start. After the family business was finished, each surviving original family member took part on the sacrament meeting program, as usual, every one in turn. They all wanted to continue reunions—even Uncle Cliff. Finally, Aunt Mary stood behind the podium cradling her treasured journal. She recounted the summer when she and her aged mother, Susie, returned to Summit, nearly sixty years after Jode and Susie courted on the mountains. She read parts of her 1951 journal entry:

We found our old cabin had tumbled in, but the names of my brothers and sisters carved on the logs inside were discernible. The spring behind the house still bubbled with water as clear and cold as ever. We scooped it up in our hands to quench our thirsts.

As we wandered down the mountain trail, we were delighted to find a huge quaking aspen, just off the path, and sure enough, high on the trunk encircled by a heart, were the initials J.A. and S.D., rather grown together and gnarled but readable. So many years had passed and it was still standing, as a witness perhaps (*Mary Johnson Journal*).

“Even though I wrote that forty years ago,” Aunt Mary said, “I’m sure I could still find that quaking aspen tree; I could tell you the stories of our life in Summit—that is, if I’m still alive next summer—and I plan to be! But we old folks won’t be around forever, you know.”

It was five weeks after the reunion, a Monday night in September, when I heard the wind rage outside my Provo home, slamming our porch chairs into the screen door. I was able to get into the front yard just in time to enjoy a few seconds of nature’s powerful display, a gale strong enough to lift me like a kite—just tie a string to my belly button. The breeze quickly returned to normal, and I went back inside to finish my fettucini.

The next morning I found out the windburst wasn’t all fun and games. The newspaper said the sudden gust, which lasted just fifteen sec-

onds, damaged forty trees on Maeser Hill, some trees one hundred years old. One toppled cottonwood had stood ninety-one feet tall.

I laced up my Reeboks and jogged to Maeser Hill. I found the lawn scattered with leaves and broken branches. Then I saw something that made me stop in midstride: a huge tree on its side, roots in the air. I walked closer. I ducked under the yellow tape that marked off the area: "Caution: Police Line. Do Not Cross!"

I crossed anyway. I didn't care. This had been my tree. Sort of. When I lived near this edge of campus, I spent my summer afternoons reading in the tree's shade. I'd slept there too. There wasn't another spot quite like it on campus.

I walked along the length of the tree, touching the weathered bark, stepping over hefty branches that once held leaves for my shade. I looked into the hole the uprooted tree had left in the ground. The sinewy roots, some as thick as my wrist, some as thin as my hair—all of them, big and small, had snapped. The bottom of the trunk, now exposed, still clung to clumps of earth.

The size of the hole surprised me. So small. About the size of a jacuzzi. How could such a small bit of earth, such a shallow root system, support such a large tree? Apparently it couldn't. Not under the freakish 90 mph winds that blasted along the edge of campus and tunneled through town.

I climbed onto the trunk, about six feet above the ground, and walked on top. The diameter got smaller and smaller. When I was near the thin branches and closer to the ground, I hopped off and jogged home.

The hole on Maeser hill is now gone, covered with grass. I know that a 91-foot tree once stood there, but I see no evidence, except that the hill looks awfully bare. Sparse. Recently landscaped. In my mind I can picture the cottonwood still standing, a watery sort of image, like ghosts on TV. It almost seems that if I imagine the tree there long enough, it will somehow reappear. It never does.

That empty spot always reminds me: I need to call home, to send my cousin a birthday card, to edit a chapter from my grandfather's history, to stay faithful. I need to gather often with my relatives who live nearby, to strengthen them—yes—but mainly so I can grow from their strength. And, of course, I need to attend the annual Armstrong reunions, maybe even convince cousins like Holly to come.

They say the upcoming Armstrong reunion will be different. The committee voted to forget about going to Ricks College this next summer. Instead, we'll go to southern Utah, to the mountains where Jode and Susie courted, to the dry farm where they raised their family a century ago. We hope to find the old cabin with our grandparents' names etched in the

logs. We hope to find their spring still bubbling clean and cold. Most of all, we hope to find an old quaking aspen still standing, the initials J. A. and S. D. carved into the bark, and a heart still binding their descendants together.