

Antidote for Solitude: The Life of Bonnie Bobet

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THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE may evoke anguish, regret, confusion, anger, shock, bitterness, despair, relief, gratitude, nostalgia, even joy. But the death of my friend Bonnie evoked in me, both on that Friday morning in September of 2001 and now, three years later, wonder. Her remarkable life began in New Orleans on June 19, 1948, when a young and single Canadian woman bore an infant she would give to Niona and Bertram Bobet, a childless, older couple from Oakland, California. Defying her destiny as an only, adopted child, Bonnie would repudiate the adjectives “only” and “alone” and would make herself the center of an enormous family.

Even as a child, Bonnie made sure she rarely had the back of the family car to herself. Her cousin Connie spent most weekends and vacations with the Bobets, and the two regarded themselves as sisters. After Bonnie learned to drive, they shared the front seat of the car as well; when they were sure that Niona and Bertram were asleep, they would sneak over to the garage, release the car’s brake, roll it down to the street, and go for a clandestine spin. Later, when Connie would become a too-young wife and mother, Bonnie became a doting aunt to little Richard; and to give Connie some time off she would wrap him in blankets, lay him on the floor of the car (this was before mandatory seat belts and car seats), and take him home with her for a good session of spoiling.

By the time I met Bonnie in the early 1970s at Berkeley’s University Ward, she had already recruited innumerable siblings from the Oakland

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public schools (where she wrote in a non-Mormon friend's yearbook, "Man is that he might have joy"), from dorms and classes and activities at BYU and the University of Utah (where her wry wit and ready tongue earned her the appellation "the great snapdragon"), and from university communities around the country. In Berkeley, Palo Alto, Los Angeles, Boston, and Washington, circles of bright, young Mormons flourished, and Bonnie had contacts in most of them.

Those college-connected clans were very important to those who had loosed their callused hands from the Iron Rod. We took comfort in like-minded individuals who, in the words of Joe Jeppson, had questions for all the gospel answers. In our Sunday School classes, we quoted Hugh B. Brown, Lowell Bennion, Gene England, Emma Lou Thayne. If *they* could be Mormons, so could we. We read with enthusiasm *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*. We journeyed to foreign countries; we worked and studied far from Zion; we saw ourselves as the Diaspora of the new children of Israel. Outraged at the Church's forays into politics, especially the ERA, most of us registered as Democrats. We rejected a celestial kingdom scenario full of undifferentiated Paul and Polly Perfects. We wanted to be good, yes, but we wanted, perhaps more, to be *interesting*. Those of us who were still single yearned for marriage, usually temple marriage, with partners who had fervent testimonies of the complexity of life. It would also help if they volunteered at homeless shelters and had graduate-school projects that would save the whales or maybe the world. We stayed friends with those who gave up on the Church as too repressive, provincial, non-intellectual, or Republican.

And nobody stayed friends with more people—people in the Church, people halfway in or on the way out of the Church, people never in the Church at all—than Bonnie. To suggest even the variety of those friendships is dizzying—the gay actor, the concert pianist, the brash Francophile, the blind German major, yuppies, hippies, old ladies, wanderers. When one of us would telephone, from across Berkeley or across the country, she would interrupt before we identified ourselves. "Hi, Kevin," she would say, or "Hey, Holly," her voice going up on the "Hi" and the "Hey." She zeroed in on our concerns. "How's your brother?" (She would substitute for "brother" the caller's current worry: troubled child, ambiguous boyfriend, doctoral dissertation, Sunday School class, tyrannical boss, impossible diet.) She was the epitome of empathy.

Although she never limited her views to Mormonism nor her

friends to Mormons, Bonnie was a Mormon to the core. In her twenties, not anticipating immediate marriage or mission, she chose to receive her temple endowments. In university wards, one could often serve as the gospel doctrine teacher or the Relief Society president while maintaining a robust unorthodoxy, and Bonnie managed both of those. She and I were both present at that first Sunstone Symposium, but I was merely a fascinated observer; Bonnie was an enthusiastic participant. It was she who helped organize some of the Bay Area's early Sunstone or Sunstone-like symposia—a small one at Santa Clara University, a bigger one at the Berkeley Marriott.

For an orderly person—she was a wizard at keeping track of her many associations and responsibilities—Bonnie had a remarkably high tolerance for chaos. There was the Albany house on Brighton Street where the bedrooms were always full and the refrigerator was usually empty except for the freezer stuffed with ice cream cartons of Swenson's Swiss Orange Chip. The unmowed lawn marred the tidy aspect of the neighborhood; and occasionally, sighing neighbors would trot over with their garden tools. Bonnie and some of her rowdy housemates housesat for me one spring, and there was so much energy within the walls that I returned home to find that both the front door and the water lines under the front lawn had exploded. Albany proved too tame, so Bonnie found an apartment in Berkeley near the lively old Shattuck Avenue Co-op. Many of her close friends were marching or tiptoeing into marriage—some of those young former housemates, many of her college contemporaries, even some of the old hold-outs, like me. Acknowledging perhaps that life as a single woman now seemed more likely, she moved to a funky apartment on Dwight Way, a block from fraternity row. The streets sang with noisy students; the radiators banged, but produced no heat; the tenants, by now all members of Bonnie's big family, organized and sued their landlord. Bonnie communed with cats that roamed the apartment and curled up on quilts. An old Ronald Reagan movie poster hung from the kitchen wall. When I visited, the apartment always seemed full of people, the kitchen sink full of plates, often stained by Bonnie's culinary masterpiece, a mean *Reine de Saba*, a cake so chocolately as to render flour unnecessary.

During the first two decades of our friendship, Bonnie was almost always running somewhere, but she invariably ran late. I adjusted to her tardy arrival at dinners and other social events; what shocked me was her

missed deadlines for graduate papers. I had been in graduate school during the '60s—and it would never have occurred to me that a teacher might accept a late paper. It never occurred to Bonnie to turn a paper in on time. She also found it quite normal to take leaves of absence from her doctoral work—sometimes to do advertising for a Bay Area bank, sometimes to free-lance and, I suspected, to work discreetly on relationships. But then Bonnie regarded her professors as peers, as companions, and not as emperors and gods, as *I* had.

It was during the Dwight Way days that Bonnie, secretive about the details but eager to share her burden and her joy, announced that she was about to extend her family in a different direction. One summer Saturday in the Piedmont living room of Dianne and Steve Roland, dozens of friends gathered to shower her with love and support and gifts, the most memorable of which was a wooden rocking chair. On August 15, 1988, she gave birth to Jane Elizabeth, a baby with Bonnie's own delicate skin and reddish-gold hair. There was quite a crowd in the birthing room, two friends at the head of the bed, chanting encouragement, two at the foot. Three of those close friends were women with first-hand experience in giving birth; the fourth was someone who had never expected to share in such an adventure—Bonnie's long-time gay friend Kevin Simmers.

One reason Bonnie was able to embrace such an enormous circle of friends was that she was intimidated by no one—not professors, not bosses, not bishops. She was very close to a number of Mormon bishops—from young and sensitive to old and crusty. Among the former was Oakland First Ward's Richard Palfreyman, who counseled her and helped her stay a Mormon the year of Jane's birth. He presided over Jane's most extraordinary naming and blessing ceremony, held at the Palfreymans' home, during which two or three dozen friends—Mormons, ex-Mormons, non-Mormons, men and women—bestowed their own blessings on and wishes for the baby.

When the leukemia was first diagnosed, in February of 1992, Bonnie was in Salt Lake City, wondering why she couldn't get over a persistent cold. Leaving Jane in Utah with her close college friend Susan Walker Anderson, Bonnie flew back to the Bay Area. There, her former housemate Holly Larsen, sobbing one moment and shouting the next, had already mobilized Bonnie's big family. Each week one person was designated as a contact person so Bonnie wouldn't have to be bothered with giving health updates or requesting services. Friends scrubbed down,

donned long-sleeved gowns, and pushed through the double doors to Bonnie's sterile hospital room, which looked neither sterile nor hospital-like. Books, jigsaw puzzles, favorite pieces of furniture (I think I remember both the much-loved rocking chair and an exercycle), knick-knacks, and quilts gave the room a distinctly homey look. Only missing were the cats and houseplants. Among the many pictures on the wall was one signed by Spanish tenor Jose Carreras, who had responded to a request from one of Bonnie's friends and had wished her well in the battle he himself had fought—and won. I bought tapes of his arias for her to play on the cassette player with the big box speakers.

In all things a student, Bonnie was open to learning from widely diverse books and teachers. She applied her scholarly techniques to become an expert on acute myelogenous leukemia, and she efficiently managed her own health care. She researched alternative medicine and was willing to try Chinese herbs and meditation. Her stays in sterile rooms lasted weeks before and after the autologous bone marrow transplant, and she knew every nurse and nurse's aide and understood and appreciated what each one did for her. She was inordinately fond of her oncologist, "Doctor Gary," who advised her that it might increase her chances to be part of a study employing a particularly aggressive treatment of the bone marrow. At the time, her widowed mother was feeble, vague, and devastated; her daughter was a toddler. "I can't be checking out of here," Bonnie told me. "The very old and the very young are dependent on me."

Dr. Gary didn't use the term "in remission"; he used the term "cured." As appreciative as she was of medical personnel and strategies, Bonnie attributed her "miracle cure" to the prayers and positive thinking of her wide family of friends. Her religious chums had fasted and got down on their knees; her agnostic pals had wished on stars and hoped for healing vibrations. In 1993, the experimental bone marrow treatment which Bonnie had received was declared a failure. Only one patient of the eighty or so in the program had survived—Bonnie.

When she was allowed to leave the hospital, Dick and Lindy Palfreyman turned part of their upstairs into a private convalescent home. There they not only cared for their patient but also greeted the endless stream of visitors who needed to reassure themselves that Bonnie had indeed survived her ordeal.

For the eight years that she was cancer-free, Bonnie no longer ran—much of her energy had been depleted in the initial battle with the

disease—but she managed to maintain and amplify her existing relationships and even add close new friends to her cadre. She was able to comfort and eventually bury her mother. She and Jane spent time with cousins. She had already contacted her birth mother in British Columbia and had developed a close association with her, her husband, and her children, especially her half-sister Caroline. After Bonnie and Jane moved to Albany—tameness now seemed an asset—they began attending the Berkeley Ward, and she made more friends—among others, Betts and Mark Sandberg, whose rambunctious twins were Jane's age. "We're kind of raising our kids together," Bonnie said. She also felt close to the ward's senior citizenesses—some of whom knew what it was like to be single parents. And she delighted in some of the younger student families as well.

During this time, Bonnie joined a writing group and started work again on some of her graduate school projects. When she showed her writing to her Cal advisor, the advisor, by now a good friend, told her she had done enough work for a Ph.D. in American studies. To celebrate, Bonnie and Jane took the Sandbergs out to dinner. The dissertation, with the esoteric title, "Domestic Constructions: Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Anxious Locale," occupied one chair at the restaurant table.

Most of Bonnie's efforts in those years were devoted to Jane. Even in the Bay Area and the accepting climate of the Berkeley Ward, it wasn't easy to raise a child without a father. There were the Primary and Young Women's lessons on temple marriage and traditional families. Once, when Bonnie wasn't diligent in getting to church, Jane complained, "Mo-om, we might as well be *jack* Mormons." Bonnie was chastised; and though they rarely attended all three meetings, in times of good health, they usually made it for the last two.

During one Sunday School lesson, a woman shocked the teacher and class with her vilification of Jews. I was not present, but was told of the stunned silence. Bonnie later reported to me that she was defending my heritage when she raised her hand and with controlled anger said she could not let such remarks go unanswered. The woman would later scream at Bonnie that she and Jane didn't belong in the ward, but many ward members sought Bonnie out to tell her how grateful they were that she had dared do what they had been too cowardly or startled to do. I saw no tears shed when the anti-Semitic woman moved her family's membership records into the ward in whose boundaries they actually lived. Many tears were shed when Bonnie's leukemia returned in the fall of 2000 and

again, after an eleven-month remission following chemotherapy, in the late summer of 2001.

It is not easy to ask for and accept help, but Bonnie managed this with grace, gratitude, and, often, humor. She threatened conservative Dr. Gary that if he didn't get her through the leukemia one more time, she planned to turn in his name to the Democratic Party as a potential Deep Pockets. The recurrences of the disease meant that she needed a great deal of nonmedical help too—care and transportation for her and for Jane, household tasks, food, but mostly companionship and contact.

What loyalty Bonnie elicited from members of her "network"! There were blessings and prayers—private and from the pulpit. During her Berkeley hospital stays or when she was allowed to convalesce at home, she was almost never alone at night. In the hospital, a woman friend (or, on some "good" nights, Jane) bunked on the chair-bed in the sterilized room. Her devoted friend Marilyn Thompson drove up from the peninsula so often that the oncology staff thought she deserved a paycheck. At times, the person on the night shift would be the aide to the nurse's aide. If Bonnie's temperature crept up, it might be necessary to pack her in ice; if she got Reicher's shakes, it might be necessary to call for Demerol. During bad nights, the companion got little sleep. In Bonnie's first month or so back home, women from the ward—young mothers, middle-aged matrons, older widows—took turns camping out at the apartment to make sure that she didn't spike a fever or need anything in the night. During her last hospital stay, many of the older women in the ward regularly sent her cards and notes. Mary Wallmann wrote her a postcard every single day. "Don't let them give up on me," Bonnie urged me once. The great ladies of the Berkeley Ward never gave up.

Bald, but round-faced, sturdy, clear-eyed, Bonnie never looked to me like a dying woman, even the morning before she died. She did seem more solemn though. While I was sitting near the foot of the bed, the substitute doctor, a thick woman dressed like a '60s hippie, breezed in and announced that the number of Bonnie's white cells had jumped. Although the words sounded hopeful, I saw Bonnie nod, and I sensed they both knew this was a very bad sign. The last time this had happened, it signified that the chemotherapy had not worked.

I had driven to the hospital that morning after driving Susan Anderson to the airport. Bonnie's soulmate from BYU and the person who had probably shared more experiences with her than anyone else, Susan had

taken one of her many leaves of absence from her own family and had been staying in Bonnie's apartment with Jane. I worried that Jane didn't have her apartment key, and I suggested to Bonnie I take *her* key. That way, when I picked Jane up from school, we could be sure she could get into the apartment to get her flute and to pack her things. After her flute lesson, she would be spending the night at the Sandbergs' home.

"We'll trust Jane," Bonnie said. "She always remembers her key."

That afternoon, Jane did not have her key, so we drove up to the hospital to get Bonnie's. "It was good I forgot it," Jane said when she stepped back out of the elevator. "Mother was having the shakes, and I was able to help her." Shortly after we left, Betts Sandberg arrived at the hospital. She noted that Bonnie looked as weak as she'd ever seen her, but she didn't see how she could spend the night since she had Jane and her own sons to care for. At that moment, Holly walked in, took one look, and announced that she was staying. "She was very tired, very sick, and had trouble talking," Holly wrote later. "But as she turned over in bed, turning from the interior wall to the large window that looked out on the Berkeley hills, she exclaimed, 'Holly, look at the sun.' I looked. There at the top of the hills, which were enshrouded in a gray mist, was a brilliant path of sunshine, illuminating the clouds. It was lovely, and Bonnie was able to give me this gift of beauty, of life, in one of the saddest and most difficult moments of my life and, surely, of hers."

Very early the next morning, the nurses sent Holly home to Alameda, and they transferred Bonnie to intensive care. Barely inside her front door, Holly picked up the ringing phone and rushed back to the hospital. She was there when Betts and Jane arrived. "Oh Jane," she said, throwing her arms around her, "your mom is gone!"

In the hours, days, weeks, months after her death, Bonnie's "brothers" and "sisters" tried to comprehend that sentence. Many of us gathered at the Sandbergs' home that September 21 to stroke Jane's hair, to make necessary plans, to comfort one another. "I've lost my best friend," Holly wailed when I hugged her. "But *she* had dozens of best friends!"

At first, we could speak and think of nothing else. The sacrament meeting talks in the Berkeley Ward the Sunday after her death focused on the value of community and of what that had meant to Bonnie. From across the country, we gathered memories for the eulogy at her memorial service and for a book we gave to Jane. As those of us in the Bay Area boxed up her dishes, her clothes, her books, her treasures, we recalled her

vitality and tried to determine her wishes—what should be stored in Utah for Jane, what should be donated to charity, what should be given to whom. I went through sacks and sacks of letters and cards from people who loved Bonnie. I hated to consign any of them to the recycling barrels, but how could we keep them all? They would require another storage locker.

Bonnie's big, big family web is already unraveling—it was Bonnie who knit us together. During her last illness, Andy Goldblatt, one of the neighbors from the noisy Dwight Way apartment building, sent out regular email updates on her condition. Some of us hadn't met in person until she died, and we aren't likely to meet each other regularly again. Others of us do often talk—we contemplate Jane, now sixteen, living with Susan Anderson and her family in Salt Lake City, and how keenly conscious we are of Bonnie's absence. Her will nominated Susan and her husband as Jane's guardians, but also specified a kind of parenting "committee"—not a viable alternative, it has turned out, but an affirmation of Bonnie's faith in the abilities and good will of her friends.

We do try to stay connected. In the spring of 2002, Holly bought up a big block of Giants' tickets for June 19, which would have been Bonnie's fifty-fourth birthday. That way, instead of sagging morosely around our various abodes, Bonnie's friends could cheer for Bonnie's favorite team. Ah, Bonnie—we would have loved to grow old with her. She would have been, as her neighbor-sister-friend Deborah Dunster has said, a sensational old lady, draped in vivid colors, treating us to her healthy laughs and her acute observations of life.

Sometimes when I'm writing, as I am this moment, I think, "I'd like to run this by Bonnie." She was surer than I about what happens to the spirit after death, so I don't picture her hovering about—but I suspect that if that is possible, that is what she's doing—keeping track of all of us as well as catching up on what's happened to those who got there—wherever there is—first. I believe we—all her hand-picked siblings—will be able to remember her features and her voice and her nature as long as we can remember anything in this life, and in that way we will keep her alive and around as best we can. In that way we will minister to our own solitude.