

Eula Ewing Monroe, “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” in *Finding God at BYU*, ed. S. Kent Brown, Kaye T. Hanson, and James R. Kearl (Provo, UT: The Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 182–92.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. . . . For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith (Romans 1:16–17).

Just a Closer Walk with Thee

Eula Ewing Monroe

Eula Monroe is a Southerner by birth and by culture, having been born in western Kentucky where she has lived most of her life. Her high school was in Clifty, Kentucky, and she spent her college years at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. Her doctorate is from the George Peabody College for Teachers of Vanderbilt University. Dr. Monroe accepted an appointment at BYU in 1992 where she helps prepare teachers. She is a member of the First Baptist Church in Provo and serves on campus as advisor to the Baptist Student Union. A deeply religious woman, she has found her faith strengthened by being at BYU. Dr. Monroe and her husband, James M. (Matt) Monroe, are the parents of one married daughter.

Just a closer walk with thee,
Grant it, Jesus, is my plea.
Daily walking close to thee,
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be!
Author unknown

My story of finding God at Brigham Young University is singularly different, I feel sure, from that of most writers of this volume. As a Southern Baptist whose colleagues and students are almost all of the LDS faith, my story of finding God is not one of conversion to Mormonism. To the contrary, it is the story of how my own faith has been strengthened during my years on the faculty at BYU. It fits within the context of a journey—one that transcends miles and years. Let me share with you some experiences along the way that have brought me to this time and place.

Hitler and his followers were on the rampage in Europe and the world was in turmoil in the early 1940s, but the influence of these events was not of recognizable impact on the Ewing family. Of more eminent significance to the remote rural community of Britmart, in north Todd County, Kentucky, were the lingering effects of the Great Depression. The young Ewing couple struggled for daily survival amid a culture that had limited their educational opportunities and inhibited active hope for upward mobility.

John and Bonnie Ewing were able to provide only the barest of necessities for themselves and their two children, Mary and William, ages five and two, when on 20 July 1940 another child was born to them. This daughter, named Eula Mae after a family friend, was quickly inducted into the life of the sharecropper family who raised tobacco and corn in the small, rocky fields of the hilly terrain. As soon as Bonnie gained a bit of strength she returned to the field, and Mary and William watched over baby Eula as she lay on a quilt in a zinc washtub under the shade of a nearby oak or maple.

Eula’s interests during her preschool years centered on the farm activities of her parents and the school pursuits of her older sister and brother. She spent much of her time following in her father’s footsteps as he guided the mule-drawn plow or harrow. She was a child full of questions. When her father tired of her queries, he sent Eula to be with her mother.

There were no books and few other print materials in the home; the school books and seemingly vast knowledge Eula’s sister and brother shared with her held special mystery and intrigue. Much of the year prior to her fifth birthday was spent with her brother and sister teaching her what they had learned in school. She entered first grade in 1945 in a one-room schoolhouse about a mile’s walking distance along the dirt, later gravel, road leading from her home. Within this mecca of learning, the teacher unveiled the secrets of reading and mathematics and started Eula on an academic journey that proved to be life-shaping and eminently fulfilling. As a young child Eula felt the tug and calling to become a teacher herself, to spend her life helping to open doors of opportunity for others as her teachers were doing for her.

Within this seemingly austere home and school environment, dedication to duty was modeled and expected of the three (later four) children. John was a hard and willing worker, always in the fields early and late, and he expected the same level of commitment from his family. There was no allowance for shirking responsibility. Bonnie was equally committed, if not more so; she worked all day on the farm to help make a living, then returned to the house in the late

afternoon to the work to be done there. Miss Willie Sue, the teacher of all eight grades in the one-room schoolhouse, also modeled hard work and expected the best effort from students, as did other teachers along the way. Discipline at home and at school was strict, and immediate measures were taken at any breach of respect for authority or resources. During Eula's growing-up years, the family usually moved every two or three years from one farm to another in north Todd County, always in search of a better livelihood. Her parents were not churchgoing, but they made right and wrong both visible and concrete in the home; the school and pervasive culture reinforced these principles. In this Bible Belt region the word of God was revered, and children became aware of the need for a personal relationship with God at an early age. Because the Ewings did not own a car until Eula was a senior in high school, transportation for any event beyond walking distance was difficult. Kind and caring neighbors from different faiths—Church of Christ, Methodist, or Baptist, depending on where the family lived at the time—took Mary, William, Eula, and younger brother David to church, helped them to learn God's word, and witnessed the love of Jesus to them.

But Eula's nature as a sinner was to resist God; she was prone to being stiffnecked . . . in heart and ears, . . . resist[ing] the Holy Ghost" (Acts 7:51). For some time she had known that she was lost without God, that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and that her soul was condemned to hell unless she accepted Jesus Christ as Savior (John 3:18; John 14:6). Even though she had been convinced of her sinful nature (Rom. 3:23), she resisted the promptings of the Holy Spirit to accept Jesus as Lord of her life until she was almost twelve years old.

Eula's parents and siblings had guided her footsteps, and others along the way had also cared enough to direct her path. It was not until 12 July 1952, however, that Eula accepted Christ as the ultimate Guide for her life, both for this world and for all eternity. On this date I was born again (John 3:3); I became a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), a child of God (John 1:12). During vacation Bible school at Bellview Baptist Church in the little community of Allegre, Kentucky, the pastor gave the altar call, and I responded by faith to the invitation to accept Christ as my personal Savior (Eph. 2:8–9). My conversion experience was not as dramatic as that of Saul on the road to Damascus; rather, it was a quiet and total submission to God's will, accompanied by the assurance of salvation that came with knowing that I had given my heart to the Lord (Rom. 8:1–2; 1 John 5:13). Shortly thereafter I followed the Lord in baptism, an act of obedience to the Lord's command (Rom. 6:4).

After I accepted Christ, my conviction of my call to teach was strengthened. I came to understand that Christ taught us to serve him through helping others (Matt. 25:34–40; Luke 22:26–27), and that my call to service was to become a teacher. This goal, however, seemed not only lofty but essentially unattainable. One had to attend college to be a teacher. To my knowledge, no one in my family had ever gone to college. I knew little about what going to college entailed. I could not envision myself as a college student (it is said that what one cannot envision, one cannot become), and I could not imagine where the finances would come from for such an odyssey.

But when God calls an individual to service, he also provides the means. He placed caring people at every juncture—individuals who believed in me and my potential, some who helped me gain access to resources necessary for pursuing my dream, and a few who provided model footsteps for me to follow before I was secure enough to find the path on my own.

Several wonderful teachers along the way helped to convince me that I could indeed go to college, and my high school English teacher helped to make attending college a feasible goal. She encouraged me to believe in myself and nurtured my dream of becoming a teacher. She helped me develop the oral facility with English usage necessary to enter the mainstream of college life. She shared practical guidance about how to seek scholarships and submit applications. She and her husband transported me to her alma mater, introduced me to college officials who helped with financial arrangements, and lent me, interest-free, the \$675 I needed to borrow during my undergraduate degree program.

During my late high school years I fell in love with Matt Monroe, who lived "over the hill and holler" from me and attended the same little country church. We were married in 1959, one year before I graduated from college. We are blessed with one child, our daughter Jamie, and, as of January 1997, her husband Roger. As a family we share virtually congruent religious beliefs, and we continue to sustain each other in whatever endeavors—spiritual, academic, career, or otherwise—each prayerfully chooses.

The early years of my elementary teaching career were busy yet rewarding for our little family, with Matt being very supportive of my career. He and I devoted much of our time and energy to work, church, and home responsibilities. The joy of our life was our daughter, the precious little being that the Lord had placed in our keeping for us to nurture and raise (Eph. 6:4).

During those years I also completed my master's degree and an additional year of graduate work. Although I sensed that eventually I should pursue a doctoral degree, I could not see myself doing so then. As I approached the age of thirty-five, I faced a mid-life crisis (at that time no one I knew in my family had lived past the age of seventy): I doubted that I had done half of all the Lord had set out for me to do. Again I was blessed by God with the support of

caring individuals, especially those nearest and dearest to me. As a family, we decided that I should go back to school. Matt and Jamie shared this venture by supporting me wholeheartedly for its duration, and I graduated with my doctorate one week before Jamie graduated from high school.

This degree prepared me to serve in a slightly different way—as a teacher of teachers. The Lord blessed me with colleagues who were good role models and collaborators, and with administrators who helped me to thrive in the university environment. I loved teaching with a fervor, and I loved the research, writing, and service aspects of my assignment nearly as much. After all, having grown up in the circumstances that I did, how could I have access to these marvelous opportunities? Only through the grace of God!

Over the years, however, I allowed myself to be caught up in the many demands of my profession. I worked many hours each day, did much of my writing on weekends, presented frequently at professional conferences, and conducted numerous workshops for teachers. I had allowed myself to become like Martha, “careful and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41), forgetting that but one thing is needful” (Luke 10:42)” to sit at Jesus’ feet and hear his word (Luke 10:39). I continued my church service but often posited it around my life in academia. The amount of time I spent with the Lord diminished. I rationalized my decisions about priorities by telling myself, “After all, the Lord called me to serve him through teaching, and that is what I am trying to do.”

But I am a child of God, and “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Heb. 12:6). He helped me to know that my life was not truly focused on doing his will. As I approached my fiftieth birthday, I asked myself the same kinds of questions that I had asked at each ten-year milestone: What is this decade supposed to count for? In previous years, this question had led to detailed planning. But somehow I knew that the current decade needed to be different. I felt life slipping away and began to wonder if, when the Lord welcomed me into his kingdom, he would say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23). When I faced my own mortality, I questioned whether the epitaph I desired for my life’s journey would be accurate or even satisfactory. For many years I had thought I wanted “She made a difference” to be a fitting tribute. Through the influence of the Holy Spirit, I realized that this epitaph needed to be reframed to place the emphasis on God rather than on me: “God made a difference through her.” I also came to understand that I did not need to try to see the big picture anymore—I was to accept on faith one day at a time and use each day for the Lord (Ps. 118:24). I knew, most of all, that in my heart I desired a closer walk with him. I prayed that he would grant that closer walk, that I would sit at Jesus’ feet and hear his word. Not in my wildest imagination would I have thought that the Lord would answer my prayers by leading me from a career at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, where I taught for many years, to Brigham Young University!

During the early months of 1990 I did not feel the Lord leading me to explore professional opportunities at BYU, but later I could see how he had prepared the way. Although a decision to live in Utah would seem preposterous to my extended family and friends, several circumstances contributed to this decision. Jamie had already completed her internship in Salt Lake City and was considering returning for additional training in ophthalmology. We had visited her several times during her internship and were somewhat familiar with the area. Matt was planning to retire soon, making his a more flexible schedule. And I had a friend at BYU.

In May 1990 I attended a national conference for mathematics educators in Salt Lake City. While at the conference, I rented a car and drove to Provo to visit Bob Cooter, then a faculty member in the Department of Elementary Education at BYU and a longtime friend from graduate-school days. In passing and almost in jest, I chatted with Bob about potential opportunities for part-time employment in mathematics education along the Wasatch Front during my retirement years. Shortly after I returned home to Bowling Green, I received a call from Marv Tolman, chair of the faculty search committee for Bob’s department. I was amazed that a Southern Baptist would be considered for a position at BYU, and I had serious doubts about whether I would want to work in such an environment if the opportunity arose. Although I frequently felt overwhelmed by my professional commitments, I loved my employing institution, Western Kentucky University. I had earned two degrees there and had been on the faculty for more than two decades; I saw little reason to finish my teaching career elsewhere. For reasons known only to God, I accepted the invitation to return to Provo and meet with the departmental faculty during late fall of that year.

I could not have faced a warmer welcome; it seemed that the faculty wished to share love in abundance. I had never actually interviewed for a position before, and I did not know that I was to have a presentation ready for a faculty meeting. When asked to speak to the group for about thirty minutes, the Lord gave me the words to say. Because they were from him, they were the right ones. But even after investigating the position in some detail and finding it to be attractive professionally, I was not sure that moving across the country at this time in my life was the way the Lord was leading me.

Dr. Tolman assured me that I could consider the position and interview formally the next year. Our family prayed about this issue over the ensuing year, and I revisited the campus during late fall of 1991. At this time I

interviewed with Dr. Dennis Thomson, then an associate academic vice president of BYU, who told me of the Baptist Student Union on campus and asked me to serve as its adviser. I know that the Lord speaks to us in many ways; was this a message from him?

In retrospect, I can see that the Lord had prepared me for every step of the employment process, but not all of it seemed easy at the time. My next scheduled interview was with a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy in Salt Lake City. An LDS General Authority interviews each prospective BYU faculty member. The prospect of this event was intimidating enough, regardless of my level of interest in a faculty position at BYU. As I left the motel in Provo on the morning of the interview, I found that I had misplaced the keys to my rental car. My anxiety level was heightened even further by this complication, and I temporarily forgot the promise that God is with us always. After a frantic search of my belongings, I called AAA, who sent a locksmith. Finding the keys required some persistence, since I had absentmindedly dropped them into one of my bags in the trunk of the car the evening before. Then I remembered to pray, and I felt the immediate presence of the Holy Spirit. Even though I knew I would be more than an hour late for my appointment, the panic disappeared with a phone call to reschedule the interview.

I had no idea of what to expect or how to prepare for any questions I might be asked; I simply prayed for God to be with me and to direct my responses. I found the interview to be very straightforward and the conversation with the General Authority pleasant, even easy; I felt the Lord actually giving me the words to say during this interview. The Holy Spirit spoke to my heart so powerfully that I knew I could indeed work in the BYU environment and that “this is the place” where I should serve the Lord, at least for the meantime. When I called Matt back in Bowling Green that evening, our decision making was fairly simple. It was not whether to come to BYU, but for how long.

I requested a year’s unpaid leave of absence from Western Kentucky University, rented an apartment in Provo, and came to BYU. That one year at BYU has now lengthened to nine, and my husband and I have joined the commuter generation. I do not know how much longer the Lord plans for me to be at BYU; I do know that he guided me there, and if I listen to him, he will let me know when it is time to serve him back in Bowling Green or elsewhere.

Often I have pondered why the Lord led me to BYU; I probably will not have a definitive answer until I meet him face to face. I do know that the events surrounding my coming here were not chance occurrences—he guided me and prepared the way. Stripped of my usual “security blanket” within a familiar cultural setting, I faced a new set of challenges: being in a different culture, learning a different “language,” living amid a different religion, and being away from family and lifelong friends. As a result, I learned to trust in and rely on Jesus more than before. And once again at a critical juncture in my life, he surrounded me with caring people. My family, my colleagues at work, and fellow members of my church helped to make my transition more of a joy than a burden.

Any apprehensions I may have felt about coming to BYU have been, for the most part, unfounded. Being a part of the BYU School of Education as the only faculty member of another faith has been a uniquely rewarding experience. I have been welcomed, supported, helped to feel that I belong and have something important to contribute, and loved and accepted for who I am.

Prior to my coming to BYU, several of my friends at other universities shared serious misgivings about such a move. They knew something of the reputation of BYU as a strong academic institution, and they respected that dimension of the university. Nevertheless, they knew me as a born-again Christian whose beliefs are doctrinally distinct. They also knew something of my life history, including my early struggles to achieve under somewhat difficult circumstances. Because of some of the expectations they held regarding the majority culture, they feared that my opportunities to grow professionally might be limited by my being Southern Baptist and female.

In my case, their concerns have proved to be unfounded. The reality is that I have almost more opportunities than I can “say grace over.” I have a demanding yet reasonable teaching load, am engaged in more self-selected research and writing projects than I care to count, and serve the University and professional organizations through committee work and in other ways as opportunities arise. In each facet of my work I enjoy the interest and support of my administrators and colleagues. The Lord has called me to this work, and, to the extent that I am faithful to his calling, I walk in the abundance of his joy.

Although the Southern Baptist position is lonely doctrinally, being at BYU has not been a threat to my faith in God and my belief in biblical principles. On the contrary, I have grown spiritually in ways I could not have imagined. My years at BYU have been a time of learning and reflection about my faith and its Author (Heb.12:2). As I have encountered differing views regarding issues such as family, marriage, baptism, and salvation, I have prayerfully revisited biblical teachings. My own beliefs have been strengthened; I have been able to sort out what is really central to my faith and to articulate more clearly my belief about and understanding of what being a born-again Christian means. The obvious commitment of my colleagues to their religious beliefs has prompted me to examine daily the consistency of my commitment to my faith and to a closer walk with the Lord.

The conditions of my employment preclude my witnessing for my faith in this environment, yet I have many opportunities to share the love the Lord has placed in my heart. To the extent that I allow my life to be Christ-centered, that love is evident. I also have the opportunity to incorporate biblical principles and examples in my instruction (e.g., the teachings of 1 Corinthians 12 affirm the need for collaborative learning) and to begin each class period or meeting I conduct with public prayer. My work with the Baptist Student Union has helped me to understand the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of students who do not identify with the predominant culture and religion and to serve those students in ways that help make their stay at BYU more meaningful.

I am convinced that had I stayed in Kentucky, the focus of my spiritual life would not have been as clear as it is today. I have come to realize that within academia or any other worthwhile pursuit I can become more like Mary, remembering that the one needful thing is to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his word, and less like Martha, caught up in the busyness of life that distances me from him.

At this writing I have completed my fortieth year in the teaching profession, with retirement pending according to the Lord's timing, which hasn't been revealed to me yet. Although I do not look forward with eagerness to that part of my life journey—I love my work at BYU and have no desire to leave it—I know he will have other ways for me to serve. I trust that he will surround me with caring, supportive individuals just as he has at every other critical juncture. And whatever God's plan, he will guide me to a closer walk with him.