



Howard W. Hunter: My Father, the Prophet



By **Richard A. Hunter**

(shown at left)

I have come to believe that men and women are measured by what they value and by what they are willing to do about those values. Great people seem to consistently do whatever is required to live by their values, even at great sacrifice. My father was one of these great people. I had the privilege of learning remarkable things from him about the true meaning of greatness. The lessons did not come from what he told me but from what he did and who he was.

The following stories illustrate what it was like to grow up with my father: a lawyer, a musician, a caregiver, a prophet—above all, a man who exuded kindness and was willing to give anything for God and family.

Sacrificing for the Good of His Family

When I was a teenager, I was rummaging in the attic one day and came across a pile of dusty boxes. I discovered a clarinet, a saxophone, a violin, and a trumpet. After asking my dad about them, I learned that these were some of the instruments he played. He had a band when he was in high school in Boise, Idaho, USA. He was a talented musician who deeply loved music and making music. His band played at major social events in Boise and even on a cruise ship that sailed to Asia. After he moved to Southern California, USA, in 1928, the band reorganized and became very popular.

In 1931 he married my mother, Clara Jeffs. They wanted to have children. He felt that for him the demands of the entertainment world were inconsistent with the meaningful family he wanted. So one day he put all the instruments in their cases and carried them to the attic. Save for rare family events, he never played them again.

Friends often ask me two questions: “What was it like to be the son of a prophet and grow up with such a remarkable man?” and “Do you really think your father was a prophet of God?”



would never play them again, he could not bear the thought of giving them up. It was only then that I realized what a great sacrifice he had made.

Developing a Commitment to Family History

After my parents were married, one of Dad's first callings was to teach a family history class. During this time he became personally committed to doing family history work. His law office calendar had many afternoons blocked off to go to the Los Angeles public library to do genealogical research. He started preparing six-foot-long (1.8 m) family group sheets, which he bound in sturdy ledgers.

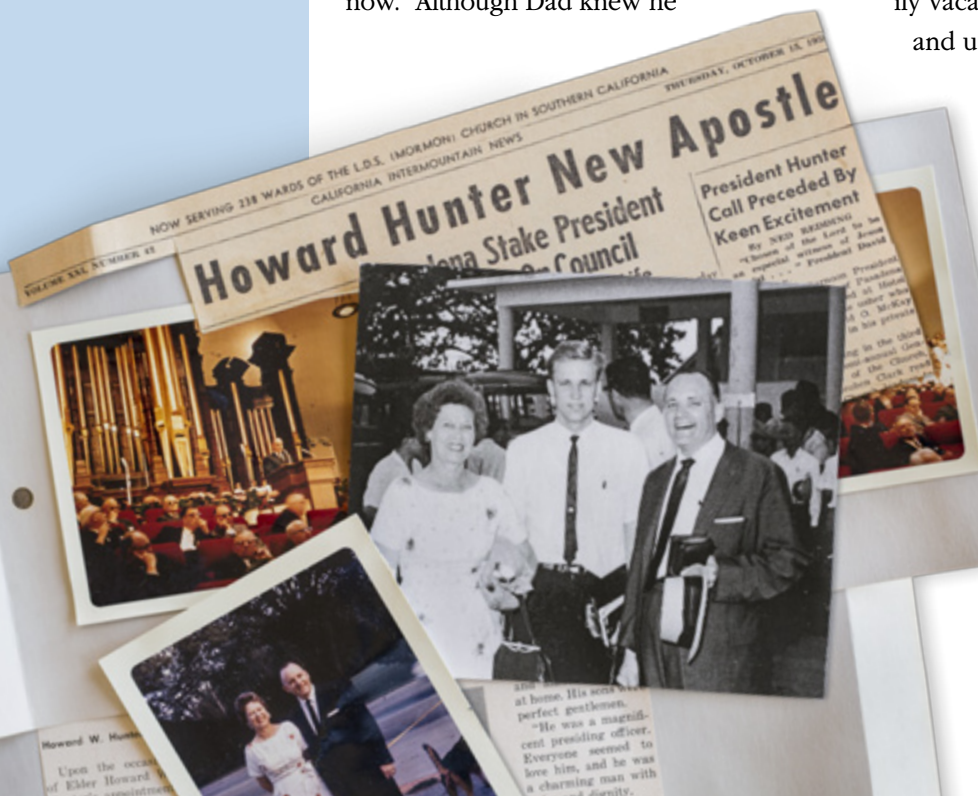
Dad would also gather data and connect with our relatives. He sent hundreds of letters to his relatives as he discovered who they were. He peppered our family vacations with visits to cousins, aunts, and uncles. From this I learned of the good that can be done when you sacrifice a pleasant day of vacationing.

Showing His Grit in Law School

When I was born, my father was reading a textbook on wills and testaments in the hospital waiting room. He had decided to become a law student when he worked with lawyers at the



I never realized what a sacrifice he had made until later. In 1993 he moved from his Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, home to an apartment in downtown Salt Lake City, near his office. During the move we came across the instruments again. I asked him if he would like to give them to the Church because of the important part they played in his young life. His answer took me by surprise: "Not yet. I can't part with them now." Although Dad knew he





“The family is the most important unit in time and in eternity and, as such, transcends every other interest in life.”¹

Los Angeles Flood Control District in Southern California. Always a family man, my dad felt he could support the family better if he were a lawyer himself. With a wife, two children, and a full-time job, however, he knew school and studying would have to be at night.

Later, when I was in law school myself, I wondered how my dad had managed. I asked, “When did you sleep?” He said he studied as much as he could, and when he was so tired that he couldn’t study anymore, he would sleep for three to four hours. That went on for five years. I marveled at his grit.

Spending Time with His Sons

Dad had a busy life, but he still made time for his family. When I was a Boy Scout, our troop planned to go down the Rogue River in Oregon, USA, in kayaks we had built ourselves. Dad volunteered to go with us even though he was not the camping, sleeping-on-the-ground kind. We spent hours in the garage working together building our two-man kayak.

Before long, we were on the river. I took the pivot position in front, and Dad took the back. As we progressed down the river, we soon headed into particularly dangerous falls.

The nose of our kayak went deep into the water at the bottom of the falls and turned over, tossing us both through the splashguard into the river. I came up and looked for Dad but couldn’t see him. He eventually bobbed up, sputtering, and we managed to right the kayak and get back in. Before we could make it to shore to assess what happened, the river swept us into the next set of rapids. We didn’t have time to get the kayak lined up again when an eddy spun us around, and we shot through a long set of rapids backwards and out of control.

We eventually made it back to camp that evening along with the other Scouts. Dad told us in some detail the story of Job. From the day’s events and the account of Job, we learned that life is not always easy. The next morning, rather than return home, Dad climbed back into our little boat and off we went. This experience taught me what a great man does when he values his family.

Caring for His Wife

In 1970 my mother was diagnosed with a chronic illness that was shutting down the arteries that fed her brain. She was a particularly bright, elegant, and engaging woman with sparkling eyes. But over the next 13 years, her condition declined. It was like losing a good friend piece by piece.

Dad stepped in to become her primary caregiver. At first he made small sacrifices to make her comfortable and cheerful. He prepared her meals, sang her songs, and held her hand. As time went on, however, caring for my mother became more difficult and more physical. It must have been trying for Dad.

As Mother’s condition worsened, my dad’s own health became a concern. I was there when his doctor told him that Mother needed full-time care in a skilled nursing facility. He would likely die if he continued to give the level of care she required, and then she would have no one to take care of her.

For the last 13 months of my mother’s life, Dad visited her in the nursing facility every day that he was not away on a Church assignment. She didn’t recognize him, but that made no difference to him. He spoke with her as though everything was all right. I would see him return from visiting a stake conference in some far-off place. He would be exhausted. But the first thing he would do when he arrived was go see Mother, to bring what cheer he could.

“I accept, without reservation, the call . . . made of me, and I am willing to devote my life and all that I have to this service.”²

My father could not have taken better care of my mother. I learned much about sacrifice from watching him take care of her.

Making Sacrifices for His Calling

Dad felt his calling as an Apostle was an absolute priority—and for good reason. There is only a small group of men called as special witnesses to lead God’s work on the earth, and they can’t take a day off, let alone a year.

Fulfilling his assignments was more important to my father than even his health. Dad left it to the Lord to renew his body (see D&C 84:33). He once asked me to go with him to a regional conference in Paris, France. His doctor thought he should take several days to make the trip because of the toll traveling would take on Dad’s body,



but we flew directly to Paris. I could hardly keep my eyes open, and Dad was off energetically conducting meet-

ings, interviewing, and lifting others.

Toward the end of his life, he was often in terrible pain. I didn’t know the human body could endure such pain. “Dad,” I asked, “do you think we really shouted for joy to have a body like this?” With conviction he answered, “Yes.” Then he added with a bit of humor, “I’m not sure we knew the whole story.”

Showing Kindness

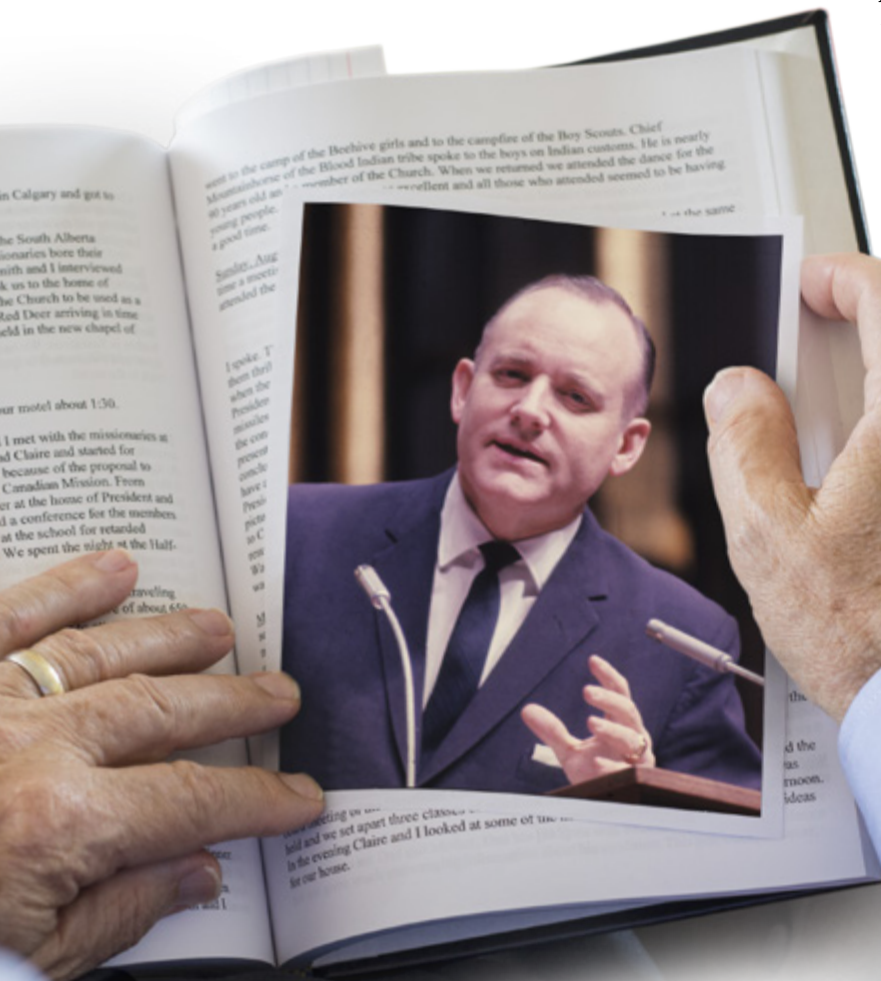
Dad valued kindness. He spoke with the moral authority of a kind man. He was known and respected by neighbors, family, friends, clients, co-workers, and Church members as a kind man.

I can’t remember a time growing up when he treated me severely or unkindly. Even when I may have deserved a harsh response, he handled each situation by teaching rather than punishing. We would discuss why what I had done was wrong and what I should do about it. For me, that worked—or at least as well as could be expected.

My father served as a bishop of the El Sereno Ward when the Church was just getting started in the Los Angeles, California, area. The ward members still talk about his kindness to them and to their families.

One Sunday Dad was not at priesthood meeting.

Everyone wondered what had happened to



him. Later they discovered that one of the priests was having trouble getting up on time to go to the meeting. So in kindness he held the quorum meeting in the priest's bedroom.

One of my high school friends was an extraordinary person with great potential, but she worried about returning to college after her freshman year because of the cost. Dad found out about her concern and invited her to his office. At the end of the visit, he gave her a check he had already made out that enabled her to return to school.

I had another high school friend in the Pasadena Stake while Dad was the stake president. She went to Brigham Young University. While on a trip representing the school, she was involved in a terrible automobile accident and was stabilized in a hospital in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. When Dad found out about her condition, he drove 270 miles (435 km) from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to see her and bring her love and encouragement.

I don't know how many acts of kindness like this Dad did. He never spoke of them to us or to anyone. Kind people usually don't.

I learned about some of these acts of kindness through letters that he kept from people who wrote to him in gratitude. This letter is typical of the kind he received: "Out of desperation I wrote concerning our oldest daughter. . . . You took the time and gentle caring to call her in for a visit, giving her your personal telephone number. She was surprised and amazed that you found her of worth. That call and personal visit was a genuine turning point in her life." The letter

then tells of her return to the Church, her sealing in the temple, and her happy and productive life. "After reading your statement [about kindness in the October 1994 general conference] it brought tears to my eyes to realize that you have been practicing for years what you are now encouraging all of us to do."

My Father, a Prophet of God

Dad believed in Jesus Christ. He made it easy for me to believe in Christ as well. I saw what someone does who believes in Christ and is like Him. I felt the peace and hope and joy that result from that kind of living.

Now for the last question: "Do you think your father was really a prophet of God?" This question has always been easy for me to answer. I can never remember a time in my father's personal, family, career, or Church life that would lead me to think that he was not qualified. But that is different than believing he was actually called as God's representative to all of His children on the earth. I have come to know that he was a prophet of God, but that knowledge didn't come from knowing him, watching his example, or being touched by what I saw him do and say. Those things help. But that knowledge was given to me as a merciful gift by the same God who called him. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Howard W. Hunter* (2015), 221.
2. *Teachings: Howard W. Hunter*, 243.
3. *Teachings: Howard W. Hunter*, 1.



"I would invite all members of the Church to live with ever more attention to the life and example of the Lord Jesus Christ, especially the love and hope and compassion He displayed. I pray that we might treat each other with more kindness."³