



A Tribute to Eric Leonard Jonasson

By his brother, Stefan Jonasson
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It will come as no surprise to many of you that Eric often threatened to pre-record his own eulogy, saying that he wanted it done right. While he offered his assurance that he trusted me – mostly – he didn't really want me to have the last word. Nonetheless, I know that he imagined that this task would fall on my shoulders and that, for once, he would forego the opportunity of rebuttal. I am certain that he knew, deep in his heart, that my feeble tribute to his memory would be conveyed in words of sympathy and understanding, admiration and devotion, abiding love and the deepest respect. He was my brother – he *is* my brother – and for me, at least, nothing more need be said. But, of course, he was so much more. So today it is the full richness of his personality and relationships, his commitments and contributions, his passion and integrity, that we seek to honour here.

Eric was always inclined to be somewhat melodramatic, so I suppose that the manner of his leaving us would have pleased him, in a way, although I know that he would have spared us the pain of it, had he been able. He died swiftly and, we hope, peacefully – sitting quietly at the home he loved in the wee hours of the morning, a book by his side and, no doubt, a song in his heart. Just the evening before, he had been re-elected vice chairman of the St. James-Assiniboia school board and he was looking forward to serving his fifth consecutive term as a school trustee. It had been a very good day, that last day. When his son, Kris, came home, they spoke for a time and then by morning he was gone. It is fitting that he breathed his last on Remembrance Day, a day that he honoured and marked each year with a reverent spirit. Given his sometimes wry sense of humour, surely Eric would have been gratified to think that the anniversary of his parting would henceforth fall on a public holiday!

However, it is not the manner of his death but the manner of his life that brings us here today. His death offers the occasion for our gathering, his life supplies the reason. It was a life richly lived, varied in texture, and devoted to noble ends.

As the oldest of our parents' four children, Eric was already part of the furniture, so to speak, by the time I happened along. Until last week, I had not known the world without him. Since Eric was nearly twelve years my senior, our relationship was complex – he was my brother, to be sure, but he was also a mentor and confidante, protector and promoter. Most importantly, though, he was my friend.

One of the earliest events in my life for which I have even a glimmer of memory was my promotion to the upstairs bedroom, where Eric and Chuck – he was still Charles then – had already divided the spoils. Until then, I had shared a room with my sister, next to our parents'

bedroom. Well, when I moved upstairs to the long dormitory-like bedroom that covered much of the upstairs, I thought that I had arrived. My brothers, however, wasted no time in clarifying my role in the pecking order. My bed was strategically located in the vulnerable space between my two brothers – something of a buffer zone with many of the hazards you might expect. Each of my brothers had a night table; I did not ... and I quickly discovered that Eric wasn't sharing his! While Eric slept soundly, he did not sleep quietly – a fact that does not bode well for Eternity – nor did he prove to be a cheerful riser when morning came.

If Eric dominated the bedroom, then it can be said that he monopolized the landing next to it. Centered on his oversized desk, the landing was filled with books and maps, drafting equipment and memorabilia. Although Chuck and I had to cross the landing to get to the stairs, there was no mistaking who the space belonged to – we had an easement, not a right of occupancy! As the youngest, I eventually secured the whole place for myself – including *both* night tables – but there was always a lingering sense that the space really belonged to Eric and that I was there as a squatter.

It was during these years that Eric showed me how to draw roads and buildings on large pieces of bristol board, so that I might play with my matchbox cars – we called them “dinky toys” back then. He also showed me how to fasten them together, creating a collapsible layout that folded out into the size of an area rug. It is interesting to me, looking back, to remember how gingerly Eric walked around these layouts, taking care not to step on them while I was playing.

I suppose I would say that Eric was my hero when I was a boy. He was enough older than me to appear worldly-wise and sophisticated; I was enough younger than him to pose no serious threat. As an adult, I arrived at a more temperate estimate of his nature – appreciating him in more human terms – though he continued to be my friend and confidante. From great things to small, Eric influenced my interests and habits. My own love of history is largely a gift from him. So are my preferences for fountain pens over ballpoint, folk music over rock, and perhaps books over savings accounts.

After earning pocket money by singing in the coffee houses that flourished in Winnipeg, Eric's first career was as a mapmaker. Employed first by Western Photogrammetry and then by Applied Photogrammetric Services, his work eventually took him to Toronto and Regina. When he first left for Toronto, I wondered *then* if I would ever see him again. In 1975, returning to Winnipeg, he established his own mapping firm in partnership with Peter Gould – Carto Graphics. I recall many a day hanging out in their offices – fooling around with the equipment but staying away from the large and expensive mapping machine (I think it was called a “plotter”).

If mapping was his vocation, then genealogy was clearly Eric's avocation. Since Eric was interested in genealogy for as long as I can remember, I've never been sure just how he came to be interested in it. I've sometimes suspected that he was hoping to show how some fraud or mistake in an ancient birthing room had led to the current royal family occupying Buckingham Palace in error, while we, the rightful heirs, languished on Riverbend Crescent ... having to share a room ... and only two night tables! Whatever sparked his early interest, there can be no doubt that Eric loved his family and was devoted to the art of preserving family history. Given his passion for this work, and his desire to share his skills and insights with other people, it is truly

wonderful that he was able to pursue genealogy as his second career. As founding president of the Manitoba Genealogical Society, as author of *The Canadian Genealogical Handbook*, as consultant and publisher, Eric has helped untold numbers of families discover their roots and find meaning within the context of the most important of human institutions – the family.

While Eric established Wheatfield Press as a vehicle for publishing his genealogical works, its scope expanded to include historical and literary publications. In addition to Eric's own books, Wheatfield Press published works ranging from Emil Gudmundson's *Icelandic Unitarian Connection* to Gus Sigurdson's many volumes of poetry. In all honesty, Eric probably wasn't the best marketer of books, but no one could have devoted more care to the production of a superior product.

In 1980, Eric gave each of us in the family what is surely my nomination for "the best Christmas present ever" – *Five Generations*, an account of our family story which reminds us of the priceless heritage we claim. We stand on the shoulders of noble forebears, who struggled and loved as we do now, who lived not for themselves alone but for the greater glory of this grand human enterprise of which we are but the latest flowering. In the introduction, Eric wrote of our ancestors, "I have come to know many of them quite intimately – others more distantly. ... I appreciate them all – the rogues and the rascals, the saints and the innocents, the hardworking and the lazy, the ingenious and the common-lace. I hope you appreciate them too! ... I hope you will find it a valuable gift for this season of the year, and that you will remember in years to come that this collection is not only a gift of myself to you – but is also a testament as to who you are and, in part, who your children will be." Eric's passion for family history had an eye to the future as well as the past and this volume is a more precious gift to us than he could ever possibly have imagined.

Three years after this gift, Eric organized the Kjærnested Family Reunion to mark the centennial of the arrival of the Icelandic branch of our family in Manitoba. At the reunion, we unveiled a commemorative cairn in the Husavik Cemetery, which we had erected with stones from our great-great-grandfather's farm. At the homestead itself, a throng of descendants ate and drank and sang and reminisced. I have a vivid memory of Eric singing the *a cappella* folksong "My name is Dick Darby, I'm a cobbler" which prompted the younger children there to run about singing gibberish while spitting between phrases.

Eric's passion for genealogy reinforced his love for history, in general, and for things Icelandic, in particular. Eric believed that we needed to experience history rather than simply memorize it or analyze it. This led him to develop walking tours that enabled participants to experience the Icelandic heritage of Winnipeg, the Manitoba Interlake, and North Dakota. In fact, several weeks ago, Eric and I were out on the prowl with my youngest daughter, identifying possibilities for a walking tour that would have told the story of the Icelanders in Winnipeg by focusing on the lives of the leading members of the Icelandic community who lie buried in our city's cemeteries. At that time, we walked over the very place where he now rests, paused, and gave thanks for the gift of being here, for the gift of those we love, for the gift of the meaningful work we all have to do.

Over the course of two decades, Eric was an active supporter of *The Icelandic Canadian* magazine, believing it to be the most important vehicle available for maintaining and promoting the Icelandic culture here in North America. He was a regular contributor to the pages of the

magazine and long served as its business manager. For him, the magazine was not so much a publication as it was a sacred cause, so he worked passionately in its best interests, as he worked passionately in most everything he did.

Like the poet Robert Frost, it might be said that my brother had something of “a lover’s quarrel with the world,” which led him to seek elected office in an effort to contribute some small measure to the common good. Little could he have known, when he first sought public office, just how broad the field of his endeavour and the sphere of his influence would become.

It was my brother’s conviction that public education was the best guarantor of a free and democratic society. We hear a great deal about the public’s fears that a two-tier medical system may be developing – but there is a strange silence in the face the slow emergence of what might be called a two-tier school system. Eric devoted considerable energy to defending the *public* school system against the continuing encroachments that undermine its mission and rob it of the precious resources available for its support. More than anything, his work for both the Manitoba Association of School Trustees and the Canadian School Boards Association grew out of his burning desire to influence provincial and federal politicians as they made decisions that affected the well-being of public schools – not just in his own community but in communities throughout the province and across the country. It is undoubtedly his passion for this work that led to his elevation to the presidency of both of these important organizations.

Having grown up in the east end of St. James, where the circumstances of neighbourhood families ranged all the way from poverty to comfort, Eric knew that a sound education was the great leveler of social circumstance. It opens the fragile window of opportunity for children of modest means but great motivation to get ahead in a competitive and unforgiving world. So he believed that no effort should be spared when it came to enriching early childhood education, cultivating each child’s natural sense of curiosity and wonder. He believed that no effort should be spared in helping children to discern and develop their personal gifts as they grow towards maturity. He believed deeply that no effort should be spared to keep our young people in school until they graduate! And so Eric committed himself to those policies and programs that made our children and their education the first priority.

Beyond the trustees’ routine of seemingly endless meetings and public appearances, Eric especially enjoyed having the opportunity to visit area schools and interact with his most important constituents – the ones without a direct vote. I have the impression that he developed a particular fondness for the Brooklands School. A couple of years ago, he was invited to that school to read a story to the children. I cannot remember which grade these children were in, but I distinctly remember that Eric was assigned the book *Waiting for the Whales*. When he read the story, he was overwhelmed, for it reminded him of childhood summers with our grandparents out at the West Coast. The illustrations in the book were hauntingly familiar, especially those of the book’s grandfather, who looked remarkably like our own ... right down to the suspenders and the hat. Reacquainted with the wonder of childhood, something of Eric’s inner self was imparted to the children that day as he read them the story and then reminisced about his own grandfather. And the children rewarded him with their attention and delight. He had planned to visit this same school next month – only this time he was appearing as Santa Claus. It was a role that he had played more than once in our own family, much to the delight of nieces and nephews, and it was as Santa that he hoped to bring a little joy and delight to the lives of the children of his wider concern.

Although my mother used to maintain that Eric had no sense of humour as a child, I always experienced him as someone with a rich, if sometimes peculiar, sense of humour. In cinema and television, Eric's love of comedy rivaled his appreciation of historical documentaries. His quest for the perfect punchline made him the most discriminating greeting card buyer that I have ever known. Like me, Eric regularly clipped and preserved cartoons from the newspaper; unlike me, he could remember jokes through to the punchline ... a gift that seems to have been especially well-exercised during his otherwise serious service on the school board. My memory is flooded with countless occasions when shared laughter brought us all to the point of tears.

When Eric published *The Canadian Genealogical Handbook* in 1976, the book's dedication read: "For Elizabeth, My partner in all things." It came to me as something of a surprise to discover that my brother was a closet romantic, but through the years I have come to know that these words were no idle turn of phrase but truly declared a heartfelt sentiment. The two of them met in Regina when Eric was working there. Their love for one another blossomed, so when Liz went to work as a teacher in Red Earth, Saskatchewan, they maintained their relationship despite the vast distance that separated them. In time, they settled down together in a common home, sharing in life's joys and sorrows, its trials and satisfactions. They were always there for each other. As a couple, Eric and Liz were as close as any I have known. Theirs was a marriage of the heart, a bond of the soul.

My brother admired his daughter Erin's keen intellect, her discipline and determination, and her kind heart. He admired his son Kris's sense of spirit, his friendly and easy-going nature, and his quiet cleverness and wit. Like our own father, my brother cherished the simple joy of talking with his children. More than once, he told me what a blessing it was to see both of his children grow into the kind of individuals that are a delight to know.

Eric even warmed up to the idea that his children would one day seek for themselves the same kind of relationship that he had enjoyed with Liz. "So tell me what's wrong with Julian," I once asked Eric, as was giving me advice on how to scare away my own children's suitors, when the time came. "Well, nothing," he replied after a little thought. "I like him a lot." And so Eric was pleased to see his circle of kinship expand to include one more.

Eric's love for our parents was unbounded. I don't imagine that Eric ever fully got through grieving the loss of our father, but I know for a fact that his love and appreciation for our mother never ceased to grow, even as their relationship evolved and changed and matured. Eric loved Mom deeply.

Eric's love for Liz's family quickly made it his own. He appreciated the countless ways in which he was welcomed into the Cazakoff family. Nothing, perhaps, symbolizes this welcome any better than Marion admonishing him, "Eat – you look so thin!," which my brother knew to mean "Welcome here, we love you."

For my sister, Deb, my brother, Chuck, and me, it is as if a part of who we are has passed from the world – and I suppose that this is true. It seems to me that there is no one with whom we are allowed to be so fully human as a brother or a sister. So, we will cherish the fierce quarrels of childhood and generous reconciliations, the shared memories of our rich experience together, the legacy of the love we have known, which has nurtured us through the years and sustains us even now.

I will miss my brother Eric more than words than say – more than tears, even, can express.
And I know that I am not alone.

Among his papers is a poem he wrote, in which he said:

*I am gone, my time is over,
Deep into the ground I go;
But I hope my life's had meaning,
Since it started, long ago.*

*I have tried my best to be –
Caring husband, father, friend;
And I hope I'll be remembered,
Fondly, now I've reached my end.*

*I have laboured long and hard,
Serving my community –
Sharing all the strengths I have
To make it better than it be.*

*I have strived through words and letters
To provide a sense of past;
Helping friends find lost ancestors,
And kindle heritage that lasts.*

*I have fought the many battles
Fate throws up up along life's way;
Some I've won, and some I haven't
In my struggles, day to day.*

*I've had strength, as well as weakness,
But I hope my strength will be
Remembered only, on my passing,
By everyone who cares for me!*

*I am gone, my earthly body
Rests contently down below;
For I'm sure my life's had meaning
Since it started, long ago!*

My dear brother: If poems are prayers – and I think they are; and if prayer can be answered – and I think it can; then your prayer has been answered in our hearts today. Sleep well, dear friend. We loved you living ... and we love you now!