"A Matter of Love": My Life with Dialogue

Eugene England

God sometimes seems to me quite unreasonable. I've thought so especially at times when it appears that the one gift he has clearly given me, the gift of dialogue, is also a source of pain to myself and to others. As I have tried to minimize the pain while using and developing that gift, I have come to understand better Thomas More's response when his daughter complained that in trying to be true to his gifts and convictions he might compromise a bit because he had "done as much as God can reasonably want": "Well . . . finally . . . it isn't a matter of reason; finally it's a matter of love" (Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, New York: Random House, 1962, p. 81).

My problem, which I'm afraid I have made a problem for many others, including some I love most, is that I'm deeply, apparently irretrievably, in love with (small d) dialogue — and with the contraries of the universe that seem to me *must* be responded to through dialogue. I can't remember any earlier love. My first memories are of my parents telling stories about life in rural Idaho, narratives that contained lovely, perplexing contraries and a resulting internal dialogue of emotion and event that defined their characters and gave me some sense of my own being: the uncle who could tell from the impression of a coin on his palm whether it was heads or tails — and used that skill to relieve my father of his first bicycle; my mother's beautiful, brilliant cousin who watched with her as lightning struck the huge cottonwood outside their kitchen window, scarring it to the ground — and who later slept on the wet grass under that tree and then died of pneumonia; the man who defrauded my parents of a great deal of money, and when they met him, years later, serving as a temple worker, one would shake hands with him and one would not; my great-uncle, a stake patriarch in Blackfoot, who stood in sacrament meeting, predicted an early

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frost, and told the Saints to get their sugar beets in — and, as my father put it, "All the non-Mormons did and saved them, but the Mormons didn't (and didn't)."

When I began to discover the *ideas* of the gospel as a teenager I found great sustenance in teachers who talked *with* me about the ravishing mysteries of eternal identity and co-existence with God, of seductive Mercy that danced with stern Justice to produce salvation, of God's comforting foreknowledge and omnipotence that struggled in our minds against his exhilarating insistence on agency and eternal progression. And I found that my parents, conditioned to be conservative in thought and repressive in discipline, responded out of a greater quality — that of love for me, even in my smart-aleck challenges and behaviors, and also talked *with* me rather than *at* me. I came to love, even before I reasoned much about it, the gospel as a part of its caretaker Church that had produced such teachers and parents as well as preserving such ideas.

In the meantime, I was also discovering Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and B. H. Roberts. My father had read *The Discourses of Brigham Young* as a seventeen-year-old, and the quality of Brother Brigham's mind, which saw this world astutely but looked through it into the eternal worlds without even a blink of separation, intoxicated him. And through him, that mind touched me with a sense of mystery. My Sunday school and seminary teachers introduced me to Brigham Young's great intellectual disciple, Brigham H. Roberts, that cool, daring, self-made mind, and Roberts introduced me to Joseph Smith. As I read *Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Teacher*, I felt a thrilling shock of recognition in passage after passage:

> [Our Prophet] taught that the intelligent entity in man, which men call "spirit" and sometimes "soul," is a self-existing entity, uncreated and eternal as God is, placed in the way by Higher Intelligences, — and guided by their love and counsels, — of increasing his own intelligence and power and glory and joy. Such he represented man to be, and once more crowned him with the dignity belonging to his Divine and eternal nature (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1908, p. 24).

I felt myself crowned with dignity by such teachings and avidly read all I could by Joseph Smith — and about him, including John Henry Evans's very moving biography. And all of this quickly immersed me in dialogue. I found that Brigham Young and B. H. Roberts — and Joseph Smith himself — not only themselves loved dialogue but taught about paradoxes (in language that moved me to tears of agreement) that some modern Mormons, even my parents, didn't seem to see the same way, let alone rejoice in. So I had to learn to talk about such things with these people whom I respected and loved but who saw things differently. And I found quickly that there were good and bad ways to do that, ways that built closeness and understanding even when there was not agreement and ways that simply won verbal battles and alienated people. I gradually learned that "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) was a genuine possibility as well as a Christian duty. And I learned, with some struggle and over a long time, I admit, to love that duty.

I remember with particular pain — and yet some gratitude — the lesson Elder Marion D. Hanks taught me in response to an overheated letter I wrote

him as a new missionary in Samoa. I had complained about what I saw as my fellow missionaries' patronizing racism and unthinking inclination to impose an American version of the gospel on the "cursed" Lamanites in Samoa. He rebuked me severely for my arrogance and self-righteousness, which he correctly blamed for the alienation I had admitted feeling in my silent condemnation of my companions; and he concluded with an insight I have learned to practice and to love: that in dealing with people it is at least as important to be effective as to be right. And I have learned that the way to be most effective is outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 121: honest confrontation, clothed clearly in faith and charity, followed by an *increase* of love. I tried that with my fellow missionaries, along with some recognition and confession of my own forms of intolerance, and things improved greatly — for all of us.

That kind of dialogue is not easy, but it certainly has become for me a matter of love, both an effect and a cause of my feelings about this universe and its unique intelligences, who are as valuable and interesting as I am and who provide a way for me to gradually know and become like God.

I remember a particularly painful but rewarding test of my conviction. I had been released from the Stanford (student) Ward bishopric, and as new members of the Palo Alto Ward, Charlotte and I were asked to speak in sacrament meeting. I bore my testimony about how the gospel impelled me and gave me guidance in various efforts to improve society through political and other volunteer action. The next Sunday, in testimony meeting, one of the ward members used a good portion of the time to rebut me point by point, concluding with the implication that I must not really have a testimony at all if I believed such liberal things about social action.

I was hurt and angry, ready to respond in kind, but Elder Hanks's letter came to mind and I restrained myself, thought things over for a week, with some fasting and prayer for the ability to be effective, and went to my antagonist's home. It was awkward and painful at first, he defensive, me still smarting, but I persevered until I could apologize sincerely for offending him and could express my feelings and faith in ways he could understand and accept. He became one of my closest friends in the ward, a regular opponent in the Gospel Doctrine class I was asked to teach. He was able to greatly improve the dialogue that went on there because, though he disagreed with me about many things, he knew that my faithfulness was "stronger than the cords of death" (D&C 121:44).

It was not long before this time that I had joined with others at Stanford in founding a journal. We wanted to foster conversation between Mormons of various perspectives and experiences and between Mormons and others, especially about the contraries of faith and reason, of esthetic freedom versus theological order, of reductive historical fact as opposed to expansive religious vision — and so we decided to call the journal DIALOGUE. But of all the kinds of dialogue we talked about and tried to promote through the journal, the one I loved and valued most was simply talking through a difficult idea, or a disagreement or offense, with a brother or sister. I believe the single most important thing we achieved with the journal, in those first five years while I was

an editor, was to build a community, within the LDS community, of people who could talk to each other about things they had been silent, even silenced, about. And gradually we were learning to talk about such things outside of our safe group, even with those who disagreed with us or had silenced us.

To begin with, we talked a good deal with each other. The five of us who started the journal had plenty of disagreements, some about very basic things and some that continued; but we learned to listen, to change our minds, to forgive, to compromise, to work together despite our differences. And the very nature of our project brought us into all sorts of dialogue with others.

In the fall of 1965, right after we sent out our simple prospectus to about 500 friends and colleagues, I invited members of the Stanford Ward to meet each Tuesday night to work on the journal. That gathering became a substitute for Mutual (which wasn't held in that student ward) for the fifteen to twenty who came regularly. We answered letters, typed up the mailing list for our brochure, then the subscription lists as people responded, began to process manuscripts and complaints — all the things that we couldn't afford to hire a secretary to do, and more. We talked constantly about the excited letters we were getting from all over the Church, often from individuals or groups who had been planning a journal themselves, letters full of happiness there would finally be such a forum, of hope for its success, sometimes a letter of despair from someone who thought that it was too late to help them in their own alienation. We talked about the manuscripts, agreeing and disagreeing and getting new visions of gospel meaning and Church service. We found out, in these contexts, much that we had not known about each other and thus deepened our understanding and appreciation of each other in the Stanford Ward.

As we developed our editorial procedures, a form of dialogue we had not explicitly planned became a major part of our effort — and, I believe, of our contribution: Wes Johnson convinced us of the importance of an editorial board, diverse in expertise and geography and gospel perspective, and we sent each manuscript to three of them for written response. In weekly editorial meetings we discussed those responses and our combined judgments and then conveyed them to the author, sometimes with an acceptance, but even then as a basis for rewriting. It soon became clear that we were establishing, essentially for the first time in Mormon culture, a tradition of criticism and response — serious but civil, severe but charitable. That tradition carried over into the printed journal in its general standard of writing and of reasoned argument, conscious of opposing views, as well as in the Roundtables, where different viewpoints on a subject were explicitly expressed, along with rebuttals. It was also encouraged, of course, in another major innovation in modern Mormon publishing, substantive letters to the editor, allowing for long as well as short, serious as well as witty responses to what we published, sometimes followed by responses to the criticism from the authors of the original essays.

And we found that we were increasingly engaged in dialogue with others about our enterprise — with individuals but also with groups gathering in the Bay area and then in Utah and around the country. Most of these were fire-

sides and regular DIALOGUE Discussion Groups, usually set up by members of our board of editors, where we reviewed our ideals and procedures for the journal and responded to hard questions about everything from doctrinal content in the essays to our own commitment to the Church. I was constantly confirmed in my faith that honest, loving dialogue, about even the most difficult matters, can do much to dispel fear and alienation, even when disagreement remains.

It was very satisfying to find confirmation of that faith in my experiences with members of the First Presidency during those beginning DIALOGUE years. Hugh B. Brown was a loyal and constant supporter of our efforts, the first (and so far only) general authority to respond to invitations to publish in DIALOGUE (his funeral sermon for P. A. Christensen, a distinguished professor of English at BYU, was published in the Spring 1969 issue). He always found time to see me on my quarterly visits to Salt Lake City and was consistently complimentary and encouraging about our work: He kept his full set of DIALOGUE prominently displayed on the right side of his desk and always had the current issue in his left hand reading drawer and would pull it out and ask questions or make comments. Not long after one of those visits, on 13 May 1969, he made his famous plea for the *process* of continuing thought and free expression at BYU. In a speech he titled "An Eternal Quest — Freedom of the Mind," he discussed the need for genuine patriotism through reverence for law and individual morality and defended the United Nations, quoting from both US and LDS presidents (the UN had been under attack by various groups and people, including some Mormons). Then he discussed "freedom of the mind" as a "dangerous" but essential freedom, the one from which all other freedoms spring:

> One cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking. More thinking is required, and we call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through on every proposition that is submitted to you and be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgement of your own shortcomings.
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> You young people live in an age when freedom of the mind is suppressed over much of the world. We must preserve it in the Church and in America and resist all efforts of earnest men to suppress it, for when it is suppressed, we might lose the liberties vouchsafed in the Constitution. . . . We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall *have* thoughts (republished in DIALOGUE, Spring 1984).

President N. Eldon Tanner was less theoretical than President Brown, more pragmatic and personal in his support for diversity of thought. I visited him once concerning conscientious objection by Latter-day Saints, something I felt was entirely legitimate but which many draft boards disallowed and some Church members had called heresy — despite a First Presidency letter that essentially said that Latter-day Saints could avail themselves of the laws which allow for conscientious objection (published in DIALOGUE, Spring 1968, p. 8). He reaffirmed the letter, telling of a personal experience with a young Mormon who had accidentally killed someone and simply could not face the possibility

of ever causing another death — which President Tanner saw as one perfectly valid reason for refusing combat service. On another occasion he suggested that DIALOGUE should be sure to include in each issue at least one article by a non-Mormon or openly disagreeing with some Church doctrine or practice, since that would clearly signal to all readers that the journal had no official status and was not to be simply accepted uncritically! He seemed not very happy about the tendency of Church members to read the official magazines with such uncritical acceptance, without engaging in the process of thought, judgment, and inspired confirmation that genuine internal dialogue with the written or spoken word makes possible.

We found, of course, that dialogue doesn't solve everything, but most of our problems — and my deepest disappointments — came because dialogue wasn't tried or maintained. The most serious mistake we made during those five years, I believe, was publishing the Stewart Udall letter on blacks and the priesthood, which he then used for political purposes through the national press in ways that did us, and probably the Church, significant harm. We had decided in an editorial meeting, after much proper dialogue, not to publish the letter; but then in an executive meeting, under pressure of deadline, I bowed to our commitment to openness and public dialogue as an absolute value and pushed it through. I was guilty of forgetting one of the main lessons of dialogue: that there are few absolutes in the human sphere, certainly no abstract ones, and that in this case people's feelings at a volatile time were more important than abstract freedom and total exposure.

I had to learn another version of that lesson years later, after I had begun teaching at BYU and was developing a team-taught interdisciplinary colloquium for honors freshmen. The course was firmly based in the value of unrestricted give and take between faculty members as a model for student learning. We had approved this ideal of open dialogue in meetings of our team, but in practice it wasn't so simple. We all tended to be somewhat defensive about our own areas of expertise and uneasy about challenging others in theirs. Without being very sensitive to the reasons for these feelings, which were based in our lack of experience and as yet incomplete trust, I got up one day after a colleague's lecture on his specialty and engaged in an extensive rebuttal. He seemed to take it in stride; but some weeks later, feeling that he was withdrawing somewhat from the team and was possibly upset about something we were planning, I confronted him. I pressed, rather bluntly, not noticing his attempts to avoid being critical of me. Finally, he told me how much I had embarrassed and hurt him with my sudden attempt, without any warning to him, to engage him in dialogue before the class. He said, "Gene, I've read your essays and admired you for your work in starting DIALOGUE and putting up with the flak that followed. You've paid your dues. But after the way you've treated me I've decided I'd rather read you than know you."

I have been a victim as well as a perpetrator of aborted dialogue. The greatest pain and disillusionment of my experience with DIALOGUE came when I heard about reports and predictions of various direful consequences to me (everything from polygamy to apostasy) because of my work with the journal.

It was often clear that these rumors and prophecies had originated with people who could easily have learned the truth — and much about the state of my soul — simply by talking with me but who did not understand the gospel imperative to such dialogue or did not love enough to obey.

I do, in fact, believe such dialogue is a strict commandment for all members of the Church community, of whatever position, though most of us seldom obey it:

> If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (Matt. 5:23–24).
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> On this, the Lord's day, thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord (D&C 59:12).

The Christian equivalent of that Jewish altar of sacrifice is certainly the sacrament table, and so I believe that Christ is commanding in these scriptures that we not partake of the sacrament while we are still feeling guilt or resentment because we have offended someone or have been offended by someone; we should first go and be reconciled through sincere confession and dialogue with that person.

That principle is central to my reasons for believing the Church is as true, as effective for salvation, as the gospel. The Restored Church is, by revelation, radically a lay church and one divided into congregations geographically rather than by choice; thus, all who obey their baptismal covenant to be "active" participants in service through the Church are brought into constant relationships with people they would not normally choose for such relationships. The result is confrontation and a chance for constant dialogue in our service together, in presidencies and quorums and committees and faculties, dialogue that quite often produces conflict and requires reconciliation. And through those processes we can best learn, inspired by the true principles of the gospel and its priesthood ordinances, to love unconditionally — which is the crucial requirement for salvation. Through the Church we can learn to love both our (sometimes unlovable) selves and our (sometimes unlovable) neighbors, and thus (and only thus) can we be saved by the atonement of Christ.

You can see by now that for me dialogue really is, in the most radical sense, a matter of love. It is the main process for developing the love that will save us. But it is also, as I have suggested, what attracts me intellectually to the gospel as well as the Church: The oppositions — the paradoxes — that the gospel suggests lie necessarily at the very heart of all things (and that seem necessarily to make up the very process of knowing) thrill me. I love the universe that those ideas suggest and that seriously entertaining those ideas has helped me find:

> For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so . . . all things must needs be a compound in one. . . . there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away (2 Ne. 2:11–13).
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> All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence (D&C 93:30).

These are among the most valuable statements about the nature of being that I know about, from any religion or philosophy. They indicate that existence itself depends on opposition and that the crucial thing opposition makes possible is the creative activity and choices of intelligences, "things to act." But the second quotation not only suggests that the very existence of the universe depends on the dynamism of opposition and develops through the perplexing, joy-bringing — but also pain- and sin-bringing — creative play of intelligences, including God; the passage also states that "truth," which we have been tempted to think of as static and permanently fixed, however hard to find, is also inseparably connected to that creative activity of intelligences and relative to the sphere of existence where it is pursued. As the Lord also told Joseph Smith in Section 93, "Truth is *knowledge* of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come" (v. 24; my emphasis). In other words, knowledge changes as the knower changes. Thus, truth may well be called, as we do in our hymn, "the sum of existence," but by that very definition it is not "eternal, unchanged evermore," because the sum is always changing as we intelligences, we knowers, change.

In Alma 32, we learn much about how a knower knows and what the process of change is — and we are also moved by the great quality of the passage as literature not only to understand but also to engage in the process, to do and be as well as know. But Alma points out that in his time, just as in ours, many start with a self-defeating condition before they will risk the search for truth: They say, "If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe" (v. 17). Human beings claim they are perfectly willing to believe, if only someone will provide perfect knowledge — clear, rational argument and evidence — in advance. But Alma knows from experience that such a condition — such prior, absolute "knowledge" — is a snare and a delusion, because "if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe" (v. 18) — that is, he will be satisfied with those static, unprogressive, essentially trivial aspects of existence which are available for perfect knowledge. He will not be moved to change his life to conform to the active knowledge of self and God that comes only through faith and through dialogue.

Alma is interested in something much more important than the limited knowledge available to us empirically and rationally. He is interested in faith, which he says is "not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye *hope* for things which are *not seen* which are true" (v. 21; my emphasis). In other words, we live in a universe (not of our making, nor ultimately of God's, but just irrevocably there) in which mortals cannot discover the most important spiritual realities and meanings using empirical methods alone. Some of those realities can only be realized by those willing to hope — those who desire the realities enough to proceed without perfect knowledge. Truth is to be found while both discovering and creating the true realities possible in our universe — not enslaving ourselves to impossible fantasies but making new relationships and developing new personality and vision by obedience to natural laws.

For instance, a good marriage, a potentially eternal one, is not simply a truth to discover; it is a truth that can and must be created and known. It cannot be fantasized into existence, or based on invincible or unfaced incompatibilities or handicaps, or forced into reality by sheer will, but it is something new in the universe, an addition to the sum of existence, when it is created by the cooperative obedience to natural laws of two free agents as they act on their desires and hopes enough to know each other. Similarly, God is not simply a truth to be discovered in the same way empirical knowledge can be — by reduction, dissection, probability. He and she, our heavenly parents, are themselves agents, presently separated from us — in part so that we can learn to find them through our own desire and agency and thus develop the essential godly quality of faith: We must respond to the evidences of their existence in their creations and their actions in history, to traces of their love and united but unique personalities, and thus become like them, the highest form of knowledge. And the best way I have found to discover those laws and create those realities of self and relationship is through dialogue, both the dialogues with myself that form the inner life of discovery and fashioning of self and the dialogues with others that create the redemptive communities of marriage and Church and the human city.

I love those communities, despite the difficulties and painful, limiting bonds they bring to my unbound self. They are my true liberation, the only means to become myself. In marriage I find, as Luther taught, "the school of love," the place to learn best what I most want to know. I find the same kind of school in the Restored Church and to a lesser degree in the human village, the great community of the living, with whom I can engage in dialogue through travel, talk, and public service — and the community also of the dead, with whom dialogue comes through temple work, literature, and writing. Through all of these I can test the truth of Joseph Smith's magnificent perception, "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest" (*History of the Church* 6:428). I love the man who had that inspired insight, love him more the more I know his life and writing and see his long struggle with the sometimes tragic contraries of existence. And I taste the joy of the struggle in his own words from the King Follett Discourse:

> This is good doctrine. It tastes good. I can taste the principles of eternal life, and so can you. They are given to me by the revelation of Jesus Christ; and I know that when I tell you these words of eternal life as they are given to me, you taste them, and I know that you believe them. You say that honey is sweet, and so do I. I can also taste the spirit of eternal life. I know that it is good (*History of the Church* 4:312).

Finally, what I love most about dialogue, what tastes best, is the way, properly engaged in, it fosters meekness and lowliness of heart. Dogmatism, self-assurance, too much concern with defining and pursuing the "right" ends as opposed to preserving civil and loving means — all these seem dangerous and bitter, both in civil society and in the Church. I believe the gospel was restored in the United States because it had a social and political system dedicated to preserving a moral process for social interaction rather than one

focused on defining and enforcing certain specified moral qualities or ends. Lying at the heart of democratic capitalism and our pluralistic polity is not some set of values, such as liberty, equality, and fraternity, or some theology such as the dictatorship of the proletariat, but merely the humble doctrine of due process, of keeping the ball in play in the political realm rather than taking up arms to defend our rights — of talking, negotiating, and trying to understand others' visions and needs, rather than asserting our will through power.

I believe the same humble values lie at the heart of the gospel and that "the only true and living Church" is that precisely because it is the best place to realize loving tolerance and free exploration and creation. I believe that "*no power*," certainly not the priesthood, can be properly and effectively exercised except "by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41). Those are the essential qualities of dialogue and the qualities that good dialogue fosters.

I love the meek — people like Joseph Smith and Marion G. Romney and Charlotte. I want to be like them and believe the best way is first to give my heart in faith to Christ and to confess my sins and repent, because "the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart" (Moro. 8:26). Then, I believe, I must endure well, mainly by engaging constantly, fully, honestly, lovingly, in dialogue: "For none is acceptable before God, save the meek and lowly in heart" (Moro. 7:44).