

The Long Cast

Douglas Thayer

I WANT TO TALK ABOUT GENE as a fisherman, with a slight metaphorical emphasis. Gene's father was a meat fisherman who believed in catching big fish and lots of them, using whatever method or bait was necessary, which is where Gene got his start. Gene's father had connections, and one day they fished some private ponds and caught some four and five pound brook trout, which are very large brookies.

Coming home, the driver—a friend of Gene's father—fell asleep and rolled the car, scattering the contents, including the occupants and the fish on the highway. People stopped to help. Of course, being from Utah, the first question they asked as they approached Gene, who sat holding his unconscious father's bleeding head on his lap and giving him a blessing, was, "Where did you catch the fish?" Good fishing holes are at a premium in Utah.

Unlike Gene's father, Gene and I were fly-fishermen, and we didn't fish for meat. We fished small streams because there are often lots of fish, not very many fishermen, and the fish are relatively dumb. We were not consummate fly fishermen, just fly fishermen having fun. We fished Diamond Fork, South Fork of the Provo, South Fork of the Weber, and Corn, Gooseberry, Fish, Nebo, Salt, Currant, and Hobble Creeks, and the small Stawberry River below the dam. Creeks, along with their other virtues, have an intimacy, beauty, and character that larger waters don't have. One of the things Gene liked most was finding a new creek to fish; he liked the sense of discovery.

Creeks are also relatively safe. You're not likely to get swept away, which is an advantage wives appreciate as fly-fishermen grow older. Yet creeks can be tricky. One late afternoon I left Gene fishing a hole on Gooseberry Creek, and five minutes later he appeared through the brush soaked to his chin. When I asked him what on earth had happened, he said he was climbing up the bank, slipped, and kind of floated or planed on his back out onto the hole he'd been fishing and sank. It takes a certain skill for a full-grown man to immerse himself completely in eighteen inches of water. Of course Gene went on fishing.

We fished dry flies, usually rather large because vision begins to fade after sixty, and you often have to see the fly to see the strike. We used barbless hooks and released nearly all our fish, except for the two or three Gene sometimes took back for either Bert Wilson or Leslie Norris. A dry fly floats of course, or is supposed to. The theory is that the fish, thinking the floating artificial is a real insect, will strike at it, and you get that unique experience of having proved that you're smarter than the fish.

There is something wonderful about being on the right creek with a good friend at the right time of day, fishing the right fly, and dropping it in the right way at just the right spot. It can be a kind of momentary perfection. Again, pushing the metaphor a little, Gene, with Charlotte, was a person who sought all his life to live life in the right way, according to the rules of the gospel, which might be all the perfection one can expect in this life.

The first time I went fly-fishing with Gene, we fished his then-favorite stream, the South Fork of the Ogden River, which is a small creek filled with six- to eight-foot-high rock and log jams. Gene, energetic as always, vaulted over these. He was an eager fisherman. I followed him, watching for his wet footprints on the rocks and logs. It was a little like trying to follow a very large squirrel.

Gene was a leader all his life. As a scholar and writer, Gene was undoubtedly one of the leading experts, if not the leading expert, on Mormon literature and culture. Most of his fourteen books, over sixty articles and book chapters, and countless talks and papers are on Mormon subjects, although he also published on Shakespeare and other writers, and wrote fine poems and personal essays (his bibliography comes to fourteen single-spaced pages). He knew and felt Mormon theology, culture, and history deeply. He was always seeking new understanding, new ways to live and apply and teach the gospel of Christ. He was a devout disciple.

The one- or two-hour drive out to the "creek of the day" was one of the chief pleasures for me when fishing with Gene. We talked about everything, and not always in subdued tones—families, the church, school, the gospel, friends, literature, theater, our writing, which is not to say that we always were right, although we often agreed.

During one trip down to Corn Creek, we parked and started hiking up the creek. But the creek had dried up. A spring-fed creek that had been flowing since long before pioneer times was down to a trickle. Ever hopeful, we hiked on. We crossed the creek several times, until, stopping, one of us remembered that we had never had to cross the creek before. We looked around, pondered, and decided that whatever the trickle was, it wasn't Corn Creek. Six college degrees between us, and it took us half a mile to realize we were in the wrong canyon.

Gene was a compassionate fishing partner, and fishing is a sport not known for fairness and compassion among partners. He brought me cookies to eat (baked by Charlotte), shared his apples and sandwiches with me (made with Charlotte's wonderful bread), bought me drinks and ice cream for the journey home, and took me in his Toyota Land Cruiser (a birthday gift from Charlotte).

Sometimes I saved the best hole for Gene, and sometimes he saved it for me. On Lower Fish Creek he once caught twenty trout from a hole I saved for him while I stood by almost in tears. Trout migrate to deeper holes when the water is low; that hole was full of fish that had moved from shallower water, and Gene, with my help, had hit a glory hole, as we called them.

Gene's life, along with Charlotte's, has been compassionate, caring for the sick, poor, distraught, needy, and the doubting. He and Charlotte often had impoverished foreign students (most of them seemed to be Polish) living in their house, and then would support them on their missions once they graduated. Gene had a unique ability to help highly intelligent students, honor students, who were wavering in their faith, to stay in the church. Gene often told me that the essence of the gospel was caring for the poor and the needy.

Gene did more than simply fish. It was an education to go with him; he was a teacher in and out of the classroom. He was always stopping to point out flowers and birds along the creeks, naming them for me. He would draw my attention to a particularly splendid cloud formation in the blue sky, or hues and colors of canyon walls. He loved the gold marking of German brown trout. Gene would hold a brown to admire its coloring and then watch the brown as he opened his hands under the water to let it swim away, vanishing in its perfect camouflage. In a sense that's what Gene was doing in his long months of suffering, nursed and loved so well by Charlotte and his children and grandchildren, vanishing for a while from our view. How often during that long time he would say he loved you and ask you to kiss him.

Although I had a lighter cast than Gene, he had a longer one. Nothing delighted him more as a fly-fisherman than a long cast that brought a smashing strike. Gene's influence, like his cast, reached out. He regularly got invitations from groups around the country to come and talk to them about the gospel, literature, and Mormon culture. He and Charlotte had friends all across the country. I've never known a couple with more friends. These groups valued Gene's thinking, scholarship, spirit, hopefulness, and Charlotte's graciousness and strength, and her ability to keep fine-tuning Gene a little.

Gene and Charlotte built their pioneer house a block away from the BYU campus. Numerous times through the years they invited students, faculty, and friends to enjoy musical performances and talks and read-

ings on a wide variety of topics. Their home was a center of culture, enlightenment, and discussion. I've never known another couple that did more than Gene and Charlotte to bring people together.

Gene was quite an aggressive fly-fisherman. He developed what I named the "Gene England Creep": Slightly bent forward, constantly false casting to dry his fly so it would float better, he would move up the hole stealthily and terribly intent. He didn't like trout to get away. Once on Salt Creek in Nephi Canyon, we spotted a trout in a hole impossible to cast to because of heavy brush, but Gene said, "I'm going to catch that guy" (a term he often used to refer to fish). Gene climbed up the high, steep, brushy bank, vanishing for about five minutes, and then I saw his rod sticking out against the skyline, just his rod, not any part of him, and the fly slowly being lowered to the water, where the trout struck. Gene hooked him and came crashing down through the brush laughing, fighting the trout all the way. (I have all this on video tape, should anyone doubt my word.) Metaphorically speaking, Gene never avoided the difficult task.

Gene liked to fish by logs. If we came to a hole with a log in it, the log was his. He had an uncanny ability to lure fish out from under logs. When we returned to a stream, he always remembered where the good logs were.

Part of the fun of fishing with Gene was remembering previous trips, what fish were caught and in what holes, what size, what the fight had been like. Sometimes we would fish a hole alone, but mostly we fished side-by-side, both casting, waiting for the strike, talking, kibitzing, laughing, suggesting where the other might try one more desperate cast.

Gene was certainly the most complimentary fisherman I've ever fished with. "Good for you, Doug, good for you," he would say when I hooked a trout. He would stop to admire my trout before I let it slip out of the net and back into the deep. Slowly, somewhat reluctantly, I learned to compliment him on his trout.

Gene had an incredible ability to get hung up, snagged in the trees and brush, which was inevitable because he fished a nine-foot rod (the tip was perpetually falling off and the handle was loose) and made long casts. But he also had an equally incredible ability to get those snags undone without losing his fly. He was a hopeful fisherman. By that same token, Gene was very aware of human frailty (particularly his own) and the incredible ironies and tragedies in our lives that would seem to mock faith.

One day, fishing the Strawberry River below the dam, we ran across a lone fisherman on a hole. He told us how he'd fished that hole for forty years and about the incredible fish he used to catch as a boy fishing with his beloved father. He fished the hole and caught nothing, and then invited Gene to try. About this time I noticed that our fisherman wore a

holstered pistol under his jacket. In the meantime Gene caught a nice brown. The fisherman didn't say anything. As Gene stepped back, I whispered, "He's carrying a gun." Gene looked at me and said, "If I'd known that I wouldn't have caught his fish." We moved on. You never know how a fisherman will react to somebody catching one of his fish.

In some ways Gene was innocent, for he believed that others were just as interested as he was in discussion, dialogue, in doing their best thinking, and in finding and knowing, which might somehow lead to the truth, or some approximation of it. So on more than one occasion there were snags, snarled leaders, lost fish in his life—the metaphor goes a little too far here perhaps. And Gene knew his moments of despair, but with Charlotte there to help him, he never gave up. Even toward the end of his illness, he would try to write lines of poetry and whisper I love you.

When we were on the way home from one of our creeks, Gene would always stop and call Charlotte to tell her we were headed back. I usually drove, and he would take a nap. Charlotte preferred that I did all the driving, for Gene was not famous for his good driving. Bert Wilson often commented somewhat negatively on Gene's driving.

Once when we were headed for Currant Creek, Gene pulled out to pass and then swerved back to avoid an imminent head-on with an approaching white pickup he hadn't noticed. In my terror I shouted out, "Jesus," which wasn't blasphemy, but the beginning of a prayer, or perhaps the name of the individual I expected to see next, although that might have been somewhat presumptuous on my part. But then all roads are hazardous, and we all drive dangerously at times.

Gene's early death is bewildering. We can't make sense out of it, but then I imagine we're not supposed to. Viewed rationally, reality doesn't give us much hope. Faith is the foundation of hope, and a belief in grace is also vital. The Gene England I fished with was a faithful, hopeful man, and a man who believed more and more in the need for grace offered through Christ. In that name, amen.