

A Brief Tour of England: My Year with Gene

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WE IN UTAH VALLEY STATE COLLEGE'S Center for the Study of Ethics were sardines, but we were happy sardines. Our office (formerly a mythical beast called a "faculty lounge") housed the chair of the humanities department, the director of the Ethics Center, Melanie (the ultra-competent secretarial glue that held the office together), and me (a research assistant). We didn't mind being crammed together in the little room, considering ourselves lucky to have anything that resembled an office in space-tight UVSC, where all unoccupied nooks were being metamorphosed into offices. Not even bathrooms were safe. Fifty feet down the hall, in a converted broom closet adjacent a pair of the few remaining bathrooms, stood the outer satellite of the center: Gene England's office.

Though Gene didn't spend much time in the Ethics Center itself, his presence still permeated our office. Our closet burst with the lawn signs he had made by the dozens to advertise the writer visits and conferences he sponsored on campus, and my ever-ringing phone provided a constant background noise to the office activity.

When people familiar with his projects discovered I worked for Gene, then the Writer in Residence at UVSC, most of them assumed I must spend my days talking theology with him or researching his next essay for *Sunstone* or *Dialogue*. It is true that I talked with him a lot—maybe once every three minutes. Gene's mind, I found, works on the fly. He called me to talk about everything that came into his mind—the moment it came into his mind. I could hear Melanie giggling sometimes when my phone rang for the thirtieth time that day from Gene's office.

"Steve? Gene here. I want you to get fifty more copies of the conference flyer and put them in my box. Oh, and I want to change the lawn signs this time to include the time and place for the keynote speaker. Do you think you can get Gustav to do that? Thanks, Steve."

Five seconds later the phone rang again. Gene had remembered that

he also wanted engraved invitations for the local dignitaries, a copy of an article on the Bear River Massacre that may have been published in October by the Salt Lake *Tribune*, and addresses for three people who'd just moved.

By the time I had opened a word processor to print out a flyer, Gene was on the phone trying to remember if the conference participants had been paid and if, by any chance, I had found that *Tribune* article yet.

Eventually I started treating myself to a liberal use of the campus voice mail system when Gene's assignments piled too high. However, I could only buy limited time with that maneuver. Failing to get me on the phone, Gene would come find me. He knew my tactics.

None of the foregoing should be construed to mean that I didn't love working for Gene. Everyone who has had personal contact with him can attest that his tremendous tolerance and genuine charity made up for all his eccentricities. Gene is the only boss I ever had who hugged me almost daily.

During the first six months I acted as his assistant, Gene kept me busy with the kind of work only he could produce: the impossible kind.

He would dash into the office an hour before the last mail pick-up and earnestly inform me he wanted his list of 300 friends and colleagues to get one more invitation to his latest conference. I started the work with the blunted enthusiasm I would use to humor the whims of an insane man. But Gene's tidal wave of faith, which he could produce spontaneously in concert with his latest project, had already caught me up to its crest, though I was oblivious to it. Carried by this invisible tsunami, we somehow completed Gene's harebrained projects nine times out of ten. We printed address labels, made copies, and folded and stuffed envelopes faster than Vaughn J. Featherstone can spit out a talk. Then Gene would run outside just before the last ten envelope flaps were licked and have his engine running, poised to snatch the batch of envelopes—still-moist—from me as I ran out into the parking lot. His 4Runner sometimes left a little rubber on the pavement as he sped off to the campus mail-room, where all the elements combined to pull off yet another miracle for the man. When he got to the mail room, Gene's puppy dog eyes, mixed with his plush teddy bear eyebrows and his absolute confidence that the clerk would let him send the mail just a few minutes after the deadline, did it every time. Sometimes I wondered if Gene had some obscure genealogical connection with the Biblical Joshua, inheriting a small bit of the ability to stop time when something really needed to get done.

After these ordeals, I would often slump, temporarily exhausted, into my chair, small paper cuts on my fingertips, envelope glue still coating my tongue, and say to myself, "Oh ye of little faith."

We pulled off other huge stunts, too, like the time Jan Shipps came to UVSC. The Regan Theater, which had been completely booked for the

next year, just happened to have as its only free night the very evening Jan came—Valentine’s Day. I snagged the theater only one day before her arrival.

Though a good 99.9 percent of Gene’s frenetic projects actually worked out, he still worried like no one I have ever known. Sometimes at 10 p.m. the night before a conference, a harried Gene would call me at my home confessing, “I can’t sleep, Steve. I don’t know if anyone is going to come tomorrow. So pray for us, all right?” Along with being my only hugging boss, Gene was also the only boss I ever had who told me to pray on a regular basis. It was practically a part of my job description.

Perhaps to assuage his hyperactive worry gland, Gene advertised prolifically. His lists of friends and contacts were voluminous, and every one of them usually received at least two separate invitations to Gene’s to-do’s, as well as extra copies with a small note asking them to hand the extras around to their friends. We badgered local reporters, plastered posters all over the UVSC and BYU campuses, and filled the computers of anyone even remotely interested in Mormon studies with emails. No one could escape.

In 2000 Gene received a rare \$25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to start a Mormon cultural studies program on the UVSC campus. Though swamped with a new volley of Gene’s rapid-fire calls and all the assignments they brought, I realize now that those were happy days. We were busy, but Gene, with his boundless energy, pulled it all off, putting together conference after conference, seminar after seminar, and generally turning the campus on its ear.

More suddenly than not, or maybe I just hadn’t noticed at first, Gene started to age. It began when he became terribly sick for three days. When I called to get some instructions, I could barely hear his voice on the other end of the line.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me, Steve,” he said, “I’ve never been this sick in my life.” He dropped the phone and didn’t pick it back up.

A few days later he seemed to be back on his feet. But his face, which had once been too full of life to give any credence to its age lines, had withered discernibly. His grand eyebrows, the kind reserved for wizards, started to droop lower over his half moon eyes, shadowing them, so I could only see the light glinting off his dark irises. He no longer sat in chairs; he folded into them like a marionette. A pad and pillow appeared in his office, and he would frequently call me to ask that I wake him up in time for appointments. Sometimes I had to knock two or three times before I could hear movement in the room.

One day Gene took me into his office and started to talk.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Steve. I’m just so tired all the time, and I get so depressed. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before.”

He said that same sentence often, almost like a mantra, "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before." His health, which had apparently been with him throughout his life even more faithfully than taxes, had been pulled out from under him like a tablecloth in a Flamenco dance.

He groped for some reason to explain this black hole inside him. He hypothesized at length with me a few times. At first he thought it might be a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome resulting from his last experiences at BYU when some of his writings had incurred displeasure from the BYU and church hierarchy. "You don't know what it was like to hear what I heard from men I believe have authority from God," he said. Interesting, I thought at the moment, that he uses "believe" in the present tense.

Gene seemed to envision some sort of mental cancer inflicted during those hard days, corroding him silently from within while his body and life had continued, unsuspecting. He started sending me out on assignments to the library to find books on post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression. Perhaps he hoped that an understanding of his disease would enable him, if not eventually to cure it, at least to learn to live with it.

Sometimes at night when everyone had gone home, either Melanie or I would be startled by the muted hum of the office printer spitting out sheets of paper. It always took a few seconds for me to remember that Gene had a connection to the printer as well; usually Gene was behind the mystery printouts. He often forgot to come in to retrieve his papers, so Melanie or I would take them out of the printer tray and set them in his box. Most of the pages had poetry printed on them. I realized later that they were pieces Gene had turned out during his free time in his office. I caught the basic drift of the poems by what I saw at a glance of the pages. One still haunts me. It starts by describing the trek of a woman and her three children in Central America who are trying to escape an oppressive husband and government by taking a one-way hike to another country. While crossing some railroad tracks, one of her children is struck and killed by a train. Gene's description of the child's broken body overflows with the pain he must have felt when he contemplated the scene. Then he switches to an incident where a president of the church is warned by the Spirit to return to his seat on a train. He obeys just before the train hits a bump that would have thrown him from his previous position, standing in the small patio at the rear of the train, probably to his death. The poem ends with Gene talking with Jesus Christ. Gene's character demands to know which of these situations God had his hand in. The Savior turns to him, tears streaming down his face and "his brow set like flint," replying, "Both."

Despite his illness, Gene continued to plan seminars for the next semester and for his study abroad trip to London. But he also continued to deteriorate. During the seminars and lectures he attended, his character-

istic pose—legs and arms crossed, head cocked slightly, denoting deep thought and attention—sagged into sporadic bouts of slumber, his head bobbing as if it were floating gently on slow wavelets of water.

Gene had one final upswing just before his brain hemorrhaged. As human beings, many of Gene's co-workers, and especially I, fell quickly and optimistically into the habit of believing that the old (meaning young) Gene was back with us again. We breathed this small pocket of clean air deeply just before the storm hit.

Early on a pleasant February morning, Charlotte dragged Gene to the hospital for the emergency surgery that left him looking, as Robert Kirby put it, "as if he had been given a good work over with a highly effective tire iron. The reports sounded grim: a lobe incised, cysts removed, and no promises that the cancer inside his brain had been completely removed. Imagine my surprise the next morning when my phone rang and Gene started issuing instructions through the half of his mouth that still worked. It is one of my few marks of undeserved distinction that I was one of the first people Gene thought of calling after he woke from the anesthesia. Charlotte kept trying to take the phone away from him, but Gene had awakened remembering that plays and flats needed reserving for his study abroad program. Nothing could stop him, not even brain surgery. We were all glad he seemed to have retained his personality and thinking power despite having fewer gray cells to work with.

What he didn't have, however, was the use of the left side of his body. With his almost embarrassing candor, Gene told me on the phone about two weeks after his operation that he was doing all right except for the fact that he could not yet "eliminate" by himself. Charlotte almost got the phone away from him that time.

"It's discouraging to see how much I have to do to recover," he told me, "but I have lots of help and love." His goal was to rehabilitate soon enough to go to London that summer.

After the surgery, Gene's previous depression began to make sense. We started to understand that the pressure leveled on his brain from the growing cysts was the most likely cause. Instead of suffering only from psychological distress, the inner space of Gene's own body had started to boil with cancer. The question we had was: How far had the cancer spread? The doctors couldn't tell.

One day I accepted an invitation to meet a few of Gene's colleagues at the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center and visit him. As I waited for them to arrive, I caught sight of Gene's head, recognizable by the huge hieroglyph of a scar the surgeons had carved into his skull. A gray stubble of hair had just started to grow back. Charlotte was wheeling Gene down the hall toward the therapy pool. He saw me, too, and raised his good right hand, flashing one of his famous smiles at me. In the therapy

room, we watched as Gene limped painstakingly through the simple exercises his therapist had assigned to him. One side of his body still retained the toned muscle he had maintained through his years of daily jogs, but the muscles and skin on the other half of his body hung from his bones like thick honey, completely surrendering to gravity. Gene worked methodically in that pool to reconnect the left side of his body to his brain. His focus on these rudimentary tasks reminded me of the intellectual intensity of his best essays. I wondered briefly how he might translate these experiences into later writings.

Half an hour later we sat in Gene's hospital room. Dressed in a T-shirt and sweat pants, his left arm posed, mannequin-like on a tray hooked to his wheel chair, Gene talked with us about literature, theology, and one of his most recent ideas: writing an article about tidbits of information Christ gives about his own mortal life in the Doctrine and Covenants. But soon he tired. In the course of our good-byes he told us, "Some people don't believe me when I say this, but I have spent my entire life being an apologist for the gospel, because I know it's true."

I only saw Gene once after that. He flagged me down in the parking lot outside the David O. McKay Events Center, just after the Dalai Lama had spoken. He gave me an avalanche of instructions, as if he had never missed a day at UVSC.

"Check my phone messages," he said, "and my email. And see if you can find my file on 'Pastwatch.' It should be in my . . ."—his eyebrows buckled in concentration—"my right-hand bottom desk drawer. And if it's not there, it may be on the floor next to the bookcase—unless of course I put it in the filing cabinet. Oh, and Steve, make sure to remind the study abroad students of the next orientation meeting. Make sure we have cookies and punch there."

During the year I spent working for Gene, my wife and I had been preparing to go to grad school. We finally chose to attend the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the most isolated and distant university we could find while still staying in the United States. A few days before we left, I received my last assignment at UVSC as I emptied out my desk. "Gently and carefully," I was told, "clean out Gene's office." The thought shocked me, but I realized that we had no idea if Gene would ever return, and office space at UVSC is coveted. To add to it all, a few weeks previously we had received the news that cancer had been found in Gene's spine, leaving us almost without hope.

Fortunately Gene had been in this particular office for less than a year, because already his ineffable filing system covered most of his office floor while the filing cabinets remained mostly empty except for a Tupperware container full of trail mix and a few other odds and ends. Anyone who knows Gene could predict my findings as I sorted through his stacks and loaded boxes. Scores of books on Mormon literature and

Shakespeare filled the shelves. There was also a stockpile of Gene's own published books along with photographs and playbills. One of Mark England's mammoth pencil drawings towered over the desk, telling Gene's geologic biography in a language of amoebic continents, states and towns baled together by whorls of telephone wires. On the back wall, portraits of Dickens, Keats, and Melville watched over my shoulder as I scoured Gene's desk, clearing out little jars of almond butter, vitamins, unused sticky notes, and finally, his four-in-one scripture set. Compact, brown, and well used, the book had Gene's name on it, literally and figuratively. I remembered that quite often I had seen it lying open on his desk. It always seemed to rest on top of the stacks of papers that inevitably piled up in his workspace.

When I had finished boxing up Gene's academic life, I left the Ethics Center for the last time and drove home, watching the contrails of smoke that circled Mount Nebo as a wildfire burned a jagged path up its slope. That summer, the mountains around Utah Valley burned constantly. A wildfire on one mountain would finally be contained only to have another break out nearby—like a Whack-a-Mole game. During the warm evenings, the people in Utah Valley peered through their telescopes and binoculars as the fires spread like opening mouths over the darkened mountainsides.

Just as fire season ended, Gene and I both left Utah. My family and I flew out past the angular mountains of the Wasatch Front and followed the sun toward Fairbanks.