

Eugene England: Our Brother in Christ

Robert A. Rees

BRIGHAM YOUNG SAID THERE NEVER WAS a time when he did not know Joseph Smith. What Brigham meant, I believe, is that when he first met Joseph Smith there was such a deep and immediate kinship he somehow felt a mysterious bond between them, as if he had known Joseph before. Whether that was an unconscious thread of some pre-existent memory or simply a deep magnetic attraction, we do not know, but Brigham's dying words were not the names of any of his wives or children but rather, "Joseph! Joseph! Joseph!"

In many ways I feel about Gene England the way Brigham felt about Joseph. When I first met him on the Stanford campus in the mid-sixties, I experienced an instant bond. Over time, I have felt closer to Gene than to all the men in my life, except for my own sons, but including my father and my brothers. He was my brother, friend, mentor, and his passing has left a giant absence in my heart. We talked about everything, shared essays and poetry, words of consolations, and dreams of a better church and a better world. In thirty-five years of friendship we never quarreled, not even when we had differences, as we did over the administration of *Sunstone* during the last year of his life. He worried and expressed concerns that he had somehow caused a rift between us. I assured him I could not imagine anything doing that.

I first knew Gene, as I suspect most people of my generation did, through the essay he wrote for the inaugural issue of *Dialogue*, "The Possibilities of Dialogue: A Personal View."¹ I vividly remember the excitement and even joy I felt reading this essay for the first time in the house my wife and I rented on North Carroll Street in Madison, Wisconsin, where we were in graduate school. Here was someone who articulated

1. *Dialogue* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 8.

my own thoughts and feelings with clarity and power. In some ways, almost everything Gene wrote, spoke, and did in his life was an unfolding of the words of this essay. I take here expressions from that essay to remember my dear friend and the enormous contribution he made to my life and to the lives of so many others of our generation.

I am motivated in my relationship to Christ and my desire to build His Kingdom by both the questing openness and the loving authority exhibited in His life and in His revelations to His prophets.

The central, overarching motive in Gene's life was to follow Christ and build his Kingdom. He was one of the most Christ-centered people I have ever known, centered not just on the idea of what it means to be a Christian, but on the expression of that ideal in action. It was the imitation of Christ's vigor, his courage and boldness, as much as his love and mercy that characterized Gene's discipleship. Gene loved the Savior and he loved teaching and telling others about him. As he himself observed, and as many of his students have reported, much of his teaching focused on the theme of redemption, especially through the atonement of Christ. He was one of the first in the modern church to make meaningful the term "Mormon Christian."

Gene's imitation of Christ included his questing openness. Perhaps no one in the contemporary church was more eager in his quest for truth or more open to both its possibilities and the need to continually reexamine his own beliefs in the light of his discoveries. As with Tennyson's Ulysses, his quest in plumbing the depths of the mind and the heart was "to strive, to seek, to find"; unlike Ulysses, however, he was willing to yield when he was wrong or when he was convinced that it was a blessing to others to do so.

My faith encourages my curiosity and awe; it thrusts me out into relationship with all creation.

Gene had an abiding curiosity about things both temporal and eternal, and an awe of creation, both human and divine. He loved fly-fishing as much as he loved poetry. His enthusiasm, whether for tennis or teaching, was infectious. Being with Gene—climbing a mountain up Provo Canyon or seeing a Shakespearian play at Stratford Upon Avon—was always an adventure. I remember meeting him in London on one occasion. He was excited to take me to a play he had just seen, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, because he knew how much I would enjoy it. We talked about it all the way back to South Kensington.

For all of Gene's maturity, there was always his little-boy's enthusiasm for nearly everything he did. Recently I watched a home video of Gene and me playing football with our children on the UCLA campus

sometime during the seventies. In the film Gene runs, chases, and throws with more exuberance than any of the children. It was lovely to see him so alive and vibrant.

We must be willing to consider that anything we believe or base our lives upon may be a partial truth—at best something seen (as Paul said) “through a glass darkly”—or even may be dead wrong. We must take seriously the jovial words of Henry Eyring, “In this Church we don’t have to believe anything that isn’t true.”

It was Gene’s absolute dedication to “prove [ing] all things [and] hold[ing] fast that which is good” (one of his favorite scriptures) that marked his uniqueness among those of us within the Mormon community who have tried to reconcile our faith with our reason. It was his willingness to put his faith on the line, to both ask and then try to answer the hard questions (and not shrink from the revelations that came) that made him the most important Mormon intellectual in the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet to call him an intellectual is misleading. Although he was certainly that, it was the deep searchings of his heart and soul as well as his mind that set him apart. For example, like many of us, Gene tried desperately to reconcile his Christian faith with the church’s practice of denying the priesthood to Blacks (calling it “the heaviest cross I have to bear”), even writing an eloquent defense of the “ecclesiastical authority” which continued the practice, while at the same time saying he believed the Lord wanted a change.² However, he continued to read the scriptures about this subject, pray for a new revelation, and talk with others about it. Once he invited me to go with him to see President Hugh B. Brown about the subject. Later, he came to believe that the practice was not inspired and the scriptures used for over a century to justify this “false theology” had been misused.³ His essay on this topic is remarkable, as most of Gene’s were, for its new insights, its thoughtfulness, and its balance and charity. Other less generous writers might have used such an occasion to attack the church or show their superior insight. Gene used it to challenge Mormons to end their racism and sexism, and at the same time to reaffirm his belief in the church and its leaders.

Gene was just as open to his own limitations and prejudices, to those things he saw through a dark glass or concerning which he discovered he was wrong. Unlike many of us, he was more interested in finding the truth than in being right. He was quick to apologize and ask forgiveness when he found he had offended someone. Our conversations during the

2. “The Mormon Cross,” *Dialogue* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 78-86.

3. “Are All Alike unto God? Prejudice against Blacks and Women in Popular Mormon Theology” *Sunstone* 14 (April 1990): 16-25.

months just prior to his passing were filled with what for me were painful expressions of his doubt about the value of his life's work and a deep self-examination of his motives. I tried to reassure him that what he had done was both right and good as attested to by all those who had been blessed by his influence.

A DIALOGUE CAN REALIZE ITS FULL POSSIBILITIES ONLY IF THERE IS CHARITY

Gene was a charitable man, in the original meaning of that word: having a Christ-like love. At the memorial service held in his honor at the Provo Tabernacle there were hundreds who had been blessed to know that love. His was a genuine and far-reaching love. It extended not only to those who knew him, but also to strangers and, most challenging of all, to those who spitefully used him. I don't think Gene had an enemy in this life although there were those who behaved toward him as if they were his enemies.

Gene had an abundant heart. For all of the controversy he generated, and for all the anguish it caused him, he was both a peaceful man and a peacemaker. He was always trying to reconcile those who were on the opposite sides of a conflict, especially those conflicts in which he represented one of the sides. His essay, "'No cause, no cause': An Essay towards Reconciliation," in the issue of *Sunstone* honoring him, exemplifies his generous spirit of peace and reconciliation.⁴ The quote in that title comes, of course, from Gene's favorite play, Shakespeare's *King Lear*. He saw the scene in which the penitent king receives unconditional forgiveness from his Christ-like daughter, Cordelia, as "perhaps the greatest scene in all drama," and it exemplifies the love and forgiveness he gave so readily to others.

As time goes on, I believe our entire culture (not just those of us who know and admire him) will feel the loss of so great a soul. It is an irony of some magnitude that someone so Christ-centered as Gene was, so committed to the life of the mind and spirit, so faithful in honoring his covenants, so devoted to the gospel, and so supportive of church authorities, should have been seen, as Gene sometimes was, as an enemy of the church, as a heretic and a trouble-maker. Rabbi David Wolpe says, "God moves between the poles of night, danger and promise." I believe that those who serve Him well also move between these poles. Certainly Gene England did.

I have sensed the risk of choice, the limitation of commitment to a defined context in this world that is full of richly complex possibilities and allows us only finite vision into their worth.

4. *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002), 31-39.

Gene may have sensed the risk of choice, but I doubt even he could have imagined how risky a path he had set upon in challenging "the limitation of commitment to a defined context." In spite of the misunderstanding, rejection, ostracism, and even punishment Gene experienced for his courage in challenging certain axioms in Mormon culture, he never flinched from the task. There is no doubt that he paid a high price, including public censure by a general authority, open disdain by some of his colleagues, and unceremonious release from the university he had served with full heart and mind for so many years.

Few scholar-teachers have explored their history and culture as did Gene ours. He informed his understanding far beyond the "defined context" of contemporary Mormonism by his reading of philosophy, theology, history, anthropology, sociology and other fields. No one of whom I am aware had such a broad understanding of our Latter-day Saint religious culture as Gene did.

The faith I hold fast impels me. . .to express honestly and fully and as gracefully as possible the convictions that shape my life, to try to demonstrate the things I find as I think and do research and experience the holy.

Perhaps no Mormon of our generation expressed his faith more fully, honestly, and gracefully than Gene England did. The fullness is attested to by the wide range of his published expression (biographies, textual studies, critical studies, short stories, edited collections, poems, sermons, letters, and, especially, personal essays), the broad range of his teaching (both religion and the wide sweep of the humanities, showing that he was equally at home with the Bible, Shakespeare, Melville, contemporary Mormon literature, and contemporary drama, to name only a few of the subjects which he taught), the incredible reach of his intellect (leaving no aspect of Mormon culture and religion unexplored or unexamined; being equally articulate about points of doctrine as about experiences of holiness), and the vast number of his publications (his bibliography running to many pages).

Gene was an excellent editor. As the editor of *Dialogue* and as a member of the editorial boards of *Dialogue*, *Sunstone* and other publications, he raised the level of both scholarship and expression. Dozens of Mormon writers were made better by his critical insights. There is scarcely an essay or poem I have published on Mormon subjects that was not improved by his incisive but charitable editorial pen. It is one of the losses I have sensed most keenly since his passing.

Gene excelled in writing personal essays. He always attempted to get beneath the surface and beyond the apparent, to get at the heart of Mormon history and theology, on the one hand, and to imagine its ultimate possibilities on the other. His essays were always provocative in

both the root meaning of that word—"to call forth"—and in its archaic fifteenth century meaning—"to arouse to a feeling or action." Gene's essays always caused me to think more deeply, to feel more profoundly, and, most importantly, to act better. Through his words and his life, he taught us how to be more courageous, more tolerant, more understanding, more merciful, and more loving.

I will give just one example of this. For much of my life I had anger and resentment for the woman who was my stepmother during a critical part of my young life. Due to her own poor upbringing and poverty, among other things, she was physically and verbally abusive to me and my siblings. I held in my heart a hardness for her that I could not (more accurately, did not want to) give up. At a fireside in which Gene talked about mercy with passion and eloquence, he asked those of us in the audience who wished, to share any personal experiences we had had with mercy. I spoke of the fact that during Gene's presentation I had been blessed to feel complete forgiveness for this woman, and I realized I no longer had room in my heart for any animosity toward her. Gene's teaching had liberated me from a heart-bondage in which I had been held for forty years.

In terms of honesty, Gene was more exacting in his honesty with himself than he was with either the church or others. It was his honesty, in fact, that often got him into trouble. Gene seemed incapable of dissembling or cant. Some faulted him for speaking out on so many subjects, feeling that he should be more discriminating, but his honesty compelled him to speak on those subjects about which he felt passionately, and he felt passionately about many things—the Viet Nam war, nuclear testing, racial prejudice, sexism, academic standards, corruption in government, polygamy, censorship, widening the highway in Provo Canyon, tearing down Brigham Young Academy—to name only those that come readily to mind.

As passionately as he felt about certain issues and as wide ranging as were his interests, Gene was a gifted writer, one who expressed his feelings and ideas, his faith and his reason with clarity and grace. He had a distinctive style and it was always a pleasure to read him, for it was possible to have one's mind stimulated at the same time one's heart rejoiced at the exactness and beauty of his way with words. Many of his essays are classics both in terms of their substance and their stylistic modeling. He was also an accomplished poet. In his last months he wrote some of his most beautiful and moving poetry. His last, a love poem written to Charlotte not long before he died, is stunning in its ability to capture the essence of their relationship and to convey the reality of that relationship continuing into the eternities.

[Christ] insists that my words and actions be integrated with each other and

relevant to the world—that they not just speak to it but really make the connection.

Whatever others may have accused Gene of, none, I believe, could accuse him of lacking integrity. Integrity was the hallmark of his life. I admired Gene for his courage, for his willingness to sacrifice his own comfort for the comfort of others, for his willingness to sacrifice personal peace for the peace of others, for his willingness to risk exclusion and loneliness in order to be obedient to his own inner integrity.

Where others wept and prayed for the poor, Gene wept, prayed, and did something. His and Charlotte's home was always open, not just for an occasional visitor, but for "foreigners and strangers," some of whom stayed for years! When my wife, Ruth, and I were on a mission in Lithuania, we arranged for a Lithuanian teacher to pursue her master's degree at BYU. Like most Lithuanians, she had very little money. We were able to get her a tuition scholarship and a job teaching at the MTC, but she had no funds for room and board. Gene and Charlotte graciously took her in and cared for her for three years. She was one of many who enjoyed the Englands' hospitality.

I miss Gene immensely. I have a frequent longing to talk to him. I want to know what he thinks and feels about many things. I look forward to the time when he and I, as Melville wrote to his close friend Hawthorne, "shall sit down in Paradise, in some little shady corner by ourselves, [where] we shall cross our celestial legs in the celestial grass. . . and pleasantly discourse on all the things manifold which now so distress [and excite] us."⁵

I have imagined Gene entering heaven. I see him reluctantly approaching Christ's throne. In my imagination Gene begins to apologize to the Lord for his mistakes, his pride, his shortcomings, telling the Lord there is cause for the Lord to be disappointed in his stewardship. But before the words are out of his mouth, I imagine Christ lifting Gene up, clasping him to his bosom and saying with cosmic tenderness, "No cause, no cause."

On the 6th of October 1855, Brigham Young declared in General Conference, "I feel like shouting hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet." Those are the sentiments I feel about Eugene England. Hallelujah for such a good man! Hallelujah for such a teacher and scholar! Hallelujah for such a Latter-day Saint! Hallelujah for such a brother in Christ!

5. Herman Melville. Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 1851.