

That the Glory of God Might Be Manifest

W. Paul Reeve

Note: W. Paul Reeve delivered this address on February 10, 2007, in the Hurricane Utah Ninth Ward, at the funeral of his sister, Roene Reeve.

Introduction

Roene Reeve was born December 21, 1946, in Hurricane, Utah, to Ora and Leo Reeve. She was welcomed into the family by her two older brothers, Stephen and David. Unknown to the doctor who delivered her, Roene was born with Rh disease. A postnatal blood transfusion prevents the disease from having negative consequences, but the doctor in Roene's case was unaware of these procedures, and she went undiagnosed. By the time Ora and Leo took her to a specialist in Salt Lake City, it was too late. She was severely handicapped, both mentally and physically. When Roene was older, doctors recommended that she be institutionalized at the Utah State Hospital in American Fork. After only one month, Ora could not stand to be away from Roene and brought her home.

Roene struggled to walk; her steps were laborious, awkward, and marked by frequent falls. She nonetheless walked unaided for most of her life and enjoyed a significant amount of independence. She competed for several years in running events in the Special Olympics and was very proud of the medals she won. She worked and learned for over twenty years at Dixie Advantages Development, an outreach program for people with special needs. She especially enjoyed the paycheck she received for her work at various jobs, including reshelving videos at a movie store and custodial work at a food market.

She struggled to talk. Her vocal cords were paralyzed and she managed to make only incoherent sounds, although those with

trained ears could recognize the few words she honed: “Mom,” “Dad,” “Paul,” “James,” “Stephen,” “David,” and “I love you.” Because of her spastic condition, sign language was not much help either. She learned a few signs, but could not control her hands enough to be effective. She learned to write letters and could copy written words onto a piece of paper, but a short note might take her an hour or more to complete. Among my prized possessions is a handwritten “I love you” note from Roene. Mostly she communicated spirit to spirit. Doctors suggested that she was intellectually stuck at a third-grade level. Those who knew her recognized a wisdom and inner strength far beyond that.

When Roene was eleven years old her mother, Ora, passed away during an operation at the Mayo Clinic for arthritis. The following year our dad, Leo, married my mom, Ruth Nelson, a woman fifteen years younger than he. In 1966 our brother David was shot and killed in the Vietnam War. James was born the following year, and I followed thirteen months later in July 1968, when Roene was twenty-one. Our father passed away in 2003. In 2005, our oldest brother, Stephen, was killed in a horse riding accident. By the time Roene was fifty-eight years old, she had witnessed the funerals of her entire “first family,” a tragic irony that no one could have predicted.

Roene’s health deteriorated over the last five years of her life. She relied more and more upon a wheelchair for mobility and struggled to stand. My mom was Roene’s primary caregiver for the majority of Roene’s life; but after she fell with Roene in the bathroom, we made the agonizing decision to place Roene in a care facility. To our relief, she enjoyed her time there and especially liked teasing the nurses and other workers. About six months later in late January 2007, Roene suffered a severe stroke and fell into a coma. On February 1, when I arrived at her bedside with my family, her breathing was heavy and erratic and we sensed that death was close. We all had the privilege of hugging her and kissing her good-bye. Four hours after we arrived, I held Roene’s hand as she slipped through the veil into the waiting arms of her brothers, mom, and dad. What follows is the talk I gave at her funeral. The chapel was crowded and mourners spilled into the overflow, a testament to the vast number of lives that Roene touched in her sixty-year sojourn.

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Roene was twenty-one when I was born. I grew up with her in my family. The people with whom we associated treated her no differently than any other member of my family. As a result, it took some time before I realized that Roene was different.

When I was eight or nine, Roene went to visit Aunt Nona and Aunt Jennie, two of her favorite friends. I was allowed to tag along. After our visit, we were walking home and passed one of the rental houses in the neighborhood. Some new people had moved in who didn't know Roene. Their kids were playing in the yard and started to make fun of the way Roene walked. At first she didn't notice. Then she realized what they were doing. She got mad and started to yell at them. This only seemed to encourage more taunts. I yelled at them, too, and told them to stop. Roene started to cry. I was filled with an overwhelming desire to protect my sister, but I didn't quite know how to go about it. What followed was an episode of what I like to justify today as righteous rock throwing.

We eventually made it home safely; but perhaps for the first time, I realized that some people might view Roene as different. This episode introduced me to the potential to belittle and make fun of differences, a potential that lies dormant within all of us. When we perceive differences in others, it can be easy to amplify the differences and ignore the commonalities. It can be easy to focus on the negative and then entrench ourselves behind walls of separation. Roene, however, called us out from behind our walls and helped us to recognize the divinity that resides in each of us, despite our differences.

This episode, and Roene's life as a whole, also raise fundamental questions about the true nature of God. How could He be a loving and kind God and still allow Roene to be born into such a limited and sometimes painful body? It seems that such questions have been around for a long time. In John 9:10-13 we read the following, which I've modified a bit to fit Roene's circumstances:

And as Jesus passed by, he saw a woman which was physically and mentally handicapped from her birth.

And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this woman, or her parents, that she was born handicapped?

Jesus answered, Neither hath this woman sinned, nor her parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in her.

To me, these verses from John speak directly to Roene. They give hope, purpose, and meaning to an otherwise seemingly hopeless, purposeless, and meaningless existence.

Like Jesus's disciples, it may be easy to answer our questions about the true nature of God by looking at people who are different from us and then describing their differences as a result of sin, or as evidence of God's punishment, or even as proof of a curse. Jesus, however, beckons us away from such overly simplistic and negative explanations. He calls us to view our differences through a more complex and exalted lens. Jesus tells us that differences are, in fact, a way to manifest the works of God. Jesus's reply to his disciples suggests that one way of viewing our differences is as a calling not as a curse.¹

I'd like to explore with you three ways that Roene's life can lead us to this same conclusion. First, her calling, as Jesus put it, was to manifest the works of God in her life. One of the most profound ways that I believe Roene fulfilled her calling is through each one of you here today, her community of caregivers. One of the reasons that the rock-throwing episode stands out to me is because it was such an anomaly, the exception to the rule. The rule was the way the people in this room treated her. You hugged her and kissed her, talked with her, joked with her, visited her, remembered her birthday, and treated her in every respect in Christlike ways. The fruits of your conversion to Jesus were manifest in the way you treated my sister. I thank you for looking past her differences to see the divine embedded deeply within her soul.

I think all of us fondly remember Roene bearing her testimony in church on fast Sundays from this very pulpit. One particular Sunday stands out to me. Roene bore her testimony, and then Mabel Klimbman's daughter, Joyce Beagly, stood up. Joyce told the congregation that, for a very long time, when Roene would bear her testimony, Joyce would pray and ask Heavenly Father to please let her understand what Roene was saying. On this particular Sunday she received an answer, but not in the way she

expected. She said that the Spirit whispered to her, “It doesn’t matter that *you* understand. *I* understand and know her.”

I was touched that someone cared enough to try to understand my sister. I was touched that God cared enough to answer. It made me feel proud that Roene was willing to testify. Thus, it was through you, her community of caregivers, that I first began to see the works of God manifest in my sister. As you fulfilled your baptismal covenants, you taught me real and practical ways to comfort those who stand in need of comfort. You helped me to see Roene’s life as a calling, not a curse.

The second aspect of Roene’s calling was as a daughter of God, a celestial being in a painfully terrestrial body. Viewing Roene as a child of God helps me in turn to view others as God’s children also. Roene helps me to look for the works of God manifest all around me in the vast diversity of God’s creations.

Roene reminds me of the wonderfully progressive, open, and even liberal doctrine that Elder M. Russell Ballard calls “the doctrine of inclusion.” God excludes no one from his invitation to come unto Christ. Elder Ballard traces this doctrine to the Savior himself who set the standard in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, the Samaritan was certainly the most justified in passing the beaten Jewish man on the other side of the road. After all, the Jews despised the Samaritans.² But, isn’t that the point of the parable? Isn’t Jesus telling us that our neighbors are the people we might feel most justified in passing by on the road to Jericho without stopping to help? I have no doubt that the people in this congregation would have stopped had we seen Roene lying on the road to Jericho. Like the Good Samaritan, we would have had compassion upon her, bound up her wounds, and taken her to an inn. I know the people in this room would have done so, because for the last sixty years you’ve done just that for my sister. And I honor my mother as chief among us in this regard.

But I think that Roene’s calling is even greater than that. If we are to truly see the works of God manifest in Roene’s life, then we must respond when Jesus calls us to reach beyond ourselves to even greater acts of Christian love. What if the person who fell among thieves was black, or gay, an illegal immigrant, a Muslim, or worse still an outsider who has moved to Hurricane and is a

member of another faith? How willing, in other words, are we to see the divine, not just in Roene, but in all of God's children?

I am convinced that the political, racial, social, economic, and religious diversity that permeates our world is a part of our earthly test. Certainly God could have created Roene whole, without a handicap. He also could have created a world without racial, social, economic, and religious differences. Instead He created us in a wonderful mix of sizes, shapes, and colors, and then He sent his prophets to teach us to get along. How sad He must be at our failures to do so.

President Gordon B. Hinckley admonished Latter-day Saints: "We cannot become arrogant. We cannot become self-righteous. We cannot become smug or egotistical. We must reach out to all mankind. They are all sons and daughters of God our Eternal Father, and He will hold us accountable for what we do concerning them."³ In short, let us use our ability to recognize the divinity in Roene as a catalyst to see the divinity in all of God's children.

Roene's third calling, as I see it, is to witness of the promises of Jesus Christ to us all. In that light, I would suggest that we are gathered here today, not to mourn the passing of Roene, but to glory in Jesus. It is largely because of Roene that I look forward with hope and anticipation to the resurrection. I look forward to the day that I can talk with her, run with her, and kiss her glorified immortal cheek. Through Jesus, I know I'll have my chance to do so.

I testify that God's promises are sure. I believe that one of Roene's callings was to testify of that as well. After sixty years, I believe she fulfilled her callings well. I'm grateful for her release.

I'd like to close with this poem that I wrote for her:

Today I Walked with an Angel

Today I walked with an angel
 down a pain-filled stony path
 her cherubic immortality
 weighed down in mortal wrath
 her steps erratic and heavy—
 trapped in the body of earthly beings
 graceless, bruised, and broken,
 an angel without wings.

Today I listened to a prophetess
reach deep within her soul
yearning to tell the world
the truths she came to know
her sermon halting and labored
trapped in mortal speech—
stumbling, ill-formed words
a prophetess who cannot preach.

Today I kissed the cheek of a goddess
wrinkled with age and pain
her smile-warmed face,
divine, celestial, plain
arthritic hands and knees
held captive to flesh and bone—
tear-streaked and tired,
a goddess without a throne.

Tomorrow I'll dance with my angel
in celestial courts on high
tomorrow I'll listen to my prophetess
witness, preach, testify
tomorrow I'll kiss her godly cheeks
and survey her worlds unknown
tomorrow we'll worship together
at Christ's exalted throne.

Notes

1. I am indebted and grateful to Darius Gray for sharing this concept with me.
2. M. Russell Ballard, "The Doctrine of Inclusion," *Ensign*, November 2001, 35–38.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Living in the Fullness of Times," *Ensign*, November 2001, 6.