

Growing Up Mormon  
**Going to Conference**  
*By Eugene England*

Essay reflecting on England's experiences on a roadtrip to LDS general conference with his wife Charlotte and several members of the small Mormon branch England led in Minnesota. This essay is the third installment of England's *Dialogue* column, "Growing Up Mormon."  
**Originally published** in: *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 81–83.

**K**SL RADIO REACHES east barely twenty miles past Rock Springs, Wyoming. That's where we were first able to make out the words of Elder Spencer W. Kimball at 11:30 Friday morning, October 6. His voice roughened by static and the throat cancer he once barely survived, the new President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was beginning the final address of the Solemn Assembly. It wasn't until that night on a rebroadcast that we knew the details of that unique ceremony where ten thousand priesthood leaders from all over the world, gathered in the Tabernacle, had sustained a new President of the Church and witnessed directly the prophetic mantle descending upon him. Elder Kimball was again, as he had done at the inauguration of President Joseph Fielding Smith, recounting firmly the process of succession to the presidency: calling by God to the apostleship, preparation by long training in that Quorum, and divine preservation until, by strict seniority, the mantle passes to the Lord's Anointed; he was putting to an end (perhaps) that awful speculation many of us felt as we grew up in the Church, founded on the persistent rumor that the Lord might choose anyone in the Church for his new prophet, even someone we knew, even one of us. There will never again for us be anything like watching for the white smoke from the Cardinals' mysterious meeting after the prolonged voting for a Pope. We know who the next Prophet will be—Elder Kimball, if he continues to be preserved, or else the next Apostle in line.

We had been driving all night from Minnesota—members of our Branch, including some young converts and two of my daughters (Charlotte, liberated by her position as District President, had flown ahead to Relief Society Conference). We heard this last speech and later listened to the afternoon session as we drove down through the crescendo of fall colors from Echo Canyon through Coalville (plumed with orange-gold cottonwoods), past the mountain backdrop above Snyderville (still spectacular though scarred by new ski runs), into Parley's Canyon, with its subtle mottling of scrub oak, shading from deep purple and wine through rusts and browns to grass yellow, accented with bright gold aspens and a few remaining florescent red maples.

The unfolding mountains and canyons and colors, together with the persistent voice of counsel and conviction from persons they had very recently come to accept as *Authorities*, men of God, were almost overwhelming for our young friends raised in crowded Brooklyn and flat Minnesota and schooled on secular relativism and Protestant skepticism. The choir seemed in collusion with some master plan and built a Handel chorus to a grand climax as we made the last turn out on Foothill Boulevard above the Valley. But then we were greeted with smog so thick it even obscured the buildings which now hide the temple we were all so anxious to see. (Our embarrassment was relieved somewhat when the skies cleared by Sunday in time for a clear and satisfactorily impressive view of the Valley and circling mountains before we left.)

On Saturday and Sunday we were able to get most of us into at least one session at the Tabernacle and watched the other sessions on T.V. For me, conference is an old song which brings a familiar spirit apart from the meanings of the words. For those with us the tune was not familiar and there were some struggles with the lyrics. A few of the more liberated females were appalled at some of the remarks on women and their place in the home (Charlotte counseled patience). Most of these first-timers found the setting too formal and impersonal—especially as it came over on T.V.—and in particular contrast with their limited Church experience in our small, personal and generally very informal (not to say chaotic) Branch. But they looked for and felt the power of the Prophet.

It was President Lee's conference. He was in charge from the first moment, conducting each session with a dignified assurance that paradoxically allowed him to be more spontaneous and personal than I remember President Smith or even President McKay. In four major addresses he set and modulated the tone and communicated a great range of specific direction and feeling. First there was the austerity of the formal voting at the beginning of the Solemn Assembly. President Tanner called each priesthood rank of the Church in order (First Presidency, Apostles, General Authorities, High Priests, etc., to Aaronic Priesthood and general assembly) to stand and sustain, if they would, the new Prophet, then each group again to stand in order and sustain the First Presidency, then the Quorum of the Twelve, with the new Apostle Bruce R. McConkie, then the other General Authorities. This standing and voting, the repetition for each group of whom they were voting for, took nearly forty minutes, but it was not boring, even to us listening over the radio to the rebroadcast; it was like a long formal preparation, a chastening of the emotions, and, according to Charlotte, who was there, the sense of building power was marvelously tangible even to a young non-member friend sitting with her. Then President Lee spoke, bearing direct witness to what had happened to him, almost standing aside from himself and describing with awe the new emotions and powers being released within him—new sense of the reality of Christ, for the first time feeling what it means to love all mankind. The formality had stretched the united feelings of the assembly so that when President Lee's voice finally broke in an intense revelation of feeling, the hearts of thousands there responded. And Charlotte's bemused consciousness that almost all of those present were men was transcended by seeing so many of them in tears and, at the end of the session, by the way the

General Authorities and others expressed their joy by freely embracing each other.

Since I find in myself tendencies toward both conservatism and liberalism, depending upon the issue and the context, it has been both unsettling and satisfying to find President Lee impartially roasting extremes in both tendencies. A year ago last spring, in his “iron rod” speech he harshly exposed the temporizing indulged in by some “liberals” in the Church. In this conference, both in his address Saturday morning and in the priesthood session Saturday evening, he leveled on the conservatives. He condemned any use of evil means in apparently good causes, such as going beyond the law and the Constitution in combating pornography or using non-church organizations or position in the Church in fighting against Communism in any way that turns brother against brother. Saturday evening he leaned over the pulpit and gave a prophetic tongue-lashing to the spiritualist gossips who spread rumors and write books on details concerning the last days that neither the Lord nor the prophets (nor common sense) have been moved to reveal. He told us to come down to earth—not to pass on rumors no matter how attractive (like the one going the rounds in Utah and California that had apparently most disturbed him: that his patriarchal blessing had promised he would be President when the Savior came). And he held the priesthood leadership responsible for putting a stop to this kind of speculation and gossip.

That steely chastisement was one indication of the authority and strength of the new prophet, of his freedom to assume full stature as President and call the Church to repentance. But the qualities revealed in him that impressed Charlotte and me most were quite different, though perhaps related, especially his humility and responsiveness. Throughout the conference his conducting was marked by warm and sensitive informality in his comments about individual speakers. There was the tone that should mark a good sacrament meeting that reveals the kind of flexibility made possible through guidance by the Spirit. One example especially moving to me occurred Sunday morning when Elder LeGrand Richards spoke. He remains one of the General Authorities who disdain the teleprompter (with its temptation to metronomic turning of the head and disconcertingly impassive recitation of everything, even personal experience and testimony). He gave a speech that was unprepared in the sense of being written out or memorized, but prepared for by a lifetime of enthusiastic missionary work. He stumbled over words, occasionally, fumbled in his pocket for quotes written on slips of paper, informed millions of our Christian brothers listening in that Christ had announced in 1820 that their creeds were an abomination in His sight and, after quoting one of their traditional credal statements about the nature of God to them, allowed that that was one of the best descriptions of nothing he had ever heard. Elder Richards’ voice rose in that characteristic crescendo that carried him beyond his denunciations to moving expression of his joy in the gospel and love for all men, transformed that stooped body and brought back the thrilling vibrancy I remember from twenty-five years ago. Then his testimony was completed and he shrunk back into a rather bent and aged man helping himself with his cane down the steps. In the silence President Lee rose, expressed personal gratitude for the spirit and testimony of a grand old missionary and asked the Lord to keep him long among us. I say Amen to that.

We had difficulty getting in the tabernacle even at 6:45 on Sunday morning because high school and college students from Utah and Idaho had come in buses shortly after 5:00 that morning and filled the balconies where the only open seating was. They remained throughout the day and again it was unusually difficult to get into the afternoon session. About five minutes before the session was to start, as President Lee came out from the rooms underneath the choir seats and was greeting General Authorities' wives and Regional Representatives seated at the right of the stand, these young people, triggered by some small group of them, rose and sang "We Thank Thee, Oh God, for a Prophet." The rest of us joined in and I was able to see President Lee's response from where I stood near the front on the main floor. Rather than ascending the stand or turning to the audience to take the honor, he turned and faced at attention the place where all the Prophets who had preceded him from Brigham Young sat and stood and preached—and joined us in singing, honoring and teaching us to honor the role not the man.

Conference is a time for feeling more than for ideas, as President Lee reminded us in his last address. Those who go looking for dramatic new doctrine or new policy are apt to continue to be disappointed (I too have gone yearning, hoping to hear that announcement about the priesthood being extended to all). Those things will come in statements from the First Presidency day by day as the revelations come. Conference will continue to be a kind of rite, a shoring up of faith and confidence, of feelings of unity and achievement. It is a place to feel what I felt when I met on the grounds a group of saints from Samoa whom I had known as rather inept, struggling new members in badly organized, barely functioning branches fifteen years ago and who are now stalwart Stake Presidents and Bishops, Relief Society Presidents and teachers, and have converted nearly half the population of their islands. I embraced one young man whom I had taught English when he was twelve (we had read Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and there at the Equator tried to imagine together what snow could be); he is now a translator for the Church and later I was able to sit in the large section equipped with foreign language microphones and hear him translating into Samoan the words of President Lee.

This conference was a time for me to agree with the young soldier converted in Vietnam President Lee told about, who had come to feel, despite the great difficulties he would face on going home, "If the gospel's true, nothing else matters." At least not nearly as much. Going to conference made it possible for me to feel more strongly than ever that the great soul-satisfying truths of the gospel and my experiences of love and growth in the Church are much more important than the things that give me trouble.

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How to cite this essay: Eugene England, "Going to Conference," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 81–83.

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