A Personal Response to Dialogue

DIALOGUES WITH MYSELF
BY EUGENE ENGLAND
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Reviewed by Susan Buhler Taber

It was with a sense of homecoming and rediscovery that I opened and read this collection of Eugene England's essays written between 1966 and 1983. For example, although his review of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was published in a 1983 *BYU Studies*, I clearly remember the Institute class in which Brother England guided our exploration and discussion of LDS doctrines and the issues of God's power and goodness. The understanding I gained from that single class sustains me daily as I cope and try to help my other children cope with my daughter's battle with leukemia. "That They Might Not Suffer," an essay about the Atonement, was delivered in sacrament meeting nineteen years ago. The scriptures which developed the theme have been the touchstones of my understanding of Christ's mission ever since.

Ironically enough, it was Eugene England who made it possible for me even to attend Stanford University. Before my parents would agree to let me go, we made a weekend trip from Salt Lake City to Palo Alto, California, to make sure that I would not "lose my testimony" within three months of setting foot on the campus. When my father returned from priesthood meeting on Sunday morning, he happily related the details of a conversation he had had with a counselor in the bishopric of the Stanford Ward. I later learned it was Gene England. For me, the most impressive feature of the ward was its elders quorum, comprised of thirty-five active (and therefore eligible) elders.

I did indeed "lose my testimony" at Stanford. It began to crack when a boyfriend not only refused to attend a special Christmas service, but shot down my defense of the Church's policy against Blacks holding the priesthood and in the process showed me my native arrogance. Two years later when I enrolled in the first of ten or so Institute classes I took from Gene England, I was ready for some answers to the hard questions which had bothered me even before I entered college.

The testimony of the gospel which I had at graduation owed a great deal to the exploration and discussions that took place at those Institute classes. When I left in 1970 I was even married, but not to one of those thirty-five elders. My husband was a convert, who practically on the water's edge shied at joining a "racist church." After Institute class that night we went downstairs to England's office where he shared with two very uspet students his personal experiences in trying to understand the existence of the policy and in praying for a change in it. Rereading "The Mormon Cross" again jolts me—not with its rejection of the theory of Black indecisiveness in premortal life, but with my memory of a man praying earnestly and trying to prepare himself for the day when a new revelation would come—an example of engagement and consecration of quite another quality than my own pallid acceptance of the Church's flaw along with the gospel I loved.

In the years since leaving Stanford I, far from both Utah and California, have followed through the pages of *Dialogue* Gene's odyssey from California to St. Olaf's College and then to BYU. I have been amused and touched by such essays as "Blessing the Chevrolet," "The Hosanna Shout in Washington, D.C." and "Going to Conference" which celebrate the deep sources of spiritual renewal and challenge inherent in our religion—priesthood blessings, the temple, the examples and words of our prophet, and soul-expanding reunions with friends in sacred places.

The essays, collected from the pages of practically every official and nonofficial Church-related publication, are not arranged chronologically, but philosophically as explained in a foreword written for this volume. Two fairly recent essays which explore the paradoxical truths of the Latter-day Saint religion begin the volume. Paradox, indeed, is a prominent theme throughout. Essential to the teachings of Lehi and Joseph Smith, paradox requires the Mormon scholar to answer "both" when faced with the dichotomies which often threaten to split Saints into two opposing camps, variously categorized as Iron Rodders vs. Liahonas or Them vs. Us. Thus, England honors the claims of both individual conscience and ecclesiastical authority; great books and true religion are both essential to our spiritual and intellectual lives.

The opening essay, "Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest," not only introduces the tensions that coexist in the universe of Mormonism; it gives a fresh image of Joseph Smith in his own words. The many quotations from the Prophet which are included in the body of the essay reveal not only England's perception of Joseph and his prophetic tragedy, but also what the life of Joseph Smith has meant in the life of Eugene England.

Throughout the essays England quotes liberally from many of the modern prophets, especially Brigham Young, David O. McKay, and Spencer W. Kimball. These quotations not only illuminate and clarify England's points, but they also lift out of the welter of dimly remembered speeches and sermons the golden threads of truth. I'm sure I must have read, or even heard, some of these sermons, but I never sensed their impact until I saw how they affected a fellow believer.

Despite the paradoxical nature of life and truth, in every essay the Mormon's quest for reason, for rational keys to the universe and a life that "makes sense" consist-

ently gives shape and direction to the dialogue.

Even though the earlier essays of the sixties bring me back to the time when England was my teacher, I find the essays of the eighties to be much more interesting. They have an immediacy, an openness, which the earlier ones do not. It is as if England has taken his own advice about the need for spiritual realism which he expresses in "We Need to Liberate Mormon Men."

"Enduring," the last essay of the book, as well as the most recent in the collection, reveals England still asking the hard questions, still thinking about them. In fact, the questions sometimes are not even asked outright in the essay but resound behind the examples which he presents—his mother-in-law undergoing chemotherapy on the strength of a hopeful priesthood blessing,and a young couple who had a second child after their first was born with the genetic defect Trisomy 13, because they had faith in another optimistic priesthood blessing. In light of the Chevrolets that have been blessed to find human help and repair, I ask myself, "How much will God permit us to intervene in the process of life and death?" "If a spirit could be given a less-damaged body as a result of medical intervention, might that intervention not be justified?" "Do we push too far into the processes of life or not far enough?" Paradox confronts us at every decision point.

It is the particular gift of Eugene England through his confrontations with experience and literature, both scriptural and secular, to provoke us to examine our own beliefs, experiences, and their meanings in our lives—to find our own questions and endure our own answers.

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