

Personal Progress and Personal Essays in South Africa

By Kristen Allred

Reflection written by one of Gene's students, Kristen Allred, for *Irreantum's* tribute issue following the passing of Eugene England.

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THE HOT, 45-KILOMETER drives to King Williamstown during the summer of 1999 were one reason we BYU interns started reading aloud. Each Sunday we rode in the back of a rusted, battered, green Volvo taxi driven by a man with matted dreadlocks that stretched to his waist, so we could attend church in South Africa. One particular afternoon I remember more vividly than any other. Crammed in the tiny back seat with our elbows digging into our ribs and our legs smashed together, we took turns reading a xeroxed copy of Eugene England's article, "Are All Alike unto God?"—each person reading a few paragraphs and then passing it on. As close as we sat to each other, we still had to strain forward to hear the reader, who was practically screaming out the article, since the windows were rolled down. Each week we read a new article or book chapter to pass the time, the analysis of our Mormon culture and religion the common denominator of all our selections. We didn't read so much to pass the time, but to satisfy the urgency we felt to talk about what we were observing and experiencing in the recuperating South Africa.

My close interactions with black and white South Africans (both Mormons and non-Mormons), combined with my intense cultural studies of the nation, compelled me to seriously consider many gospel principles in a way I never had before. I thought about the nature of God, and considered whether or not it was possible for Him to be a respecter of persons. I thought about our living prophets and the divine revelation I so firmly believed they received—puzzling over the apparent contradictions I saw between our racially selective policies and our theology. I thought about apartheid and the problem of evil—why families had to be split, human dignity stolen, and good people denied their individual sense of worth. I grew overwhelmed in realizing that mercy and forgiveness were more necessary in—and more capable of—building Zion than I had ever imagined.

After coming home, I saw a lot of parallels between South Africa and Utah Valley. The members of the Church and community struggled with many of the same spiritual and emotional challenges, such as forgiveness, racism, mercy, and increasing in love and understanding towards each other. My interest in Mormon studies grew, and I suddenly felt more responsible to my community than I ever had before. I realized that regardless of the issue, dialogue is crucial in strengthening the Mormon community, and that we each have a personal responsibility to involve ourselves in dialogue in one way or another. I wanted to continue in dialogue,

whether by reading, conversing, or writing. Yearning to make the changes in my lifestyle and attitude that would help me to become a better member of my religious community, I began to more actively study LDS history, religious discourse, and literature. One of my most exciting discoveries was the Mormon personal essay. I immersed myself in more of Gene's essays, humbled at his scholarly, faithful study of our religion and culture.

Gene's personal essays were among the first pieces of serious Mormon nonfiction written by a regular member of the community that I had read. Not only did I start to feel the power that discourse has to heal and build individuals and communities, I began to become familiar with the literary testimony. This was a testimony conceived of a deep reflection on personal experience and a sincere study of challenging social, religious, and cultural issues. Gene's essays were also beautifully written—the literary quality could be admired by all, yet they could be read and appreciated by the average reader. He didn't write for an elite audience.

What amazed me about Eugene's essays was the absolute honesty and trust he put in readers as he made himself vulnerable by sharing intimate personal stories. He understood well that he was not alone in his many struggles—and as Hugh Nibley remarked when *Dialogues with Myself* first came out, “his intensely personal reflections would be embarrassing if they did not always turn out to be the reader's own. Always experience comes to the rescue.”

Even though I recognized that personal experience was one of the most valuable elements of Gene's essays, for a long time I believed that I was an exception to this. My fear of not being understood kept me from refining, finishing, and sharing the half-written, rough “personal essays” recorded in my journal. I remember asking Gene one February night in his living room how he did it—how he wrote pieces that brought people together in more love and understanding. I told him I wanted to try it, but I was afraid that it would be self-centered, impossible for others to relate to. He simply told me, “Write about what keeps you awake at night.” His comment took my breath away—because what kept me awake at night were concerns I doubted anyone else possessed.

But the more I talked to him, and worked the idea over in my mind, the more I believed it. The struggles and joys we members of the Church deal with are more similar than different. Writing truly does initiate dialogue: it is a wonderful way to connect us together. Not only does it allow us to discuss our similar challenges or joys, it encourages us to become more faithful, committed students, scholars, and Saints.

I often wonder about the events of the last two and a half years that have so profoundly shaped me. I know the complexity of spiritual and emotional development—that many factors share in making a new creation, a new me. But I could not feel more incredibly blessed—or privileged—to have had Gene as such a rich guide and mentor. There was no way for me to have planned on discovering him so many thousands of miles away from home in a humid old car—but I couldn't ask for or imagine anything better. Although I didn't personally meet him until months after I started reading his essays, I felt I had already met him through his writing. He helped me to more deeply recommit to my beliefs and faith, and to feel more confident in openly sharing my personal experiences through writing—which is not only a way of bringing peace and strength to each other in love, but also a means of bearing testimony of our Savior and the gospel.

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