

A Letter to Eugene England

By Dian Saderup Monson

Except from a personal letter from the author to Eugene England shortly after his collapse in February 2001 and included in *Irreantum's* tribute issue following his passing.

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Dear Gene,

You and Charlotte have meant much to me over the course of my adult life, but I doubt that you know just how much. Now, it seems I had better try to tell you as well as I can the enormous positive force you have been to me. I'm afraid you'll have to endure a bit of my personal history to understand the context of your influence.

I remember so much of our early acquaintance. You were teaching at the University of Utah Institute and I was working as a waitress for the Lion House. After an adolescence quite preoccupied with gloom and doom, I had spent a year and a half studying the gospel and had become, after lots of study and no small struggle, what I would describe as radiantly converted. The moment of my conversion—I'm sure you know the sensation, of being filled with the love of God from head to foot—occurred in Logan where I was a freshman at Utah State. After two semesters there, though, despite being converted and sure I could do everything needful through faith in Christ, I was completely unsure that I could do college. So I'd gone back to Salt Lake to live with my parents and work part time.

Although college seemed beyond my ability, I loved to study; I was ravenously hungry to understand the gospel and became very interested in Church history. I discovered the historical library in the Church Office Building and began to go there after work each afternoon at the Lion House. This was when Leonard Arrington—and you, too, I think—were all there doing serious history. I didn't know at the time how special this period in the study of Church history would be; I just knew I'd found a quiet place to read all kinds of fascinating things. That's where I discovered a journal called *Dialogue*. It astonished me. Every afternoon, after serving four or five wedding luncheons and the occasional General Authority function, I'd tear off my pink gingham uniform, get into my street clothes, and run to the historical library, straight to the section with *Dialogue*. Here were Mormons who thought about things the way I tended to think about things, which was a lot.

Then one day I drove past the Institute and dropped in. I discovered you would be teaching a class about LDS literature. I was very nervous the first day of class—I'd read your name and your work in that incredible journal I'd discovered at the Church library—but my nervousness quickly changed to exhilaration. I couldn't believe I'd met a person like you. Everything you said, and how you said it, was a revelation to me. How well I remember the first time I read the journal of Mary

Goble Pay and felt its simple power. And there were the other books of Mormon history you told us about: *Twelve Mormon Homes*, *A Mormon Mother*, *Dear Ellen*. I started to understand the way in which personal essays, journals, letters, and autobiography were especially suited to the expression of the Latter-day Saint experience. You seemed to me to be a person crammed with knowledge that I needed; literally, you fed my young spirit and led me in the directions I needed to be led, both aesthetically and spiritually. I remember reading in the Church library your great sermon on the atonement. I still think it the most insightful piece of writing I have ever read on that mysterious subject. It persuaded me to believe, just as you suggest the atonement persuades people to believe in Christ.

And you noticed me. You actually asked if I minded your sharing something I had written for the class with your family! I'd never done well in school, in grade school having been placed on the slow track while all my friends were tracked as fast, smart, etc., and in high school not caring enough about what they taught—with the strange exception of one grammar course and two physiology classes—to try. I think that is probably why I'd found my first terms at Utah State so daunting: I was simply certain I wasn't as smart as everybody else and therefore had to work so hard just to keep up that it wore me out. But there you were, saying I'd written something worth reading.

I had discovered literary fiction on my own during high school in a used paperback bookstore where you could get a Thomas Hardy novel for a dime. I went there weekly. I'd had the weird experience of reading L.P. Hartley's *The Go Between* once through and then rereading it and realizing the text existed on different levels, although I didn't think of it in those terms. I had discovered on a second reading, very much to my amazement, that the book was full of objects that stood for things—symbols, metaphors—and that along with a story, the book had themes—ideas the author had embedded in it. I didn't know any of the literary terms, but I intuited the concepts. Then in your LDS literature course we discussed how and why literature works. And I realized you understood this wonderful realm—how words mean and make meaning—in ways far beyond my imagining. And not only did you have this knowledge, but you had noticed me and the way I thought, and had been generous and kind and gently encouraging to me.

That June I left Salt Lake to try school at BYU and you arrived there to teach shortly thereafter. I'd written the story "A Blessing of Duty" during summer term for another teacher and he had seemed little impressed by it, but when I enrolled in your creative writing class the following fall, you asked everyone to submit something they had recently written and, since that was all I had, I gave it to you. I think I was as excited by your reaction to that story as Sally Field was in her famous Academy award speech: "You like me! You really like me!" Only for me the words in my head went, "He likes it! He really likes it!" You understood exactly what I was trying to say and you showed it to your friends. I remember getting your copy back with Bruce Jorgensen's comment: "You're right, Gene, she is good." I'd never had so much praise or encouragement in my life. Some time after that, at a reception of some kind in the MARB which Mary Bradford attended, you introduced me to her—the current editor of my favorite publication! And you said, "This is the student I was telling you about."

In short, Gene, you made me see I had a talent, you nourished it, and you introduced me to the people who would let my talent grow and be seen by other people.

In doing this you really and truly changed the entire course of my life. I can hardly imagine the shape of my life, what it would be today, if I had not met you. I completed college because I could write. I went on to get two graduate degrees—one in creative writing, the other a Ph.D. in literature, because I could write. When I moved to the East Coast I had an instant host of friends, because so many of the LDS intellectuals there read *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* and *Exponent II*, where, largely because of your influence, I had published my work.

If I hadn't developed my mind and abilities in the way your encouragement and confidence had driven me to do, I wouldn't have married my husband—it's difficult to imagine a basis for our initial attraction if I had not pursued my intellectual and creative interests, interests which gave us a form of common ground. I wouldn't have my children. I wouldn't have my family. I am not understating the case when I say your generous influence sent the little stream of my talent into its proper channel, and being in that channel has given me a vast measure of all my adult stability and joy. As no doubt you know, stability is not my strongest point, but my testimony of the atonement, which you have nurtured through the wisdom of your own writing, and the love of writing and literature which you helped so greatly to instill in me, have enabled me to stay (or retrieve when necessary) my course.

You gave me all this, and you gave me the beautiful advantage of knowing you not just as a teacher but as a friend, and along with that the opportunity of becoming friends with Charlotte. I will never forget your strenuously urging me to come to England with one of your study abroad groups. That's when I really got to know Charlotte. She and I would sit in that little kitchen and snack on Danish butter with bread and talk for hours sometimes.

I remember the first time I met Charlotte: you'd invited me as a student to one of your Thursday night get-togethers (which of course felt like one of the greatest honors of my life). I'd always thought that whoever you were married to must certainly be a lucky woman because you were so inspired and smart, but (this is the truth) the moment I saw Charlotte I knew: you were the lucky one. I could see in her countenance all her gentleness and the remarkable strength of the love that simply abides in her.

And then there's England. Would I have ever gotten there without your coaxing? I doubt it. And I certainly wouldn't have seen it the way I got to see it by piggy-backing on the study abroad tours and hearing your commentary. Oh my gosh, when I think of the assault of wonder I experienced at nearly every sight that met my eyes in England. I so coveted having a window seat on the coaches when we went out touring to various places, I'd scheme all through breakfast how I would get one without looking too greedy! All I wanted to do as the coach would go through the countryside is look and look. I rationalized stealing the window seats because a lot of the students really just seemed to want to talk. It didn't mean that much to them, I told myself; but I always felt like the greediest of children and afraid to be found out: I've got to have the window! I might start crying and not stop if I can't have the window! I might have a screaming fit right here if I can't have a window seat!

But a window seat was worth it—the hills that actually appeared to be rolling, really moving, like great green swells on an ocean; the fearsome landscape of Northern Wales and all the rock walls, running up and down the mountains, this way, that way; the villages with their ancient churchyards; the austerity of Oxford, the lushness of Cambridge; the cathedrals—when we went to Salisbury, there in that ancient

building a handful of ordinary modern townspeople were conducting a funeral for a child; the forests with trees older than the United States, so mossy and green and magical looking you could almost imagine Merlin appearing; the perfection of Bath, a city planned ahead to be beautiful.

It was all so much. I remember detaching myself from the group one day for a half hour and wandering into a forest adjacent to a castle or some other sort of large building. There was a herd of deer in the forest and two bucks were sparring. It was a grey, grey, drizzly day and the clack of the bucks' horns rang in the cold, bleak air under a canopy of fabulous, ancient oaks (I think they were oaks), and I remember sitting on a rock, very cold, my stomach hurting horribly, and just weeping for the beauty of it. I had never felt more drenched in beauty. And that was how the whole of England felt to me, as if I were constantly being drenched in beauty. Outdoors or in the coach, in London or touring, in the theatres too—the National and the Barbican, watching Judy Dench play *Mother Courage* (up close because you said if the seats were empty it was okay to claim them) and Ian McKellen as *Coriolanus* (we had seats on the stage—I think we played the rabble) and seeing *The Mystery Plays* with all that medieval passion and energy.

And you're the one who gave it to me. All of it. Made it possible. So you see I have so much to thank you for, so many, many things. You have never brought anything but blessing upon blessing into my life—and I haven't even named them all, never could. And I know that there are many other people, students especially and readers of your work and friends, whom you have similarly blessed.

Gene, nobody but God, I guess, knows what the future holds for you. Mary [Slover] has seen you fairly recently and reassured me that your spirit is as strong as it has ever been. She says you seem at peace and very focused, your eyes just radiating love to her as she talked with you. She said your eyes were intensely beautiful in the quality of love shining from them. She actually told me she thought she was seeing the very best you perhaps she'd ever seen, entirely undistracted by anything but love, perfectly in tune with everything that matters most. I pray every day, alone and with my family, that you will be blessed to continue in that peace, your heart brimming with love, and that the Lord will strengthen your spirit to endure all things in the same manner as you have done so many things: devoutly well.

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