

Hearing Gene's Voice

By Margaret Young

Reflection from one of England's former students who became a colleague at BYU and one of the writer's whose truth telling and compassionate writing about difficult issues England enjoyed most. This essay was published in the tribute issue *Irreantum* published following England's death.

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I 'VE SAID THAT I don't know if I would even be a writer were it not for Gene England. Let me explain what I mean by that.

The first novel I wrote—*House without Walls*—has been accurately described as “home” literature. It was a faith-promoter clearly written for Mormons. I wrote it during a time I was trying desperately to live up to the image I had been given through Primary and MIA.

After a devastating divorce, I returned to my hometown—Provo—in 1984, harrowed and almost ready to pursue a master's degree in creative writing. I soon married Bruce Young, who introduced me to Gene England. Then my real writing life began. Gene became one of the primary forces in my finally telling the hard stories my heart knew so well.

I took Gene's Mormon literature class in 1988. I remember reading *The Giant Joshua* and some pioneer journals describing women giving blessings. I asked why women didn't give blessings any longer. Gene's response was, “That's a great question, isn't it?” A wonderful, provocative discussion ensued.

In that setting, I remembered another BYU class, wherein a student had asked the religion professor about a difficult issue in the Doctrine and Covenants. The professor had given him a wilting glare, dropped his voice to its deepest, most accusing tones, and declared: “We do not ask such questions.” I mentioned the incident to Gene, who answered fast: “You don't have to put up with crap like that. Nobody has to put up with crap like that.” (Of course, it was that attitude and that haste which brought Gene his most relentless opposition.)

Gene was the first to read a draft of my novel *Salvador*, which I turned in as my class project for Mormon Literature. He was the best critic of *Love Chains*—which he criticized with unflinching honesty. He insisted I understand something before I presumed to write about it, and took me to task time and again for my errors in portraying a fishing scene. He knew fishing and said he couldn't trust me as a writer if I got the details of fishing wrong. “How can I be sure you're telling the truth about other things if I know you're not telling the truth in this thing?” he'd say. So he

provided me the fishing vocabulary he had learned at the banks of the Snake River. He told me where I would find trout and where I'd find carp, and demanded that I get it right in my fiction. He was not one to gloss over my errors in writing. He knew I could do better, and I worked hard to prove him right. And so it was essential that when I took on my greatest challenge as a writer—the project which currently fills so much of my time and life—*Standing on the Promises* (a trilogy about black Mormon pioneers), I did so with a coauthor who intimately knew the world I would be writing about. Gene's own passion for racial equality and his own writing on the subject—from "The Mormon Cross" to "'No Respector of Persons': An Ethics of Diversity"—had already heightened my awareness of racial issues. In 1998, Gene effectually paired me with my black coauthor, Darius Gray, who would guide me in writing accurately about a world I barely knew, with diction I had not mastered.

Darius had been given a ticket to the Sunstone conference that year, and noticed that Gene and I were presenting a "twenty years later" retrospective on the change in the priesthood policy. Darius, the president of the Church's Genesis Group (an official organization to support black members), had not planned on attending the conference, but decided to see what two white folks would have to say about issues he knew intimately.

After Gene and I presented our papers, Darius gave me a hug and said, "Let's write a book."

The rest is history. Hard history.

I didn't realize how deeply I would be affected by this project, how soul-wrenching it would be to read Church leaders' past writings about Africans and African Americans. I felt real anguish as I worked to build an Elijah Abel being told he must confine his preaching to the "colored" population, or a Jane James begging a Church president for temple blessings and adding as a postscript: "I am colored." My eyes were fully opened to the racism I had grown up with, and I saw it hadn't disappeared. I needed to talk to someone about all I was learning, all that was troubling me, and it had to be someone who wouldn't say, "We do not ask such questions." It had to be Gene England. It had to be the hasty man who would exclaim before he could remember to be careful: "You don't have to put up with crap like that!" It had to be the man who would recognize the saint in me even as he recognized the saint in Levi Peterson, and would not only understand the pain of facing a hard truth, but would insist I not flinch in telling it right.

I made the appointment and went to Gene's UVSC office as scheduled. But he wasn't there. I left a note saying, "Gene—Sorry I missed you." Though my words were not accusing, my feelings were. I was thinking, "How could you not be here for me? I came all this way to talk to you! Aren't you with me on this journey? You started me on the road—don't abandon me now! Abide with me."

Months after I left that note on Gene's office door, I had a brief phone conversation with him. I could tell something was wrong and asked directly, "Are you all right?" He answered, "Margaret, I'm depressed. I just can't seem to kick it. I think everything that happened at BYU has finally hit me. I didn't let it hit me for a long time, but I think it finally did." He told me about his sleeping problems and feelings of despondency. I already knew what had happened not only at BYU, but at UVSC.

(My last official meeting with him had been to schedule a showing of my play *I Am Jane* at UVSC. Gene explained that he wanted it shown, but would have to be invisible in his support. He had said something at Sunstone about racism in the Church and had been censured by the UVSC board.) It seemed absolutely understandable that he would be depressed. Any of us who knew how he had been treated over the past few years understood. No one thought to suggest a CAT scan.

I tried to visit Gene in the hospital. Charlotte intercepted me and said he was sleeping. I accepted the fact that I was missing him yet again.

When Gene was two weeks from death, my husband and I phoned him. Charlotte told Bruce to keep the conversation brief, for Gene was weak. Bruce told Gene he loved him, and then handed the phone to me. But Gene's strength was used up. I missed hearing his voice that one last time.

I missed the memorial service, too. I had scheduled my grandparents' cabin in Island Park, Idaho, for a Genesis youth activity and was required to be present. While my husband and friends were paying tribute to Gene in the Provo Tabernacle, I was standing in Gene's home state, searching for carp in the Snake River. It was like looking through a glass darkly, but sometimes I could make out the shadowy forms like swishing commas. With me was a group of young people—several African-Americans, two Africans, and a few Caucasians (including my own children). They were silently watching loons perched in lodgepole trees, and scanning the boggy grass for bears or moose. That evening, we would return to the banks as the sun spread its dying light across the Snake's ripples. As night came, we would sing "A Child's Prayer" and talk about faith. We would do a "Faith Walk" back to the cabin, the leaders with eyes open, the youth with eyes closed, all of us holding hands—brown hands clasped in white hands, and white in brown.

I would think about Gene and try not to cry.

Ultimately, despite missing the last conversation I had longed for, despite missing him in all those final, disappointing ways, I didn't miss Gene at all. I got the immense honor of knowing him. I was privileged to move from being his student to being his friend. That is a gift future Mormon writers will not have—at least not in the way I had it. Fifty years from now, Mormon writers may not even realize they are receiving instructions, prodding, and critiques from a man they will never see in this life. His legacy will live in those of us lucky enough to have known him. We, his offspring in many ways, will continue to write about subjects he opened to us. We will continue to show the peace-loving but forthright behavior he modeled for us, even though he will not be at our side with his reassuring smile, his hasty words, or his insistent critiques. We'll manage to hear his voice anyway, and to send his messages through the generations.

Gene, I really wanted that last talk. Maybe I didn't need it as much as I thought I did, because I'm negotiating the trail pretty well on my own. I'm sorry my children won't have you as their teacher, but you should know that your legacy has lit up their lives. My son answered his Sunday School teacher's explanation of why blacks were denied priesthood until 1978 ("less valiant in the spirit world and cursed with the mark of Cain") with a hasty "That's not Church doctrine."

Maybe I should have lectured him about respecting his teacher and being more

polite. Maybe I should have warned him to be careful when questioning any authority. But I was proud of him, and I know you would've been proud too. I was grateful he knew the truth and spoke it. I was proud he knew he didn't need to take that crap from anybody. Someday, I'll have him read "The Mormon Cross."

What would you have told me in that last conversation, had we had it? What would you tell me today, now that you see so clearly? Something from Shakespeare? "Wisely and slow; they stumble who run fast"? No, I don't think so. "Ripeness is all"? Maybe. "The quality of mercy is not strained." Yes, that sounds more like it. Or maybe you would just repeat the words you inscribed in the copy Bruce bought me of *Making Peace*: "For Margaret: May you continue to be a peaceful person—both finding and making."

Of course, you and I both know that peace doesn't come free, though it is freely offered. And it never comes on the fishtail of a lie. I commit myself to getting the story right and telling it well, as you taught me, and as I am now teaching my own students, my own children, and a multitude of others from many races. I am privileged to inhabit the world you dreamed of from the 1960s until the day you died—where people of varying pigments sing about their faith in a God who invites all to partake of His goodness. I continue my commitment—sprung from your relentless but gentle critiques—to know the details and be truthful enough to be trusted. I continue to remind myself that God is the author of Truth, and I will answer to Him, who will be my ultimate critic and friend. I may never learn all you know about fishing, but I will continue to learn whatever God needs me to learn, and boldly—even hastily—cast my humble net where He directs.

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