

Letter to Gene, My Eternal Brother

By Mary Lythgoe Bradford

Reflection about their journey together published in the *Irreantum* tribute issue.
Originally published: *Irreantum* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 23–25.

“Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.”
—W.S. Merwin

YOU WERE ALWAYS just a few steps ahead of me, even though you were three years younger. You married the love of your life while still a mere slip of a lad, and you left for a mission with Charlotte while we were in school at the University of Utah. I kept track of your career and your family until that fateful summer of 1957 when you announced that you were planning to found an independent scholarly journal. I was finally getting around to marriage, so I exacted a promise that you would seek me and recruit me.

When you and Wes Johnson founded *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* almost a decade later, I had no idea that I would one day follow you as its editor. Deeply into motherhood, I hungered for connections with the literary/academic life I had left behind. You put me on *Dialogue*'s staff, and you published poems of mine that I had believed would never see the light of day. The thesis I had written on Virginia Sorensen was languishing at the University of Utah when you asked me to write about her for *Dialogue*. Later on, you appointed me guest editor for an issue on Mormons and the City. Though I was offended at your stringent editing of my work, I had to admit that you had made me look good, a habit that stayed with you.

(I once had the temerity to edit you, but I soon gave up. You had created your own style—somewhere between Jane Austen and Faulkner—it was useless to tamper with it.)

You epitomized the lofty ideal I had learned to respect in graduate school: the study of literature is a noble, humane calling, one that helps us to endure life, to understand life, and to enjoy life. Since you and I also studied with Lowell Bennion, we tied this to a principle he often enunciated, “The gospel is bigger than any one person’s understanding of it.” The gospel embraces all truth while literature expresses the human yearning for that truth. In the beginning was The Word, and you were devoted to The Word in all of its manifestations.

“Gene, Gene, the Writing Machine,” my children called you. Would I were so accomplished in so many genres. As an essayist, you were there first, urging me to

write personal essays for *Dialogue*. You published your own collections while I limped along in your wake. My own collection emerged in 1987, and you used it in your classes, recommending it to students and friends just as if you hadn't put me up to it!

We sometimes argued in friendly fashion about those slightly inflammatory ideas you enjoyed running up the flagpole. I was not sure that Mormon women are "freer than Mormon men under the patriarchy." I was sure that Virginia Sorensen was not the "founding foremother of the personal essay." But I always learned from you. I noticed that whenever others disagreed, sometime vehemently, you did your utmost to engage them in dialogue. You believed that we learn more from those with whom we disagree. You were expansive and open. You invited everybody into your wide and spacious tent.

One day we sat down to discuss the life of Lowell Bennion. It was clear that a biography and an anthology were needed. We decided that I would work on the life while you collected his lesser-known speeches and essays. Typically, you published in about a year; I birthed mine in about nine years. You stayed by my side, though, cheering, editing, advising—always downplaying your role in my development. You single-handedly kept my reputation alive through your comprehensive essays on Mormon literature. You usually included me in your anthologies. Because of you, my reputation exceeded my output.

Your essays, though personal, ranged over theological and ethical issues that hardly anybody else had the intellectual or spiritual equipment to handle. As a theologian and a peacemaker, you were unafraid of subjects like those in your 1995 collection, *Making Peace*: the ethics of nonviolence, why Nephi killed Laban, scapegoating and labeling in the church and in our communities. You attacked the bugaboo of perfectionism and one-sided patriotism. You knew how to think prayerfully and powerfully about our deepest needs.

During our whole fifty-year journey, you managed to post yourself at the major crossroads in my life, where you gently pointed the way. You were Lowell Bennion to my three children. Mentor and model, you were their renaissance man. As founder of *Dialogue*, you proved that faith and scholarship are not enemies. As founder of Food for Poland, you proved that one man can make a difference.

You and Charlotte took my children into your home whenever they needed extra attention. Our children and yours became true brothers and sisters. My daughter registered for BYU's semester abroad where you made room for me in the London flat during its last weeks. I went into training before I left so I could keep up with you when we crossed London streets and raced through Sherwood Forest to see the Major Tree before dark. When you visited us in Virginia, you always found a way to lead me into sold out plays and concerts. We then sat up into the night discussing *Swan Lake* or *Henry IV*. You always had a new twist on the old classics.

Now I see that you have gone ahead once again. Wait up, Gene! Please save a seat for me.

Your loving sister,
Mary

How to cite this essay: Mary Lythgoe Bradford, "Letter to Gene, My Eternal Brother" *Irreantum* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 64–65.

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