

# Eugene England—Master Teacher: The BYU Years

*By Dian Saderup Monson*

This essay appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after the passing of Eugene England. The author, Dian Saderup Monson, was a student of Gene's at Brigham Young University who morphed into a long-time family friend.

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**R**ECENTLY, MY MOTHER got a call from a full-time missionary. She had apparently filled out a card requesting one of the new, free Church movies, not realizing the offer was meant only for non-members. The missionary was following up on the request. They got into a lengthy conversation. They covered the missionary's homeland (India) and conversion from Episcopalianism, then a number of gospel topics (including the merits of Sunday School). They touched upon BYU (which the missionary had attended for four years) and Eugene England and that I would be writing an article about his years at the university. "Eugene England!" the missionary cried. "He was the most wonderful professor I ever had the whole time I went to BYU! I am so sad that he died. He was the best teacher in the world!"

After two months of looking through emails posted to Gene and Charlotte during his illness, and to the family following his death, and talking with professors on campus and former students of Gene's, I'm hardly surprised by this missionary's reaction. Since my first class with him at the University of Utah Institute of Religion the year before he came to the Y, I've known that he had remarkable gifts as a teacher, gifts of particular value to me personally. Yet these past weeks, I've become vividly aware of—awestruck, really, at the great breadth of Gene's reach, how profoundly he influenced nearly a quarter-century's worth of Latter-day Saint students. It has come home to me with great force: we've lost one of the most splendid teachers the Church has ever known—or may ever know.

Despite dire warnings from many friends about the repressive environment he would be entering, Gene arrived at the Y in 1977, convinced that at BYU, he would be free to teach what was most important to him, what he cared most about as a professor of literature and creative writing: the religious and ethical values embedded in classic British and American literature, and how they may be woven into creative work, and the relationship of those values to his own Latter-day Saint faith. Throughout his tenure at the Y, he remained convinced that his friends' warnings were misplaced. He enjoyed the freedoms he had hoped for, teaching his students not only literature and the craft of writing but also how in the best literature, central gospel values are explored and affirmed, and how in the finest writing, faith is given

shape and expanded. Despite his many misunderstandings with administrators and colleagues during his twenty-one years at the Y, Gene never lost either his commitment to bringing a gospel perspective to academic subjects or his gratitude for a position that allowed him to do this openly and joyfully.

I remember my first class with him when I was an undergraduate at BYU. The course was LDS literature. I recall the focused passion he brought to the material. He always chose his words with exquisite care and precision. Saying the right thing in the right way, so that we students would catch his vision, animated him absolutely. In his presence, I felt for perhaps the first time the power of true charisma.

That Gene was charismatic seems so obvious it hardly needs stating. What always remained remarkable about his great charismatic gifts, however, were the uses to which he did and did not put them. Douglas Thayer, with whom he taught, says, “He didn’t have this messianic attitude that some people have, that they have to gather a whole group around them. He just didn’t feel that way. Gene was on his way. He was preoccupied by so many things . . . always thinking, always writing, always reading. . . . He was a man who kind of pulled students with him because he was so dynamic.” For many years, Gene and Charlotte graciously held open-invitation gatherings on Thursday nights in their home, hosting musicians, writers, and thinkers to share their work with faculty and students. I remember how honored and simply thrilled I felt the first time he invited me to attend one of those evenings, and how grateful I was when I realized I could come any Thursday my schedule permitted. The doors were always open. According to Thayer, such sharing was natural: “Gene was interested in dialogue. . . . He thought that was how you learned, that’s how you understood, that’s how you enjoyed yourself.” He saw the university and its extended community as a wonderful opportunity for generating the best sorts of conversation.

And Gene England loved conversation—the energy and ideas that good conversation could generate. He wanted his students to catch that energy and begin generating their own useful, spirit- and mind-stretching ideas. Just as C S. Lewis describes the transmission of the gospel as a kind of “good infection,” Gene hoped that his own gifts might serve the larger end of “infecting” his students with a desire to understand and create their own scholarship or art, and achieve their own highest goals.

His example of life lived vigorously in the pursuit of worthy knowledge and experience fired both will and imagination in his students. “He pushed us to move through space with passion and drive,” recalls one student who accompanied Gene on a London Study Abroad, “whether by moving into better, unoccupied theatre seats during the intermissions or by taking in one more castle or museum before boarding a bus while sightseeing.” As Gary Browning, dean of the Honors program when Gene served as an associate dean, recalls, “Gene’s enthusiasm was contagious. . . . In all of Gene’s teaching, his primary goal was to open new vistas. . . . One often felt [in Gene’s classroom] a kind of holy danger.” Holy because Gene’s fundamental goals for students were always tied to the central, transforming power and ideals of the gospel; danger because, being firmly rooted by an immovable faith in Christ and in the restored gospel and Church, he never feared to confront any issue that faith

might raise, no matter how troubling, no matter how vexing the questions it provoked. As Thayer says, he was famous “for helping highly intelligent students . . . who were on the fringes of the Church or on the way out of the Church. They would come to him, and he would stabilize them, help them to understand [difficult religious issues].” Joe Straubhaar, a BYU professor of communications who met Gene as a student at Stanford, bluntly states: “Gene England almost singlehandedly saved my activity in the LDS Church.” Recently, a BYU student wrote: “When I couldn’t think of reasons to go on [in the Church], Gene provided them. He still does.”

Browning believes Gene, in his work with honors students, felt a particular urgency to make sure these bright kids didn’t jump to conclusions too quickly, didn’t accept too uncritically what other scholars might have said about broad issues, including the Church. A virtual chorus of students and colleagues have written, essentially, that they could talk with him about anything. No idea frightened him. Nothing remained off-limits to discussion. He always believed truth would win the day. “He was so enthusiastic about exploring,” says Browning. “Everything invigorated him. . . . Learning for him was as important, *more* important than eating or drinking. . . . Gene felt very deeply that we progress eternally and we’re learning eternally. That’s what makes eternity bearable. It’s not static. It’s not stagnant. There is a newness to all of it.”

Many former students recall the Honors colloquium in which he took part from 1979 to 1983 as highlights of their BYU experience. In the colloquium, three to five professors taught across disciplines ranging from the physical and social sciences to the humanities and fine arts; as many as nine credit hours would be offered to those enrolled. Gene emerged as a leader, a driving force, among the teachers of these tightly knit groups. As one participant recollects, the colloquium invited teacher-student interdependence in the learning experience and emphasized the value of engaging “the whole person” in learning—intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. “My peers and I saw traditional classroom structures of power and authority become inverted as our professors also became students—sometimes stumbling as much as we did—in each others’ disciplines.” Browning recalls the colloquium in which he participated with Gene as being as intense for the professors as it was for the students, real head-to-head, heart-to-heart learning—often involving the dismaying dismantling of former prejudices or beliefs and the construction of new and sturdier structures of knowledge. But no matter what new thing might be discovered, constants remained; whatever circuitous route a conversation might take, the “journey ended up at the same place and that was with [Gene’s] incredible, unmovable, unshakable faith. . . . He always brought it back to his testimony.” I myself remember his starting every class with prayer when I was a student nearly twenty-five years ago. He continued that tradition until he left the school. Gene invoked the Lord’s Spirit to attend and guide every BYU classroom discussion he ever led.

#### SEEKER, SUPPORTER, AND NURTURER OF TALENT

*“I must be somebody pretty special”*

**I**N THE CORRESPONDENCE I've reviewed, again and again, former students express gratitude for Gene's inspired and inspiring teaching.

- KRISTA HALVERSON: "I consider him my most involved and significant mentor, both of writing and of the gospel."
- BRAD WOODWORTH: "Brother England was the single most influential force in my undergraduate education at BYU, the period in my adult life that more than any other has determined who I am. . . . [He] constantly pushed us to think more clearly, to apply faith more assiduously, and to love more steadfastly."
- CHRISTOPHER BIGELOW: "The most important class of my whole English master's degree at BYU was Gene's Mormon literature class."
- RUSSELL HANCOCK, whom Gene met on a trip back east when Russell was an undergraduate at Harvard: "You have been the most profoundly influential person in my spiritual life."
- ALLISON PINGREE: "For the ways in which Gene has served—and will continue to serve—as a moral compass, an intellectual spur, and a kind voice in my head, I am grateful."
- COLIN BAY: "His honest self-scrutiny and to-the-bone generosity and charity were the greatest influence for good in my life during my college years."

Perhaps most strikingly, these emails and letters reveal Gene to be a teacher whose sense of responsibility for his students simply did not end when the bell rang. Again and again, students as well as colleagues write of Gene's tangible support and real aid in his writing key recommendations for jobs and programs, in their publishing their work, preparing for interviews, and deciding upon a major or a mission. He gave priesthood blessings to students, including a young woman who had been sexually assaulted and needed to heal and forgive. He attended one student's temple wedding and opened his home to another's marriage when the temple was not an option. He typed a bibliography for a student about to miss a plane home at semester's end, then drove the student to the airport. A colloquium student remembers how, when a group had gone on a field trip and romances had begun to develop, Gene expressed his concern about the inward-looking, preoccupied nature of the relationships he saw. He then challenged all the students to strive for relationships in which they could stand together and face outward with blessing toward the world: "[It was so] Gene-esque, the caring for the lives of his students and others—not just the formal requirements of the teacher-student relationship."

I will be forever grateful for Gene and Charlotte's generosity in inviting me to live with their family for six months during their second study abroad trip to London in 1985 (their first had come in 1981, and during the '90s, Gene directed seven spring term Theatre in London programs for BYU). The Englands made my participation financially feasible by allowing me to live in their already-crowded flat and "piggy back" on student-group discounts for theatre tickets as well as coach trips whenever an extra seat was available for travels throughout the country. Gene

encouraged me as strongly as he could to come to England—and I went. What a glorious experience!

His influence positively overflowed the classroom. I personally cannot imagine the direction my own life would have taken, the shape it would have assumed, had I not met Gene England when I was twenty years old and had him take me by the hand and show me I had ideas worth expressing on paper and sharing with others through the miracle of publication. He showed my work to his colleagues then passed on their comments to me; he directed that work to appropriate venues for publication, often pleading my case with editors. At the time, I thought, with no small measure of amazement, that I must be somebody pretty special.

When I read the correspondence he received during his illness, though, I realize yet again that that was just Gene's way. Laraine Wilkins writes, "[I] was on a high for a week when Dr. England suggested I submit my paper on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* for publication." Allison Pingree states that, after attending Gene's Mormon literature course and reading his essay collection *Dialogues with Myself*, "I attempted my own personal essay . . . one which, aided by Gene's editorial challenges and encouragement, became my first publication." Another student recalls Gene phoning him in Oregon to ask if he still had the notes for a presentation on Shakespeare he had long ago made as a member of Gene's class. "Gene wants my notes?! But it was sincere. He really wanted to know what I thought. There's nothing I [could] teach Gene about Shakespeare, yet there he was believing that there was." When Gideon Burton was Gene's student, they sat musing one day about the ideal kinds of writing and writers the LDS community needed. Burton recalls that Gene commented "both casually and sincerely, that maybe I could fill that need." Burton is now a professor at the Y, a publisher, and actively involved with AML. Susan Howe feels that Gene's invitation to her to read her work for the English faculty in his home may well have helped her go from a one-year appointment to a full-time, tenure-track job. "I always felt that he was a supporter, which I'm sure everyone who knew him always felt—that he would value [their] work and support it." He was always urging, encouraging, and promoting the development of talents whenever and wherever he saw them, and nurturing ability even in its most—as in my own case—infant state. BYU presented to Gene a vast opportunity for spying out and fostering the beginnings of ability in young Latter-day Saints.

He used his charisma to infect people not with a sense of *his* uniqueness and strength but with a sense of *their own* potential. I think Gene understood quite well his remarkable hold on the minds and hearts of many of the young people he taught, but he simultaneously felt a keen sense of stewardship toward those young people. Gene had a compelling sense that whatever gifts God had given him could only properly be used in building up the souls who crossed his path, in helping them recognize their own divinely appointed capacities. He drew people to him so that he could immediately reflect back to them an image of a better—more temporally accomplished, more spiritually attuned—self. Howe, who has occupied first one and then another of Gene's office spaces in the English department, says, "I feel this responsibility to be as much as I can be because of who he was and because I'm following him from office to office. . . . I can't do some things, some of the things

he did. But I feel the responsibility to be the very best that I can.” He exercised a most benevolent magnetism.

#### SEARCHING FOR A LATTER-DAY SHAKESPEARE

*Talking the Bard “over under-ripe cantaloupe and overcooked green beans.”*

THAT IS NOT to say Gene did not have his own agendas. He had plenty of firm hopes for himself, his students, the department, and the university. As he drew students toward their best work and better selves, his larger goals for LDS culture were manifest. One of his chief pursuits throughout his BYU career and beyond became the recognition and expansion of Mormon literature. When he encouraged a young Gideon Burton or whomever to write, he was planting seeds, sowing as prodigiously as he could the possibilities he saw for the creation of a genuinely Mormon and truly excellent literature of our people. He saw that fine work over the years had been done by talents ranging from an unschooled survivor of the Martin handcart company, Mary Goble Pay, to Maureen Whipple and Virginia Sorenson with their substantial and nationally recognized gifts for fiction writing. But he saw that many, perhaps most, of our accomplishments as a people and tradition were insufficiently recognized. He longed, with real and obvious longing (you only had to sit in on one of his Mormon literature classes to see it), to amend that cultural neglect. During his early years at the Y, he met opposition from some department members who felt Mormon literature to be too sectarian to merit a place within the curriculum, but he won that battle, and today, the English department typically offers two classes in Mormon literature per semester. He fervently desired to see good critics analyze and appreciate the finest writing of the Latter-day Saints, but he knew that before we could have good criticism, we must foster the development of those critics. In Mormon literature courses year after year, he pushed students to hone their critical faculties and publish their work.

He was always fostering latent capacities in his students, and not just critical capacity but creative capability, too. Recognizing our past achievements was only one part of his agenda for Mormon literature. Getting new work out there, produced, published, appreciated, and applauded could well be called one of Gene’s obsessions. Julie Nichols wrote to the England family shortly following Gene’s death: “He was, when I met him, the most helpful Mormon male I’d ever met, unfailingly supportive, acknowledging and appreciative of intelligence wherever he saw it, always nourishing talent and ability.” It might be fair to say that Gene’s perpetual nourishing of talent and ability wasn’t *entirely* disinterested. He dearly wanted to see every worthy talent magnified, especially literary talent. He wanted to see us depict and explore in fiction, drama, poetry and the personal essay, not just the surface of Mormonism and Mormon culture, but the deeper implications of our faith. He believed BYU to be the perfect setting for the advancement of Mormon literature.

It is possible that a few students were discomfited by some of the LDS works they encountered in his course. Gene could never be satisfied with two-dimensional, didactic literary productions. He recognized the place and value of such work, but he didn’t call it literature. He challenged his students to see the world in broad terms

and then interpret that world according to gospel principles—without disserving the at-times-confounding realities of mortal experience *or* the most demanding teachings of the gospel. One writing student still possesses the draft of an essay with Gene’s response “scrawled” at the end of it, “the tails of his g’s curling eccentrically backward.” The essay, about the student’s grandmother who’d recently died and whose “zest for life” she had tried to capture, prompted Gene’s comment:

Good ideas and details but too carefully constructed—too neatly packaged. Where is the mystery of another being, your passion for life and for knowing her and despair at facing her death and your own mortality? Isn’t there an experience you can relate—or create from some hints—that will give us the living person, unexplained perhaps, but real, living, dying and your literal progenitor? Take some risks. Leave something unresolved but deeply felt.

Some students may have at times felt uneasy at “things unresolved but deeply felt.” Young Latter-day Saints (and sometimes old ones, for that matter) tend to crave resolution, and good literature doesn’t usually hand us a tidy package, a moral—like a bright bow—taped to the top. Howe describes Gene’s view of Mormon literature as “compassionate. . . . In other words, he had compassion for all the characters, even the sinning characters. . . . He would consider [the sinning and its effects] an expression of Mormon experience, and he would consider the characters with empathy. With the same kind of empathy that he extended to people. [He wanted] all the people who went through his Mormon literature classes to learn that broad view of what Mormon literature is.”

Blaine Sundrud, who had two Shakespeare courses from Gene, wrote thanking Gene not only for giving him a greater love for Shakespeare’s works, but for helping him “understand more about what it means to be a person.” All literature for Gene—from Shakespeare to Levi Peterson—had multiple potentials, aesthetically and morally. A literature that shrank from addressing the most challenging aspects of our humanity—our potential for sin, the meaning to be found (or lost) in grief and suffering, our need of real repentance, the necessity of human and divine forgiveness of wrongdoing—must fall short of the highest mark. Gene wanted his students, co-workers, and friends to produce work equal to and worthy of our broadest and deepest experience of mortality and our highest intuitions about and understanding of eternity.

Shakespeare certainly provided a benchmark. Gene saw in that work magnificent explorations of human and divine realities: the evil that inheres in revenge, manifest most graphically in *Hamlet*’s bloody pile of royal corpses; the Atonement in the character of *Lear*’s Cordelia. Shakespeare embodied for Gene the ideal of a literature both artistically exhilarating and morally, ethically, and spiritually enlightening, even ennobling. His Shakespeare courses were renowned; he even experimented with teaching Shakespeare in the dorms at Helaman Halls, after class going so far as to “hold court,” as one student wrote, “over under-ripe cantaloupe and overcooked green beans in the Cannon Center.” He wanted to reach those students who might not make it to a classroom, he would bring the Bard—the consummate practitioner of language and philosopher of the human condition—to them. Perhaps most

fantastically he believed, really believed, that as prophesied, the Latter-day Saints would produce Shakespeares of their own.

### LEAVING BYU

*Gene never quit, never threw up his hands in resignation.*

SUCH OPTIMISM CHARACTERIZED Gene, his personality, and his work. He seemed to believe that with the Lord’s approval and help, virtually anything could be possible. During his last years at the Y, that optimism was sorely tested. David Barber writes that “When I interviewed Gene for a special issue of the *Student Review* on the occasion of his retirement, he sounded pessimistic about the future of Mormon studies, especially at BYU. Coming from the eternally optimistic Gene England, this assessment sounded especially alarming. But within a year [of leaving BYU] he was back in the fray, speaking passionately to promote *Sunstone* and helping build a community of scholars at UVSC.” During the preceding years, Gene had placed himself at the center of the controversy over academic freedom at BYU, vocally and vigorously supporting individuals whom he felt the university was dismissing for inappropriate reasons.

Several students wrote to Gene of their outrage at his “retirement” from BYU, but perhaps the most telling note came from Christopher Bigelow: “When he left BYU, I passed along a rumor on an email list that BYU had forced him into early retirement, and he firmly corrected me. I imagine there was some truth to the rumor, but I admire him for overcompensating so he didn’t take on the stink of disaffection.” I feel certain Gene had deeply hurt feelings when he left the Y, but I am also aware he did not choose to announce the reasons for his leaving; he did not make a public issue of what he clearly perceived to be a private matter.

This stance exhibits yet one more facet of his complex spirituality and understanding of his role as a mentor. He called himself both a conservative and a liberal. All of his life, he supported the Brethren in their callings. He *loved* the institutional church, despite—sometimes you might almost think *because* of—its failings, its perceived inadequacies, its at-times infuriating hierarchically-imposed inflexibility. He could acknowledge disturbing apparent failures within the Church without succumbing to dissatisfaction or alienation. He never stopped believing, passionately, in the Church’s divine mission and its divinely inspired structure and doctrines. One student wrote: “Many things happened while I was at BYU that made me angry at the Church and even at God. People close to me were silenced, harassed, fired, expelled, and excommunicated, and I found it difficult to negotiate my faith.” She describes how Gene helped her at this crucial time to maintain her belief in and commitment to the Church. Brad Woodworth has written:

On the one hand [Gene’s refusal to parochialize Mormon belief] made me realize that no matter what challenges to my faith I came across or experienced, I needn’t give up on the core of that faith. On the other hand, he laid bare the difficult requirements that LDS faith made of those who dared take it seriously. Brother England was not a mere “reconciler.” Rather, he was engaged, and encouraged others



to join him, in “proving contraries,” examining and testing experience, knowledge, and faith until what was dross burned away.

“Proving contraries” must invariably mean free discussion of ideas. In the debate over academic freedom that raged on campus during the early and mid-nineties, particularly in the English department, Gene championed the rights of the faculty to explore ideas freely but responsibly. He worried about the policing of thought and the suppression of dissent on campus. He fervently wished the administration would have faith in the faculty’s, well, faith. Joseph Smith’s adage, “Teach them correct principles and let them govern themselves,” appeared to him as the most appropriate guideline for directing faculty research and teaching. It’s not that he believed BYU faculty had no obligation to support the Church, its doctrines, practices, and representatives—he understood the school’s unique mission and realized public-discussion must take place within certain parameters—he just saw those parameters as much wider than many BYU administrators and faculty saw them. “You ought to come to college precisely to have your cultural assumptions challenged. And you have to seek out the professors who will do that, and you have to hire professors who will do that. And what that means is there needs to be more liberal professors because this is a conservative institution culturally,” he said in an interview for the *Student Review*. He believed the faculty to be deserving of a respect and trust he did not always see them receive.

That he chose to stay with the university *as long as he could*, retiring in 1998 rather than simply abandoning it in frustration, tells a lot about the intensity of Gene’s commitment to BYU, his real love for the institution as a place to educate young Latter-day Saints rigorously and prepare them for lives of service. Gene personified in his relationship with BYU a willingness to *endure* in love with his fellows despite serious disagreement. I remember how admiringly he would tell the story of Levi Savage, a member of the Martin Handcart Company and one of the few to challenge the decision by company leaders, among them an apostle, to embark on the trek across the plains at such a late season in the year. After voicing his strenuous objection to the decision and realizing his objection would go unheeded, Savage told fellow company members: “Seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, will help you all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, will suffer with you, and if necessary, I will die with you.” Gene never quit, never threw up his hands in despair or resignation; to his most deeply felt aspirations, beliefs, and commitments, he invariably held fast. And he aspired to the creation of an academic community bound not as much by love of ideas as by love of individuals who invested themselves in ideas; he believed that we grow: by enduring with one another, despite misunderstandings and mistakes; to the end of his life, he remained committed to such creation and endurance.

A REAL CHRISTIAN  
*Making peace over tea*

ONE COMMENT FROM Gene’s former students and colleagues I have most frequently seen is he took his Christianity seriously. “He was a real Christian.”

“He was the most Christian man I ever had the opportunity of meeting.” “Eugene England is one of the very few men I’ve ever met in my life who I felt fully took upon himself Christ’s name. . . .” He participated wholeheartedly in any kind of peace movement or activity on campus, always lending his powerful voice to the cause of nonviolence (although one student recalls the imp in Gene at a peace rally shooting rubber bands at the backs of fellow participants’ heads). In 1982, he organized and enlisted student volunteers to help run the relief effort Food for Poland when that country was living under martial law. Gene loved and accepted people across a wide political and spiritual spectrum. During his last year at the Y, he organized weekly “teas” for the faculty where English department members could simply come to relax and socialize with one another. According to Susan Howe, he sincerely believed all that the members of the department needed to do to reconcile their differences was get to know each other as individuals. His darling Charlotte, who over the years made possible so much of Gene’s generosity to students and others with her own openhandedness and willingness to constantly serve, provided refreshments for these important gatherings, weekly homemade bread and ice cream and other delicacies. Gene went out of his way to invite all members of the department, especially those whom he knew to disapprove of him or his ideas, to the “teas.” Howe remembers one of the more conservative faculty members saying, “You know, I disagree with Gene on many issues, but he is the truest Christian I’ve ever known. He is truly a Christian.” Gary Browning believes that those who feared or disliked Gene’s way of looking at the world “took only a slice of him. They never followed him all the way through to the end.”

Those of us who did follow Gene’s thought and way of being through to the end were rewarded with a view of extraordinarily resilient faith, frank and fearless dialogue, and—ultimately—committed, unconditional, enduring love. Gene’s years at BYU both illustrate and underscore his fidelity to the ideals of faith, unconstrained inquiry, and Christlike love.

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