

Dancing with Gene

By Charlotte Hawkins England

This reflection appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after the passing of Eugene England.

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WHEN GENE AND I were courting, my mother was concerned for my welfare. Gene seemed to her like some kind of nut who brought out the craziness in her daughter. She was absolutely right! Our dates ranged from silly to tender to serious. We laughed together at our favorite comic philosopher, Pogo. We hiked Lamb’s Canyon on a hot summer day only to discover the thermos of lemonade was still in the car below. Years later, Gene claimed that he had done this on purpose to test my reaction. (He often found creative excuses for slip-ups!) Apparently I passed the “test” because he surprised me with a diamond ring one Sunday morning on Temple Square.

Gene and I were so easy with each other it just felt natural to be together. We sought good teachers like Lowell Bennion, who gave us invaluable and timely guidance in his “Courtship and Marriage” class, and Marion “Duff” Hanks, who helped us gain a lifelong appreciation for the scriptures.

GENE AND I loved to dance and took every opportunity to do so. Our first date was the “Hello” dance at the University of Utah. We arrived early, in sporty, casual dress, as was advertised, and danced while the band warmed up. When people started arriving in their best dress, I was embarrassed and wanted to leave. But Gene, not minding our standing out in the crowd, insisted that we stay. I gave up being self-conscious about my bobby sox and saddle oxfords and had a great time dancing the rest of the evening. Ever since that first date, whatever our mood, dancing together has lifted our spirits.

One year after our first date, we celebrated Christmas by getting married. Six months later, we were on a boat to Samoa to serve a mission together. Our experiences in Samoa had a profound effect on our lives. The generosity and love of the Samoan people were contagious. When we returned to the States, we wanted our home to be an open place for family, friends, and strangers to share in conversation, good food, and shelter. This was a vision we have shared and made possible throughout our forty-eight extraordinary years together. The new “old” house we built together in Provo especially has served as a place for countless gatherings for music, storytelling, discussion, and laughter.

EVEN DURING GENE'S depression last year, we enjoyed dancing together. The night before Gene collapsed, we danced for the last time at our friends' daughter's wedding reception. Gene's illness took us to a new place, a place of sorrow and tears—a different kind of dance. Against my will, the music seemed to change to a more somber melody. As I pleaded for his life in the emergency room, I thought surely he would pull out of this as he had other critical moments—blood poisoning in Samoa, a punctured lung after a car accident. Minutes became hours to me as I felt his hand weaken. He was slipping, and I was terrified. I tried to keep him present by talking to him about our plans for study abroad the coming spring, and writing and painting and spending time together at the cabin the next summer.

Our dance together didn't end as I had hoped. He died six months later. Although we're separated physically, I continue to dance with Gene as if he were here right beside me. I write to him often and imagine how he might respond. And I try to stay faithful to the vision we created when our dance began.

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