

A Dining Room Table

By Allison Pingree

Reflection by a former student of Gene's and London Study Abroad participant. It was published in the tribute issue *Dialogue* published following England's passing.

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IN THE TAPESTRY that is my intellectual and spiritual life, Eugene England's influence not only figures as a prominent color, but helps to shape the pattern of the weave itself. Many of the moments I spent with Gene are akin to Wordsworth's "spots of time"—moments that leave our minds "nourished and invisibly repaired" when "depressed by false opinion and contentious thought," or caught up in "trivial occupations" (*The Prelude*, 12:208–15). The imprints of Gene that live on in me most certainly have nourished me when I've been depressed and invigorated me in the midst of complacency.

LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

For the past four years, I have directed Vanderbilt's Center for Teaching—a center dedicated to promoting teaching excellence across the university. One of the foundational premises of our center's work (and of faculty and curriculum development more broadly) is that teaching and learning are inextricably linked—one learns in profound ways by teaching another, and viewing material from the learner's point of view enables one to teach most effectively.

A second premise is that frontiers of knowledge are pushed forward in the most compelling ways by questions that reach across disciplines and divisions and draw on a broad range of voices, expertise, and experience. Thus, there is great richness in interdisciplinary conversation about teaching and learning. A final principle that guides our approach to teaching and learning is the need to engage the "whole person," not only cognitive structures, but emotions and beliefs as well.

I internalized all of these principles when I took the Freshman Honors Colloquium called "Learning How to Learn" that Gene co-taught with colleagues from English, Physics, and Psychology. My peers and I learned the learner-teacher interchange through the "Gong Method"—a process (developed by Walter Gong) of capturing, expanding, applying, and then teaching someone else about what we had learned. My patient roommate was the most frequent target of my pedagogical attempts.

We saw traditional structures of classroom authority and disciplinary boundaries become blurred as our professors became students in each other's lectures, sometimes stumbling as much as we did to understand Kafka or the theory of relativity or George Kelly's notions of "core role constructs." And we were nour-

ished by five wise and generous adults who took personal interest in our well-being: they invited us into their homes, sponsored small discussion groups, and stayed afterwards for individual conversations; they shared candid views on topics that pressed our freshman minds and hearts such as career paths, marriage, and spiritual doubt and belief.

The model that Gene helped fashion, then, deeply impressed in me the principles of learner-teacher interdependence, interdisciplinary inquiry, and the value of attending to the “whole person.” I can honestly say that after three subsequent years at BYU and six more of doctoral work at Harvard, “Learning How to Learn” remains one of the most compelling models of learning and teaching I know of—and one I reference frequently in my current work.

SOMETHING UNRESOLVED BUT DEEPLY FELT

In 1984 I took Gene’s LDS Literature course. There, I read the spare, moving account in Mary Goble Pay’s pioneer journal and discovered the voices of other Mormon women I had never heard of. Gene taught us the power of the personal essay as a genre. Drawing on the work of Mary Bradford and others, he emphasized the “I,” “eye,” and “aye” in such writing—“self-reflection, precise and honest perception, and powerful affirmation.” I reviewed Gene’s newly-published book of essays, *Dialogues with Myself*, for my final course project. Inspired by his example, I made my own attempt at a personal essay—one which, aided by Gene’s editorial challenges and encouragement, became my first publication.

My essay described the experience of living with my grandmother for the summer and came to a tidy close by praising her “zest for life, love for her family, and gutsy way of facing reality.” I still have that early draft on which Gene scrawled his response, the tails of his g’s curling eccentrically backwards:

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.

These comments certainly applied to the essay—but, more importantly, they illustrated Gene’s own credo. Taking risks, sensing the mystery of others (and in ourselves), facing the despair of mortality, giving way to the passion and pulse of things unresolved but deeply felt—these are lessons Gene both lived and taught.

I learned to live adventurously through travel when I joined Gene and his family—and a remarkable group of other students and faculty—on a six-month Study Abroad to London in 1985. Gene introduced us to the raw beauty of the medieval Mystery Plays showing at the National Theatre that year. He pushed us to move through space with passion and drive, to scramble for the best theater seats, to take in one more castle or museum before boarding the bus. Traveling with Gene left such an imprint on me that a few years later, after arriving at the Maui hotel where my husband and I were to spend our honeymoon, I instinctively blurted out: “If Gene England were here, he’d be unpacked and out sightseeing by now!”

Gene also encouraged risk-taking in the questions he asked—and pushed his

students to ask. Once in a class discussion he wondered whether Abraham actually may have failed his test in his willingness to kill Isaac—a question that echoed my own discomfort with the violence embedded in that narrative. Gene taught to ask questions of theodicy—the mystery of why bad things happen to good people. And Gene framed what is “unresolved but deeply felt” as an opportunity, not a threat, through his ongoing love affair with “paradox”—the tensions that make us come alive. He never gave up on the possibility of dialogue, even when he was stung to the core by reprimands from high-ranking church authorities he worked hard to support. He blessed Chevrolets as well as people. His essay “That They Might Not Suffer” describes the most healing, redemptive view of the Atonement I have ever encountered, layered within his own struggle to reconcile himself with failure. And he taught the power that ritual—even “games” like those in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—can hold in the face of the paradox of mortality.

The mystery I struggle with now is Gene’s own mortality. He always seemed to surface wherever the action was—getting food to Poland during martial law or witnessing an assassination attempt on the Pope. On September 11th, I wondered almost immediately what mission would have emerged for Gene out of the tragedy, for he surely would have pursued one. He embodied perpetual motion. Several years ago, when doing some research at Harvard’s Houghton Library, Gene stayed with me and my husband in our cramped graduate student apartment. On Sunday afternoon after dinner, Gene lay down for a brief rest on the futon-couch that was his bed. I walked through the living room at one point to see how he was doing, and found him in a deep sleep. I instinctively reached for my camera: I was too struck by his utter stillness to resist capturing it on film. I never imagined that Gene would come so quickly to the more somber stillness of death. How can it be that this man’s frenetic vitality, his full head of hair, his restlessness, is actually extinguished?

Of course, parts of Gene stay alive in all of us—much as, at the end of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s beloved Tea Cake lives on even after his death: “Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great-fish net. . . . So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.”

Last fall, I bought a dining room table and chairs. Having separated from my husband and moved into my own townhouse in the last year, I have been struggling to build home and community for me and my eight-year-old daughter out of the loneliness I often feel. Buying this particular furniture was, therefore, a big step: this table—like the large one constantly used in Gene and Charlotte’s home—would be the site where I could gather dear ones for food, drink, and conversation. Before its first use—before I even laid down the cloth, dishes, and silverware for that first meal—I found myself reaching out my hands to touch the smooth, dark surface. And then I found myself simply blessing my dining room table and my attempts to create community around it. It was a prayer that was brief and “unresolved” but certainly “deeply felt.”

My life path, my home, my writing, and my questions cannot and should not replicate those of Eugene England. But I will always be grateful for the ways in which he has offered a moral compass, an intellectual spur, and a kind voice in my head that taught me to bless even broken things.

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