

# For Eugene

*By William A. “Bert” Wilson*

Funeral remarks given at Eugene England’s memorial service held at the Provo Tabernacle on 25 August 2001. It was published in the tribute issue *Dialogue* published following England’s passing.

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I APPRECIATE THE opportunity to pay tribute to my life-long friend, Eugene England, but my need to honor him properly may lie beyond any hope of my doing so. I feel Eugene’s loss so keenly and have shed so many tears that words to express my feelings will not come easily. A few hours before Hannele and I left on our mission, Eugene and Charlotte came to our house to talk with us and to embrace us one last time. The thought that I would not see Eugene again in this life would have devastated me. I am devastated now. A glorious light that shone in the darkness has gone out, and we are all poorer for its loss. In the poetry and essays he left behind, however, that light will continue to glow. And in the hearts of those of us who knew and loved him, Eugene’s light will never grow dim.

Charlotte—Eugene’s beloved Charlotte—I pray you will realize that Eugene’s noble spirit lives on, hovering near—loving you, praying for you, watching over you. Mark, Eugene’s favorite son, Katherine, Jody, Jennifer, Becky, Jane, and all you grandchildren—I pray you will feel the presence of your father’s spirit through all your lives. He loved you; he worried about you; he was your enthusiastic cheerleader.

Most of you here today knew Eugene as the eminent Mormon intellectual, the poet and essayist, the organizer and promoter of Mormon studies, the teacher without peer, the compassionate organizer of projects like Food for Poland. I knew the boy who became that man. I claim the distinction of having known Eugene longer than anyone here, with the possible exception of his sister, Ann. In March of 1939 my father, a Union Pacific Railroad section foreman, moved our family from Montana to Downey, Idaho, where Eugene’s father was a dryland wheat farmer. That fall, with faces scrubbed and wearing new bib overalls, Eugene and I entered first grade in the newly completed Downey Elementary School. You will notice that I refer to him always as “Eugene,” rather than “Gene.” In Downey he was always Eugene; he became Gene only after his family later moved to Salt Lake City.

Our friendship grew slowly because we lived on the wrong side of the tracks in a railroad company house, and Eugene and his family lived in the upper part of town. But gradually we recognized in each other soul companions. Still very young, we decided to play heroic and camp out on the England farmstead above town. We pitched our tent, spread our blankets, then built a fire and roasted hot dogs. Eugene

sat so close to the flames his pant leg caught fire, and he had to jump into the nearby stream to extinguish the blaze. He spent the rest of the night and the next morning in wet shoes. When we were just about to fall asleep, a creature came roaring out of the bushes behind us and frightened us nearly to death. It was Eugene's father—come, he said, to check on some farm equipment.

Eugene was full of mischief, and I didn't lag too far behind. My mother, one of Eugene's Sunday School teachers, never could contain his restless energy and buoyant spirit though, as she somewhat ruefully admitted, she could never come up with a question he couldn't answer immediately. Our fourth grade teacher, Miss Salvesen, punished our misbehavior by having us copy a page from our history book for each of our transgressions. At day's end, we would sometimes have many pages of history to copy before we could go home. When we discovered that Miss Salvesen did not actually read our pages but simply counted them, Eugene and I memorized the shortest page in the book and then wrote out as many of these as we could in our spare time—sort of like putting misbehavior in the bank for future need. In the sixth grade, all we boys fell in love with our pretty young teacher, Miss Gilbert, and tried to win her attention with silly antics, which pleased her on the one hand but forced her to punish us on the other. When our first report card came out, Eugene had straight A's in all academic subjects, but a D in "comportment"—a circumstance that did not quite please Eugene's rather stern mother. My grade in comportment was C, about the only time I ever got a better grade than Eugene in anything.

Instead of selling his grain through middlemen, Eugene's father purchased a grain elevator near the railroad tracks, added a third bin, or silo, and stored his grain there until he could get the price for it he wished. At a very early age, Eugene became the operator of the elevator, turning it on each time the hired man brought a truckload of grain Eugene's father had cut at the farm, and turning it off when the grain had emptied out. The elevator was across the tracks from our railroad house. Eugene knew almost exactly how much time he would have between loads, so shortly after he had emptied the first load, he would show up at our house, or I would make my way over to the elevator. We spent most of the harvest time together. Before the new silo was filled with grain, Eugene and I and other neighborhood boys would crawl through the trap door at the bottom with our rubber guns. Some of us would stand against one wall of the silo, the others against the opposite wall. Then we would carefully aim our weapons at each other, guns constructed from spare pieces of lumber, from clothing pins, and from rubber bands cut from old inner tubes. Eugene would shut the door. We would reposition ourselves in complete darkness. Someone would yell, "Fire!" Then rubber bands would fly across the silo producing yelps of pain from those hit. I wonder still that we didn't blind each other.

Though Eugene would remain always my fast friend, I soon realized that his embrace was too large to include just me. He was on the way to becoming one of those rare individuals whose driving intellect, magnetic personality, and compassionate concern for all he met would make him stand head and shoulders above the rest of us. Even as a boy Eugene was always different from most of the youth in our rural farming community. He read books, he loved ideas, and he loved to talk about them. Probably he converted me to literature as we slept out under Idaho's star-bright skies and talked deep into the night of the brave new worlds we had found in books. He was different in other ways as well. In all the years I knew him, years when many youth attempted to prove their manhood by using foul language, I never

heard a smutty story, an obscene word, or a vile phrase cross Eugene's lips. In a community where physical intimacy was far too common among the young people, Eugene never veered from the path of virtue. In all ways, his conduct pointed the rest of us toward the road we should follow.

And this is how he has spent his life, pointing out the roads the rest of us should follow. Driven by divine discontent, he could never be satisfied with the status quo. He wanted all of us, himself included, to be better than we are—to be more loving, more charitable, more inclusive, more accepting of differences. However many mistakes he may have made, and he made some, Eugene's motivations have always been pure: to build the kingdom and to perfect the saints. I can only regret that some of his critics have denied themselves the blessing of knowing and loving this remarkable human being.

Each of us, I am sure, knows Eugene in a different way. Let me tell you briefly about the Eugene I know, the Eugene I have always known.

First, Eugene was both a thinking man and a believing man. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, he could not believe that God would have given us "godlike reason to fust in us unused." He understood that faith untempered by reason can spill over into superstition and that reason untempered by faith can dissolve into sophistry. We must have them both. He believed in dialogue, in the spirited exchange and defense of ideas. Like John Milton, he could not believe that "truth" had anything to fear from a free and open discussion of important issues. On the contrary, out of such discussion, opposites could be reconciled and progress could occur. What we did have to fear was the suppression of dialogue, the protection of the status quo by simply not allowing the other side to be heard.

But as strong as was Eugene's mind, his faith was still stronger. From the time we were young boys, I have never seen that faith falter. Few have written more eloquently about the atonement of Jesus Christ and about our Savior's redeeming love. Eugene did not live a compartmentalized life. The thinking Eugene and the believing Eugene were the same Eugene. In fact, many of his essays grew out of what he believed most deeply. Over and over again, he looked at issues that trouble some church members and in his writings tried to lead them to solutions that would keep them in the church and at the same time live more comfortably there. Some argued that he was trying to create a new theology. He wasn't. He just didn't want anyone to get lost. Although he preached many sermons in his essays, his most eloquent sermon was his life itself. Through all the abuse, humiliation, and pain he suffered in recent years at the hands of those who misinterpreted or almost wilfully misunderstood him, he remained true to the faith and encouraged others to do likewise.

Second, Eugene was an obedient man. Some will disagree with that statement, but those who knew his heart of hearts will not. He loved and respected the general authorities and wanted few things more than their approval. He especially loved President Hinckley and in his final months wrote poems about him and for him. When I asked Eugene why he had defended practically everyone else in the world but himself, he responded simply, "I can't. I cannot take a stand against those I believe to be called of God." Some may see this as capitulation, as selling out his ideals for expedient ends. It was not. Obedience to the servants of God was an essential part of that faith he held dear.

Finally, Eugene was a kind man, surely the kindest and most loving man I have

ever known. Those who know this best may be his students, who have felt his love and concern for them in every class he taught. Having served six years as Eugene's English Department chair, I read student evaluation after student evaluation expressing gratitude for Eugene's kindness and for his having helped struggling young people stay in the church. This loving care for all people extended beyond the classroom. Shortly after Hannele and I left home, Eugene, in the midst of his busy schedule, took over my grandfatherly role and taught my grandson Kory to fly fish. When my daughter Denise and her husband Ralph were building a home and were pressed for help, Eugene and Doug Thayer spent a day helping with their wiring. I will never be able to walk into the mountain cabin I have been building forever without feeling Eugene's presence as I look at the tongue-in-groove, six-inch pine boards we pounded into place nail by nail. Although Eugene always had about ten irons in the fire, at no time did he ever say he was too busy when I needed help. Those who could repeat that same story are legion. When Denise, who had also been Eugene's student, heard of his death, she wrote me: "As I drove home and thought about Brother England (I still don't feel really comfortable calling him Eugene) for a few moments I felt wrapped up in love, as if he were giving me one of his big hugs. Then I thought about everyone's loss and just felt extremely sad. I like to think, though, that Brother England's large, energetic, uncontrollable spirit is racing the earth now, hugging everyone—even undeserving, very distant friends like me."

Shortly before his collapse in February, Eugene wrote me saying he had been thinking about events of recent years in which the two of us had been involved and worrying that he himself might have done more to avoid conflicts. Then, in a statement I'll always cherish, he said he was repenting in his heart and in his prayers. What a marvelous lesson to leave us! No judgmental statement here, no bitterness. Only an attempt to reconcile himself fully with his God. Can those of us who love Eugene do any less? If we want to honor him and what he stood for, we must not let bitterness rancor our souls. Let us follow his example and bring all people into our circle of love, even those who may have caused us great pain.

About an hour before Eugene left us, Donlu Thayer sent me an email message with the subject heading "On his way." I have thought much about those words. On his way where? The prophet Alma answers that question, pointing out that after they have returned to that God who gave them life, the spirits of the righteous—and surely Eugene's spirit is one of these—"are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow." What then, after this state has passed? Alma again gives the answer, in a passage that Eugene recently told me he liked very much and that in my judgment can almost serve as his epitaph. Speaking of those who wish to become members of the church, Alma states that these are they who are "willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life."

Now, brothers and sisters, please indulge me as I say goodbye, directly, to my friend.

Dear Eugene, dear sweet, loving, gentle, loyal friend—oh, how I will miss you! With every particle of my body and soul I would have fought to keep you here had

I possessed the power to do so. I had to yield to a higher power. But you got it all wrong, you dummy. You were supposed to deliver my funeral sermon—you with your boyish good looks, your boundless energy, your enthusiasm and love of life; me with my crumbling, old, decrepit body. I could never have believed I would outlast you. Kory says that the day you took him fishing you reminded him of a twenty-year-old.

I want to thank you, Eugene, for all you have given me and taught me over the years. I thank you for your unconditional love, in spite of my many frailties. I thank you for your kindness, your goodness, your tender mercies. I thank you for teaching me to hold onto faith in the face of adversity. I thank you for your wry sense of humor. I thank you for demonstrating by example a love that encircled people of all colors, creeds, and persuasions. I thank you for sixty-three years of the best friendship a Downey boy could ever hope for.

Last June in rural Finland, I stopped by a field for some time and watched a farmer disk deeply plowed furrows into ground ready for planting. Most fields were already planted. Winter wheat was up eight to twelve inches, spring wheat two to three. I picked up the smell of the freshly-disked soil and thought of you, thought of our time together in Downey, thought of a time forever gone but forever in our hearts. We've come a long way, my friend, since we faced each other with loaded rubber guns across the dusty floor of your father's grain silo. But it's been a good trip. About the same time I was watching the farmer disk his field, you wrote the last letter I received from you. You said: "I think of you all the time and am grateful to God for all the good memories we share. . . . Through my sleepless, lonely nights, thoughts of you come like a sweet melody." That same melody, Eugene, sounds clearly in all my thoughts of you. One day we will play it again together. Until then, "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

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