

Salvaged for Mormonism

By Levi S. Peterson

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 FEEL GREATLY HONORED to be asked to speak at this memorial service. I hope I can add a dimension to our mutual recognition of Gene's virtues and qualities. I suppose that Charlotte and the children discerned a good many foibles in Gene. Perhaps he habitually failed to put down the toilet seat after relieving himself, or perhaps he failed to rinse his dirty dishes and stack them in the dishwasher as agreed upon in family council. But such foibles were invisible to me. In my presence Gene projected an aura of amiability, gentle humor, and benevolence. Benevolence, a desire that good prevail, was rooted deeply within Gene's spirit. It was, in fact, the essence of his spirituality.

I was aware of Gene as a co-founder of *Dialogue* before I met him personally. My admiration for that journal, which continues unabated to the latest moment, predisposed me to admire him. I first met Gene personally when he left St. Olaf's College and returned to Utah. About 1978, he and I became colleagues on the board of the Association for Mormon Letters. During the 1980s, he published affirmative interpretations of some of my fiction. I could wish that every author had an interpreter and critic like Gene. Throughout the later 1980s and well into the 1990s, Gene invited me about once a year to speak to his Mormon literature class at BYU. Almost invariably, some earnest student would inquire why I felt the need in my fiction to treat sex frankly and add vulgarities to the dialogue of my characters. I'm not sure I had a satisfactory answer. Nonetheless, a year later Gene would invite me to return.

My affection for Gene—and for Charlotte too—was deepened when, during the early 1990s, they joined a writing group to which Althea and I belonged. The group included four other couples over an eighteen-year period. We met once a month for dinner at the home of the writer whose turn it was to have previously mailed a manuscript for our critique. Althea and I regarded all the couples as dear and intimate friends with whom we felt utterly comfortable. It was only after Gene and Charlotte joined this writing group that I became aware that in their youth they had wed and forthwith departed on a mission to Samoa. I am not sure that Gene, comforted for months by the presence of his wife, was properly tested by his mission. Thanks to my association with Gene and Charlotte, I gradually came to know their children as well, who, like Gene and Charlotte, are warm, intense, and creative personalities, deeply religious yet tolerant of the tensions between faith and reason.

Among many lessons close association with Gene has taught me is the ability to embrace men whom I love. Upon arriving at our house for dinner and an evening of discussion, Gene approached me with open arms and gave me a warm hug. I was raised to be reticent about such demonstrations between men. Tutored by Gene and others in our writing group, I overcame that reticence.

I will call Gene a liberal Mormon. I consider myself a liberal Mormon, too. However, whereas I am a liberal jack Mormon, Gene was a liberal good Mormon. In common Mormon parlance, a good Mormon is one who goes to church, pays tithing, keeps the Word of Wisdom, performs church assignments, and attends the temple. Gene was a Mormon of that sort. But as I say, he was also a liberal Mormon. A liberal is often defined as a person who desires change within an organization. I for one am the sort of liberal who would propose changes within the church in the name of civilization, civilization implying a dynamic process by which one culture adopts a desirable improvement or change for the better from another. Obviously, the Mormon church is a part of this large dynamic process, its members commingling with the members of sister cultures on a daily basis, influencing and being influenced by them. In my view, the person within the church best suited to propose desirable change is the faithful Mormon liberal, who by virtue of wide reading and a curious, rational mind is instinctively attracted to the expanding edge of civilization, where the old is constantly transformed into the new in science, art, morality, and dozens of other categories. To my thinking, this was exactly the role Gene fulfilled. However, I am aware that Gene would not have explained his proposals for change within the church in terms of an advancing world civilization. He would have explained them in terms of leading a Christ-like life.

Every faithful Mormon desires to be Christ-like, and every faithful Mormon will urge a more Christ-like life upon fellow church members. What distinguished Gene's concept of a Christ-like life was that it was not punctilious. It was not concerned with jots and tittles, with dotting your i's and crossing your t's. It was concerned with the spirit, not the letter, of the law. It did not assume you can quantify righteousness.

I would like to read a paragraph from Gene's introduction to *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings 1928–1988*, a book Gene compiled and published in 1988. Besides being a tribute to the spiritual qualities of Lowell Bennion, the paragraph reveals much about Gene's own spiritual qualities. These are Gene's words:

I remember a class at the institute in about 1953 on the nature of God. A student asked why, if God is no respecter of persons, as the scriptures and common sense clearly indicate, a difference existed in God's church between blacks and all others. I immediately answered, as I had been taught all my life, "Well, God is also a God of justice, and since blacks were not valiant in the preexistence, they are cursed with the just consequences." In the discussion following my remark, Brother Bennion—who in my experience never mentioned this issue except when directly questioned—pronounced no answers, quoted no dogma. He simply asked me how I knew blacks had not been valiant. When I had no answer but tradition, he gently suggested that the God revealed in Christ would surely let blacks know what they had done wrong and how they could repent, rather than merely

punishing them—and since God had done no such thing, it seemed better to believe that blacks had been, and were, no different spiritually from the rest of us. As I thought about this, my way of thinking about the gospel was changed, and not merely concerning this issue. I came to realize with stunning clarity that many of my beliefs, ones that profoundly affected my relationships to others, were based on flimsy and unexamined evidence and were directly contradictory to great gospel principles like the impartial Fatherhood of God, the universal brotherhood of humankind, and the unconditional atonement, which offered sufficient power to all to repent and be both saved and exalted.¹

Gene propagated those “great gospel principles” on many fronts over a long and influential career. I recall the excitement I felt at a regional Sunstone symposium in Seattle in 1989 where Gene boldly asserted that when the Book of Mormon speaks of the brown skin of the Lamanites as a curse from God, it should be interpreted as a statement of racial prejudice on the part of the Nephite prophets who wrote the Book of Mormon. This excited me, as I say, because I believed Gene’s interpretation made it easier for a reasonable person to believe in the Book of Mormon.

The most important thing about Gene for me was that he made me feel more like a true Mormon. Whereas many readers have felt that the vision of the Cowboy Jesus which occurs to my character Frank Windham in *The Backslider* is blasphemous, Gene called it “one of the most lovely and believable epiphanies I have encountered in modern fiction.” He went on to say in the same review that, while I have often called myself a backslider in public places, my novel suggests that I have, as he put it, “backslid a bit from backsliding.”² Actually, I have not got over the feeling that I am an irretrievable backslider. Yet I recognize that my association with persons who are both good Mormons and liberal Mormons has made me feel that I am, good or bad, nothing less than a Mormon. Many of them are present in this building today. I admire such persons greatly and believe I do well to add my effort to the cause of making the Mormon church a comfortable home for such worshipers as they. Gene was among the foremost who salvaged me for Mormonism. In his benevolent presence, I felt my inadequacies diminished and my qualities enhanced.

I have written that I am a Christian, if not by faith, at least by yearning. I have said that my fellow Latter-day Saints often seem so intent upon exaltation—a condition of celestial reward and glory to be earned by earthly valor and vigilance—that they appear to pay only a perfunctory respect to salvation, the gift of eternal life, given to all freely by the atoning death of Christ. As for celestial reward and glory, it would seem that a backslider should expect little. All the more reason for me to rely on the simple promise of eternal life. Still I somehow expect that if, after I have awakened from the darkness of death into the miraculous light of eternal life, I need someone to speak a good word for me, Gene will step forth to do it. I know I can rely on Gene to assert that my soul is more worthy than I ever imagined.

NOTES

1. Eugene England, ed., “Introduction” in *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings 1928–1988* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988), xiv.
2. Eugene England, “Beyond ‘Jack Fiction’: Recent Achievement in the Mormon Novel,” *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 101, 102.

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