

The Simple Yet Profound Influence of a Master Teacher

by Thomas B. Griffith (Humanities '78)

Eugene England had the gift of truly teaching by study and by faith—in a way that transformed countless lives, including mine.



Photo of Eugene England by BYU Photo.

The year 2021 saw the publication of two excellent books about Eugene England, former professor of English at BYU: Terryl Givens' *Stretching the Heavens: The Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* and Kristine Haglund's *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal*. I cheer this renaissance of attention to a teacher who touched, shaped, and changed the lives of so many for the better, including mine.

I first met Gene England through his essays. In March 1975, I was away from BYU on my mission when Gene delivered his speech, "Great Books or True Religion?: Defining the Mormon Scholar." The resourceful Honors Program distributed his remarks in pamphlet form, which I read soon after my return to campus. Today, my dog-eared and marginalia-filled copy is wedged tightly between other tattered titles in the "Englandophile" section of my library. From that first encounter with Gene's writing, I read everything I could find that he wrote. I heard in his essays a voice that explained my dearest beliefs, spoke to my deepest concerns, and expressed my highest aspirations. His insights filled my lessons and talks (sometimes with proper attribution). The members of the ward over which I presided must have thought that I was of the view that Gene, along with C. S. Lewis, had been called into the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in a session of general conference they had missed. "Elder G. Eugene England." It fit, right down to the first initial in place of a name.

Because Gene only came to BYU after I had graduated and moved back to the Washington, DC, area, I first met him in person after I had become—unknown to him—his acolyte. It was the winter of 1995. I cashed in my frequent-flier miles accumulated with blood, sweat, and tears as a litigation partner at a law firm in DC and took my three oldest children, then in their teens, on a trip to Utah to see the sites, visit BYU, and introduce them to skiing. For the BYU portion of the trip, I allowed each to pick out a class to visit. I gave them free rein with one exception. They had to attend with me the class I picked: Early American Literature taught by Gene England. There, sitting among 30 or so BYU students in a classroom in the Joseph F. Smith Family Living Center, I introduced my children to the best of BYU. The discussion Gene led that day moved seamlessly from Hawthorne to Alma, back to Hawthorne, on to Paul, Joseph Smith, and Jeffrey R. Holland, then back again to Hawthorne. Academic freedom at its best. No artificial distinction between secular and sacred, heart and mind, reason and faith.

I could have left Gene's classroom that day feeling that the purpose of my trip had been achieved. I had shown my children the pursuit of knowledge at its best, by the best. What happened next exceeded my expectations. Gene invited us to meet him in his office to chat. Because his office would have been too small a space even had it not been filled with the clutter of books, papers, and articles, we moved to the faculty lounge. There, for the next hour, Gene directed the conversation not to me but to my teenage children. He understood what was happening here, what was at stake. Young lives, young hearts, young minds were being shaped and formed. For a great teacher, there are no ordinary moments. So I resisted the temptation to ask Gene the hundred questions I had in mind. Instead, I sat back and watched a great teacher talk to my children. I watched him model love, genuine interest, and empathy. At times I had to pinch myself. Here was the man most responsible for the fire of my adult faith and commitment to the Church teaching the children I loved more than life, and I knew that he knew what was at stake. It doesn't get any better than that.

Only a few years later, I found myself back at BYU as its general counsel. Gene had moved on to Utah Valley University, but the acolyte sought out the leader. Gene found time to address a few of my hundred questions, and the day before he collapsed from the tumor that took him from us, I was in his home talking with him and his wife, Charlotte, about how best to carry out my new responsibilities as a campus stake president. "Emphasize the Savior, speak constantly of the Atonement, and teach that full engagement in the life of the ward is redemptive," he counseled. And I did. And the members of my stake heard much from Gene England (always with proper attribution). ■