



So why are we shaking ourselves apart over something so relative and relatively insignificant—differences between us that could actually be a source of strength if we would combine them positively and learn from each other through dialogue?

“NO CAUSE, NO CAUSE”: AN ESSAY TOWARD RECONCILIATION

By Eugene England

Previously unpublished speech delivered to the BYU English department in 1997, six months before Gene retired from the university

WHEN I WAS QUITE YOUNG, I HAD TWO PROFOUND spiritual experiences, more like encounters, that became the grounding realities of my life. One convinced me of the personal reality of the Savior and that what he most fundamentally requires of us is total consecration of our means, our time, and our talents in service to others; it provided a touchstone of feeling by which I have measured all moral and religious matters since—that is, I came to judge whether something was from the Savior by its resonance with that feeling. The other experience convinced me of the divine mission of the Church and the divine appointment, by Jesus Christ, of the apostles and prophets who direct the Church. Though those convictions have matured in comprehension and have been sorely tried, they have never betrayed me nor left me.

One of the interesting results of those experiences is that I became *both* a conservative and a liberal and *both* orthodox and unorthodox. The first experience centered me in the central, orthodox, gospel principles of faith in Christ unto repentance and the necessary and infinite Atonement. It also moved me toward increasing focus on what are, in our culture, considered liberal and therefore unorthodox, even suspect, causes—despite Christ’s emphasis on them. I mean causes such as more equal consumption of world resources, justice for minority or dispossessed peoples, opposition to all wars.

The second experience gave me a firm, conservative confidence in the Church and its leaders as well as the gospel, such that I have never felt any need to avoid difficult issues or to simply accept culturally prescribed boundaries. I have felt able to explore our history without fear, to examine troubling questions of doctrine and Church practice, to face squarely the humanness of our leaders. Because I have had supreme confidence that the gospel, the Church, and our leaders were true and could pass any test. I also felt that the prophets had called us to make those tests from the Apostle Paul’s “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good,” to Joseph Smith’s “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”

Elder Marion D. Hanks, soon after he was called into the Seventy, told a group of us institute students at the University of Utah that if the gospel were not true, he would want to be the first to know, and so he must always be willing to look at all the evidence. I loved his conservative confidence and liberal openness.

Of course, my center of gravity has shifted between these poles of liberal and conservative at different times and with different parts of my being. In my teenage years, fine teachers—and my father at home—exposed me to the great liberal concepts in our theology: that we have existed co-eternally with God and can grow to be like him and continue creating and learning and adventuring together in realms beyond

our imaginations; that the same “sociality” will exist there between us; that sin and repentance are a natural process of growth initiated by Adam and Eve and made possible by the teachings, example, and atoning, unconditional love of our Savior; that evil is neither God’s creation nor his will but an unavoidable result of God *not* being omnipotent and having to set up the adventure of growth in a universe of natural law and moral agents who have genuine freedom.

These were ravishing, liberating ideas to me, but they fit easily with the basically conservative lifestyle and political views I shared with my parents. And, to their everlasting credit, my parents, as well as my teachers, responded to the liberal ideas and smart aleck challenges and behaviors I sometimes indulged in by talking with me *about* them, rather than simply dismissing the ideas or condemning me with a label. I avoided the all-too-common rebellion of adolescents against the Church that occurs as part of a rebellion against authoritarian parents and teachers—because, however conservative, they treated me liberally.

My twenties were a more conservative period. I married a saint [ED. NOTE FROM CHARLOTTE: *Not!*], which tends to help anyone focus his or her life on central, conservative values. Charlotte and I went, soon after we were married, on a mission to Samoa and concentrated, for two and a half years, on teaching the fundamentals of the gospel and seeing lives change profoundly as a result. We started our family, which confirmed us, through experience, in conservative family values, and I served three years as a weather officer in the Air Force, which confirmed me in patriotism. But I felt powerful liberal currents developing as well.

Coming from rather cold, emotionally reserved, largely Anglo-Saxon families and Church culture, Charlotte and I were positively bowled over by the passionate openness and directness of much Polynesian culture. I felt what I imagine being inebriated is like at its best—emotionally freed and elated—and I had a huge culture shock coming back to Salt Lake in the middle of winter to emotional bleakness and reserve. On the other hand, I once saw a Samoan man, insane with rage, chasing his son with a huge rock over his head—and I intervened. You who know Samoans may think I was as crazy as he was and wonder how I survived, but I was young and new in Samoa—and, as it turned out, my alien appearance and high cultural standing as a missionary shocked the man into immobility and probably saved the boy’s life as well as my own.

As I reflected on those experiences, I realized more and more that culture is relative, not absolute, that Mormons can have quite different cultural ways, some better, some worse

than those of others but mainly different—and that the quality of our religious life is not obviously a function of cultural values. That may seem obvious, but it was a revelation to me. Mormon culture right now seems far from this understanding of cultural relativism, and yet I believe such understanding is a key, perhaps the most important key, to renewal of this department. But more of that later.

As I said, I was a patriotic American. In fact, our squadron of F-100 fighter-bombers was alerted a few times in 1961 for service in Vietnam. But we didn’t go, and I left the Air Force and went to Stanford for graduate work. There, only three years later, I experienced a profound paradigm shift. I had believed, with a certainty that was complete and religious, that the U.S. Constitution had been inspired by God, that our government therefore was essentially Christian, devoted to goodness and truth, and directed by God in its purposes and actions. In particular, I had believed our presidents were sincere and truthful.

On 4 August 1964, our government announced that North Korean gunboats had twice attacked an American destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, and that consequently we had bombed Hanoi and were greatly increasing our buildup of American troops. At the Stanford library, I had been reading reports and analyses in periodicals from around the world—not just American sources—of what was happening in Vietnam. I had become increasingly uneasy about our policies and now became convinced (as was later admitted) that our government was lying about the “Tonkin Gulf Incident”—and suddenly my whole world shifted. For me, being convinced that a president had lied and that our government was willing to deceive us and kill people far away, in my name and using my taxes—for what seemed more and more an unworthy and unjust cause—was a life-changing experience.

I became involved in the Graduate Student Coordinating Council, Stanford’s version of the Free Speech Movement that had developed at Berkeley just across the Bay. We published a newsletter, organized anti-war rallies, and worked to pass local fair-housing laws. We talked a lot about how the university itself, in its involvement in military research and tendency to support the status quo, especially through authoritarian educational methods, might be contributing directly to such evils as militarism and racism.

I began to learn how the conservatism of some Mormons could lead them to act in destructive ways because it would keep them from seeing that their ideologies were culturally constructed and relative, not doctrinal and absolute. Some of the most prominent Palo Alto landlords were Mormons and took it as a religious affront that I would campaign to get them

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to rent to blacks. I taught institute part-time, where we discussed some of these matters quite thoroughly in a Mormon Ethics class. The parents of one of my students, who had applied for conscientious objector status, blamed me for his supposedly going astray. They contacted Institute authorities in Provo, who directed me not to talk about the ethics of violence, if I wanted to keep my job.

Yet I was, of course, still basically conservative. I helped start *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* for the express purpose of helping young LDS students, like those I taught each day at Stanford, build and preserve their testimonies. I know they faced many academic and ethical and cultural challenges, of the kind that going to college and moving away from Mormon cultural centers inevitably brings. I served in the Stanford Ward bishopric and there also was fully engaged in building testimonies and teaching basically conservative values.

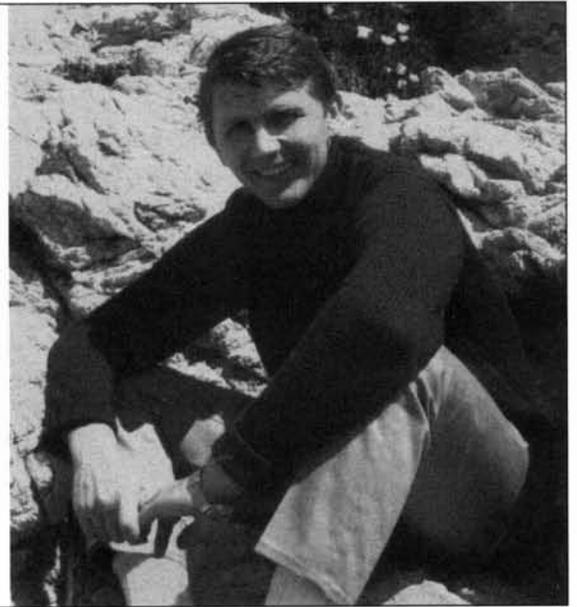
As I served in these capacities, I saw more and more how relative are the terms liberal and conservative. I found I could change from one to the other simply by walking across Stanford Avenue from the university to the Institute building. On campus, among graduate students and anti-war and civil-rights activists, I was that strange, non-smoking, short-haired, family-raising conservative; at the Institute, I was that strange liberal who renounced war and worried about fair-housing and free speech. Of course, I was the same person both places; those terms reduced me to a stereotype, often marginalized me, and sometimes caused me real harm—but they did not touch my real self.

I learned how powerful though absurd cultural shibboleths can be as totalizing, stereotyping mechanisms. One day, while we worked on anti-war posters, a graduate student friend said to me, "You've got to let your hair grow long, to show which side you're on." That very evening, a Church leader said to me, "Gene, you've got to keep your hair short and always do your home teaching, to show you're really OK despite your liberal ideas."



Well, I was getting some liberal ideas, but the most powerful ones came from apostles. During this time, I heard Elder

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Harold B. Lee announce that "the activities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are a continuing revelation against the sub-standard conditions of society." I assumed he meant non-Mormon society and focused my efforts, which were informed fully by the gospel and my Church experience, on changing the racism and violence in American society. It wasn't until ten years later, when President Kimball spoke out against the sub-standard materialism and militarism of *Mormons*, that I realized Elder Lee may have meant *our* society as well.

It was also during this time that I got to know President Hugh B. Brown. Intriguingly, he and President N. Eldon Tanner, both of the First Presidency, were Democrats. I had grown up with that mistaken idea that Mormons were naturally Republicans for *bona fide* religious rather than cultural reasons. Years later, I read with great interest in President Brown's memoirs that when he had come from Canada in 1928 and was deciding which party to join, President Heber J. Grant and Elder B. H. Roberts, staunch Democrats, counseled him, "If I wanted to belong to a party that represented the common people, I should become a Democrat, but that if I wanted to be popular and have the adulation of others and be in touch with the wealth of the nation, I should become a Republican." President Brown reflects on that choice, which he realizes has put him "in the minority—almost a minority of one—among the General Authorities, since most of them are now Republicans. But . . . as time goes on I become more and more convinced that the Democrats have the right philosophy. . . . Theirs is the party of progress."

What does all this mean? Only that I was learning that political and cultural differences don't matter to the Lord, and that we err mightily when we try to make them matter. President Brown was not afraid to make this clear by letting political differences among the Brethren show. Elder Ezra Taft Benson was an outspoken conservative on many issues and lent at least tacit support to the John Birch Society's attacks on

