

2006 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, Third Place Winner

# AN OUTLAW'S MANIFESTO

By E. George Goold

I COME FROM A CULTURE OF writers. From the beginning, we Mormons are repeatedly told that we will be judged by our works. I've always assumed that means written works. It all begins with Joseph Smith, of course—the most influential American writer of all time. He never made any money off the Book of Mormon, but he changed the world with it. My own writer's lineage begins with him, then goes to my granddad W. George Goold, after whom I am named. My father's father wrote his life story in a neatly typed, 200-page volume entitled, *What Has Made My Life*. It includes photocopies of the six personal commendations he received from J. Edgar Hoover, Granddad's boss at the FBI in the '60s. Also present are the letters of praise Ezra Taft Benson gave him while Granddad served in the Department of Agriculture. The book's table of contents lists chapter titles such as, "Earning a Livelihood," "Church Activity," and "Your Mother's Role." My favorite chapter is, "The Most Important Person in the World," which Granddad begins like this:

To each of you, the most important person in the world should be yourself. It is you who will have to account for the way in which you have used your life. Thank God for the free agency He has given you, and the pattern He has presented for you to follow in exercising it wisely.

After that, the roots of my writer's tree also dig into the soil of my grandfather Ray Loughton. My mother's father is a poet. His life story was compiled by my mom in a three-ring binder and was given the expansive title, "A Discerning Pen: The Life Story of Ray Loughton in Prose, Poetry and Pictures." My mom's family all presented it to Grampa on his 90th birthday last year. Grampa greatly admires Robert Frost, though their legacy as poets will certainly never be judged as similar. Several of Grampa's poems actually include the proviso, "With apologies to Robert Frost." For nearly all his life, Grampa shared his poetry only with my grandma. But she's gone now, and he is just kind of sitting in his easy chair and waiting to follow her. So I guess that makes it okay to share some of his



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poetry, which I admit is kind of growing on me. The poems have titles such as, "The Thought," and "Not Ours Alone." My favorite poem is the ironically titled, "Poem with a Point," Grampa included in a letter to a friend on 10 March 1966.

## POEM WITH A POINT

T'is said that poetry measures best  
The mark of civilization's crest. . .  
So. . . poetical evaluation is the theme—

To say in verse just what I mean  
Is rather an ambitious quest. . .  
Please grade me generously in the test!

In any event the issue raised  
Is what in poetry is to be praised:  
Pure form and beauty of the art?  
The piercing of a lover's heart—  
Description of a poignant pen—  
Or the rambling of artistic yen—  
Enlargement of historical fact—  
Or persuasion by emotional impact?

How do we measure an artist's terms,  
"applied to his own deepest concerns"?

My mind, like Frost's, gropes for reason,  
And to avoid intellectual treason. . .  
I judge a poem quite smug-gl-y. . .  
Do I understand better than formerly?  
If there's more confusion after the fact  
I conclude t'was the Poet, not me, that lacked!

My parents passed the literary legacy of their fathers on to all six of us kids in the Goold clan. In Family Home Evening one night when I was eleven, my dad gave us all a new, spiral notebook and encouraged us to start journals. I'm still writing mine, and it is more than 2,000 pages long. But I didn't become a "real" writer—one who's paid to do it—until I went to Alaska in August 2001, to accept a job as a sportswriter for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. That was also right around the

time, after a twelve-year absence, I returned to the Church.

I didn't become an outlaw until I went back to the Mormons.

**T**HE DAY I entered into the fellowship of the Fairbanks 1st Ward, I walked up to the bishop, stuck out my hand, and said, "Hi, I'm Eric. I'm inactive."

He shook hands with me and responded, "Not today."

Great answer.

What makes me an outlaw? There's this: I'm a fourth-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I've never read the Book of Mormon. I've read certain parts of the Blue Book (because it's blue, I know it's true), but never has it pulled me through cover-to-cover. Patchwork pieces of it were preached at me every Sunday for the first eighteen years of my life, so I couldn't help but retain a small bit of its wisdom. For example, I know that the authors use the phrase, "And it came to pass," quite an inordinate number of times. I know lots of personal tidbits that interest me—and probably no one else—like the Psalm of Nephi is pretty cool. But mostly, every time I try to buckle down and read those 531 pages all the way through, well, it puts me to sleep. It reminds me that Mark Twain's famous declaration about the Book of Mormon being "chloroform in print" was right on then and is right on now. No, I haven't read the Book of Mormon, but I still believe it's true. I'm an outlaw; I don't have to read it to believe that.

Last year, the prophet urged us all to read the Book of Mormon together as families. I'm a thirty-two-year-old single man (eegads, I am such an outlaw), so I had no family to read it with. I tried to read the whole book, cover-to-cover. I tried; I fell asleep. I tried; I failed. I was successful, however, in initiating an email conversation with my parents about it. I mean, it seems ludicrous, but I never really thought that either of them had read it. Growing up, I don't recall any fervent testimonials about the book from either of them. I always got the impression that they read it because someone told them to, and that in turn, they told me to read it out of some vague notion about, "doing the right thing."

I never really understood what that meant, "Do the right thing."

**U**NTIL HE WAS fifteen, my dad's exposure to the Book of Mormon came from his grandmother. "Dad's mom was something, he writes:

Some said she had the book memorized, begin-

ning to end. I don't know if that was true, or not. But she did know what was in it cover-to-cover. She could tell story after story from the book all day long. When she did, her eyes sparkled, she had a big smile, she just radiated. She told the stories well, to boot.

Before this, I knew nothing of my dad's grandmother. I hadn't even known that she was a member of the Church. Interesting that my dad's fond memories arise from an oral tradition and have nothing to do with actually reading the book.

Then at age fifteen, my dad took a Book of Mormon class in Sunday School that was taught by a West Point graduate. "At that stage in my life," Dad writes:

religious doctrine was in the esoteric, Never-Never Land. I had no doubts about the veracity of the Church because that was what I had been exposed to all my life. A deeply questioning mind was never one of my traits. If it was good enough for my dad, and my friends, it was good enough for me.

While my father never had a "deeply questioning mind," his fourth son somehow inherited one. My mind is in a state of perpetual questioning, and among Mormons, that definitely makes me an outlaw. Like 99 percent of all the Mormon males I know, my dad was drawn into the Book of Mormon by its military tradition. As he says:

A good fight was always more interesting than a nebulous doctrinal concept. What my teacher (the West Pointer) brought to the table was an understanding of war—troops, strategy, material, motivation and result. He taught with a military understanding—got across the winning and losing reasons—and he had

the ability to weave in the doctrinal stuff (faith, prayer, obedience, among others) that had a direct influence on the outcome of any particular fight. It was inspiring, and really got my interest in the book up.

War is yet another qualifying reason for my being a Mormon outlaw: I don't believe in war. Not for any purpose. Not ever. The warrior spirit my dad writes about is the chief reason why so many Mormon men (like my namesake) go into the military and government service. They're used to taking orders and used to following them. They believe in war; they believe that killing is justified if it's for a righteous cause.

In this, I am proud to be an outlaw. Killing is just killing. It is never justified. The warrior spirit has led us precisely to where we

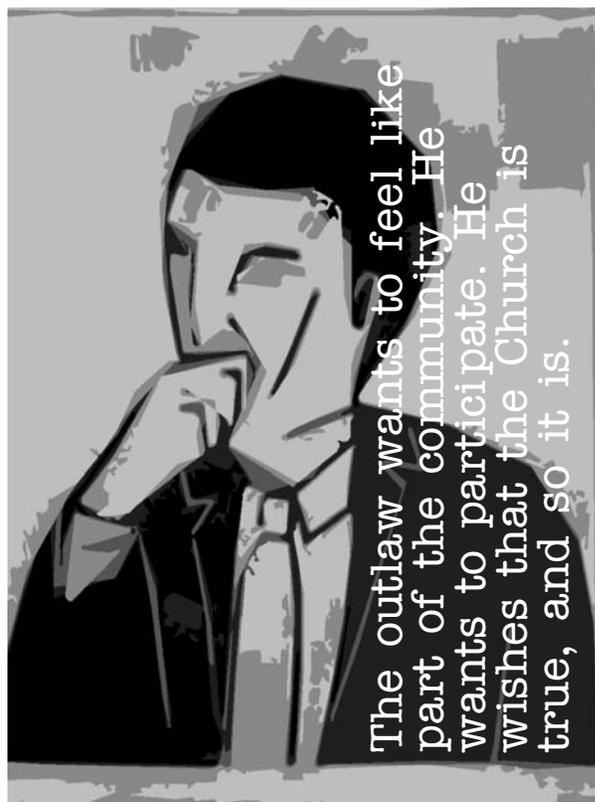


ILLUSTRATION BASED ON WOODCUT BY SUE ENSLEY

are now, ignorantly following orders while on the verge of World War III.

How's that working for you?

**O**F ALL THE people on earth, the one who has most directly shaped who I am has been my mother. The one lesson she wanted me to learn more than any other was that the wisest policy is always to act in your own best self-interest. She taught me how to read and write. She taught me to love music and the arts. She has a few thoughts on reading the Book of Mormon. "I can see why President Hinckley was encouraging people to read it," she writes.

If it's not a commandment, people won't do it—kinda like the Word of Wisdom. It's hard to "sell" people on Mormonism when most Mormons haven't even read the book. But then I read on the Internet that most kids can't find the USA on a globe. *And*, besides which, the *only* way you could have a testimony of Joseph Smith is to believe he transcribed it by the gift of God. If you don't believe that, he's just another Mark Twain.

I love that. Just another Mark Twain. I should be so lucky.

"They were saying in the Relief Society lesson on Sunday that Joseph Smith had *very* little formal education," Mom informs.

He could read mostly thanks to his mother reading him the Bible at home. Poor farm boys were needed to work the farm, and if they weren't busy enough, his father would parcel him out to work for other neighboring farmers who needed help. (No child labor laws.) Apparently, this was the *primary* reason Emma's family objected to their marriage—she was better educated than he was. So, belief in the Book of Mormon *allows* you to believe that Joseph Smith, a local yokel with a distinct predisposition to polygamy, could still be a prophet.

I've read it three times cover-to-cover. Once in Seminary, second time was at BYU, and third was when I taught Seminary. Reading it through cover-to-cover is not how I got a testimony of its truthfulness. It's just how I learned the history lesson of what's in there. It has always seemed like a rather mundane, pedantic morality play, written when the prophets were the only ones who could read and write.

The way I came to believe it is from God is the only way I know how to believe anything is true—put it to the test. Does it work? Can I apply it, improve my life?

My pragmatic answer: The Book of Mormon is true for me because I've seen it work in my life to the extent that I apply it. Just like the church, or the Savior, or the Celestial Kingdom. I choose to believe in the concept and work to understand how it can enlarge my life. I know truth when I see it or hear it—it just rings true. That's so much better than anything you can read in any book.

Amen, sister.

**M**Y PARENTS DIVORCED after six kids and twenty-nine years of marriage. The split came when I was a junior in high school. If I had to pick one moment when, one reason why, I spiraled into inactivity in the Church, that would be it. When you're sixteen and you see your parents' love for each other die right in front of your eyes, it's going to have an impact. What began for me was a long period of wandering and wondering. Secretly, I always knew that my path would eventually lead me back to the Church. It was not a straight and narrow path—it curved around many peaks and went through countless valleys. I had no iron rod to hold onto, and I tasted no fruit from the tree the fellow told about. But the way had already been prepared, and I found some answers.

Eventually.

The outlaw sits alone in church—as it should be. He wears black pants, black shoes, and a dark sweater. He is the man in black, and he walks the line. He used to wear a tie but stopped when he got too fat for his dress shirt. He sits alone in the corner of the 1st Ward, wondering why no one ever really talks to him but subconsciously knows why: the other members are afraid of him. To them, the outlaw represents where they've been, or maybe where they're going, or maybe where they are. The outlaw is the Mormons' past, present, and future.

I come by it honestly, of course. My church was founded by outlaws, some of the most (in)famous in American history. Joseph Smith. Brigham Young. Porter Rockwell. Each of these men, without whom the Church would likely have never survived, flagrantly violated the laws of the land whenever it became necessary. Each of these men sought their own answers, refusing to accept what was told to them until they arrived at their own personal versions of the truth. They became members of the group by first acting like lone individuals—by using their agency rather than giving it up for the sake of convenience.

You were right, Granddad. Thank God for free agency.

The outlaw sits alone in church and wants many things. More than anything else, he wants to go to the temple. He wants to receive his endowments, and someday, despite it all, he wants to get married there. Wandering the path, he has come to understand that he did not see his parents' love for each other die when they got divorced; their love just shifted its focus. It went from them as a couple to their family as a unit. The way that the outlaw can show them that their love is not dead is by being married in the temple himself.

Outlaws aren't allowed into the temple. And generally, Mormon women don't want to date them. But someday it will happen for me. I will meet the one Mormon woman who *will* date an outlaw, and we *will* marry in the temple. And there will be healing for all.

The outlaw wants to feel like part of the community. He wants to participate. He wants to be active.

He wants the Church to be true. And despite Sigmund Freud, the outlaw believes that wanting something to be true, wishing for it with all the strength he has left in his cold soul, is enough to make it so. The outlaw wishes that the Church is true, and so it is.

Since I've never read the Book of Mormon all the way through, I only learned of this scripture recently, when it was read in a sacrament meeting. Alma said it way better than I ever could:

Now they had never fought, yet they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it. (Alma 56:47-48)

Yes, this is about yet another group of warriors in the Book of Mormon (and perhaps the most famous one, the Stripling Warriors) and yes, this is yet another continuation of the hateful war metaphor in the book. But those words speak to the outlaw in direct terms—they define his fight. They tell him why he keeps struggling, why he keeps looking, why he keeps fighting, why he even bothers to go to church *at all*.

By becoming a writer, I am honoring the tradition of my fathers. I am saying I want to be like my father's father, the G-Man, and my mother's father, the poet. I am saying that I want to emulate my own father, who more than anything else was a jock. By being a writer, I am thinking more upon the liberty of my fathers than I think upon my own life. And by being a Mormon writer, I am honoring my mother.

I do not doubt that my mother knows it.

I WORKED WITH a person at the *News-Miner* whom I like to call Sam the Photographer. Sam is a hippy with a long braid of hair down his back. I respected him the moment I met him, because he is from Kansas and because he is wise like the mighty oak. He is someone I can imagine being a great peacemaker, an arbiter of reason who mandates common sense.

One of the six dwellings I lived in in Alaska was a cabin over on Goldhill Road. When I lived there, Sam lived in a cabin across from my driveway. I used to wander over to his place on weekends when he would have a bonfire, and we would chat about things. You know, life.

When I told him I was thinking about going back to church, he asked me, "Which church?"

I told him, "Mormon."

He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. They glinted in the firelight. "Is that your mother's church?" he asked.

It gave me pause. I'd never heard it phrased like that.

"Yes," I said. "It's my mother's church, and it's her mother's church, too."

The answer seemed to satisfy him. It was what I came up with on the spot. But I should have answered something better.

"Yes, it's my mother's church," I should have said. "It's the only church I know that accepts outlaws." ☺

## Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest Call for Entries

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites writers to enter the 2007 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, made possible by the Eugene and Charlotte England Education Fund.

In the spirit of Gene's writings, entries should relate to Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview. Essays, without author identification, will be judged by noted Mormon authors and professors of writing. The winner(s) will be announced in SUNSTONE and at the 2006 Association for Mormon Letters conference. Only the winners will be notified of the results. After the judging is complete, all non-winning entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

**PRIZES:** A total of \$450 will be shared among the winning entries.

### RULES:

1. Up to three entries may be submitted by a single author. Four copies of each entry must be delivered (or postmarked) to Sunstone by **31 JANUARY 2007**. Entries will not be returned. A \$5 fee must accompany each entry.

2. Each essay must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper and be stapled in the upper left corner. All essays must be 3500 words or fewer. The author's name should not appear on any page of the essay.

3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the essay's title and the author's name, address, and telephone number. Each cover letter must be signed and attest that the entry is the author's work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, will not be submitted to other forums until after the contest, and that, if the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights.

*In addition to the essay above, examples of past contest winners can be found in the May 2003, July 2003, October 2003, March 2004, May 2004, July 2004, May 2005, April 2006, and September 2006 issues of SUNSTONE.*



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