

## **Earl W. Stevick: Keeping the Faith in Theory and Practice**

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When God said, ‘Let us make man’ there was no technician with a clipboard standing at the Divine Elbow to murmur, ‘Will that be with or without brain?’” (Stevick, 2006a)

The excerpt above is taken from the foundational section of a short paper by Earl W. Stevick for MA TESOL students, a paper intended to facilitate reflection on the teaching and learning of languages from theistic and non-theistic perspectives. Written near the end of a long illustrious career, it reflects Earl’s interest in the interrelation of Christian worldview and the profession he loved and to which he made pivotal contributions (cf., Arnold & Murphey, 2013). It also emerges from his personal journey, chronicled in and out of print<sup>1</sup>.

In 1948 Earl graduated from college as the Methodist Church in America was preparing to send short-term missionaries overseas to teach English. Drawn to the cause, he was soon in an intensive language teacher training program alongside other candidates, expecting before long to be attending to people’s spiritual as well as linguistic needs. When overseas plans crumbled, he redirected his efforts to an MA TEFL while at the same time volunteering in a church-based language program on New York’s East Side. Concurrent involvement in these two settings drew his attention to differences between his theological beliefs and motivation and key assumptions underlying the emphases of his MA program. As he described it in a speech,

In ‘scientific’ language teaching...there was no mind, no soul, no spirit, nothing non-material. ‘Scientific’ language teachers acknowledged that the brain probably did something important, but the way it came packaged, we just had to treat it as an impenetrable ‘black box’. What we would now call a ‘person’ was just another ‘organism’ . . . (Stevick, 2006b)

Grounded in this foundation, teaching practices focused on mechanistic shaping of language behaviours. It was an approach considered “superior to all predecessors because of avoidance of concepts such as ‘mind’ and ‘meaning’.” For his part, Earl “had always had a pedagogical

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows, unattributed comments in quotation marks are taken from personal communication with Earl (cf., Kristjánsson, 2014).

attitude toward language study” and regardless of divergent assumptions, he turned his talents to developing learning materials and enhanced teaching techniques within the dominant paradigm.

These efforts characterized his involvement in both secular and Christian environments for the next decade, although Earl’s primary interest was the latter. This led him to involvement in part-time language training for missionaries after MA completion and during PhD studies. It also led to fulltime post-doctoral employment at a Christian college, including two years of linguistic fieldwork in Central Africa along with preparation of language materials for missionaries. Then, in 1961, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. Following program closure at the Christian college, Earl accepted a position with the American government’s Foreign Service Institute and was soon designing and teaching courses for the State Department.

Over time, Earl’s growing unease with the limited results of language teaching based on prevailing scholarly wisdom, combined with his exposure to unconventional methodologies, led him to more closely examine the underlying assumptions as well as practices of learning and teaching. Before long, the first edition of his ground-breaking book, *Memory, Meaning, and Method* (Stevick, 1976) appeared, a record of his quest to better understand the human experience of language learning. The reaction was enthusiastic. It also brought Earl face-to-face with the divide between anti-theistic assumptions and his own when three unconventional methodologies he described came to be called “humanistic” and he himself a proponent of “humanism” in language teaching. While associations with efforts to exploit human potential did not trouble him, something else did, namely “the position that there is no ‘god’ of any consequence and that we humans are entirely responsible for our own salvation . . .” (Stevick, 2009, p. 293).

This marked a turning point. Not content to overlook theoretical differences of principal significance, Earl began to incorporate evidence of his Christian perspectives in published work, including use of Dostoyevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor* (Stevick, 1980; 1998), and a book-length discussion of “humanism” in language teaching that encompassed a dissection of related “faiths” (Stevick, 1990). The latter provided context for his reinterpretation of one of the unconventional methodologies from a Christian perspective, and the presentation of his own understanding of teaching as sacramental, an understanding rooted in the Incarnation. These and other expressions of outlook (cf., Stevick, 2000; Stevick, 2013) represented Earl’s ongoing examination and disclosure of the interface between his Christian faith and his professional practice.

Following retirement and the publication of his last print book, Earl continued the process in talks and short written pieces “of an overtly spiritual nature,” now freely available as *Afterwords* (online at <http://www.celea.net/page-1736597>). These emerged through interaction with Christians as well as those who did not share his persuasions, sometimes in public forums and sometimes in private exchanges. In fact, Earl’s personal correspondence indicates that throughout his career, he engaged friends and critics – not mutually exclusive groups – in dialogue about matters of faith whenever opportunity arose. An example is seen in the explanation included in a letter to one TESOL colleague<sup>2</sup>:

As you doubtless picked up from the Dostoyevsky chapter, I am a serious Christian... On p. 286 of AWAW<sup>3</sup>, I conceded that it’s not a matter of *whether* “miracle, mystery and authority,” but of *which*. For me, the miracle and the mystery and the authority in my life are Christian ones, so that p. 295 of AWAW is deliberately based on New Testament ideas. In a nutshell, we are to imitate Christ by loving one another in a self-giving way.

No less significant than the explicit content of some exchanges was the manner in which Earl engaged with others. His behind-the-scenes practice was itself representative of the kind of self-giving he espoused in other contexts. This is well demonstrated in his response to another colleague whose work he could not endorse:

I hope you will be patient with my withholding of an endorsement. It would have been easier to have said, as you report that others did, that I “find nothing to disagree with.” Please accept this letter as a token that I take you seriously.

Earl was a friend to many, including those of us in the MA TESOL program at Trinity Western University (TWU). He kindly made himself available as program advisor and his last international trip was to TWU in June 2004 for the final two-day resident phase of a course titled “Faith-Informed Language Teaching” of which he was lead instructor. Shortly after he returned home from that trip, deteriorating health compelled him to relocate to an assisted living facility and with this move he began the process of donating his personal library to the MA TESOL program at TWU.

Now, years later, Earl’s library collection continues to advise and inspire me. Various book dedications and numerous fly-leaf inscriptions addressed to him from well-known authors in our field speak eloquently to the influence of his conceptual insights and personal practice on

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<sup>2</sup> Included in Earl Stevick’s personal papers donated to Trinity Western University.

<sup>3</sup> *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways* (Stevick, 1980).

theirs and that of their students. Earl's own meticulous notes in many volumes also speak eloquently of the careful attention he afforded to their ideas and those of many others beyond the borders of applied linguistics.

*The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Marsden, 1997) is one book that provides a record of this sort of interaction. Neat arrows and single checkmarks in the margins draw attention to statements of particular interest along with brief notes and acronyms such as *HILT* and *MMM*<sup>4</sup> where Earl identified points represented in his work. Among the annotations, two stand out due to emphatic force. The first: “religious perspectives ought to be recognized as legitimate in the mainstream academy so long as their proponents are willing to support the rules necessary for constructive exchange of ideas in a pluralistic setting” (Marsden, 1997, p. 45). The underlining is Earl's and in the margin, the word *crucial* stands in stark relief. The second: ✓✓✓! “Christians should be models of what it means to love and respect those with whom one differs, even as they may debate their difference” (Marsden, 1997, p. 54). This comment is the only one in the book distinguished by triple checkmarks and an exclamation point. As I review these annotations, I'm not surprised – they truly encapsulate the way Earl endeavoured to represent himself and his allegiance to Christ in the academy.

Earl would be the first to admit that he wasn't perfect. However, the respect he earned from people in all walks of life gives testimony to the authenticity and impact of his faith-informed stance. This is exemplified by the appraisal of a colleague in a published open-letter exchange: “Among a great deal of sounding brass and tinkling cymbal, your own writing has always been distinguished by that quality that the old translations rendered ‘charity,’ and the newer ones give as ‘love’” (Edge, 1996-1997, p. 6). That exchange was called *Keeping the Faith*.

It seems fitting that the last award listed on Earl's CV was an Honorary Doctorate of Christian Ministries (by TWU in 2006). It also seems fitting that his faith-informed perspective was acknowledged by TESOL colleagues in the slim compendium of curated selections of his work posthumously published to honour his memory and commemorate his lifetime achievement (Freeman, 2015, p. 66). Earl fought the good fight. He finished the race. He kept the faith. My thoughts echo the message of a personal letter sent to Earl some years ago, and here I end:

Dear Earl . . . thanks not only for . . . the time you've spent with us, but for the Spirit with which you have imbued your books, your teaching, and your life.

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<sup>4</sup> *Humanism in Language Teaching* (1990) and *Memory, Meaning, and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1996).

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