

EARL STEVICK:
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT REQUESTED BY CETESOL
WEBSITE FOR ITS "SPOTLIGHT" SECTION
SUMMER, 2000

The Quakers have an expression "as way opens," and a hymn by John Henry Newman begins, "Lead, Kindly Light ... one step [at a time is] enough for me." These two quotations pretty well summarize my life.

I majored in government at Harvard, having been informed that there was no worthwhile career in foreign languages. Just before graduation, however, an apparently chance encounter in a stairwell got me signed up to teach English for the Methodists in Warsaw. The dropping of the Iron Curtain killed that plan, but as part of the preparation for it I'd had an intensive two-week exposure to teaching English as a foreign language. That was how the way opened for my career in TESOL. With the help of the GI Bill and a working wife, I got an M.A. TEFL. Another apparently chance encounter, this one in an elevator, led me into training short-term missionaries in the learning and teaching of languages. That work put me in touch with Eugene A. Nida of the American Bible Society, who was later helpful in arranging a teaching fellowship at Cornell, where I got a degree in linguistics.

My first post-doctoral job was at Scarritt College for Christian Workers, in Nashville. There the president twisted my arm to apply for a Ford Fellowship, which gave me two years in Central Africa, thereby catapulting me into the position of eleventh-ranking African languages specialist in the United States (out of a field of twelve in those days). That in turn led me to the Language School of the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State, where I spent the rest of my career. During that time, I was frequently lent to the Peace Corps for a variety of tasks in language training. This opened my eyes to how limited my understanding of learning and teaching had been up to then, which led to most of my books, all of them aimed at nudging language teachers toward a better understanding of themselves and their work. (It also led indirectly to an avocation in what might be called "lay pastoral care.")

I took early retirement in 1984, precipitated by my wife's health. She is doing fine these days, though I have been struggling with Parkinson's Disease. I'm still trying to live according to Philippians 1:27: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

I have mentioned my books; here are a few more details about them. As part of my employment I prepared a number of language textbooks for use by missionaries or

government workers. What I most enjoyed writing, however, were books for language teachers:

Helping People Learn English (1957),

A Workbook in Language Teaching (1963),

Adapting and Writing Language Lessons (1971),

Memory, Meaning and Method (1976)

Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways (1981)

Teaching and Learning Languages (1982)

Images and Options in the Language Classroom (1986)

Success with Foreign Languages (1989)

Humanism in Language Teaching (1990)

Memory, Meaning & Method: Revised [actually 78% new] edition (1996)

Working with Teaching Methods: What's at Stake? (1998).

In writing the first four of these books, my thoughts were purely professional, with no conscious attention to matters of faith. The reactions to *Memory, Meaning & Method* (1976 edition) changed that.

1. Three unconventional approaches that I described in the 1976 book came to be called "humanistic" (apparently in the sense that all of them tried to explore and exploit human potential more fully than previous approaches had done) and I came to be known as an exponent of "humanism" in language teaching . That didn't bother me. What did bother me was that in another sense, "humanistic" in philosophy is the position that there is no "god" of any consequence, and that we humans are responsible for our own salvation, mainly through the use of reason. Anyone who thinks otherwise is regarded as a dangerous saboteur of the scientific quest for a better world.

2. The words "humanism" and "humanistic" carried a wide range of meanings and emotional associations which were sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory. As a result, discussions in this area were generating more heat than light.

3. Some critics of the three unconventional approaches seemed to use words like "theological" as epithets to discredit those approaches. Religion was now portrayed not as a saboteur of right thinking, but as a feeble-minded cousin.

In *Humanism in Language Teaching* I tried to deal in a non-polemic way with these three concerns, pointing out that the supposedly objective stance adopted by some critics both of "humanistic" methods and of religious faith, is itself dependent on unprovable articles of "faith" in a more generic sense.

In this same book, Christian readers may also want to look at my assessment of the religious content in Community Language Learning and the Silent Way, and at a style of teaching that I called "sacramental." I also began the casual use of the phrase "the created order" in contexts where many other writers had been equally casually referring to "evolution." (In the 1996 and 1998 books I listed the Christian touches in the index under "outlook.")

Now that my book-writing days are past, I've been looking back at my life overall, trying to integrate its professional aspects with its faith aspects. This has led to a few short pieces, two of which have appeared in the CETC Newsletter. I do not plan to publish these, but will gladly make them available on email to anyone who is interested. Meantime, Newman's hymn continues:

So long Thy love hath blest me, sure it still will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till the night is gone.

END OF THE STATEMENT THAT APPEARED IN THE CHRISTIAN CAUCUS NEWSLETTER.

SUPPLEMENT TO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

“Oh! To start over again!”

A correspondent once wondered in response to something I had said,

“Why [do] you consider your years in secular employment to have been such a “wilderness”? A very small light can make a big difference in a dark room, and it would seem to me that God has granted you knowledge and understanding in the field of FLT, along with the accompanying exposure, so that His light through you might shine in many such circumstances. Did you, at some point, feel that God had called you into a more “official” role of ministry?”

In 1948 I was formally and publicly commissioned as a missionary. In this role I expected to be working alongside other Christians in ministering to the spiritual as well as the linguistic needs of ordinary people. In 1949, however, I found myself in a secular academic program studying about how to meet linguistic needs, but with mention of the spiritual side either missing or even frowned on. After a couple of years like this, I was able to get back into contact with a summer program that trained short-term (3-year) missionaries, which led after graduate school to a full-time job in a Christian college. That was much closer to what I had been hoping for, but after 4 years the language program collapsed, and I was back in the secular world, where any mention of the name of the Lord was — or at least seemed — awkward at best and possibly illegal or dangerous or both. True, my duties brought me into close contact with a number of unusual methods, but the people I met there were many of them new and enthusiastic converts to one or another kind of updated Eastern mysticism or contemporary spirituality. I felt a strong personal affinity with many of these my colleagues, but seemed never to find ways to talk about spiritual matters with them that would not turn them off. This, I suppose, is what I meant by my “years in the wilderness,” outside of the “official” role I had once occupied.

Now in a recent letter, W comments about how it’s not as simple as he (we) once thought to distinguish between things that have bearing on language learning and those that don’t. I remembered when it was simple — or at least we thought it was. I first taught “English for Foreigners” at Presbyterian Labor Temple on New York’s Lower East Side in 1949. The brief methodology textbook I followed — in fact, the only methods text I knew — was titled TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. The author was Charles C. Fries of the University of Michigan, affectionately called “Papa Fries” by those who knew him. The approach was entirely behavioristic, there was no reference to “affect” or anything like it, and mention of the difference between basic and specialized vocabulary provided the author with an opportunity to insert a phrase that implicitly questioned “the historicity of certain common Christological predicates.” So there I was, a brand new Bachelor of Arts still wet behind the ears, full of spiritual motivation for teaching

English in a church-sponsored program in Eastern Europe, but guided by “Papa Fries” and his friends. My motivations and my methods were pretty much cut adrift from each other, and remained so until the 1970s.

The years 1977 and 1978 were an especially low period for me, principally for medical reasons that have long since cleared up. It was then, while I was working on *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*, (1980) that I first added a deliberately Christian touch to my writing. This consisted of a chapter on Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, which I retained in *What’s at Stake?* (1998). Christian ideas appear also in some of my later writings, most obviously in *Humanism in Language Teaching* (1990) and at several points in the 1996 edition of *Memory, Meaning & Method*, and in *What’s at Stake?* (1998).

The next turning point came with the 1999 TESOL meeting in New York, where Jane Arnold invited me to contribute to a panel she was chairing on the place of “affect” in the learning process. Within the context of a 15-minute taped paper on different ways in which language teachers most commonly react to “humanistic” ideas in methodology, I devoted four minutes to some fairly explicit Christian witness. (This is now in the AFTERWORD on Jane Arnold’s panel at TESOL 1999.)