

**Remarks by Gordon Thompson, professor emeritus of English, upon receiving
the Distinguished Service Award
October 23, 2010**

Thanks very much to the Alumni Council for this award. I always thought of this award as a tribute to people who occupied positions of leadership, people who shaped the college in significant ways. By those standards, I don't deserve the award at all. Nevertheless, I am glad that the council saw fit to honor a day-by-day teacher, a working stiff who first entered an Earlham classroom in 1966 and—after what felt like about three years—looked up and saw that it was 2005 and time to stop.

A few years ago, Nancy Sinex of the Admissions staff reminded me of an observation I once made to a group of prospective students and their parents. I am going to repeat that observation—repetition being an old man's privilege.

When I was a little boy, I assumed that I would fall madly in love with a woman and live with her in wedded bliss for the rest of my life. That happened.

When I was a little boy, I assumed that my wife and I would have children and that I would fall dotingly in love with them. That happened too. Four times.

When I was a little boy, I assumed I would become a teacher and fall in love with teaching. I was always sublimely happy at school and, at the end of each school day, I entertained myself by shanghaiing the suffering children of my neighborhood into my house and administering to them tests and chastisement.

What I never, ever anticipated throughout my boyhood was that I would fall in love with a school. That would have struck me as ridiculous. Schools were just buildings with desks in them. Schools were interchangeable and I figured I could teach anywhere.

But I did fall in love with a school, this school, starting at the very moment I stepped on campus for a job interview in 1965. My love for Earlham mostly intensified over the years. This isn't to say there weren't students and colleagues who drove me crazy. There were. I'm sure I drove them crazy too. But from the very beginning, the essential values of the Earlham community struck me as so right and the individuals who embodied those values struck me as so decent and dedicated that I always knew this was the perfect place for me to teach.

When I first came to Earlham, I knew very little about Quakers. I had the impressions that Quakers were quiet people who liked to prostrate themselves in front of tanks. It didn't take me long to discover that lots of Quakers weren't all that quiet but—this being the 1960's—many Quakers were passionately committed to peace and anti-war movements. But the great revelation to me was that every educational principle I was coming to embrace was an essentially religious principle rooted in Quakerism. Let me give you a couple of examples. Most of you are probably so familiar with these principles that you can move your lips as I recite them.

There is the principle of informality in which regalia and titles and rituals are not allowed to interfere with the collaboration of teachers and students.

There is the principle of consensus-seeking, not only in campus governance but—more importantly in my view—in classroom participation where careful listening and making good arguments are seen as the highest good.

There is the principle of experimental education whereby students and teachers are not allowed to rest comfortably with what they know but compelled by a community ethos to push their thinking into uncharted territories. As Dean Len Clark once observed, "Teaching at Earlham ought to show you that

the problem you spent four years in graduate school studying is far too narrow to keep an active mind alive.” It was only after coming to Earlham that I began to learn how to read History and Religion, nowadays two of the chief joys of my life.

There is the principle of global citizenship by which we try to look at any issue from as many cultural perspectives as possible. I am perhaps the world’s most reluctant traveler, and yet even I regard cultivating a global perspective as essential.

There is the principle of ethical assessment. We conduct no experiment and read no book and learn no language without considering the ethical implications of such study. At Earlham, we are unashamedly engaged in the pursuit of goodness.

Finally, there is the principle of the inner teacher, the conviction that every student possesses a unique capacity to master material and offer insights. Religious Quakers call this a belief in the Christ within; others of us settle for feebler language. I hope it means we all see students as potential vessels of the divine.

The fundamental rightness of this educational vision captured me right away, but it took years and years for me to begin to understand it and to try to build it into my classes and collegial relationships. I retired a very flawed teacher and a very flawed colleague, but at least I knew what I was trying to do and I knew it was the right thing to do, not just for me but for higher education in America.

I fell in love with this school because of its educational vision and the people who embodied that vision for me. I know this is not an Academy Award so I can’t thank my agent and my sound technician, but I am awash in gratitude at the moment. A lot of the people who introduced me to the essential Earlham are not here this morning, but a lot of them are. Most of them are Quakers or running dogs with Quakers. They are people who view teaching not as just a job but as a sacred calling, a divine commandment, a mitzvah. Each one of them modeled for me some feature of the vision. Thanks, Friends.

By way of coda, I confess I get worried when people who are indifferent to Quakerism want to redesign the college or when we undertake a search for a new president. My fear is that we’ll try to model ourselves on some more prestigious institution. In my view, the world doesn’t need a second-rate Oberlin or a second-rate Amherst. What the world needs is a first-rate Earlham.

Thanks again for this honor.