

**Distinguished Service Award presented to Gordon Thompson, Professor Emeritus of English
October 23, 2010**

This introduction given by Michael Birkel, Professor of Religion

Rabbi Leib said of the Hasidic master, the great maggid, Dov Baer of Mezritch: “I did not go to the maggid in order to hear him expound on the Torah, the Scriptures, but to see how he unlaces his shoes and laces them up again.”

(see Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*, p. 107)

This Hasidic tale teaches us that the most ordinary acts, when performed with *kavannah*, sacred intention, can become extraordinary, even redemptive.

When Gordon Thompson offered me the great honor of introducing him today, he said:

“I don't know why I'm being given this award. I showed up for my classes for about 40 years...I was just a day-to-day teacher like most Earlham faculty.”

As some students would say: well,...like,...duh.

Teaching is what we do around here. It's what makes college college.

Besides, as Rebbe Zusya of Centerville said—or was it Menahem of College Avenue?—“Life is about showing up.”

But this award is not just about showing up. It's about *how* Gordon taught.

It's about teaching as listening: to texts, to ideas, and most of all, to students.

It's about teaching as an act of care. It's about teaching as an act of passion—whether for George Eliot, the metaphysical poets, or the sages of the Talmud. It's about teaching as an act of courage—for example, in teaching the Literature of the Middle East.

Gordon's teaching was deeply informed by his vision of Earlham College. We can discern a glimpse of an important dimension of that vision in the college's Statement on Religious Life, of which Gordon was the chief author.

That statement speaks of religious life at Earlham as constituted by four overlapping communities:

A Quaker Community, a college rooted in principles derived from the teachings of the Religious Society of Friends;

A Multi-Faith Community, made up of people of various faiths and religious practices and people of who identify with no particular historical community of faith;

A Community of Dialogue, in which our goal is to become good guests, good hosts, and good students of one another's religious traditions and practices. As Gordon put it, “Dialogue can sometimes be painful; the legacies of intolerance run through all our religious histories. Respectful dialogue, nevertheless, is the first step in modeling a peaceful world, in making new friends, in deepening our spiritual lives”;

A Rational Community, a college of liberal arts and sciences that expects its students and faculty to develop their intellects to the greatest extent possible, committed to the view that the intellect can most fruitfully develop in an environment that also nourishes the spiritual life. Gordon wrote, “We hope the possibility of spiritual wonderment, of awe, is never absent from our class-rooms, our laboratories, our libraries.”

This is teaching with *kavannah*, holy intention.

Had time permitted, I would have elaborated on Gordon Thompson as one of the primary architects of Jewish life as it now flourishes on campus. I would have spoken about Gordon as a person of wide interests, as someone whose intellect is like a mansion where each time you visit you discover a room that you did not know about beforehand.

And then there's his sense of humor. Share your stories about this afterwards.

I'll close simply by saying: Congratulations, Gordon, and thank you.

As we Quakers say, Mazel tov!