

REMEMBERING MEETING ERH

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In 1971-73 I was a graduate student at the Institute of Christian Thought at St. Michael's in the University of Toronto and living on a farm outside of Elmira, Ontario. I was also reading mss. for Harper and Row. Sometime in 1971 I received a ms. on Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. I don't remember the title and of course I had no idea of the author. Although I had read the *Christian Future Or the Modern Mind Outrun* in 1967, it was only after working for the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, organizing a series of events for the WELY or World Encounter of Lutheran Youth, and traveling in every Latin American country and encountering the Liberation theologians before we in North America knew they existed, that I had devoured all of ERH's writings available in English. When I came back to Canada from Europe in 1970, I was surprised to learn that a former colleague, Aarne Siirala, at Waterloo Lutheran University where I had taught from 1967-69 had included *Out of Revolution: The Autobiography of Western Man* in a seminar. I joined that class and it furthered my fascination. I was hot and full of enthusiasm for ERH.

I tore through the ms and gave it a very, very critical review. In retrospect, I don't think any ms. on ERH would have been satisfying or even adequate for me. I think it was a month later that I received a letter from Harper and Row. It contained the letter that Clinton Gardner had written to Harper and Row along with his request that it be forwarded to the person that had reviewed his manuscript. It was remarkably generous, even appreciative of my critical review and wondered if we might meet to talk about ERH. I remember his saying something about his surprise in discovering someone who seemed so enthusiastic about ERH. I was taken aback and feeling badly that I had been so harsh.

He invited me to visit him in Vermont and said that if I wished, I could meet Rosenstock-Huessy. I don't think I even realized that he was still alive. I got in touch with Clinton Gardner and arranged to go to Norwich in February of 1972. I arrived on a Friday in February and it was snowing in Vermont, but that was nothing special for someone who had grown up on the prairies of North Dakota. Besides, my Volkswagen even had a heater. I had a wonderful evening with Clinton Gardner. I hope I apologized for my critique of his ms, but I don't remember that. What I remember was a wonderful evening of conversation with someone who knew ERH inside and out. He had been at Camp William James, studied with ERH, lived in the same town for decades, and created Argo Books to keep some of ERH's writings in print.

Clint told me that he had arranged for me to meet Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy on Saturday morning around 10:00 am. He also told me – and this I remember very vividly – that sometimes ERH would be very present to a conversation and at other times he would just sit and hardly say a word. Clint said that just the other day he had a great conversation with Eugen, his term, not mine, about the Carolingian era, but other days not so much. So, I should be prepared. I told Clint that that was fine and I just wanted to tell ERH how much I had appreciated his writings and how inspiring they had been for me.

It had snowed heavily during the night and there was a fresh foot or two of snow on the ground the following morning. Clint drove me over to Four Wells, came to the door that was opened by Freya von Moltke, introduced me and took his leave. We then went into the living

room where some coffee had been set out and I had my first glimpse of this man who I felt had given me back my life. He had cut through the polarized mentality of our post-Enlightenment world and taught us of the multiformity of humanity that could not be reduced to the polarized ideologies of our time. He was smaller than I had anticipated and he was wearing a vest, it looked Mexican to me, that one of his grandchildren had given him. I was so happy to just be in his presence.

As Freya poured coffee, I told Rosenstock-Huessy of my gratitude, and a story from my days at Harvard Divinity School. I thought he would appreciate it since I knew that he had been “sent” there but didn’t want to be there. I told him that Professor Potter had once remarked that before the Spirit in the form of a dove could land on the altar of the divinity school chapel he would be nothing but feathers. Totally shredded by rational criticism! He laughed, he liked the joke! I also told him that I was working on the figure of Jonathan Edwards. He didn’t say a lot, and the conversation largely flowed through Freya von Moltke. I found her very impressive, articulate, and she obviously know ERH’s thought very well. When I would ask him about something in one of his writings, he would often say a word or two and then Freya would elaborate. She obviously know *Speech and Reality* and *I am an Impure Thinker* very well.

Clint had also told me something of Freya and I was fascinated by her story as well. It was something that I had not known anything about. Now it seemed I had a direct connection with the terrible war that the USA had entered just three months before I was born. While I know about Bonhoeffer and his opposition to Hitler, I did not know about James Helmuth von Moltke and the Krisau group, something that I would later hear about directly from Freya.

At one point I mentioned the possibility of returning to North Dakota and he suddenly blurted out: “Do you think you can save North Dakota?” Yikes. I didn’t know what he meant or why he said what he said, so I meekly said that it was just a thought.

It was nearing 11:30 when there was a knock on the front door. It was Page Smith and he was stuck in the drive-way. I realized it was time to say good-bye and I said I would help Page get his car out. I got my coat and grabbed a shovel, said hello to Page Smith – I didn’t know who he was at the time – and we went out. We got the car back on the road and I returned to Clint Gardner’s home.

I was so pleased that I had gotten to meet this remarkable man.

In July of 1972 I returned to Norwich and Four Wells. I don’t think that I was there for the birthday party, but it must have been around that time. This time I just sat with ERH on the stone patio (?) behind the house. We had tea, exchanged a few words, and mostly just sat together looking across the field down towards the Connecticut River. I asked him a few questions, but talking seemed an effort so we just sat together. It felt totally comfortable. It was a silent communion. It was the last time I saw ERH.