

The influence of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy on the life of Bas Leenman

Wim Leenman

My father, Bastiaan Leenman, Bas for short, met Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy in 1956. Bas, several of his friends, (among them Jaap Steigstra, Maarten van Vliet, Henk Durr, Adriaan van der Ven) and including his younger brother Wim Leenman, were part of a book discussion group. They came across ERH's name in a footnote in a book by the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte. As the story goes, against older brother Bas' advice, Wim wrote ERH which resulted in an invitation to come to Cologne where ERH was speaking. This meeting was followed by a return visit by ERH to Putten in the Netherlands. A friendship between ERH and the Dutch friends followed. Invitations to come for a visit to Four Wells in Vermont followed in 1963 and 1965.

It is not possible to separate the influence of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and the impact of Freya von Moltke. Freya' influence, often behind the scenes, is difficult to measure except to know it was wide spread.

Bas received his formal education as a WIKa (Werker in Kerkelijke Arbeid), {loosely translated as Worker in Church Labor} at Kerk and Wereld (Church and World) in Driebergen, the Netherlands. This training was part minister and part social worker. From the early 50's until 1962, Bas worked as WIKa in Velp, the Netherlands. In 1962, at the age of 42, he decided to leave this position and instead became one of the early computer programmers at the Dutch steelworks Hoogovens in IJmuiden. Otto Kroesen wrote me and said Bas had become convinced that the path he was on had no future. The change in jobs required a move from Velp to Heemskerk, north of Amsterdam. As a 12 year old, I was not much aware of the reasons for this move. In 1966, Bas left the Hoogovens, again without having another job lined up. By this time I was more aware and understood at least some of the implications of loss of income and uncertainty what to do next. I know that by this time there was a regular correspondence between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Bas, including letters that were accompanied by a check from Eugen or Freya to help alleviate the burden of loss of income. Also, several Dutch friends contributed financially while Bas searched for what to do next. Building on the contacts that Bas

had made both as WIKA and during the time he worked at the Hoogovens, Bas found a position with the Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam. He was deeply intrigued why the Diary of Anne Frank was so popular. This was not a book about war but about eight people forced to live together. Bas surmised that Anne Frank, in expressing her thoughts and feelings had described and given voice to a situation and a new society that echoed among the diary's readers. My understanding is that the job position's goals included fostering a better understanding between Jews and Christians. I have a clear memory driving with my father from the Netherlands to Switzerland for a private meeting he had with Otto Frank.

While this was happening, Freya arranged for me to spend the summer of 1967 in Vermont. In early July I arrived at Homeplace, the home of Hans and Mariot Huessy in Jericho, Vermont. Although Hans and Mariot had eleven children between them and were hosting Lucinda, a Navaho Indian, for two years of high school, I was added to the mix. Mariot told me later: "One does not say no to Freya."

While I spent a summer in Vermont, Bas' relationship with the Anne Frank Foundation ended over philosophical differences. Once again, Bas was unemployed. And once again, Freya stepped in and arranged for my parents and my three siblings to spend a year at Spring Lake Ranch in Cuttingsville, Vermont. ¹ Spring Lake Ranch was, and remains to this day, a special place as a community dedicated to better the lives of people afflicted with mental illness and addiction. Freya was Chair of the Board of Trustees of Spring Lake Ranch while Hans R. Huessy, M.D. was the Ranch's beloved psychiatrist. Michael Wells was Spring Lake Ranch' Director who guided the Ranch with wisdom and a firm but gentle hand.

I think it is to my parents' credit that they were willing to face uncertainty and try new things. My mother, Teuntje, was practical while my father took a long view of things. Together they made for an almost ideal combination. Throughout his life, Bas had an unshaken faith in the power of life itself. A recurrent theme in Bas' life was the on-going growth of Christianity. In 1958 he wrote an essay which he considered his favorite. "Het Heil of Weg" (Salvation on the Road) dealt with the way Christianity evolved from Jesus to his Disciples and continues to grow. Bas' contribution to the last ERH conference in Waterloo in 1988 entitled: "the Ever Growing Word" explored a similar theme. Although Bas no longer attended church on a regular basis

¹ www.springlakeranch.org

since he stopped his work as a WIKA, he continued his life as a practicing Christian. Bas would, on occasion, attend church at Mission Farm, the church where his friend Daniel Goldsmith was the Episcopal priest.

Throughout his life, Bas had a firm belief in coincidences as an affirmation of a life on the right track. He did not fail to notice his departure date from The Netherlands as the anniversary of the death of Freya's husband, Helmuth von Moltke on January 23, 1945. Due to numerous delays, my parents and siblings arrived in the USA on January 24, 1968. Little did Bas know that exactly 40 years later, on January 24, 2008, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, M.D. would honor him by stating during a visit to FortySeven Main Street, Inc. that the program my parents founded was "like an oasis in an otherwise barren field of mental health".²

My parents served as "house parents" at Spring Lake Ranch from January 1968 until April 1969. With the support of Michael Wells and Freya, who co-signed a mortgage, my parents moved to Castleton to a former nursing home to start their own program now known as FortySeven Main Street, Inc.³ My parents interest in mental health was a response to my sister's diagnosis of schizophrenia in 1965, later changed to bipolar disorder. Like all parents who have a child with a serious illness, this was a life changing event.

My parents ran FortySeven Main Street, Inc. from 1969 until 1985 when they decided to return to the Netherlands, leaving me in charge. While in Vermont, my father, almost without fail, visited Eugen and Freya at Four Wells almost every Wednesday. Eugen's influence on my parents work was almost entirely based on language. Bas developed an astute sense of whose language was "healthy" and whose language was not. They understood the power of the word to keep hope alive for those ready to give up. Both my parents worked passionately to create new beginnings and renewed faith for people whose lives had been impacted by severe and persistent mental illness. Eugen's influence on their program was further enhanced by Hans Huessy who became our consulting psychiatrist. The program my parents founded continued on. On April 18, 2014, FortySeven Main Street, Inc. will have been in existence for 45 years.

In 1985 by parents moved back to the Netherlands. I know less of this period of their lives. They became involved with the Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy Gesellschaft and with the Dutch group

² Rutland Herald, January 24, 2008

³ www.fortysevenmain.com

"Respondeo". There was limited involvement with the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis of which my uncle Wim was one of the co-founders. My parents did have close friendships with several of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis members. Numerous friendships with old friends were renewed. Chief among them were Wouter van Dam, Greet and Aart Oosterbroek, and Anneke van Oijen. Also Eckart Wilkens deserves a special mention. Bas continued to read, write and speak about Rosenstock-Huessy. As he had his entire adult life, he continued a vast correspondence. Bas' letters are now being edited, and readied for publication by Otto Kroesen and Anneke van Oijen. Chief among these letters are the correspondence between Bas and Miskotte and between Bas and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. At the invitation of Horst-Klaus Hoffman, the spiritual leader of the OJC community in Reichelsheim, my parents moved to Germany for a three year period. The stated goal for moving there was to teach Rosenstock-Huessy. Interestingly, my parents did not become members of this community of fundamental Christians but retained their "visitor" status and thus their independence.

Healthy language, knowing the right time, furthering the cause of Christianity, searching for community and a new society were essential themes in Bas' life. He had a firm belief in the ongoing journey of Christianity. He had no doubt that if Jesus were alive today, Jesus would have original answers. Jesus would not quote himself and say: "as I told you two thousand years ago". Bas fully expected that Jesus would have an original answer to the challenges we face today and that it is our task to figure out what Jesus would have said and done today. Bas had a firm belief in the eventual positive outcome for Mankind. He had a firm belief in our role as conductors of the orchestra of our own lives. Every instrument has a right to be heard. But, it is up to us, as conductor, to decide what instrument plays when and for how long and even, how loud. Bas was also very involved how the Word gets carried from generation to generation. The story of Jesus and the disciples played a pivotal role in Bas' life. How does one generation pass on what is important to the next generation? The fact that there are four gospels and four different ways to pass the message is essential. There is more than one way, there is more than one answer. The answer also depends on who is the listener. A recurrent theme is knowing on whose shoulders we stand, who made the sacrifices for life to go on, to whom or to what events do we owe a debt of gratitude. Bas also became convinced that Christianity was not an essential or mandatory gate to enter into the family of Mankind. Bas believed that Life itself had become "Christian" and that therefore conversion to Christianity was no longer necessary. The path to

the family of Mankind has been opened to Jews, Christians, Muslims, Atheist, Buddhists and all others whether he or she practiced a religion or not.

It is impossible for me to imagine a life without Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy or Freya von Moltke. Certainly marriages that took place, as a result of moving to the USA, would not have happened. Children and grandchildren would not have been born. FortySeven Main Street, Inc. would not exist. But beyond that, the friendship between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Bas Leenman would not have resulted in a several decades long friendship and collaboration. In my father's copy of Sprach Buch is the inscription: "An, fur und mit Bas" (to, for and with Bas).

My father's almost unshaken faith in life allowed him to endure periods of uncertainty with serenity and acceptance. His understanding of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's teaching allowed him to put a value on every event in his life and thus assess the relative importance of each event. Rosenstock-Huessy was a compass which showed which direction was worth pursuing and which direction was not.

Many friendships developed as a direct result of meeting Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Freya von Moltke. There were the von Moltke and Huessy families, including "Tante Lotti" and Verena Chase who became close friends. There were the Rosenstock-Huessy students among them Dan and Nadya Goldsmith, Bob O'Brien, Robert Heath, Clinton Gardner and Russ Keep.

I worked for Russ for 3 years in group homes for troubled teenagers in New Jersey. Russ was for me the next generation "translator" of Rosenstock-Huessy as relevant and applied to the lives of troubled teenagers. Creating a future for children who had none and who were in risk of becoming addicts and end up dead or in jail was our daily task. Russ also was able to look at seemingly impossible situations and come up with responses that were original, removed obstacles and objections, and opened the road again. I also learned what it is like to work with passion alongside co-workers who were equally passionate. The experience of working with Russ was a case of the master teaching the apprentice. I imagine that working with Russ was similar to what I understand was the experience of those who attended Camp William James. An experience that was formative, life altering, and the foundation upon which all else was built.

“I respond although I will be changed” could also have been a fitting epitaph for Bas’ life. He met Eugen, read and studied him with passion, moved to Vermont for 18 years, moved back to the Netherlands, moved to Germany and back to the Netherlands. All the while practicing and speaking about what he saw as important. Bas was fortunate in that for most of his life, his work and his deepest personal concerns were one and the same. Bas continued to read Eugen on a regular basis. He listened to the tapes, often straining to hear. He applied what he learned in his personal and professional life. He continued to teach, explain and built upon what he learned. For me, the lines of what are Rosenstock-Huessy’s thoughts and what are my father’s original thoughts or combinations of the thoughts of both are impossible to separate.

Klazina van Wel deserves a special mention. She was a close friend of my parents who lived and worked with them. Klazina followed my parents from the Netherlands to Vermont and back again. She was a Rosenstock-Huessy student in her own right and often visited Four Wells, the home of Eugen and Freya. Her contribution to my parents’ life was significant.

A few words about my mother. Although brought up in a time of European male dominance, my mother was, nevertheless, her own person who grew in stature over the years. Although her grasp of English was poor, she bravely and willingly moved to Vermont at the age of 47. Twenty years later, she again agreed to move to Germany and had to learn that language as well. Her natural kindness and genuine interest in other people helped make this process easier. Without my mother by his side my father would not have been able to accomplish what he did.

Joop Pieterse, a fellow student and WIKA, wrote Bas shortly before Bas died on April 2, 2006. Joop wrote: “jij was en bent en blijft een gezegend mens”. You were and are and remain a blessed human being.

Willem Leenman

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