



University of Humanity

This April 28th, William & Catherine Booth College in Winnipeg will hold its twentieth graduation convocation. As part of the 20-year celebrations, the College will be conferring its very first *honorary doctorate*. The recipient will be the College's founding president, Colonel Earl Robinson, BA, M.Div, MA, D.Min. Since he was my boss for twelve of those twenty years and a significant influence on my life as a professor, I'd like to honor him with this column.

I remember some of Earl's charming idiosyncrasies. I think, for instance, that he is probably the only college president in the world who painted his own car (a Chev). By hand. With a brush! While this showed Earl's frugality and humility—both virtues in a Salvation Army Officer—I was glad that he didn't make it policy for all faculty to follow suit.

I also remember being summoned to his office when a student complained about a movie I had shown in ethics class. The movie was the Richard Dreyfus version of "Whose life is it, anyway?" which I had used previously in the public university context to teach about euthanasia.. Now I found myself confronted with a student objecting. Not because the movie was pro-euthanasia, but because it contained some nudity. The student thought that completely inappropriate for a Christian college. I can't remember exactly how Earl Robinson guided the student and me through this dispute, but I recall that he did it with

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consummate diplomacy, helping me mature without forcing me into an intellectual straightjacket.

The gift of Christian diplomacy has fitted Colonel Robinson well for his most recent appointments as the chair of the international Doctrine Council and The Salvation Army's "ambassador" to various interchurch councils and United Nations bodies. What has also fitted him for these jobs is his globe-encircling Christian faith.

Earl and his wife Benita come originally from the small prairie city of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan—which, besides being their home, is famous as the Canadian hideout of Al Capone during Prohibition. Not the likeliest place for the Army to find people with an expansive outlook, one might think. But that's where we found them.

It's their big vision of the great work of Christian faith education that made Earl Robinson the right man to be the pioneering president of the Army's first degree-granting post-secondary institution anywhere in the world, and Benita Robinson his unequalled assistant.

Some have the idea that Christian education is narrow and doctrinaire. (One of the battles Earl had to fight from his first days as president was the feeling that putting "Bible" in front of "college," as in "Catherine Booth Bible College," carried the connotation of "not-a-real-college." Unfortunately this was the assumption of many Christians as well as non-Christians, and is part of the reason the college now has a different name.)

By contrast, Colonel Robinson's vision is of Christian education that is truly liberating. People who have God-given talents but are denied the opportunity to nurture

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and sharpen them end up personally frustrated. And the rest of us are shortchanged because their gifts are squandered. Much better that education set them free.

To explain his vision, Earl liked to quote a fascinating memorandum that William Booth himself penned around 1900 regarding a “university of humanity.” Said Booth, “My wish is the establishment of a great Training Institution, an International University for training men and women for dealing with the sins and miseries of the submerged throughout the world....These Officers [William Booth thought all his graduates would become Officers] would come, in time, to represent every country on the face of the earth. In their acceptance no distinction would be made, or preference shown, with regard to sex, language, nation or colour.” In Booth’s dream university, students, who would generally come from non-privileged backgrounds, would qualify for “evangelistic work among the masses,” and also “medical work, engineering, architecture, accountancy and auditing, finance, editorial and literary pursuits.” The reason for the broad range of studies? Human need and injustice has many facets.

Colonel Robinson knew the college he headed up for twelve years could not bring William Booth’s dream to full realization. But it’s a great dream, isn’t it? And the growing consortium of Army colleges—of which Crestmont College in California and William & Catherine Booth College in Canada are parts—is vital to keeping that dream alive.

I had a non-Salvationist graduate student of mine ask me recently if the Army was having trouble attracting its most talented youth to ministry within the Army. His denomination was, he said, and he just wondered about us. The regrettable answer is yes. I wonder whether it would be different if William Booth’s and Earl Robinson’s vision

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caught fire. Imagine informed Christian faith integrated with the knowledge and skills necessary for the *full range* of human need, and set free (as Booth put it) “to deal effectively with those suffering from the most terrible and crying evils that afflict the race”—it still inspires *me*! Thank you, Earl Robinson, for committing yourself to the advancement of this ideal.

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