



Eastern
Mennonite
University

EMU Donor Appreciation Banquet

October 9, 2015

Keynote address – Loren E. Swartzendruber

Muchas gracias, danke shon, and kam sa ham ni da. Most of you recognize the Spanish, some of you know the German. Kam sa ham ni da is Korean.

Here's another one - "Teh shek uer eh der eem" (Turkish) Here's an obvious question-- teh shek uer ed der eem is a bit long. Does that mean that Turkish people don't say "thank you" very often? I'm guessing they have a shorter version, something like "thanks!" Maybe just "teh shek?"

My primary intent this evening is very simple and straightforward -- to say "thanks" to each of you for your generous support of EMU's vital mission. I realize some of you might prefer that I just say, danke shon, and sit down. Before I get to thanking you as donors, however, I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank Pat and our adult children and their spouses for their constant love and support over these 13 years.

Last Christmas Eve Pat and I celebrated our 45th wedding anniversary. Contrary to what some of you are thinking, we did NOT get married while still in high school, but it's true, we didn't wait long!

Our children:

Tim and Nicole Noguerras

Beth and Mike Goertzen

Steve and Katie Grove Swartzendruber

Angela and Joe Hackman

They aren't here tonight but we've also been blessed by the energy of five grandchildren, now ages 1-6.

As I thought of the different ways of saying "thank you," I recalled an interesting language observation with our oldest grandson, Noah, when he was perhaps 8 months old. Obviously he wasn't talking (perhaps I shouldn't say obviously, because "obviously" all our grandchildren are well above average!). But, he wasn't talking and I was counting to him in English. Then I switched to German--einz, swei, drei, fuer, fuenf. It was hilarious; as soon as I said "fuenf" he started laughing. Something about the sound of the German "fuenf" struck him as funny. I doubt that is how a German child responds to "fuenf." How does language develop in such a small child, who cannot even yet form words, that he or she would know that a word in another language sounds different?

Most of us who have studied a foreign language know that some languages, like English, are more difficult to learn as a second language than others. Most people would say that Arabic is one of those difficult languages. Archbishop Elias Chacour, in his visit to EMU some years ago, made a joke about it. "Everyone says that Arabic is so difficult to learn. Here's what I say to that. Come with me to Palestine and I'll show you that even little children can learn Arabic very easily." Incidentally, thank you in Arabic is "shukran."

In the remaining minutes let me identify a few things, among many possibilities, for which I am thankful. Let me be very clear—I am thankful for your partnership in making so many things possible at EMU.

Muchas gracias for your generosity which provides financial support for students like Jolee and Maria. For the past 23 years, at Hesston College and EMU, I've had a front row seat to observe the impact of your generosity on our undergraduate, graduate and seminary students. Not only do we get to witness the impact of EMU while they are students, some of us have the incredible opportunity to engage alumni who are serving and leading all over the world. At the end of every academic year we share in special events such as the athletic and senior banquets. The last chapel services of each

semester are given to sharing from the cross-cultural groups that have just returned to campus. It is frequently the case that we walk out of those events saying to each other, "This is why we do this work." This is why we endure some of the challenges that keep us awake at night.

Danka shoen for generously supporting a vital ministry of the Christian church that is walking boldly into the conversations of the day as followers of Jesus. Our culture, including the church, is fragmented by the polarities that threaten to divide us. We live in a society that is characterized by fear and anxiety, rather than hope. The Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman has said that roots of the surface issues that divide us are fear and anxiety—the world isn't turning out the way we thought it would. Things seem to be falling apart all around us. We desperately cling to that which is familiar and safe. I understand that impulse.

Over the past 40 years as a pastor and involvement in Mennonite education I've preached in nearly 300 congregations. In recent years I've been asking a question of the parents. "Do any of you practice your faith and hold exactly the same beliefs as your parents?" No one, among hundreds of parents, has yet had the audacity to raise their hands. And then, slightly tongue in cheek, I follow that with, "Congratulations. You are the very first generation since the beginning of humankind to get it absolutely right!" What an accomplishment! Finally, we have figured it all out and our children should never have to make any changes. If only they would be so wise as to see that we have arrived at perfection? (To our own kids—are you listening? Trust us—your mother and I know best!. Well at least she does!)

So I do understand the human tendency to succumb to fear and anxiety. It's hard to maintain a sense of equilibrium as we read the daily newspapers and watch the constant stream of news. We do have serious problems to address in our society and church. But, here's my problem. The Bible, which all of us take seriously as God's story of salvation history, repeatedly invites, indeed implores us to "fear not." It seems rather obvious to me that many Christians in our context aren't getting the message. I don't mind saying that I'm so concerned about the hijacking of the "Christian" brand by some

segments of the American church that it's easier for me to stake my claim as a follower of Jesus.

"Kam sa ham ni da" for generously supporting an institution that challenges all of us to confront the status quo. We occupy a rather narrow niche, but one that I would suggest is increasingly appealing and much needed in our world. As followers of Jesus we believe that the Sermon on the Mount leads us to positions that are not popular with secular culture on the one hand nor with many fellow Christians on the other hand. It is a "third way" alternative that is both demanding and liberating. It is a vision that none of us can achieve on our own strength but rather one that thrives by the ongoing energy of the Holy Spirit and by the encouragement of a community engaged in the hard but inescapable work of discernment.

Thank you for providing opportunities for our students to encounter cultures around the world different from their own. I dare say that if every American attended a college where such expectations were built into the curriculum many of our current problems would be significantly diminished over time. We would more quickly understand that "the other" is not nearly so threatening as we tend to assume. We might internalize emotionally what we know to be true intellectually—the dreams and hopes for a sustainable world that provides for the basic needs of all God's children are universal.

Over these years Pat and I have visited cross cultural groups in Guatemala, New Zealand, China, the Middle East, Zimbabwe, Washington D.C., and Vietnam. One of the most vivid memories is our experience of Easter weekend in Nazareth. We began the weekend with a Friday evening Shabbat service in a Jewish synagogue on the edge of the city. Our students were invited to sing two or three songs for the gathered group. After the service I was chatting with a few of the older members of the synagogue and one of them asked, "So how long has this choir been on tour?"

The highlight of the weekend, in spite of the exhaustion from chasing Linford Stutzman on foot several miles from the hostel in center city up the mountainside, was the Easter sunrise service we experienced as a group. Our photos of the students perched on the mountainside watching the sun rise above the sea of clouds obscuring the valleys all around us are among my most prized possessions. I doubt we will ever experience a more meaningful celebration of Easter in our lifetimes.

Finally, shukran, muchas gracias, danke shoen, kam sa ham ni da, teh shek uer eh der eem, thank you, for the extraordinary privilege of your friendship and for the opportunity to serve the church that has nurtured, challenged, encouraged, (and sometimes frustrated) me over these past years. The future of Eastern Mennonite University is bright—it is bright because of you, the faculty and staff that serve with distinction and sacrifice, and it is bright because of what I know our students are being prepared to do—to serve and lead in a global context!