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Forum

In Memoriam Zoltán Dörnyei (1960-2022)

The Christian TESOL community was saddened to hear the news of Zoltán Dörnyei's death on June 10, 2022. He was a friend and mentor to many and will be greatly missed.

Zoltán began his career as a language teacher for International House in Budapest, Hungary. He completed his PhD in Psycholinguistics at Eötvös Loránd University in 1989 and he began teaching in the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in 1988. He joined the School of English at the University of Nottingham in 2000. In 2003 he received a D.Sc. in Linguistics from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In 2017 Zoltán completed a Ph.D. in Theology from Durham University.

Zoltán's research and scholarship focused on how motivation affected the language learning process, and he was considered one of the foremost scholars on the topic. His Christian faith also was an important part of his life and he was eager to integrate his faith and scholarship.

In 2013 he co-edited the book, *Christian Faith and English Language Teaching and Learning* (Routledge). His theological dissertation was revised and published in 2018 as *Progressive Creation and the Struggles of Humanity in the Bible: A Canonical Narrative Interpretation* (Pickwick). He published a final book on this topic, *Vision, Mental Imagery and the Christian Life: Insights from Science and Scripture* (Routledge, 2020).

Zoltán was a friend and mentor to many in the Christian TESOL community and in this section we hear from three individuals who knew him well in these roles. Eleanor J. Pease describes the influential role his work had in her scholarship. Elfrieda Lepp-Kaethler shares her experience in working with him as her doctoral advisor. Mary Shepard Wong recounts the opportunities that she had to collaborate with Zoltán on several projects. Each of these tributes portrays Zoltán as more than an intellectual giant, but more importantly as a kind, humble and godly man.

Tribute to Dr. Zoltán Dörnyei
Eleanor J. Pease

While preparing for a higher education course on second language acquisition, I was introduced to the work of Dr. Dörnyei. As I developed more Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages courses, I leaned heavily on his work and the deeper my research went the more I realized that something set him apart from others. I thought, “This man must be a Christian.” His treatment of the motivational needs of learners and the methods for facilitating their motivation and learning was in tune with biblical teaching. Sometime later, in talking to a colleague, I discovered that Zoltán was indeed a Christian, well-known for taking a stand for the claims of Jesus Christ. This fell in line with the history of linguistics and the wealth of dedicated Christians, such as Eugene Nida, Kenneth Pike, and William Smalley, who were leaders in the field.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Zoltán because of the strong influence of his work when I was in my doctoral studies on the role of affect in Japanese adolescent English language learners, when developing graduate level language-related courses for two colleges, and when teaching in those colleges. In 2008, I chaired the annual CELT conference in New York City and was thrilled when he agreed to be the plenary speaker. This gave my own students an opportunity to meet him face-to-face and to talk with a globally known professor whose calling was not only in psycholinguistics, but also in demonstrating Christ-like humility.

Zoltán’s gracious generosity is another notable quality. Through the years, whenever I had occasion to communicate with Zoltán, he was always prompt in responding. He shared something about his life, such as his goal to earn a PhD in Theology and then its completion, and he always took care in answering my questions. The greatest example of his generosity is in granting permission to adapt his motivational self-system for a women’s Bible study on “Daughters of the King.” In addition, he sent materials that would help with building the course. Most encouraging was his statement, “I would also love to hear more details about how my work fits into the intriguing topic of the course. It sounds genuinely interesting!”

I don’t know why God chose to call Zoltán home, but when I think back over my many students—students diverse in race and religion—who were influenced by Dr. Dörnyei’s work, I can confidently say God has done great things through this humble and gracious man and will continue to do so because his work lives on.

Eleanor J. Pease (ejpease2005@yahoo.com) semi-retired in 2009, when she and her husband moved to a retirement community in Fort Myers, Florida. She continued to teach online for Nyack College in New York and agreed to teach for Spring Arbor University in Michigan. About four years ago, she went into full retirement and now enjoys playing her cello and writing a weekly devotional for women.

Zoltán Dörnyei, my Doktor Vater
Elfrieda Lepp-Kaethler

When I began my work as assistant professor of TESOL in 2007, I was encouraged to apply for doctoral programs “– not right away,” said my dean, “but once you have mastered that anxiety that is common in a new teaching post.” “Your supervisor is the key,” advised another colleague. “Make sure he or she is someone you can work with. Go to conferences, listen to presenters, find someone who resonates.”

I first met Zoltán in the spring of 2008 at a conference of Christian educators in TESOL at Nyack College in New York. I had read some of his work on L2 Motivation. At Nyack, he spoke of his Motivational Self System and its relevance to Christian faith. Mesmerized by his gentle and humble manner, I heard him inviting ‘practitioners’ to take his constructs and research them. I had the urge to shoot up my hand right there and shout, “I could do that!” I didn’t shout, but I made a quiet beeline to shake his hand and ask if he was taking doctoral students.

Once at home, I formulated my research questions in a brief paragraph, but sending them to him in Nottingham was a steep climb. I felt insignificant against this giant of a scholar. Would my small voice even be heard in the halls of the towering Nottingham? With much encouragement from my colleagues, and much trembling, I pressed the ‘send’ button. Two hours later, I had a response from Zoltán. Two hours. He told me about this on his end later. “That first email, Frieda, I knew you were on to something.”

This was the beginning of annual trips between Winnipeg and Nottingham. Always eager to travel, my husband (born and raised in a South American country) volunteered to be my ‘bodyguard’. Always eager to combine motherhood with work or studies, I offered my three children – now in their teens and twenties – each a turn to accompany their mother on ‘educational field trips’ to the U.K. Everyone got to meet Zoltán and Sarah, Aaron and Benny, and enjoy dinner at their house – a privilege enjoyed by all Zoltán’s doctoral students. Zoltán’s ‘Hungarian’ hospitality was memorable: scrumptious Goulash till we could not hold another bite.

Then Zoltán to Sarah in a low voice imitating a typical Hungarian host: “You see, Sarah, they didn’t even like the food. They ate nothing!”

Having grown up in communist and atheist Hungary, Zoltán encountered Christian faith as an unanticipated and unlikely explosion into his life. Over dinner in their home, Sarah and Zoltán related to us their radical conversion stories – in a small evangelical church in Budapest. As a new Christian, he took up several ‘spiritual disciplines.’ One was painting icons. “I’m not an artist,” he said, “But I just love the colors.” Another discipline was launching on a program of study in Theology. “It’s just the way I learn best.” His humility was astounding. His PhD in Psycholinguistics was not seen as relevant for studies in Theology; he was expected to begin from scratch, which he did, without complaint. Except once. In his undergraduate in Bible and Theology, he was required to take a course in learning styles. He approached the instructor after class one day and said, quietly, “Well, actually, I’ve published a book on this topic.” His instructor (who obviously had no idea of Zoltán’s illustrious and world-renown career in Psycholinguistics and L2 Motivational Theory) said: no. Zoltán still had to take the course and do all the assignments. His MA was a thesis on Transcendental Beauty, which shed light on his fascination with ‘visual theology’ and iconography. Only then could he start his PhD in Theology proper, which was about the time I arrived at Nottingham. “We’ll do this together,” he said to me, “we’ll both be doctoral students.” Zoltán completed his PhD. in theology in 2016.

As a family, we got precious glimpses into Zoltán’s devotion to his wife Sarah, and to his children, Ben and Aaron, who is on the spectrum. Zoltán’s playful tenderness as a father might be best seen through the eyes of Chippy, Aaron’s little toy duck, who was also ‘pursuing a doctorate’. Each time we came, we would get dinner table updates on Chippy’s ‘progress’. At one point, Chippy was ‘narrowing down his research questions’, then he was ‘working on his literature review’. Once, Chippy had been ‘fooling around and neglecting his research, having too much fun’. “But, Zoltán,” I said, “you told me we should be enjoying our research process.” “Yes,” he said, “those are lies we tell our first-year students.”

Having too much fun was not my problem, at least not initially. Four months into the program and I found myself on a one-year medical leave with a severe clinical depressive episode. Foundationally shaken in my already weak confidence in my ability to climb this sheer doctoral cliff, I floundered with changing my research focus. “We need to talk with Zoltán,” said my husband. We arrived in Nottingham on a Sunday. Zoltán, together with his family, picked us

up from our hotel along with another international Ph.D. student – from Japan, I think. “I had promised the kids we’d go to McDonald’s,” he said, half apologetically. Over hamburgers and French fries, Zoltán smiled warmly across the table. “We’ll figure something out for you, Frieda.”

The last time I met Zoltán was in Chicago in 2018 at the international TESOL conference. I planned on paying for drinks, but he insisted, “Of course not, Frieda – once a supervisor, always a supervisor.” We got caught up on work and family. Still fascinated with the ‘Chippy saga’, I asked about ‘Chippy’s progress.’ Yes, finally, the time had come for Chippy’s defence – an ‘external’ had to be found for him. The eminent Emma Ushioda became Chippy’s examiner, and a celebration dinner was held at the Dörnyei home. Chippy, just six inches tall, had completed his Ph.D. But then Zoltán was never one to worry about stature.

In German, the term for one’s doctoral supervisor is ‘Doktor Vater’ – Doctor Father. The words of the German poet Matthias Claudius (1740–1815) from his poem “At the graveside of my father” come to mind: “They have buried a good man . . . but for me he was more.”

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Emails from Zoltán Mary Shepard Wong

When I read The University of Nottingham’s “In Memoriam - Professor Zoltán Dörnyei” I was a bit disappointed as there was so much more to this man than his Ph.D.s and many publications. To me, it failed to get at who he was, how he sought after God, and the many ways he invested in his students and colleagues.

I’m one of the lucky ones. I got to work with Zoltán for well over a decade. My email exchanges with Zoltán number in the high hundreds. It all started with an email request to contribute a chapter to the edited volume that Suresh and I were working on from 2005–2009. I don’t have a record of emails before 2010, but I recall he was quick to accept. Later he told me that the chance to deeply reflect on how his academic work intersected with his Christian faith

was something new to him and that he deeply enjoyed. He mentioned that writing the chapter for us was the impetus for him to start a doctorate in theology, which he completed in 2017.

To get a sense of what it was like to work with Zoltán, let me share excerpts from some of his emails. I sent this email to Zoltán after Carolyn Kristjánsson and I drafted a book idea on a napkin at the Cheesecake Factory in Boston following our TESOL panel, *English teaching and Christian mission: Empirical research perspectives*.

April 17, 2010 Dear Zoltán,
[. . .] My co-presenter, Carolyn Kristjánsson (Trinity Western University) and I got to thinking, why not edit a book on empirical studies on ELT and Christianity? Since we both have done qualitative studies and are not well-known scholars in the field, our thought and prayer was to ask a scholar like you to join the project to lend credibility and support. :) So I got to dreaming what a call for papers would look like and came up with the following. (See attached).

His response came so quickly that we were shocked.

April 19, 2010 Dear Mary and Carolyn,
Thank you very much for your intriguing e-mail with the very kind invitations. I really appreciate your thinking of me. Having thought about this, my answer to both issues is an enthusiastic 'yes'.
[. . .]
I am genuinely touched by your gracious response. I sincerely hope that our planned volume will become a significant contribution both to our own lives and to the field. There is undoubtedly something very special about English with regard to the progress of Christianity, just as Greek played a crucial role in New Testament times – so I pray that we may understand and reveal to others some of this special character in the post-Babel world.

Not long after that, we got the good news of an accepted book proposal, which resulted in the 2013 volume that the three of us co-edited with a few co-authored chapters. He wrote us this:

Jan 26, 2011 Dear Mary and Carolyn,
We did it! I am really pleased about this - Routledge is a good publisher. (I must admit, I have doubted until now whether they would issue a contract without seeing the actual studies . . .) Well-done to both of you for dreaming this up and Mary, I think you handled [it] perfectly - thank you!

Something I'm sure many others know about Zoltán was how welcoming he was, eager to share both professionally and personally as expressed here:

April 2010 Dear Mary and Carolyn,
Just to make our cooperation more personal, please find attached a photo of myself with my family, taken last week during our family trip to Israel (the church behind us is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem).

All the best,
Zoltán

Carolyn and I would plan dinners with Zoltán every time he came to speak at TESOL or AAAL. Those dinners were amazing. I recall that getting to a restaurant near the conventions was not always easy with so many people coming up to him to shake his hand or ask for a photo. I felt like his bodyguard at times. We had more extended time to talk over several days in Hong Kong in 2012, when once again, he accepted my request, this time to be a plenary speaker at the CELT conference at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

I'll conclude with one of his last emails from 2019, telling me he was mailing me yet another one his books from the U.K.

Aug 9, 2019 Dear Mary,
The Vision book is out! I would love to send you a copy – what address shall I send it to?
Once again, thank you for all your help!
With love,
Zoltán

Love to you, too, Zoltán. Thank you for sharing your work and your life with us.

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