

Grace in the center: A sampling of sayings

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

Tim Goeglein, special assistant to the president and deputy director of the Office of Public Liaison, was recently caught plagiarizing Dartmouth veteran Jeffrey Hart. At issue was a Hart editorial that included a quotation from Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, miscopied by Goeglein as Eugene Rosenstock-Hussey. While the administration wants to forget Goeglein, let me thank him for bringing to remembrance Eugen R.-H. I want to seize the opportunity to answer the *New Yorker's* punning question, "Rosenstock-Huessy, who is he?"—asked after W. H. Auden put more of the German scholar's aphorisms into the *Viking Book of Aphorisms* than he did quotations from Voltaire.

Berlin-born in 1888 to a wealthy Jewish family, a casual baptizee at age 14, Eugen Rosenstock first earned a doctorate in law, then married Margrit Huessy and, Swiss-style, hyphenated his name. (I used to quote him so often in talks that I was counseled to cut down references; repeating his long name took too much lecture time.) The scholar saw frontline action in World War I, and corresponded with his friend Franz Rosenzweig, the foremost Jewish philosopher of the century. In 1923 he acquired a doctorate in philosophy, then taught legal history at the University of Breslau.

He helped invent modern work camps such as Camp William James, a haven for conscientious objectors in New England during World War II. Anti-Nazi, he resigned from the university in 1933 and a year later was teaching at Harvard, where he was regularly criticized for sounding too Christian. He taught at Dartmouth for a score of years. After retiring, he continued writing in Norwich, Vermont.

I was influenced enough by him to write a now forgotten book on his theme *Respondeo etsi mutabor*, "I Respond Although I Will Be Changed." The motto would be on my coat-of-arms if I had one. In 1966 I reviewed him in this magazine: "It has never been possible to pigeon-hole Rosenstock-Huessy. [His] juxtaposition of

conventional genius and genial unconventionality is both disconcerting and creative. . . . In 1946 Rosenstock-Huessy was ahead of his time—and he still is today.”

Those who want to get started on him might read *The Multiformity of Man*; *The Christian Future or the Modern Mind Outrun*; or *I Am an Impure Thinker*, with its provocative essay “Farewell to Descartes.”

The best service I can perform post-Googling is to offer samples of his sayings, plundered—with acknowledgment!—from a collection of his aphorisms culled by his tireless editor, Clinton C. Gardner, in *Life Lines*.

“Anybody in our midst who boasts that he is a liberal or a conservative obviously cannot count to three—Nobody can be anything but a liberal conservative or a progressive reactionary.” (We might say that anyone who claims to be orthodox or heretical cannot count to three. Nobody can express anything except heretical orthodoxy or orthodox heresy.)

“Any original thinker knows that he has to jump; later you can build bridges.” Such a risk taker has to be open to the future: *“Any man who says he is ‘just’ something has ceased to live. How can he know what he will be tomorrow?”*

Jumping means possessing a firm undergirding: *“As soon as we place grace where it belongs, in the center of life, as its inspiration, life ceases to be arbitrary or accidental or casual or boring.”*

And finally, the basics: The human *“is equipped with two great forces—hope and faith—compared to which his intelligence is a minor matter. If you have faith, you will live forward in spite of disappointment. If you have hope, you will let nothing die that once proved worthwhile.”*