

Teaching moments: Attentive to the text

by [Beverly R. Gaventa](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

Sometime in the middle of my second year at New York's Union Seminary, I made an appointment to consult with J. Louis Martyn about my prospects for graduate work in New Testament. I gathered together my undergraduate transcript, a list of courses I had taken at Union, copies of my seminary papers in biblical studies, and all the courage I could muster. At the agreed-upon hour, I arrived at his study, presented my case, and put forward the anxious question, "In your judgment, do I have the credentials and the abilities for scholarly work in New Testament?"

The response was not what I expected: "Well, now tell me, Beverly. What do you understand to be your vocation?" Stunned by this conversational curve ball, I stumbled around for an answer and then tried again to focus the discussion on my concern about whether I could do the work, only to hear a second question, "Do you think God would call you to do something without giving you the ability to do it?"

That moment was pivotal in my formation as an exegete in service of the church. With penetrating simplicity, Lou Martyn had taken a question about ability and desire and career and handed it back to me as a question about vocation, a distinctly theological question. Although the conversational turn took me by surprise, it should not have done so. By that time I had been sitting in his classroom for a year or more, and I knew that the shortest path between two points was not the one likely to be chosen by Lou Martyn.

My introduction to Lou came during my second semester, when I enrolled in his exegesis class on Romans. To tell the truth, I took that course solely because it fulfilled a graduation requirement. My interest in biblical studies at the time was roughly the equivalent of my current interest in professional football. By the end of the semester, I was studying the course offerings for the following year with an eye to 1 Corinthians and the Gospel of John, not to mention digging out my abandoned undergraduate Greek textbook. To say that I experienced a change of mind is too

little. I was grabbed by the text, and it would not let me go. More than 30 years later it still will not let me go.

What happened? I saw exegesis in the making. Lou would come into the classroom, sit down at the end of the table of maybe 15 students, and pull out from his briefcase a Greek New Testament, held together by layers of electrical tape, along with a file of handwritten notes. Discussion would begin. His attention was unabashedly riveted to the text—to every letter and each nuance.

I remember much about that course. There I first encountered Karl Barth's commentary on Romans. Lou's passing reference to John Steinbeck sent me searching through *East of Eden*, because I simply had to understand the connection Lou made between that novel and Romans 7. I remain grateful for the care lavished on my pitiful attempts at exegesis by Lou and his teaching fellow, Jennifer Frost. And Lou's remarks on the conflicting perceptions of the cross, especially in 1 Corinthians 1:18, reverberate in every course I teach on Paul.

Yet the vivid memory I carry from that course is of a man who is utterly engrossed in a text, as if the letters might rearrange themselves if he looked away, as if some new language would speak from it by virtue of the very gaze of the reader. When, years later, I read Simone Weil's essay on the importance of school studies for prayer and noted her insistence on giving "attention," I knew immediately where I had first seen attention being paid.

Observing someone else's vocation is a powerful thing. Yet Lou's classes never consisted of passive exercises in which the novice simply watched the expert at work. We were invited to engage the text on our own, bringing to class our hunches, our observations and especially our questions. As we sputtered those out (mercifully I have forgotten most of them), Lou would dig around among them, spot some tiny speck of an idea, and then coax the student into elaborating on it. Lou possesses an uncommon capacity to listen for what is actually trying to be said, as well as the patience to endure maddening false starts along the way.

In those early years of coming to know J. Louis Martyn, I do not remember an occasion when he spoke directly of his own personal commitment to the Word witnessed to in the words we were studying. He did not need to: his careful, disciplined attention spoke eloquently to the importance of the text for his own being. I also do not remember an occasion when I wondered about his faith. It did

not seem to me possible that the concentration with which he read the lines of Romans or the intensity with which he listened to fumbling voices could be consistent with anything other than a living faith. His eyes and his ears told the whole of the story. Faith was not so much something to be uttered as it was something enacted in our classroom in bodily form.

In the years since, I have encountered and wearied of the complaints made about biblical scholars who have distanced themselves from the text and who disdain the Christian faith itself. That was never my experience, either with Louis Martyn or with any of my teachers. Their vocation led them to give witness—sometimes explicitly, often implicitly and always genuinely—to the real nourishment of the scripture and the sheer delight to be found in its study.