



# Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

## *Phyllis and Elmer Martens: Trees of Inspiration*

When I think of my parents, Phyllis and Elmer Martens, two different trees come to mind: a willow and an oak. The willow is graceful, fluid, bends with the wind, and branches can be bowed to the ground but not broken. The oak is solid, grounded, sometimes unyielding, but the roots are deep and unshakable. The image of these two trees creates a context for how my parents provided a place of rest for many who would find acceptance and guidance over 60 years under the shade of their branches.

Phyllis Hiebert (1928–2016) was born in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. Her formative years were spent in India, the daughter of Mennonite Brethren (MB) missionaries and the eldest of eight children. Her worldview was shaped by cultural diversity, boarding school, and creative play. Painting, sketching, creative puppetry, games, and music were her outlets of artistic expression and deep intelligence. She received a Master's degree in English at the University of Kansas and taught writing and English classes for various educational institutions.

Upon returning from the mission field in her late teens and continuing throughout her life, Phyllis struggled with bouts of depression. As a keenly intelligent woman, she

questioned how churches taught faith and the concept of God, asking why they portrayed God as judgmental toward individuals who did not conform to a particular identity as prescribed by church leaders. She felt that this effectively produced cookie-cutter Christians without unique expression. Phyllis channeled her ideas through sketches and drawings that challenged the church culture and unhealthy teaching.

Phyllis's questioning also put her on a philosophical path of searching for the divine perspective and regard for all of humanity. Receiving a Master's degree in Counseling from the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS), in Fresno, California, in her later years allowed her to positively impact the lives of those she encountered. Her work as a school counselor for Jackson Elementary in Fresno enabled her to use unique interventions and teaching strategies that are not found in textbooks. Her delightful

sense of humor emerged while dealing with angry or frustrated grandchildren; her "diversion tactics" included taking them outside to see the wild "animals" or to feed the "hippos" in the bathtub. Their belief in her vivid imagination quickly caused any negativity to vanish!



Phyllis and Elmer Martens

Elmer Martens (1930–2016) grew up in Main Centre, Saskatchewan, the eldest of four children and son of immigrants to Canada. His worldview was shaped by farming, agriculture, and a rural MB church community. Elmer loved to sing and play violin, but studying was his passion. He preached his first sermon at fourteen and felt called to God’s service at that age. Moving to California, he enrolled at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary to further his education in theology; he met Phyllis, who was working at Pacific Bible Institute, and they got married in 1956. He received his PhD in Old Testament from Claremont Graduate School and became a lifelong Old Testament professor at MBBS, serving for nine years as president.

With a chuckle, Elmer would often comment about being a farm boy from Canada who never thought he would be immersed in academic circles on a global scale and renowned for his Old Testament expertise. Those who had him as a professor remember how excited he could become over one of their ideas; often seeing the potential long before they did, ready with suggestions for turning a paper into a publication. His keen commitment to pedagogy, formation, and mentoring was remarkable. They could also witness the blend of farm boy and scholar. For example, one day he came to class with poison oak blotches and welts all over his face from cutting wood in the mountains, but this did not stop him from teaching. When asked why class wasn’t canceled, he said with a smirk, “I don’t have to look at it, so what’s the problem?”

Two different “trunks” but the “branches” could often be seen as intertwined. One such branch was in scholarship and authorship. Elmer exuded passion about theology, publishing numerous articles and books on Old Testament

(*God’s Design*) and on biblical understandings of the prophets (*Jeremiah Commentary*). Phyllis was intrigued by philosophy and the English language, publishing in children’s literature (*Manners for Kids* and *Buzzer Bug*), biographical stories (*Stories from an Old Town*), and English Learning Games. They both used creative and unique pedagogies, impacting and challenging students to think more broadly, widely, and deeply.

Elmer was often asked to teach and preach around the world to pastors, missionaries, and students, which provided Phyllis the opportunity to accompany him and paint or sketch amazing scenes of their travels, capturing each culture in vibrant visual form. Together they combined auditory, written, and visual learning styles to communicate the beauty of the global community.

The other intertwining branch was that of hospitality, extended to family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Their home had an open door, and anyone who walked through might encounter the delicious smell of curry or taste homemade ice cream. In conversations, Phyllis and Elmer emanated wisdom and support, one in gentle listening and the other in confrontive challenge, but both from a place of genuine interest and compassion to see the person move toward a better place.

Two completely different trees but both rooted in love, faith, learning, and openness to new cultural experiences. As their daughter, I fondly remember camping in the mountains and emerging from the tent to find them both reading by the morning campfire or sitting under the shade of a tree, waiting for the world to awaken to discover the delights and wonder of creation and humanity. For that, I am deeply grateful and indebted to my “trees” of inspiration.



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