

## **In Remembrance of J. Milton Yinger**

By John Yinger

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I would like to begin by thanking you all for being here to honor my father, J. Milton Yinger, also known as Professor Yinger, Milton, Milt, Honnie, Uncle Honnie, Granddaddy, and, of course, Dad.

I have spoken with many of you. Some of you were his students and know what a wonderful teacher he was. Others were his colleagues and know what a great colleague he was. Others were his friend and know what a thoughtful, loyal friend he was. Still others were his tennis partners and know how much fun it was to play tennis with him. So you can all begin to imagine my immeasurable good fortune because J. Milton Yinger was my teacher, my colleague, my friend, my tennis partner—and my father to boot.

My father was most of all a family man. He met my mother while they were both graduate students at the University of Wisconsin. They were married for 61 years, until she passed away in 2002. So far as my sisters and I could tell, their love and devotion to each other only increased over the years. He was also a devoted father, with plenty of time for family summer vacations to all parts of the country, games of catch in the side yard, and answers to the endless questions that his children asked him. He had a professorial habit of rubbing his chin and looking up when he answered our questions, so one time my sisters and I pasted a lot of stock answers on the ceiling to tease him. You know, stuff like,  $\pi r^2$ , 250 million, 1941, and aluminum. He didn't need our help of course, as his knowledge and wisdom far exceeded our own, but he laughed as hard as anyone at the joke.

My father's family orientation may have come from his own upbringing. His mother and father were both Methodist ministers. (Yes, his mother, too. In the 1920s, she was the first woman in the United States to be ordained as a Methodist minister.) He had five brothers and two sisters, and his father organized them into singing groups called, naturally, the Yinger Singers. They traveled all over the Midwest singing at churches, fairs, and various other gatherings. So my father also had a singing career that began when he was a small boy and lasted all the way through his college years at DePauw University. He once told that me he had sung in over 600 concerts.

While he was at DePauw, by the way, he was also on the track team and once raced against Jesse Owens. I think it was a 60 yard dash, so my father didn't lose by much—and every time he told the story the race got a little closer.

My father was the kindest man I have ever known. I don't think I ever heard him say a bad word about anyone—just like I never saw him make a bad call on the tennis court. As many of you know, he was by no means a milquetoast, and he would vigorously defend his point of view (and vigorously compete on the tennis court). But his arguments never became personal, and he went out of his way to be kind and respectful to his opponents—while demolishing their arguments or their serves.

I know these things from personal experience.

Oberlin College was fortunate to employ my father for 40 years. He was a talented and devoted teacher and thousands of students passed through his classes. In fact, I have met many Oberlin graduates over the years, including some people who are here today, who still remember what a wonderful teacher my father was. As many of you know, he was also an exceptionally active member of the college community, serving as chair of the Department of Sociology and

Anthropology, mentoring junior faculty members, and serving on a huge number of task forces, commissions, and committees. As an academic myself, I can't quite fathom how he did so much.

My father was also, of course, a profound and prolific scholar. I have a box in my office that used to sit on my father's desk. He typed out and taped to this box a quotation from the poet John Milton, after whom he was named, that seems to me sum up the way he thought about his scholarship. Here's the quote:

By labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life), joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to after times as they should not willingly let it die.

As it turns out, I think my father's scholarly work will be around for a long time.

His textbook on race relations, *Racial and Cultural Minorities*, which was co-authored with his Oberlin colleague George Simpson, went through five editions and educated thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of student about the realities of prejudice and discrimination—at the dawn of the civil rights era. This book won the 1959 Anisfield-Wolf award for the best scholarly work on race relations. Actually, he and Dr. Simpson had to share this \$1,000 award with a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote a book on the Montgomery bus boycott. As a result, my father began a correspondence with Dr. King. I believe they joked about stealing \$500 from each other. In any case, this correspondence eventually led to an invitation, and my father was Dr. King's host and introducer when he gave the commencement address at Oberlin College in 1965. I will never forget that day myself because my father and I rode in a car with Dr. King from the Oberlin Inn all the way over to Finney Chapel.

My father also invented the concept of a counterculture in an article that appeared in the *American Sociological Review* in 1960. His work on this topic culminated over two decades

later with his widely cited book, *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down*. He also wrote influential books on the sociology of religion, ethnicity, and education, among other things. In recognition of his many contributions, he was elected president of the American Sociological Association—an honor rarely bestowed on a scholar who teaches at a liberal arts college.

My father's research was motivated by a profound interest in understanding why people behave the way they do and also by a deep desire to promote justice and peace. As he said in the preface to his book on countercultures:

As all can see, three interlocking problems of enormous proportions are upon us: How [to] increase the range of justice among nations, classes, races, ethnic groups, sexes, ages? How [to] attain peace, the elimination of the use of organized and official violence as the way to attempt to settle disputes? And how [to] protect the environment against overcrowding, the depletion of irreplaceable resources, and pollution? Humankind has made a few tentative gestures, indicating awareness of these problems, but our social systems seem incapable of the major transformations that are required. Do they have to be turned upside down? Or are efforts to do so—the drastic reversals of recent decades—major causes of those very problems? It is my hope that the study of countercultures will lead us to pose these questions in a less stereotypical, a more creative way.

Amen to that.

Thank you all again for coming. Please join me in celebrating the memory of this wise and wonderful man.