

# Ken Pike Remembered

by Tim Smith

Supplement to the analysis of  
J. S. Bach's fugue in F major  
*Well-Tempered Clavier, book 1*  
<http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/ii11.html>

In his [preface](#) to *Talk, Thought, and Thing*, Kenneth L. Pike wrote, "So here I begin with person—but person interacting through language with other persons, along with interaction with things and events in that environment." In view of his emphasis upon personal knowledge, it is appropriate to supplement the analysis with my memories of this humble man.

I knew Ken Pike when I was a youngster of ten while living in the Amazon rain forest of eastern Ecuador. He was a family friend and a friend of minority people in the far corners of the world. In those days I knew him simply as "uncle Ken" (of respect, children in this closely knit community of faith addressed all adults as members of their own family). Many years later I would learn that Ken Pike was a prominent linguist and anthropologist who had received ten honorary doctorates and fifteen consecutive nominations for the Nobel Prize.<sup>1</sup>



*Kenneth L. Pike*  
Photo courtesy of SIL International

When I met him in the early 60's, Dr. Pike was in his 50's. And now, 50 years later, I have begun to read his books.<sup>2</sup> There I've discovered a brilliant observer of human behavior whom I had known simply in my youth as the witty man who loved word games, riddles, and jokes. I'll never forget how heartily my mother laughed when Dr. Pike told the story of his breakfast host who confused his name with a fish: "Dr. Bacon, have some Pike!" And my youngest brother, Scott, won't be allowed to forget his literal interpretation of our mother's instruction for setting the dinner table, "Give Dr. Pike a *whole* napkin." (In

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<sup>1</sup> For a retrospective of Ken Pike's many honors and contributions to the community of scholars, see Thomas N. Headland's [Biographical Memoir of Kenneth Lee Pike](#) (pdf), published by the National Academy of Sciences. See also [this page](#) at the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

<sup>2</sup> A bibliography of Pike's 271 publications, spanning sixty-five years, can be found at the [Ethnologue website](#) maintained by the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

those days every napkin was a luxury that, to stretch the supply, we cut in half.) But Scott, who was then two and a half, cut a *hole* in Dr. Pike's half! Scott, who is now a respected linguist<sup>3</sup> in his own right, had not yet come to understand the *homophone* (whole/hole) and its humorous inclination.

All great fun, of course! But, I value the memory of Dr. Pike most for his having taught me a hymn—one that I now consider to be my favorite. One Sunday morning, it being his turn to preach, Dr. Pike asked the assembled children if they knew the song, "Jesus Paid It All." To his surprise, no one did. So, before the service he taught it to us. Then, at the end of his sermon, he asked us to sing:

I hear the Savior say,  
Thy strength indeed is small;  
Child of weakness, watch and pray,  
Find in me thine all in all.<sup>4</sup>

That "all in all" would be tested in the coming months as a measles epidemic struck the lowland regions of Ecuador. The indigenous people of Amazonia had no natural immunity to childhood diseases that we would consider to be relatively benign, and many precious lives were lost. At each, the lowland people would sing a lament, the sadness of which I shall never forget. These songs, unlike anything we know in western music, were heard in descending waves of grief that echoed sadly through the dark night. Although I did not know the song's particles of word, its waves of melody, and contextual field of lost loved ones, communicated its full meaning.

This personal reflection is intended to transport us from our known culture and language to that of the unknown. Listening to a Bach fugue is like that, only in this instance we are communicating with a civilization lost in time. Bach is speaking to us about our cultural past—a vision of psychological affect, musical structure, and contrapuntal truth that is as unfamiliar to most people today as the Amazon.

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<sup>3</sup> Scott is one of the co-founders of the Spanish advocacy organization for linguistics known as [PROEL](#) (Promotora Española de Linguística). Visit their website for a detailed interactive map of the world's [languages](#) and [alphabets](#). He now lives in Africa and is completing a doctoral degree at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Shortly before Dr. Pike went to be with the Lord, he visited Scott's family in Madrid. There he shared with them his personal philosophy of life. It is like the son whose father tells him to lift a heavy table. The child, knowing that he is not strong enough, grabs the table anyway, and begins lifting. To his amazement, it begins to rise. Then he sees that his father has wrapped his arms around the table from above and is carrying all the weight.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Pike would have enjoyed [Fernando Ortega's rendition of this hymn](#), especially with its translation into Dutch. I'm quite certain, too, that he would have liked Ortega's version of the African-American spiritual, [Give Me Jesus](#), in tribute to [Ruth Bell Graham](#), another of those gentle pietistic Evangelicals of a generation gone.