



# TIMOTHY KELLER

His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation

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## BONUS CONTENT

# HOW RICHARD LOVELACE INFLUENCED TIM KELLER

*by Collin Hansen*

Studying with Richard Lovelace at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary wasn't an easy experience to forget. He became one of Tim Keller's first and most enduring influences from the seminary years of 1972 to 1975.

Tall and broad, with a close-trimmed beard, Lovelace typically wore a tweed jacket, sometimes with a vest. He carried a leather attaché case and used overhead projectors in large classrooms. No one struggled to hear him, but students often struggled to follow him. Easily side-tracked, occasionally frustrating, sometimes profound, Lovelace didn't show much personal touch with students. They wondered if he was ever fully present in the classroom. "He was notoriously absent-minded," Tim Keller's friend Louise Midwood remembered.

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Once, while fishing with colleague William Kerr, he forgot the gas and stranded them in the middle of the lake. Another time he nearly drowned off Newburyport, north of Boston. His family's station wagon, out of gas, burned to the frame with his students' final exams inside. Students sitting in the library would watch him walk back and forth from the parking lot. When approached he would respond, "I couldn't remember if I was coming to school or leaving." His lectures felt half-finished to some students. He'd discuss the history of Christian rock music but completely forget when class was supposed to finish. After hours he still found time to DJ for Boston's classical music station and revel in his love for Beethoven.

Not even Beethoven, though, could challenge Lovelace's affection for Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century colonial American pastor and revivalist. And he passed that love on to Keller. Lovelace taught his Edwards classes in his home, filled with partially completed projects. Cages full of snakes—pythons, anacondas, boas—were everywhere. Lovelace noticed at one point that he couldn't get his car seat to move. So he took the car to a garage. The mechanic jumped back with a scream when he discovered a 15-foot black snake wrapped around the seat mechanism.

"We all loved him as our resident eccentric," Midwood said. "We loved the stories we had of him; they were special to us. I don't think in any way we were making fun of him, at least in our thoughtless young 20s. We really loved him for what he meant to the seminary and what he brought and his distinctive flair. He was in his own little world."

There was more going on in that little world than students realized.

Richard Lovelace entered Yale College an atheist majoring in philosophy and emerged a Christian, largely thanks to the influence of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. From Yale he moved to Westminster Theological Seminary, where he earned his master of divinity, and then to Princeton, where he completed a doctorate in theology. He published his dissertation, *The American Pietism of Cotton*

*Mather*, in 1968. Thus began his expertise in the revival strain of American Puritanism.

Ordained Presbyterian, he never departed from the mainline denomination. As a youth pastor in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, Lovelace didn't mesh with the congregation, even as he enjoyed discussing Kierkegaard, Calvin, and Luther with the senior minister. Lovelace illustrated his occasional sermons with references to film, poetry, and music that the church couldn't comprehend. His sermon on Roman Polanski's R-rated horror flick *Rosemary's Baby* provoked a visit from the deacons. His son David remembered,

My father was aloof and cerebral and lacked many of the basic ministerial tools, social skills like facial recognition. Dad was terrible with names. He once buried a body without knowing its gender, fudging the pronouns. When he looked out over the faithful, I'm convinced Dad simply had no idea who most of these people were or what they were doing in his church.

Lovelace knew his time was finished in Scotch Plains when the church's custodian quit. One of Lovelace's alligators tried to bite her from the church organ's keyboard. Lovelace landed at Conwell Seminary in 1968, just before the merger with Gordon and the move to Boston's North Shore. The seminary tolerated Lovelace's quirks better than any church could. Students knew he didn't know their names. But he knew history. Lovelace named one of his sons Jonathan, for Edwards, and another David, for Brainerd, the missionary made famous when Edwards published his journals posthumously. Students joked that if he had a third son, he would've been named for Cotton Mather. And no young man deserved to go through life as Cotton Lovelace.

When Lovelace died in 2020, Gordon-Conwell remembered his classes as "wildly popular." He assigned Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" alongside John Owen's *The Mortification of Sin*. His courses on Edwards introduced a generation of students to the

greatest theologian of revival. Lovelace required students to read Edwards himself, and not just about Edwards. “That would be like attending a banquet feast and going for the baked beans instead of the fresh lobster,” he said. He didn’t want them to miss out on the rich feast of *The Nature of True Virtue*, *The Freedom of the Will*, and *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*.

Gordon-Conwell’s obituary didn’t mention Lovelace’s mental illness, by then widely known through his son David’s 2008 memoir, *Scattershot: My Bipolar Family*. Some of Lovelace’s eccentricities would be revealed as manic depression, or bipolar disorder. The illness forced him to step away from teaching when he could no longer get out of bed. Lovelace and his two sons were all committed for psychiatric evaluation and treatment in 1986. His wife also suffered from various mental maladies.

Lovelace spent his entire career in the liminal space between unusual emotional manifestations and spiritual awakening, starting with Cotton Mather at the Salem Witch Trials. Jonathan Edwards himself struggled with what was then termed melancholy, and he wrote about the spiritual ecstasy of his wife, Sarah, which followed her prolonged depression. Revival is never neat and tidy. Hence the need for spiritual discernment as in Edwards’s *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*.

Lovelace never stopped hoping, and praying, that God would rend the heavens once more, as he did in the days of Jonathan Edwards and then again during the Jesus Movement. His hopefulness rubbed off on Keller, who saw revival first at Bucknell and again when he moved to New York. More than any other Gordon-Conwell professor, Lovelace took interest in Keller’s work and tracked his progress after graduation. Whenever Lovelace noticed a bump in his royalty check, he knew Keller must’ve been recommending *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.