

Protagonist Corner

Accidental Preacher: A Memoir by Will Willimon

An On-Going Imagination: A Conversation About Scripture, Faith, and the Thickness of Relationship by Walter Brueggemann and Clover Reuter Beal

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Two Guys and a Vocation

It is satisfying when you discover something that is special, like a movie, a meal, a painting, etc., and you can introduce it to your friends. I am very grateful for the opportunity of introducing you to a couple of extraordinary books which I have found to be enlightening and inspiring.

In their reflections, Walter Brueggemann and Will Willimon have invited us into their lives and ministries. They are two of the most prolific writers about faith and Scripture, with 200 books between them along with numerous articles and sermons, which is utterly amazing! Their contributions to the lives of individuals and faith communities are tremendous. The impact of *The Prophetic Imagination* by Brueggemann and *Resident Aliens*, co-authored by Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, continue to help us find our way as people of faith.

It is refreshing to hear from authors about what makes them tick. In the interest of transparency, I want you to know that I am not an independent observer. Walter and Will have been friends for over 40 years, which has given me the opportunity to observe and interact with them up close and personal.

In 2001, I was a Campbell Scholar at Columbia Theological Seminary where Walter was teaching. I asked to sit in his course studying Scripture. I was amazed at the first class when all the students arrived early and were in their seats when the professor entered. This kept happening, so I asked a student what was going on. She responded, “It’s the prayer! No one wants to miss his prayer!” Each class began with an inspiring prayer which felt like a very personal conversation about things that mattered (*Awed to Heaven: Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*).

Following the prayer, Brueggemann entered into a conversation with the students about the readings for the class. He answered their questions and pushed them to give expression to their thoughts. I would grow impatient as I had come to receive wisdom from his lecture—“Come on, Walter! Let’s get to the good stuff”—until it dawned on me that this *was* the good stuff. He was tutoring these future pastors and church leaders in how to say what they believed. They would be called on to respond to questions of faith on the run, when they encounter a parishioner in the grocery store or in a hospital room, with no time to consult *The Institutes* or the letters of Paul. What a good way to prepare for ministry!

I bring this up because this goes to the heart of Brueggemann’s understanding of God and his role as a teacher/theologian. *An On-Going Imagination* is a conversation between Brueggemann and Clover Reuter Beal, a former student and friend who is now a pastor. She asks him questions, and they discuss the development of his thought and understanding of his calling with the honesty and openness you would expect

from good friends engaging in conversation.

The method and work of Walter Brueggemann is dialogical. He believes we live our lives in dialogue with the text, the neighbor, the stranger, and God because “the God of the Bible is a dialogical character, that is, a character that takes on life and form in dialogical relationship” (p. 46).

When you pick up this book, make sure your seat belt is fastened! His theological perspective is not of a God who is tied down in our traditional terms, but a God who is “in recovery,” who is “barely good enough,” who is “irascible” and “inscrutable,” a God who has “agency” and is about the business of articulating into existence an alternative world. Where does he get this stuff? It grows out of a serious, honest, faithful dialogue with the text. The words of the spiritual seem appropriate for his work: “Order My Steps in Your Word!”

There is much more for you to discover, like a fascinating answer to the question about whether we use the terms “Old Testament” or “Hebrew Scripture” in worship. I must admit I am still trying to understand what is crucial for Brueggemann in “The God of the Text” in which he asserts that God exists “in, with, and under the text... and nowhere else.”

Then along comes the *Accidental Preacher*, whose story is deep, delightful, painfully honest, and vintage Willimon. He gives an account of how this amazing God has been at work in his life. He describes himself as a “peddler of words.” He does this in the belief that words make a difference; they call into existence alternative reality that gives us hope and courage on this journey.

Will is a thoroughgoing Southerner down to his love of and appreciation of place and the importance of relationships. On a lighter note, Will’s love of shrimp and grits precedes their current status as a delicacy! By the grace of God, he has transcended his culture without losing respect and love for the people, place, and things that shaped him. We both migrated from South Carolina to the “Nawth!” This gives us a head start in understanding sin! We became colleagues and friends when I was a pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Durham and he was Dean of Duke Chapel. We worked together to help build community in our city and lift the lives of our neighbors in need.

Will is a fantastic teller of stories. I was able to witness many of the remarkable accounts in the book. In his encounters with students, faculty, staff, and neighbors, there is always a sense that something is going on that “enlightened minds” don’t understand. For example, his relating of experiences in the presence of Oscar Dantzler, the custodian of Duke Chapel; Terry Sanford, president of Duke; fraternity guys at Duke; and Methodist clergy in Alabama are fascinating.

But for Will, it is most often more than meets the eye or ear; God who enters the human story is at work. In most of the stories, what happens is a revelation to Will. It is only in retrospect that he realizes God at work in, for example, his surprising move from Duke to be a Methodist Bishop in Alabama, where he winds up confronting the Governor and Senator Jeff Sessions on the matter of justice for immigrants.

A mentor of mine, Doug Oldenburg, died recently. He had been president of Columbia Theological Seminary and served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, which is the highest elected office in the denomination. As he traveled the world visiting congregations, seminaries, and hospitals, he was fond of quoting this verse: “We drink from wells we did not dig; we are warmed by fires we did not

kindle” (Deut. 6:11). Walter and Will are deeply grateful for all those who dug the wells from which they drink. They acknowledge family, friends, and teachers on whose shoulders they stand.

I was amazed to find that Will and I share the same mentor. When Will was a college student, Dr. Carlyle Marney, pastor of the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, was Religious Emphasis Speaker at Wofford College. He made a huge impression on Will. I had a similar experience in my second year of seminary when Marney appeared and challenged us to be bold in proclaiming God’s justice and love in the segregated south. Marney had a voice that sounded like God—“I tried to, but no luck.”

A few months after the Wofford appearance, Will was traveling in Europe and visited a museum in Amsterdam. And who should he bump into but Carlyle Marney. A poignant conversation over a couple of drinks with Marney was a game changer. (And you don’t think God is what Walter calls a “trickster”!) In addition, Karl Barth has had a major influence on Will, and his work is full of references to Barth.

What were Walter’s influences? When he was a sophomore in college, a favorite professor suggested that he read Reinhold Niebuhr. He spent that afternoon in the library reading *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and then he read them again! It was a game changer, and he considers himself a Niebuhrian today.

There is a fascinating connection: Walter is influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr. Recently, the Reverend William Barber, a tremendous figure in the current struggle for justice in the US, wrote an endorsement for the 40th Anniversary edition of *Prophetic Imagination* by Brueggemann. Reverend Barber explains how indebted he is to Brueggemann’s vision in the book which has shaped his ministry. He carries a copy of the book with him wherever he goes. I am told that Martin Luther King, Jr., kept a copy of *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman with him wherever he went. All of which leads to the question, what do you carry in your backpack?

Near the end of their conversation in *An On-Going Imagination*, Clover Reuter Beal asked Walter a poignant question: “What keeps you going?” At first, he responded with some humor: “Partly, I don’t have anything else to do.” But then he says, “I think it is honest to say that I am propelled by my sense of vocation as a scholar and interpreter.” It becomes evident that vocation is at the heart of what inspires and energizes these two remarkable “peddlers of the word.” They are a reminder and an invitation to keep before us the challenge that God has a vocation for each of us. Will is insistent that his vocation is God given. He also has the keen eye for how God uses all kinds of folks to get the work done. The notion that a boy with a tough start from South Carolina would be called upon to be a messenger of the Gospel in all the places and to the people where he landed seems like an accident or absurd. But Walter and Will believe that God the “trickster” has been up to this “vocationing” business for a long time.

Don’t take their word for it; it is right there in the text. So let me encourage you to engage in dialogue with these two guys and the text about their vocations and yours. A warning: you may not be the same!