



FAITH matters

October 3, 2022

Pay Attention!

When I was teaching, I happily reread *The Scarlet Letter* or *Crime and Punishment* twenty times, but now that I'm retired, I typically read a book just once. Many of these books have been excellent, but I've read perhaps too many forgettable thrillers that don't require rereading. Neither during my teaching years nor since retirement have I often read theology or nonfiction "religious" writing. When a favorite columnist, Michael Gerson, wrote a beautiful tribute in response to the death of Frederick Buechner last month, though, I wondered what I had been missing.

Michael Gerson called Buechner the mentor he had never met and celebrated Buechner's sermons and novels, which "showed how a modern person, schooled in skepticism, pursued by appropriate doubts, could find the frequency of grace, as if he were tuning an old radio." Frederick Buechner was a theologian, ordained Presbyterian minister, teacher, essayist, memoirist, and novelist—and still I did not know his work. (You might recall that Rev. Harnish quoted Buechner a few weeks ago in his "back-to-school" issue of *Faith Matters*.) Gerson piqued my interest, and I had the time, so I set about becoming acquainted with Buechner's writing. I have a long way to go, but the novel *Brendan* and a little book called *Buechner 101* offered me a start.

The most important lesson I've found in Buechner's writing so far is that we should *pay attention*. This is no astute deduction on my part, for Buechner actually says at the end of his lecture "Faith and Fiction," "Pay attention. As a summation of all I have had to say as a writer, I would settle for that. And as a talisman or motto for that journey in search of a homeland, which is what faith is, I would settle for that too." Faith as a "journey in search of a homeland" could be baffling, but Buechner quotes Hebrews (11:13-14) about those who "died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people [like that], they are making it clear that they are seeking a homeland."

When Buechner states that we must pay attention, he is not merely lamenting the countless daily assaults on our attention or complaining that we spend too much time on our cell phones or watching television, true though these charges

might be. Buechner profoundly connects attention and faith. He is saying that God speaks to us in the moments of our lives and in our emotional responses to those moments. The moments might seem coincidental, but they are not superficial. God is all around us, waiting to be acknowledged. Worship might be rational and intentional, but faith is more emotional and surprising. We need to pay attention to our own lives and what happens to us and be alert for signals that guide us on our “journey in search of a homeland.” We might have doubts that such a homeland exists, but sometimes we will perceive a hint of it, enough to long for it and to be inspired to move closer to it.

In “Faith and Fiction,” Buechner recognizes that he is termed a religious writer, and he probes the similarities between faith and fiction and the ways that faith informs his art as a writer of fiction. He does not intend to preach in his novels, but rather to portray honestly the doubts and the darkness along with those glimpses of the homeland. He wants his own characters to come alive and surprise him. Our lives develop like stories, he says, and “Maybe it is all utterly meaningless. Maybe it is all unutterably meaningful. If you want to know which, pay attention.”

There’s nothing wrong with reading the seventeenth mystery in a series, but I suspect I might do better by paying attention to the tip from Michael Gerson and read Frederick Buechner instead. Ask me in a few weeks if I’ve read *Godric*.

~Written by Maurine Slaughter



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