

Teaching Death and Dying

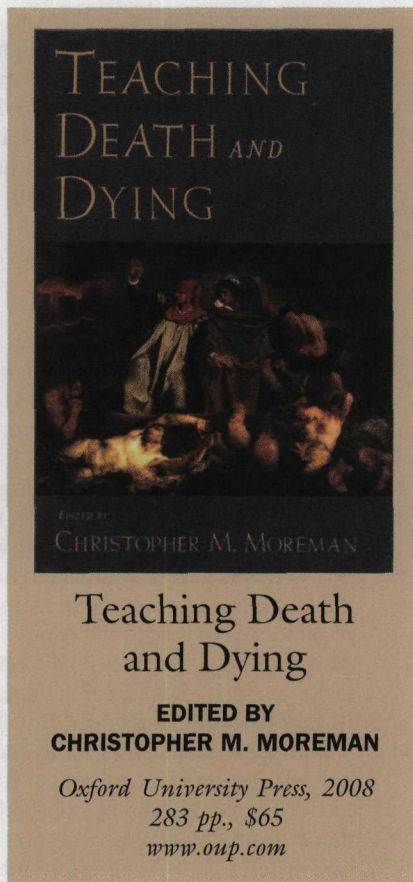
BY SR. RENEE YANN, RSM, D.Min.

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Prepared for a weekend of meticulous reading and review, I left work one Friday evening with a fresh copy of *Teaching Death and Dying* tucked under my arm. Our security guard and our cleaning lady, sentineling the front door, asked what I was reading. Hearing the title, they offered these antiphonal responses that underscore the need for such a book:

- “Something we all gotta’ do!”
- “Seems like we ought to be better at it by now!”

Editor Christopher Moreman and his peers present here a comprehensive compendium of, at once, scholarly and practical papers addressing both the historical inevitability of death and the need to integrate it holistically into our human experience. Writing primarily for other teachers, the contributors execute their task with expertise and professional enthusiasm and the result is a work that will resonate beyond the intended audience. These are good teachers. Obvious throughout each essay is not only the author’s deep subject knowledge, but also a love of teaching itself. Readers of these multi-



faceted approaches to death and dying studies will gain valuable insights. They will also learn a discipline of pedagogy that, adhered to, will make them better teachers.

Teaching Death and Dying gathers the wisdom and successes of 16 college-level teachers who have approached the theme within the context of religious studies. The book is divided into six sections covering appropriate course goals, practical applications, use of media, inclusion of personal experience, helpful literature and considerations of afterlife. Each contributor sets his or her paper within the context of personal classroom experience, lending the material a lively and accessible tone. At the same time, each author offers painstaking and in-depth research to substantiate the views presented, fostering an invitation to the reader to engage in further scholarly dialogue.

The volume addresses many of the long-standing questions surrounding the construction and delivery of courses on death and dying in the context of religious studies, including:

- How can a multi-disciplinary approach best balance the input of psychology, social sciences and history with the specific goals of religious studies?
- What particular nuances create the most effective learning experiences for various audiences, such as medical professionals, clergy and historians?
- What techniques can help assure student investment in the learning process without creating the expectation of a therapeutic environment to address individual needs?
- How does the consideration of various cultures (ethnic, gender and age cultures for example) affect the dynamics of death-related teaching?
- How can teachers assist in the translation of teaching into learning?

In developing perspectives on such questions, the contributors create an open and inviting academic milieu that encourages not only thoughtful reading, but also a desire to pursue the sources provided in the ample bibliographies.

Not all of these authors agree on answers to the questions presented

Without any clear notion of what we believe about the relationship between ourselves, God, life, and death, ministers can easily slip into an approach to pastoral care that either is sentimental, is marked by false assurances, avoids the reality of death, or is so bland that it fails to connect believers to the sources of the Christian faith. Only if the pastor understands that her task is both theological and pastoral, can she lead persons to the engagement with God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Christian faith that believers want and expect as they pass through the crisis of death. As Charles Gerkin said many years ago, ministers cannot go into the grave with their parishioners, but they can go up to the edge and peer over into the darkness with them.”

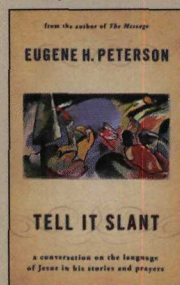
— G. Lee Ramsey Jr., *“Teaching Death and Dying: A Pastoral Theological Approach,”* pg. 71

Tell It Slant

EUGENE H. PETERSON

Eerdman's, 2008; 287 pages

Looking for an intimate walk with Jesus? This could be it. Peterson, taking his title from the first line of an Emily Dickenson poem: "Tell all the



Truth, but tell it slant," invites his readers to walk along as one of the followers who, according to gospel-writer Luke's account, accompanied or met Jesus on a

journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Peterson makes the journey too, as something of a tour guide, leading his readers to a more careful listening to 10 parables Jesus tells along the way. What readers gain is "the ears to hear" the nuances, the whispers, the knowledge needed to catch "the slant." Although Peterson is a scholar — professor emeritus of spiritual theology at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia — he is also a pastor, and his style is conversational, down-to-earth — not coincidentally, much like that of Jesus. Along with interpretation of Jesus' stories, Peterson offers a few stories of his own, entertaining as he instructs: another similarity to Jesus' style. Noting that "Jesus, equally at home in heaven and on earth ... used the same language — personal, metaphorical, particular, relational, local — wherever he happened to be," Peterson dares to hope others might do likewise. Ultimately, he is out to recover for religion the common speech of the Bible, to "break down the walls of partition that separate matters of God and prayer from matters of getting food on the table and making a living"; to banish pious, depersonalizing and self-righteous God-talk. "As we keep company with Jesus in matters of language, language itself becomes sacramental," he writes. This book, subtitled "A conversation on the language of Jesus in his stories and prayers," is one in a series of "conversation" books by Peterson on the broad theme of spiritual theology.

Readers who try out this one and find they know Jesus better than they did before just might decide they want to read the rest.

What Top-Performing Healthcare Organizations Know

GREG BUTLER & CHIP CALDWELL

Health Administration Press, 2009; 130 pages

This small book by health care consultants who lead Chip Caldwell & Associates is based on the authors' research of more than 220 health care organizations aimed at determining "what differentiates high performers



from organizations that fail to achieve lasting operational success." Their method of analysis was similar to that of Jim Collins for his best-selling book

Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't (Harper Collins, 2001). The resulting model for performance improvement for health care providers is based on this major finding: success lies in the ability of leaders to organize the change process. The intended audience is senior health care executives, and their charge is to establish clear goals for transforming work processes, overcome "silo thinking" in the organization, and thereby greatly reduce health care costs.

A Balanced Life

TOM SMITH

Hazelden, 2008; 141 pages

In a book written in honor of his daughter, Karla, whose struggle with bipolar disorder ended in suicide when she was 26, Tom Smith provides nine strategies for coping with the mental disorder of a loved one. While brief descriptions of the nine strategies can be found online at the website of the Karla Smith Founda-

An investigation of the reciprocal relationship between death and culture invites students to engage in introspection about their current situation. Why do I believe and respond as I do, and how did this come to be? If there has been change in the past, what are the likely directions of change in the future, and what large forces might be responsible? Confronting these questions awakens students' curiosity because the subject of death is not one normally encountered in traditional university courses."

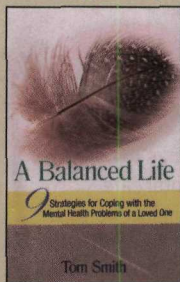
— Albert N. Hamscher, "Death and Dying in History," pg. 155

within the book. What is evident, however, is an empowering professional respect, which generates the productive mutuality necessary to advance pedagogical excellence.

Who should read this substantial book? As noted earlier, the audience is not limited to those who teach courses on death and dying. Consider the multiple contexts in which learning about death and dying occurs. *Teaching Death and Dying* offers invaluable insights for ethics committees, mission leaders, pastoral ministers, institutional trustees, elementary and secondary teachers, parish leaders, just to name a few. In each of these roles, individuals are asked to set a tone for the dialogue of life and death that will inevitably surround those whom they serve.

Awareness and understanding of the themes, methods and research presented in this book will help assure an informed approach to such responsibilities. Beyond that, the book offers anyone who reads it a profound opportunity to reflect on one's personal values and understanding of this life activity that "we all gotta do" and that maybe we would like "to be better at it by now." ■

tion (www.karlasmithfoundation.org), Smith elaborates on them in the book, devoting a chapter to each: medication,



counseling, education, self-esteem, acceptance, self-care, intentional networks, warning signs, and faith. His advice reflects his first-hand knowledge of mental disease, acquired not

only through his personal pain, but also through walking the journey with others. Each chapter includes questions for reflection and “stories of hope” — personal accounts by people coping with the mental illness of someone close to them. The chapter on faith, or reliance on a “higher power,” reflects Smith’s knowledge of 12-step programs. Here, faith leads to acceptance and peace.

“We do what we can, but in the final analysis, we must acknowledge that we cannot ‘fix’ the illness by ourselves,” Smith writes, “or even with all the professional help and support we can muster. ... We want this illness to go away, and when we discover that we can’t banish it ourselves, we want our Higher Power to take it away miraculously. But with time, we find that we are seeking guidance for coping with the continuing reality of the illness, not for making it disappear.”

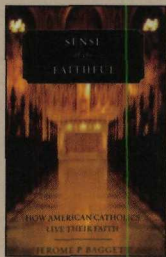
Sense of the Faithful

JEROME P. BAGGETT

Oxford University Press, 2009; 285 pages

Choosing six very different Catholic parishes in the San Francisco Bay area as his laboratory, and employing the tools of a sociologist, Jerome Baggett, associate professor of religion and society at the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, examines the fluid relationship of contemporary Catholics to their church — a relationship he finds

poorly served by such terms as “cafeteria Catholics” and such dichotomies as “spiritual but not religious.” Baggett



bases his observations primarily on conversations with 300 Catholics, about 50 parishioners in each of the six parishes, striving to elicit and report on how these Catholics negotiate and incorporate the tradition in their efforts to integrate it with the complexities of their daily lives: how they grapple with institutional encumbrances they find problematic; how they define what it is to be “a good Catholic”; how they participate in civic life outside the parish; and more. He aims to present his findings with “neither excessive celebration nor consternation,” approaching his subject rather as an “art lover,” that is, by examining “the intricate brushstrokes and complicated hues of American Catholics’ religious lives in an appreciative temper,” and looking carefully “at the manner in which they go back again and again to a shared palette of religious symbols.” Against those who might suggest that Catholics in Baggett’s West Coast laboratory are at one end of a continuum compared to the rest of the nation’s Catholics, he bases his disagreement on the diversity of his selected parishes, in both ethnicities and mentalities. (Some parishes are conservative, some liberal.) In any case, he explains, his goal is not to present a representative picture, but “to better understand the complex and innumerable ways in which contemporary Catholics make sense of their faith.” One overarching question, “whether contemporary American Catholics amount to a problem for a 2,000-year-old church, or a valuable contribution as it moves into the future,” he leaves to us “to discuss and decide.”

— Pamela Schaeffer, Ph.D., editor

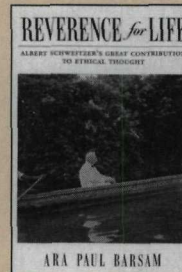
Reverence for Life: Albert Schweitzer’s Great Contribution to Ethical Thought

ARA PAUL BARSAM

Oxford University Press, 2008;
216 pages

Author Ara Paul Barsam outlines in this work Albert Schweitzer’s contributions to ethical thought and discusses the philosophical and theological founda-

tions that informed his positions. His philosophy, often reduced to the phrase “reverence for life,” belies a far greater axiology. For Schweitzer, the moral life, and more broadly our relationship with the Divine, is not centered primarily upon intellectual reflection and contemplation but rather upon praxis and participation in the community of life. Chapters focus initially upon many of the key philosophical underpinnings of Schweitzer’s work, particularly the influence of Schopenhauer in the development of his metaphysics of the will. The author builds upon this with a discussion of Schweitzer’s concept of ethical mysticism, that is, a mysticism directed outwards toward the service of suffering life.



Barsam examines the link between Schweitzer’s theological convictions (those gleaned both from Western and Indian religious traditions) and his exposition of reverence for life, particularly the manner in which Schweitzer, based in the historical Jesus and Pauline mysticism, developed his concept of *practical eschatology*. The book concludes with examples of Schweitzer’s influence on current scholarship and how key concepts of his ethic might be reclaimed and applied to contemporary ethical discussion.

Given the depth of analysis here, a certain familiarity with both the basics of philosophical/theological ethical thought and metaphysics is necessary. For the medical professional community, the text offers numerous insights but may be hard going for some. For the theological community, though, the work is relevant to the task of engaging the secular community in a constructive dialogue. Schweitzer’s example of translating key theological claims into more accessible universal constructs and language may be one model for this crucial undertaking.

— Robert J. Walter, MD, is a physician at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C.