

M. Laubscher

Rev. M. Laubscher, Department
Practical and Missional
Theology, University of the
Free State

(orcid.org/0000-0002-4240-1991)

laubschem@ufs.ac.za

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BOOK REVIEW

IN THIS WORLD OF WONDERS. MEMOIR OF A LIFE IN LEARNING

Wolterstorff, N. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2019), 334pp. Price: R447. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7679-9

Now I understand the critical acclaim the work showcases on its covers! A truly remarkable, gripping, and inspiring memoir to read. I read this within the first few days of our national lockdown earlier in the year, and much of it stayed with me ever since. So much so, that months later I am still determined to review, reread, reflect, and tell about being *in this world of wonders*. Once you have entered, you do not want to leave this world. There is a lot to ponder on, and learn from Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Memoir of a life in learning*.

Already in the preface he makes a telling remark that his life "has not been the life of a solitary individual in an alien world discovering his true self", but "a life in community – many communities", and he has "been shaped by those communities ... [and] in turn contributed to shaping them" (p. xiv). He "masters" being simultaneously a teacher and student who testifies to *Philosophy as a way of life* (Pierre Hadot); or, in the most recent work of Adam Neder, witness to *Theology as a way of life*. The delicate nuance, in this instance, between life and work, rooted in communities, attuned to context, and accountable to others, is perhaps best framed in the closely knitted narrative that continues to



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seek a deeper truth, justice and beauty in community. For instance, simply note the way in which he defines the following: “In a good philosophical paper, there is both intellectual imagination and craftsmanship. All the dovetails are tight” (p. 20). There is a lightness in learning to produce work that does not feel laboured (p. 47). It captivates and engages, because it is not merely concerned with the *studying* of philosophy, but also the *doing* thereof (p. 65). A core conviction from the start of his academic career was this commitment to *practice* philosophy (p. 115), or, as he puts it, “practicing philosophy is love in action” (p. 105). In his 2007 *laudatio* to the honorary doctorate he received from the Free University in Amsterdam, he states:

You have honored a philosopher. Thereby you have declared that the Free University is not simply a cog in the machinery of the technocratic society. You have declared that you are committed to providing an arena for the deepest questions of our human existence, questions that underlie all we think and do, yet never receive final answers: What is justice? What is beauty? What is truth? ... And in honoring me, you have honored someone who, throughout his career, has spoken up for both the wronged of the world and for the importance of the arts in our human existence. Thereby you have declared your support of both those who struggle for justice and those who create beauty – and those who long for the day when these two come together. For justice without beauty is unjust; beauty without justice is ugly (pp. 221-222).

This integrated embodiment and love of learning is perhaps most tangible in his interest in liturgy that developed in various ways along different episodes over the decades. Quite early in his career as a Christian philosopher, Wolterstorff mentions that he was “persuaded that liturgy is too important – and too fascinating – to be confined to committees, synods and seminaries” (p. 130). For him, liturgy is not doctrine (as some thought at the time), but an activity of worshipping God, which made him determined “to do whatever was necessary to keep liturgy out of the hands of the theologians” (p. 130). This became extremely real during his first visit to apartheid South Africa in 1975, at a conference in Potchefstroom, where he was “embarrassed” and “angry” about what he experienced there about the Reformed tradition. Serious introspection had to take place. “They had hijacked my tradition. Or if they represented the authentic tradition, I would have to repudiate that tradition” (p. 173). Needless to say, Wolterstorff “left South Africa a changed person” (p. 168). Initially, he had a panic attack on the plane back home, because his focus apparently seemed to be all over the place. Was he

becoming a jack of many trades and a master of none? What do justice, liturgy, art, and philosophy have to do with each other? (pp. 168-169).

Fortunately, the panic attack did not last long, as he soon realised that “what unites justice, aesthetic delight, worship, and theoretical understanding is that they are all dimensions of shalom” (p. 188).¹ Moreover, he knew

it was through the speech of the ‘black’ and ‘colored’ delegates that God addressed me. Never before had I had such an experience (p. 167).

Justice was now an integral part of the intellectual agenda he was convinced and committed to pursue. In fact, it was rooted quite deeply when he reveals:

Hearing the voices and seeing the faces evoked empathy in me. Not pity. *Empathy*. I felt *with* these oppressed people. ... I doubt that I would have heard God call had I not identified emotionally with these oppressed people. ... It is emotional engagement that motivates them [us], either in the form of empathy with the victims or in the form of anger at the victimizers – or both. Knowledge and convictions are not enough; most people have to be stirred emotionally (p. 174).

The story of their founding of Christ the Servant Church/congregation in Grand Rapids back home is also a fascinating story in itself – “an extraordinarily rewarding experience” (p. 147) – but it is especially the details regarding the building process, years later, I have found to be even more so. How they envisioned the building, the symbolism, and the eventual process between them as a committee and the architect is thoroughly inspiring. Typically in accordance with Wolterstorff’s line of thinking, he states: “Whereas our low budget had stifled the imagination of the Grand Rapids architect, it challenged and stimulated Birkett’s imagination” (p. 227). Not only did they succeed in creating a space of “coming into light” (p. 228), but “mysteriously, even in bright daylight, there are no shadows in the sanctuary, not even under the translucent peak” (p. 230). Wolterstorff mentions earlier that, for Calvin and his followers, the church buildings were not empty, but bright; full of light, because light “is the best symbol we have for God” (p. 25).

But, as we know, liturgy is not only about light; there is also the struggle with darkness. Two decades later, with the tragic death of their son, Eric, Wolterstorff’s way of dealing with the pain and grief was to write *Lament for a son*. At the time he says that he “understood nothing about grief” other than it “was the price I was paying for love” (p. 202). Gradually, the insight grew that grief is “*wanting the death or destruction of the loved one to be undone, while at the same time knowing it cannot be undone*” (p. 204). The relevance of this is how he helps us go against the tendency “to *disown* one’s grief” (p. 205). In a few beautiful lines, he states: “I felt intuitively that to disown my grief

1 (The correct English translation of shalom is therefore also not “peace”, but “flourishing”).

would be [to] live a lie” (p. 205), and “I would own my grief. When tears came, I would let them flow” (p. 206). This story took an unexpected deep turn in 2016 when he had an opportunity to visit a group of (mostly lifelong) prisoners in Handlon State Prison who were reading *Lament for a son*. Wolterstorff describes this day as “the most moving teaching experience of his life” (p. 310). His matured empathy and humanity are tangible when we read: “I did tear up when these men declared that they were honored that I had to visit their class” (p. 312). What took place there that day was not merely about grief, or about someone else’s grief, but expression and articulation of each of them living with their own-ed grief. It was yet another remarkable learning experience for Wolterstorff’s journey on the road of living one’s grief. Moved by their interpretation of his words that never occurred to him, he concludes: “I was the student that day – they were the teachers” (P. 312).

This memoir is about Wolterstorff’s deep love for God, humanity, and learning. Almost from start to finish, his wonder and awe for learning, understanding, and being moved stir him on. As a child he remembers “a deep love of learning” he saw in his grandfather that had the form of regret and longing – “longing to know what lay behind those closed doors that had been closed to them” (p. 33). Or, as he phrased it earlier: “What is education but a window onto the world? Sit down, and let me explain it to you” (p. 24). That is what continues to characterise his writings to this day, namely “not to describe but to understand. Something baffles me. I want to understand” (p. 292). His way of doing this is, of course, with “a blend of vision and craftsmanship, imagination and tight dovetails!” (p. 296). Needless to say, also in his memoir, he once again meets his own criteria with flying colours! It not only engages the mind, but also touches the heart, the body as such.

I might have started reading Wolterstorff’s memoir when most of the world was in lockdown and shelter, however, just soon to be touched into thoughtful action anew, inspired by a life *in this world of wonders*. Perhaps the best way to end and recommend this work is to mention that his work continues to shape and influence other minds and communities he could not even imagine. The delight, wonder and awe are contagious and will be widely shared.