

The Man Who Found His Inner Depths

By David Brooks, Columnist
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One morning in the fall of 1936, 10-year-old Frederick Buechner and his younger brother were playing in their room. Their father opened the door, checked on them, and then went down into the family garage, turned on the engine of the car and waited for the exhaust to kill him.

Buechner and his brother heard a commotion, looked out the window and saw their father on his back in the driveway. Their mother and grandmother, in their nightgowns, had dragged him out of the garage and were pumping his legs up and down in a doomed attempt to revive him.

There would be no funeral, or discussion of what happened. Their mother just moved the boys to Bermuda to escape. The rules in that family were, “Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel.” They became masters at covering themselves over.

Many decades later, after his mother had died, Buechner wrote of her: “The sadness of other people’s lives, even the people she loved, never seemed to touch her where she lived. I don’t know why. It wasn’t that she had a hard heart, I think — in many ways she was warm, sympathetic, generous — but that she had a heart that for one reason or another she kept permanently closed to other people’s suffering, as well as to the darkest corners of her own.”

Buechner went the other way. He realized that the problem with steeling yourself against pain is that you simultaneously close yourself off from being transformed by the power of life itself.

Buechner, who died this week at 96, became a master of uncovering his inner depths. The titles of his books speak to the mission he set for himself: “The Sacred Journey,” “The Longing for Home,” “Telling Secrets,” “The Eyes of the Heart.”

His books are understated, not narcissistic. By and large, they don’t make arguments. Buechner’s books tell stories, let you experience another person’s experience, let you get involved with the deep parts of one person’s life to see where it rhymes with and differs from your own.

He modeled how a person can experience life more fully, which is a process of scraping off some of the ways adulthood teaches us to see. As Philip Yancey wrote, Buechner “tries to reawaken the child in people: the one who naively trusts, who

will at least go and look for the magic place, who is not ashamed of not knowing the answers because he is not expected to know the answers.”

In one of his frequently quoted passages, Buechner wrote: “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than the excitement and the gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

His first novel was a great success. After his second, he came to faith. He was attending a church service in New York where the pastor was talking about how Jesus is crowned amid confession, tears and great laughter. “At the phrase *great laughter*, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face.”

He spent the rest of his life as a border-stalker, too literary for many Christians and too Christian for the literary set. His faith was personal, unpretentious and accessible. “Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward.” It is sensing a presence, not buying an argument.

He described the Gospel as a great fairy tale that happens to be true. The fairy tale has pain and danger, goodness is pitted against evil, people are transformed, and in the end all the characters are revealed for who they really are. To live within this fairy tale is to experience the “joy and beauty and holiness beyond the walls of the world.”

Christians, he wrote in one novel, should get up every morning, read The Times and ask themselves, “Can I believe it all again today?” If you say Yes 10 days out of 10, he wrote, then you probably don’t know what believing means. But on the days you can say Yes, “it should be a Yes that’s choked with confession and tears and ... great laughter.”

One of Buechner’s often cited observations is that you find your vocation at the spot where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need. Perhaps like many others, I struggle to experience my inner life in the quiet, patient, deep and old-fashioned way that Buechner experienced his. So much of the world covers over all that — constant media consumption, shallow communication, speed and productivity. Sometimes I think the national obsession with politics has become a way to evade ourselves.

Buechner’s vocation was to show a way to experience the fullness of life. Of death, he wrote, “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.”

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