

Daily Meditation 6-09-25

Thank You, Walter Brueggemann!

Good morning.

Today, we're honoring the memory and the wonderful accomplishments, theologically speaking, in particular of Walter Brueggemann. In my essay, I shared some of his writings, but also some stories that were triggered by people in his presence, and his PhD student, Helen Kenik, who was on our faculty for several years.

Let's take a look at his book, *Prophetic Imagination*. This was his biggest selling book, and it certainly was important to me in my theology. This, along with Rabbi Heschel's tome on the prophets, very important book, simply called *The Prophets*, that came out in the early 60s. So Brueggemann's book, of course, came out after that. But Rabbi Heschel sets a pace for profound scholarship around the prophets. And Walter Brueggemann, you can see, this is not a big fat book, but it's very concise and to the point. And let me just share a few of his teachings here.

First of all, his definition of the prophetic vocation: *The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception, alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. Alternative to the perception of the dominant culture around us. It serves to criticize and dismantle the dominant consciousness. And it serves to energize people, to present this alternative. And it is about putting forward a new social community to match the vision of God's freedom, such as in the Exodus event from Egypt. He talks about "criticizing the Lords of Order." And that Exodus is a "primal scream that permits the beginning of history," a new kind of history, a primal scream.*

And Walter Brueggemann was very influenced by the Black movement in America, the Civil Rights movement. As a young man, he came upon it in the state of Missouri, where he was raised, and it made a very great impact on him. He says on page 29, *The notion of human justice and compassion is rarely a foremost factor in ordering a community. Indeed, most communities find ways of treating it as a last question, and never the first*

question about human reality. So for him, the prophetic imagination brings up compassion and justice as a Number One question.

Now the title of his second chapter in this book is “The Royal Consciousness, Countering the Counter-Culture.” The Royal Consciousness. I brought that up already in my essay, because his student, Helen Kenik, wrote this very important article on Creation Spirituality and the biblical foundations thereof. And in it, she really develops this whole concept of the Royal Consciousness very profoundly. And I bring that up again in my recent book on the Antichrist, because I have a chapter on “Jesus and Democracy.” And I call upon that whole idea that everyone is a royal person. Meister Eckhart wrote an entire thesis on that, an entire treatise on the Royal Person. Or it can be translated “the aristocrat,” and he preached about it also. That we’re all royal persons.

For me, this is the basis of Christian democracy. That is, that everyone is a person and a being of elegance and excellence. And responsibility: that we are responsible for the community, for justice, for compassion, and, of course, justice for the earth. So all that is the occupation of the prophetic consciousness, the prophetic mind.

And in this book, as I said previously, the role of imagination, and therefore creativity, is absolutely out front. And I want to stress how Helen Kenik, who was his doctoral student, and also taught for a while at the same university that Brueggemann was at -- her doctoral thesis is published, and it’s called *Design for Kingship: The Deuteronomistic Narrative Technique* (it’s a long word) in *I Kings 3:4-15*. So it focuses on one short passage in the Book of Kings. But she draws very profound conclusions from it. And of course, brings in so much else from the scriptures, from the Psalms and so forth. But in many ways, she summarizes it in that wonderful article published in my book *Western Spirituality*, in which I say, along with Eckhart, is a real basis for the whole theme of the royalty, the elegance of every human person.

And this, to me, is a bedrock of authentic democracy. All people are treated equal: equal in elegance, equal in dignity, equal, therefore in rights. And then we have to ask, how are we playing this out in our institutions, from education to religion to politics to economics? And in this regard, I think our culture is failing seriously today.

Now I'd like to share with you a few more of the teachings of Walter Brueggemann, that really are speaking to us today.

So in my chapter on Trust, Chapter 5 in *Original Blessing*, as I say, I call trust “a psychology of trust and expansion,” I make the point, of course, that trust is the primary meaning of faith in the New Testament. Brueggemann says, *What God does first and best and most, is to trust his people with their moments in history. He trusts them to do what must be done, for the sake of a soul community.* And he goes on and develops the idea of being entrusted, *that faith is not just about trust in God, but in ourselves, insofar as we have been entrusted to carry on the divine work of compassion and justice.*

And I think that's such an important concept, because, again, it lifts us up. It names our dignity and responsibility, that they go together. We're not just to be honored with our dignity, but we are to be responsible, because we have been entrusted to carry on the works of compassion that are the works of God. And this, of course, is what Rabbi Heschel also emphasizes in the entire Jewish tradition that “we are carrying on the works of divinity,” and the works of what we call the works of mercy, works of compassion, that we get from Isaiah: “For the work of the spirit is feeding the hungry” and so forth. And all this Jesus brings up in Matthew 25, that this is carrying on the divine work.

So there's just so much that Walter Brueggemann contributed in his writings. It's interesting that if you look at the five books that I took down from my shelf immediately, none of them is long. His books were kind of to the point. So this is his *Praying of the Psalms*, and this, *The Bible and Post-Modern Imagination*. Again, he's so keen on imagination, the role of the artist. And as I cited in the essay, how the artist frightens totalitarian minds. And *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith*, putting the responsibility on us to carry on the divine work, that everything is not coming at us from heaven. We are, as Jesus said, to make heaven on earth. And bring heaven to earth. And this is the Christ way.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.