

The Rabbi, the Powers, and the Prayers: A Tribute to the Life and Witness of Walter Wink

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Can we say anything more complimentary than to say that a person profoundly shaped our life for the good? Walter Wink was such a person for me—and not just me, but countless people around the world.

You may not realize it, but his teachings have influenced you as well. Why? Because I daresay that most of the preachers who have offered a word at Circle of Mercy have benefited from the writings of Walter Wink. When you hear words like “the domination system,” “the myth of redemptive violence,” “Jesus’ third way,” or “history belongs to the intercessors,” then you know that Walter Wink has crossed our path again.

Walter Wink was my New Testament professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City way back in the 1970s. He died last month, two weeks shy of his 77th birthday. To me he was a good rabbi, searching out the Word to bring it to life for his students.

I remember that he sounded like home in a foreign land, and it was not just because he was from my hometown of Dallas, Texas. He wanted to know how the biblical story was shaping our lives. Not too many seminary professors asked us in such a direct way. So, Wink sounded like the best of my evangelical heritage: wanting to know how the biblical Word was transforming us, changing us, challenging us.

He started the study of the Gospels with the Resurrection stories. We looked at the contradictions, the similarities, the omissions—all within the best of the historical/critical method of biblical studies. Then he zinged out the unsettling questions: “Is Jesus alive for you?” “Where have you had an experience like Jesus’ disciples, an experience of Jesus’ presence?” “Dr. Wink, is that an extra credit question? Will it be on the final exam?”

What he knew is that such questions were about the examination of our lives. For Dr. Wink, there was no such thing as a completely objective opinion.

Sometimes he would end the class by asking us all to stand and shout out the Lord’s Prayer. He wanted us to experience how it was written in the Greek language, in the imperative mode. “Yell it. Pray it like you mean it. Plead with all that is within you.”

Give us this day our daily bread... Deliver us from evil!

I remember one more thing about his class. He seemed tired. It took it a while to become public, but we soon learned that Dr. Wink did not get tenure. It may have had something to do with his little book called *The Bible in Human Transformation*. The first line read: “Biblical historical criticism is bankrupt.”

Perhaps the academy found that a bit threatening to its work.

It seemed like failure. A promising career halted just at the moment of ascension. But it was a new beginning instead. Wink landed at Auburn Theological Seminary, a school that focused on educating church folk. He became an itinerant teacher, offering the best of biblical and theological studies to the people in the pews.

He was able to more intentionally partner with his wife, June Keener-Wink, an artist and dancer. They offered workshops on biblical studies that combined the tools of biblical historical criticism with depth psychology and social analysis. Wink continued to refine his Socratic style of questioning students. With June’s gifts, art, meditation, and body movement became a part of the teachings. Their workshops truly integrated a body, mind, and spirit experience.

Jump-started by the work of theologian William Stringfellow, Wink embarked on a 30-year journey of exegetical and theological reflection of the “powers and principalities” in the Bible. He wrote seven books on the topic. The main study became a trilogy: *Naming the Powers* (1984), an exegetical survey; *Unmasking the Powers* (1986), a set of thematic theological essays; and *Engaging the Powers* (1992), a treatise on the power of nonviolence.

After his first visit to South Africa in 1986, Wink wrote *Jesus’ Third Way: Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa*. The book was banned in apartheid South Africa. The Fellowship of Reconciliation printed a plain-brown-cover version and named it simply *Jesus’ Third Way*. The book was then mailed to 3,200 South African pastors.

When Wink was denied a visa to visit South Africa, he slipped in the back gate through Lesotho and offered workshops on nonviolent resistance all over the country. He embodied his teachings. He put his life on the line.

In the winter of early 1987, I read a 4-part series in *Sojourners* magazine on Wink's interpretation of Jesus' words on love of enemies from the Sermon on the Mount. In the fall of that year, I became the pastor of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis. The church's calling of a woman pastor set off a firestorm within the contentious times of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Enemies encircled us. I believe that somewhere inside of me were the teachings of Wink on love of enemies as I walked through that wild time. He reminded me of the third way of Jesus: not fight or flight, not submission or violence, but soul force, the Jesus way of resisting evil. Hear Wink's words:

It cannot be stressed too much: Love of enemies has, for our time, become the litmus test of authentic Christian faith. Commitment to justice, liberation, or the overthrow of oppression is not enough, for the means used have all too often brought in their wake new injustices and oppressions.

Love of enemies is the recognition that the enemy, too, is a child of God. The enemy, too, believes he or she is in the right, and fears us because we represent a threat against his or her values, lifestyle, and affluence. When we demonize our enemies, calling them names and identifying them with absolute evil, we deny that they have a part of God within them that still makes transformation possible. We conclude that our enemy has drifted beyond the redemptive hand of God.

Since I seemed to be making enemies wherever I went, I needed practice in the Jesus way. Wink translated Jesus' words in Matthew "Do not resist evil" as "Do not resist evil with evil." He also reminded us activists that we can become just like the enemy we hate. We can become what we oppose:

Jesus' Third Way requires us to root out the violence within our own souls. To resist something, we must meet it with counterforce. If we resist violence with violence, we mirror back its evil. But even when we resist evil creatively, seizing the initiative and lovingly challenging the powers to change, there is danger. The easiest temptation to unmask is self-righteousness. What a wonderfully expansive feeling it is to denounce evil grandly.

Several years after my dramatic entrance into Memphis, I grew weary. I was a full-time pastor as well as a leader of a national movement for women in leadership in the church. I was flying hither, thither, and yon. I was preaching every week, plus making home visits, hospital visits, doing funerals, offering Bible studies, offering pastoral care, attending committee meetings, facilitating staff meetings, starting women's advocacy groups, participating in interracial and interfaith efforts, particularly in advocacy work for people in poverty.

Plus I was a wife, mother to two growing daughters, and daughter to two aging parents. With Ken on the road quite a bit, I was making a lot of mac-and-cheese, and for variety, picking up a pizza for dinner.

Fortunately, I did have a supportive husband and family. I had terrific friends. I meditated. I went on retreats. I read extensively. I did aerobics and tai chi. I journaled. I saw a therapist and a spiritual director. I read books on time management. I was part of a clergy support group. I walked the labyrinth.

And I was sinking down. I did not want to fail. I was a pioneer. I wanted to prove to myself and the world that women not only could be pastors, but we could be damn good at it, too. I wanted my vision of church to match the efforts that I was putting into it. I wanted to see transformation, renewal of the church.

Instead I sank into despair. We were not making much progress. We couldn't even get half the deacons to show up for meetings. I thought it was all up to me. I thought that I should be able to speak more clearly, compellingly, and forthrightly to stir us up to great works. I spent time vacillating between blaming myself and blaming the church.

It was the writings of Walter Wink that finally gave me some perspective. You would have thought that I'd have remembered all that I had learned while a student in seminary about the intractable social systems that we are all a part of. You'd think that liberation and feminist theology would have taught me

something of the snare of institutional forces that are at work on all of us. And most of all, you would think that I would have remembered the Jesus story and his failed efforts to get through to his own disciples with his vision.

But no. I did what most of us do. I took it personally. I believed that we could fortify ourselves in such a way that we could rise above the systems that we are a part of. I believed that if we took care of ourselves well enough, examined our lives carefully enough, justified our woes clearly enough, articulated our problems truthfully enough...that we could side-step the daily forces at work on us.

The Bible calls them "the powers and principalities." The Bible also has language foreign to us in talking about these forces in our lives: "angels," "the spirits," "Satan," "the devil," "demons," "evil," "sin." Through these words the Bible gives language to idolatry, injustice, and inhumanity.

When I read Wink's book *Engaging the Powers*, I realized how much I had been living as if it was all up to me. I had forgotten how forceful the unseen forces are. It rattled the institution enough just to have a female voice coming forth from the pulpit. Add to that my determination to want to see other changes, and you can imagine what unseen forces of resistance were emerging.

It did not take me long to realize that having women in positions of power did not necessarily change the power dynamics. The hierarchical structure of the church is extremely powerful, regardless of our church language of equality and empowerment and team work and the priesthood of the believer. It is good to have women in visible leadership, but ultimately our mission is to be a part of transforming the powers, not just revolving the powers.

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The church is a domination system too, oppressing us in ways that are hard to discern, but easy enough to see in our conflicts and our weariness. The Powers are our realities of human dynamics: our institutions, our social structures, our traditions, our belief systems. The Powers have a shape that is visible, like a church or a school or a nation. Each of these has invisible forces that animate and regulate it. And as Walter Wink wrote in his introduction to *Engaging the Powers*:

The Powers are good.

The Powers are fallen.

The Powers must be redeemed.

This redemptive work is the calling of the church. The tricky part is that the church has to discern the spirit at work within us and around us, and that takes prayer.

History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being. If this is so, then intercession, far from being an escape from action, is a means of focusing for action and of creating action. (Engaging the Powers, p. 304)

Wink wrote that those who experience episodic depression may be the ones who have a heightened sense of the suffering around them. He said we need portable wailing walls to cry out about the accumulated sufferings within us and around us.

We human beings are far too frail and tiny to bear all this pain. And the solution is not avoidance.

So the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how to pray as we ought: this does not mean...that we lack the proper techniques...We think it is something we do. It is not.

We learn to pray by stopping the attempt and simply listening to the prayer already being prayed in us. And what we hear is a strange kind of help. The Spirit groans in us inarticulately, wordlessly. Our task is simply to bring the Spirit's utterances to awareness.

We are not called to do everything, to heal everything, to change everything, but only to do what God asks of us. And in the asking is supplied the power to perform it. We are freed from the paralysis that results from being overwhelmed by the immensity of the need and our relative powerlessness...

The groaning of the Holy Spirit inside us is the hum of a dynamo producing the power to envision and act. Without being so borne up, it would be folly for us to engage the Powers. (Engaging the Powers, p.307)

The groaning of the Spirit took me out of the church for a while. I could not hear the hum from ears that had become deaf through a constant din of demands and despair. I felt like failure. Mahan Siler has said to me more than once, "Nancy, it is good that we were failures." (Mahan had a season in his life when he experienced burnout.) There is truth in that.

In failing, we are forced to pray. In being up against systems that have barely budged from our efforts, we are forced to pray. And with it we learn to take ourselves more lightly, while taking our calling more seriously.

In being up against systems that have barely budged from our efforts, we are forced to pray, and to take ourselves more lightly while taking our calling more seriously.

In 2003 I was with Wink at a conference. We both made presentations. I was nervous. Wink was pacing in the back of the room as I spoke. I talked about the Powers that I experienced in the prison system: the sea of sadness, the inhumanity, the shame, the humiliation. I named the oddness of being a feminist in a men's prison, and yet finding in it a calling to still advocate for women.

I named how clear it was to discern "the powers and principalities" at work in the prison system, and how hard it was to discern the forces at work in the church. The church uses language like "unity," "love," "compassion," "mercy," and "justice." The prison system does not use such language. I confessed that I was driven to pray.

At the end, Wink hugged me and gave me the kind of Wink-like response that made me know he understood. I didn't have to have his affirmation, but I was grateful for it. It's a funny thing about us human beings. Affirmation of our calling can come in handy from time to time as we meet the Powers.

...Prayer changes the world and it changes what is possible to God. It creates an island of relative freedom in a world gripped by an unholy necessity. (Engaging the Powers, p. 302)

Praying is rattling God's cage and waking God up and setting God free and giving this famished God water and this starved God food and cutting the ropes off God's hands and the manacles off God's feet and washing the caked sweat from God's eyes and then watching God swell with life and vitality and energy and following God wherever God goes. (Engaging the Powers, p. 303)

Beloveds, let's keep following.

Amen.