

# Giving life to meaning: Women leaders write their memoirs

by [Suzanne Selinger](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

*Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors*, by Marian Wright

*Not Till I Have Done: A Personal Testimony*, by Elizabeth Achtemeier

*Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, by Dorothee Sölle

When Dorothee Sölle's editor first suggested that the theologian write an autobiography, Sölle replied that she had better things to do. But the editor persisted, and the resulting book has been recently translated from German into English. Marian Wright Edelman, founder, director and advocate of the Children's Defense Fund, wrote her memoir after recovering a long-forgotten diary from her college years. Elizabeth Achtemeier, Old Testament scholar and preacher, wrote her autobiography as a way of witnessing to God's working in her life.

All three books are extended expressions of gratitude. Achtemeier invites readers to be spectators of the Christian drama. Edelman and Sölle exhibit a secular Christianity in the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and their introspective analyses parallel Augustine's conversion account. All three present love of life as an important part of their spirituality. All three discuss their mistakes, exhaustion, pain, frustration and joy. All three books are tales of spiritual formation—and at the same time, acts of spiritual formation, for we always write at least in part for ourselves—and each discloses a distinctive spirituality. Each says a lot about the church as an institution. Each includes a personal jeremiad or two.

Edelman was a plenary speaker at the 1998 American Academy of Religion meeting—a forum few lawyers have occupied. But she speaks and writes in the language of the pulpit, a language marked by commitment, passion and learning. Like her AAR address, her book includes cascades of statistics, but it also provides stories. She sees herself fundamentally as a servant leader, engaged, among other things, in training a new generation of servant leaders.

Edelman's use of the upper case for "Black" and "White" makes clear that race is a constant presence. "Don't lower your guard; don't forget the racial tightrope," she warns. She also reflects on the privilege of being a black girl born at a particular time—she was a teenager when the civil rights movement began—and born into a particular family.

Her father was a Baptist minister in Bennettsville, South Carolina, and her mother filled the many roles of pastor's wife. Community elders reinforced and exemplified her parents' values and priorities. Two priorities, enveloped in a sense of gratitude and indebtedness, are constant for Edelman: to serve the black community (which involves concern for the spiritual health of the white community also), and to serve God.

God's presence and the importance of prayer in Edelman's life are demonstrated by the passages she quotes from her college diary in which she asks God for guidance and discipline. Readers who know her collection of meditations and prayers, *Guide My Feet* (1995), will recognize this young voice. She prays for God to make her strong in purpose, will and goodness, and for the Lord to make her will like iron. She prays that God will work through his unworthy servant; she prays for God to examine her and tell her how to change. The gift of this book is its author's cultivated, disciplined spirituality.

Spelman College in Atlanta allowed Edelman to begin to discover her own powers, challenged and nurtured by unforgettable teachers and administrators, including the renegade white historian Howard Zinn, and a series of guest preachers that included Martin Luther King Jr. She won a fellowship for study in Europe during her junior year. At age 19 she woke up one morning in Paris with no supervision and no American-white-imposed identity. She felt she had gone to heaven. She returned to the U.S. the next year to work for freedom from the ground up, first in the civil rights movement and then in an effort to save children from death, deprivation and crippling white prejudice.

In 1960, during her last semester of college, Edelman and the movement met. On the heels of the Woolworth's demonstrations that began in February and spread like wildfire, she organized demonstrations involving all of Atlanta's black campuses. Faced with both hesitant college administrators and angry whites, she issued a directive in her diary, "Get a hold of yourself and then forget yourself."

She proceeded to Yale Law School, where her studies were punctuated by work with movement leaders, including two friends from Atlanta, Julian Bond and Andrew Young. She also became close to William Sloane Coffin. She went to Mississippi in 1964 for “Freedom Summer,” thinking that her legal skills would be helpful in the voter registration project. When she came to work dressed in jeans and an old shirt, the disappointed faces taught her that she was also the symbol of the human dignity that her clients sought. Henceforth she dressed like a proper lawyer.

Edelman values her mentors: her parents, the community of Bennettsville, teachers, political figures and activist clergy. And she values children. Indeed, learning from children is one of her themes. They are the civil rights movement’s heroes, its shock troops and too often its martyrs.

In Mississippi, Edelman began to focus on the plight of poor black children in need of food and health care, education and hope. She devised the concept, later realized as Child Watch, of highlighting for visiting politicians and media the suffering of poor children. Child Watch continues as part of the Children’s Defense Fund.

One of her mentors was Robert F. Kennedy, who accepted her invitation to visit Mississippi and brought along a large delegation—exactly the audience for which she had hoped. (The delegation included Kennedy’s legislative assistant, Peter Edelman, who later became her husband.) Kennedy liked her strategy and told her to encourage King to bring the poor to Washington. She did, and King then put together the Poor People’s Campaign.

Edelman trusts only those who, like King, know fear and bone-deep uncertainty and who act nevertheless. This “nevertheless” is at the core of the Christian life for her, as it is for Sölle. The day after King’s assassination, riots broke out and anarchy seemed to take over the streets of Washington, where the Edelmans had come to work and live. She went straight to the schools. When she said, “No, don’t run in the streets. You’ll get arrested and ruin your future,” a boy answered, “Lady, what future? I ain’t got no future.” She says she is spending her life trying to prove him wrong.

All three authors are practiced advocates and campaigners, and all serve up a good helping of their stump speeches. You know one is coming when the verbs change tense and the zoom lens opens wide. In Edelman’s case she talks about violence and about corporate welfare, and wonders why the U.S. government is more concerned

with foreign defense than the defense of its children.

Edelman's concern with children leads to another theme not often associated with liberal activism: the need to build up and sustain the family. Children's need for both parents and for a home life that nurtures the whole person is so great that estranged parents should forgo divorce if at all possible. She argues this position realistically, without supposing that the pressure to save the children will create marital harmony and love. The cost of maintaining a family can be very great. Sometimes divorce is unavoidable and best for the children, but the 50 percent divorce rate does not reflect the number of those untenable situations.

Achtemeier sets out to demonstrate that God's providential presence and active direction in her life are constant. In her hermeneutic there are no accidents, no discontinuities, no random events, no inexplicable tragedies. Disappointments turn out to have been part of God's larger plan. With disciplined obedience and will, with prayer and the guidance of scripture, human dilemmas can be resolved and obstacles overcome. She learned these truths as a child, from family and church. Her conception of Christianity is highly Reformed. She believes in a transcendent and sovereign God, Christ the Savior, the Bible's authority for all of life, and unceasing discipline.

She presents her happy marriage to Paul Achtemeier, their raising of two children who carry on their parents' faith, and the fact that she was able to combine marriage and a productive career as a scholar, teacher and preacher as examples of God's loving direction. She disapproves of married women wasting their minds and talents. She is serious about the involvement of fathers in child rearing (but she does not think that parents have equivalent assignments).

Though she managed to be a writer and occasional teacher while her children were growing up, she was largely a housewife for those 15 years. Her conclusion about balancing work and family is that any determined woman can develop a worthy vocation even if she does not pursue a full-time career. Achtemeier's portrayal of her rich family life runs through this book; she also tells us several times that her at-oneness with her husband includes great pleasure in their sexual relationship.

Often the book seems to be an extended homily for youth and young adults, telling them the good news about Christian marriage so that they can resist the seductions of our wayward society. Achtemeier is equally intent on exposing those who are

responsible for the shortcomings of this society: “radical feminists.” She devotes two chapters to this topic and reverts to it in other sections.

Who are the “radical feminists”? Achtemeier does not identify them, and she relies on a caricature. According to her, the radical feminists worship an immanent deity in the form of a goddess or some other human construct. They do not allow scripture to govern their lives because they consider it patriarchal. Worse, they have robbed the church of scripture, replacing it with nature and their individual experiences. They have tried to change God’s word by rejecting use of the masculine pronoun and the names of Father and Son. Sometimes Achtemeier seems to think she can slay the dragon; more often her attitude is resigned despair. She counts, finally, on God to rectify the situation.

Embedded in these irate attacks is an interesting theological position. She and her husband studied in Basel with Karl Barth, and it was Barth who taught her that the Word is not static truth but the active working of God in our lives, and that God’s truths are not human truths. However, her appeal to Barth’s theology does not justify distortions about those to whom she would preach it. Nor does her appeal to Barth (himself not known for gentleness) warrant incendiary phrases such as “this whoring society.”

To be critically aware of patriarchalism in scripture is not to reject scripture. On abortion, Achtemeier has done important work in stimulating the church to develop alternative solutions for women with unwanted pregnancies, but she is incorrect when she suggests that women choose to have abortions as a means of demonstrating their freedom, and that the only guidance needed on the subject is scripture.

Achtemeier combined child rearing with writing and a variety of adjunct teaching jobs. She did not seek the full-time, career-track academic positions she could have had. She regrets that some women have criticized such an acceptance of lower salary and status. But money and status are not all that Achtemeier missed. She missed the dialogue and ongoing community of professional academic life. She missed the multiplicity of viewpoints, the shading along the spectrum. This may account, at least in part, for her tendency to organize disagreement into opposing polarities. She wonders whether she has had a lasting impact on her students and her audiences. Readers may wonder whether students or congregations could have had an impact on her.

Dorothee Sölle lived her adolescent years in wartime Germany. Her middle-class parents—liberal, enlightened and secular—quietly opposed the war. Though Sölle found the Nazis “repugnant or trivial,” her “natural state of opposition to [her] parents” delayed the advent of her political consciousness. After the war she realized that theology must consciously respond to Auschwitz. Hence her interest in memory and cosuffering, her analysis of the causes of suffering, and her energetic work for social change. Reflections on her German identity and post-Auschwitz perspective characterize all her writings.

So do passion, spunk, some glee in shocking the bourgeoisie, particularly those in high office, and a zest for life. Sölle’s theology relies critically on stories. She dispenses with strict chronological order and makes of her text a well-designed mosaic. Most often the stories tell of sorrows, but they can also be whimsical. Like Edelman and Achtemeier, she is convinced that personal growth comes only through doing God’s work. To find meaning in life, you must give life to meaning.

Absorbing the existentialism of postwar intellectuals, she found herself resisting the nihilism it seemed to entail. Her story is of great interest for skeptics and those who counsel them. Something made her hold on to Christianity (her parents were nonpracticing Lutherans), something made her examine theology, try it on and imagine ways to use it. Key teachers helped in this process. In secondary school a teacher who had studied with Rudolf Bultmann insisted that Dorothee sort out Paul, Luther and the Gospels before dismissing Christianity. Then she encountered Kierkegaard’s presentation of faith as the passion for the unconditional, his conviction that to be in need of God is humanity’s greatest perfection.

But it was “the face of a man, tortured to death 2,000 years ago, who did not choose nihilism” that was decisive. Craving clarity, she “struggled for every inch of theological territory.” She finally was able to concede “that whatever was fascinating [her] was much stronger than [her] own wisdom.” She added theology to her university studies.

Bultmann (who became a friend and later a subject of her criticism) taught her to demythologize Christianity as a prologue to the realistic “reappropriation of the hope that is promised in the myth.” Hope frees people from false security and leads them into the Christian future of love. In 1965, following a difficult divorce, she published her first book, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology After the Death of God*. By the “death of God” she means that the God we celebrate has “no other

hands but ours,” as Teresa of Ávila said. Sölle understands the incarnation “no longer as a unique, completed event, but as an ongoing process in history.” It is impossible for her to conceive of a God “removed from the world, who would intervene with supernatural might. Such intervention always happens through us, that is, in the history of incarnation, to put it theologically.”

She came to identify with liberation theology, and was fascinated by the Latin American base churches and their conception of theology not only for but by the people. Like Edelman, she is drawn to hope, to the “nevertheless.” Sölle links the development of her theology of suffering to her personal life and to a political consciousness molded by Auschwitz and Vietnam. From her confrontation with philosophical materialism in the Christian-Marxist dialogue in the 1960s she absorbed a twofold sense of material existence: it includes both body and society.

Many will not be able to follow Sölle’s political theology. And many will not affirm her unnuanced assertion that, having chosen Christianity, she can choose and reject elements of the faith from within—rejecting, for example, its teaching on women. Sölle is a longstanding critic of the German Protestant church, a biblically based theologian who habitually uses Marxist analysis.

Galaxies away from Achtemeier’s story is Sölle’s claim that the absence of a childhood experience of church left her unneuroticized, undamaged, undeformed, unalienated, and thus able to feel not just anger but love for the church. Her church life really began with the construction of an alternative church, the “political evensong,” which she helped create in Cologne in 1968 to study the Vietnam war in the light of scripture.

Theological work led Sölle to the conviction that the church is part of any incarnational theology. “Spirituality requires an incarnation.” She borrows Daniel Berrigan’s idea of the church as an umbrella; it is “a tent for the wandering people of God.” In Sölle’s theology, the parish or denominational church today can still be Jerusalem. Only a church that never stops rebuilding itself—that is not out to be number one among denominations and that does not seek affirmation from political and economic centers—is free.

Sölle’s matter-of-fact criticism of church and capitalism did not earn her praise from the German establishment. She moved to Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1975—entering what European intellectuals considered the belly of the beast. Her

family moved back to Germany after two years; but she continued to teach at Union each spring semester for ten years. Because her students questioned authority, because they let no reserve get between them and their teachers, she learned what it is to be taught by one's students.

She found in the U.S. a congenial counterculture of opposition to the war in Vietnam. More generally, she observed that America was a space in which new things could be tried. Through her American women friends she became a feminist: this seemed to her a natural part of liberation theology. In a remarkable chapter on giving birth—Sölle has four children—she reflects on the New Testament use of birth imagery for pain. God's history, and Christian hope and love, continually include pain on behalf of life.

In America Sölle learned that worship can be sensuous—a celebration of creator and creation. The holism that permeates her work, that prompts her to shift without pause from prose to poetry and to identify with the mystic consciousness, is consistent with this worship practice. Her final wish for her children is that they will come to praise God spontaneously when they are happy, when they feel true joy as Meister Eckhart defined it: a feeling “utterly devoid of ‘why.’”

Edelman, Achtemeier and Sölle agree that the church is vital to Christian life. But could any single church contain these three? And should it? Achtemeier declares that the church should be free of the political and cultural issues of the day. But “politics” is her term for the views she disagrees with. She doesn't realize that political and social ideas abound in her work. Might not the realization of a politics-free church result in such an extreme least common denominator as to be vapid?

Sölle's book argues that a politics-free church is not desirable. It is certainly the premise of Edelman and Sölle that one's work in the world should not and cannot be separated from what one understands to be the self—the same self one offers to the church. All three believe in vocation as the Reformers explicated it.

These books suggest that our commitments in their totality may be more important in choosing a church than denominationalism or form and style of worship. Composing new forms of “political evensong” might be a very practical church move.