

Letters and Papers from Prison

By [Richard Lischer](#)

August 27, 2014

In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* comes under the category of "Books to Be Read on an Annual Basis"—like Augustine's *Confessions*, *King Lear*, or anything by Flannery O'Connor. In general, we read too many books and return to too few. The critic John Ciardi coined the phrases "horizontal audience" and "vertical audience" to describe the reach of a novelist or a poet. It's a big mistake to return again and again to a book that doesn't probe the heart or expand the reader's vision.

I first read *Letters and Papers from Prison* as a seminary student many years ago. It was an assigned book. We read it for a couple of inadequate reasons. The first was its usefulness as a historical precursor to the "secular religion" fad of the 1960s. The second was to help us master a theological entity called "Bonhoeffer," whom we could then file in the "B" section of our theological libraries among Barth, Brunner, Buber, and Bultmann. I don't remember feeling a close kinship with the author or being particularly moved or shaped by his story.

So why am I drawn to it now? It's a case of reading readiness. I now view Bonhoeffer through a different set of lenses. I read his letters as an end-of-life narrative and an experiment in alternative living. Taken together, they tell the story of a young man in his mid-thirties who is coming to terms with the loss of his own future. He moves from an optimistic appraisal of his chances for release to poignant realism about his impending loss. As the father of a son who made a similar journey, I have discovered something new in Bonhoeffer's *Letters*. I now esteem them as not only the best guide to dying I know of but as a rare inspiration to the life of faith.

What Bonhoeffer discovers in prison is the significance of the day. The letters are the last edition of *Life Together*, as it were, only his community is no longer his brothers in faith but his comrades in suffering. The significance of the

day—today—means that he will jettison the human impulse to strive, improve his lot, and enhance his reputation. Like Paul who in Philippians confesses, “I have learned in whatever state I am to be content,” Bonhoeffer writes his friend, “I think that even in this place we ought to live as if we had no wishes and no future, and just be our true selves.” He begins living strictly according to the rhythms of private prayer and the festivals of the church year. He fills his letters with references to the scripture readings for the day. He takes up the practice of God the way another might take up the clarinet or piano. He responds to his confinement by doing holy things slowly. He never feels sorry for himself or resentful of others. Bonhoeffer is crossing over into a new realm of self-awareness.

He claims it is possible to practice his faith “even in this place.” “I’m in a bad place right now,” we say, by which we mean a bad time in our lives, a bad relationship, a dead-end job, or a mean funk. The bad place is not restricted to dying. The life of faith is filled with bad places. They may not be morally bad, but they’re hard or lonely.

If I understand Pastor Bonhoeffer correctly, he is not offering a few snappy bullet points for successful Christian living. When he says we should be our “true selves” he is not referring to our innate capacity to overcome obstacles. He is moving from pious jargon, which he had learned to distrust, to reliance on a self that has been imbued with the grace of baptism. “Practice that,” he seems to say, in whatever situation you find yourself. Let the day open itself to you. Enter it and discover the presence of God in it. Respond to the day.

Notice my tendency to offer my own bullet points and to revert to the very thing Bonhoeffer refused to do. We all have a long way to go. It’s so much easier to read Dr. Phil on healthy relationships or Joel Osteen on financial success. With Bonhoeffer, we have to read his mail, enter his life, visit his cell, mess with his soul. Then, after absorbing the full measure of another person’s faith and doubt, we return to our own places, but now in the companionship of a friend who signs his letters, “Your faithful Dietrich.”

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