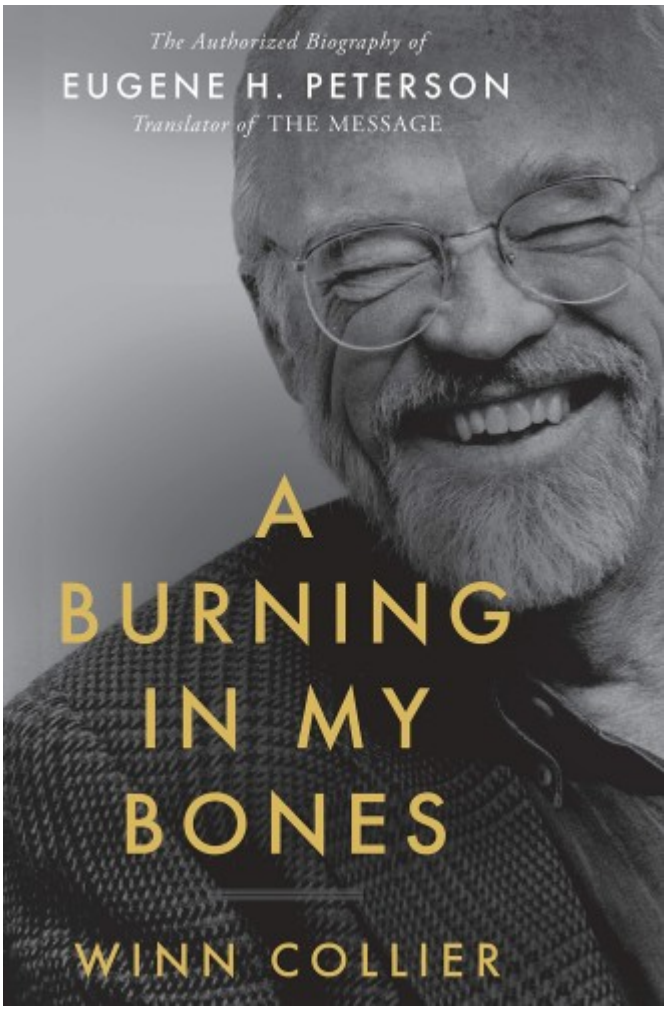
The real Eugene Peterson

Many of my LGBTQ friends and clergy sisters have disavowed Peterson’s writings. Not I.

by Katherine Willis Pershey in the May 19, 2021 issue

In Review



A Burning in My Bones

The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson, Translator of The Message

by Winn Collier
WaterBrook
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During my first year of ministry I happened upon a copy of *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. Until then, I had only heard of Eugene Peterson in the context of *The Message*, which I regarded with a hermeneutic of condescension. His spiritual theology was a revelation, and discovering it during my first terrifying year of ministry was a gift. Then, just as I was about to burn out, I spent a week with Peterson at the Collegeville Institute. That time with Peterson salvaged my vocation and renewed my courage.

It made sense, then, during a midcareer sabbatical grounded in Peterson's wisdom, to apply for one of the doctor of ministry cohorts facilitated through the new Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary—a program that Winn Collier leads. That Collier's biography of Peterson and an acceptance letter to the doctoral program fell into my lap around the same time is fitting. Peterson always shows up when I need him, even posthumously.

Despite Peterson's broad popularity among both mainline and evangelical Christians (even Bono is a fan), my own colleague network is notably lacking in fellow enthusiasts. Indeed, many of my clergy sisters and LGTBQ friends actively disavow his oeuvre. Peterson wasn't exactly a feminist figure; he practiced and preached an approach to pastoral work and sabbath rest seemingly dependent on the unpaid labor of a stay-at-home wife. And though he refused to use the word *homosexual* in his paraphrasic translation of scripture and despised homophobic bigotry perpetrated by the church, he was so averse to conflict he avoided public comments on same-sex marriage.

That is, until a 2017 interview with Jonathan Merritt. "Yes," was Peterson's definitive answer to Merritt's query regarding his willingness to perform a gay marriage. *Yes*, until the next day, when a new statement was released: "On further reflection and prayer, I would like to retract that." I remember feeling dumbstruck by the reversal—and suspicious about whether it really came from Peterson. This was a question I desperately hoped would be resolved within the pages of Collier's biography.

But before the conflict, the context: Peterson's life. Collier is an artful storyteller, adept at crafting a narrative with theological footholds and a strong sense of place. With a trove of interviews, letters, and Peterson's published work, the author paints a portrait of Peterson as a complex, even paradoxical person, containing multitudes as disparate as New York City is from Kalispell, Montana.

Montana is practically a character in the book, and appropriately so; the big skies and broad landscapes shaped Peterson as surely as his Pentecostal roots. Later, when he was inadvertently becoming Presbyterian during his seminary years on the East Coast, he penned a homesick letter:

> But somehow the snow isn't as pretty in the city. Snowflakes weren't made to caress steel towers and soulless cement. They only make them look a little more gaunt and make the cold a trifle more severe. Snowflakes were made for rolling meadows and living trees and black earth that teems with life. Snow is winter's robe for sleeping nature. . . . Snow was made for the country where things live and people live and beauty throws garlands all around.

This appetite for beauty and frustration with the "soulless" are quintessential Peterson.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Peterson encountered a certain soullessness in the suburban context of Christ Our King Church in Bel Air, Maryland, the parish he served as founding pastor for nearly three decades. After the congregation's initial energy dissipated upon the completion of their building, Peterson found himself working nonstop, alternately attempting to please and awaken his alarmingly apathetic flock. The church did not live up to his lofty ideals—but then, neither did the pastorate, at least the way he was embodying the vocation. His daughter startled him out of his workaholism by telling him, pointedly, that he'd gone out to evening meetings 27 nights in a row.

Collier quotes Peterson's memoir at length, letting the pastor speak for himself: "I want to be a pastor who prays. I want to be reflective and responsive and relaxed in the presence of God so that I can be reflective and responsive and relaxed in your presence. . . . I want to be an unbusy pastor." This crucible became the seed of Peterson's pastoral theology, and though he never ceased his struggle against overfunction and ego-driven ambition, the desire to be a so-called contemplative

pastor is what resonated with countless ministers. Early book sales were middling, but Collier notes that, in time,

> vast numbers of readers recognized in Eugene's words a hunger they'd forgotten, a craving for an authentic encounter with God. They were hungry for a vision calling them into the wondrous expanse of a life that honored what it meant to be a beloved (though finite) human living under the mercy of a magnificent, generous, infinite God.

Collier follows this core thread of Peterson's calling through his later years of translating, writing, teaching, and more writing. All of it was meant to foment authentic and earthy encounters with a God wholly worthy of praise.

The Petersons retired to Montana and tried, often unsuccessfully, to stay out of the limelight cast by the publication of *The Message*. By the time his final book was published, Peterson's health was declining. Collier notes a devastating fall in 2016, after which Peterson, despite his escalating dementia, acknowledged his condition to his chosen biographer: "You're catching me at the tail end, just in the nick of time."

It was in this stage of his life that Peterson publicly and unequivocally affirmed his willingness to bless same-sex unions. Collier describes the aftermath of the Merritt interview:

> Friends called and described the inferno—that he was being placarded and shredded, or cheered, by twenty million people. Eugene was dumbfounded. A man who barely knew how to open his email could not comprehend the social media maelstrom or how his interview (that he remembered only in pieces) had set off such a shock wave.

It's hard not to be cynical about what happened next.

Did Peterson's agent, publisher, and editor stand to benefit from the world knowing the truth about his full understanding of what it means to live under the mercy of a magnificent, generous, infinite God? No, they did not. The retraction they wrote and released on his behalf was devastating and, despite Peterson's confused assent, reflected neither his heart nor his mind. Collier quotes a letter Peterson's son Eric, also a pastor, distributed to friends, lamenting the false retraction: "After a lifetime of being immersed in the scriptures and devoted to the way of prayer, after fifty-

nine years of pastoral ministry, there was only one honest response." Peterson's *yes* to marriage equality was indeed a *yes*.

Perhaps it is folly to give so much attention to a singular moment in a long and rich biography, let alone a long and rich life. Yet this incident, which Collier names as one of Peterson's "most profound heartbreaks," has great bearing on how and whether Peterson's work will be read. For many of my contemporaries, the revelations of *A Burning in My Bones* are too little too late. As for me, I still intend to saturate myself in the imperfect yet unparalleled wisdom of the "unbusy pastor."