Frederick Buechner’s many benedictions

Buechner never stopped searching his own life for clues to the presence of God.

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the October 2022 issue

Photo by A. Blake Gardner

Frederick Buechner was arguably the foremost spiritual writer of his generation. His writing career spanned six decades, during which he wrote more than 30 books. His work has been translated into 27 languages. One of his books (*Lion Country*) was nominated for the National Book Award and another (*Godric*) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. During the 1980s and 1990s, he was quoted from American pulpits more often than anyone alive at the time. He was the rare author who appealed to both mainline Protestants and evangelicals.

What is even more remarkable is that he was a master of four distinct genres: novel, sermon, popular theology, and memoir. He might have won the literary equivalent of a pentathlon if he had pursued a fifth genre—short stories. The only one he ever published, early in his career, won the O. Henry Award.

Buechner's literary career began in spectacular fashion with the publication of his first novel, *A Long Day's Dying*, in 1950, when Buechner was 23 years old. Today, the novel seems rather labored and stylized, with only hints of the artistry of his works that followed. At the time it was published, however, it was a literary sensation. The book inspired rapturous reviews in all the major publications. Buechner was compared to Henry James and Marcel Proust. Leonard Bernstein declared the novel "a literary triumph" and expressed interest in collaborating with Buechner on an opera libretto. The book became a bestseller.

By contrast, Buechner's second novel, *A Season's Difference*, was widely dismissed by critics and was a commercial flop. In fact, no book Buechner published after *A Long Day's Dying* approached its commercial success, something he would often point out ruefully. In that regard, he was like the Dylan Thomas character who remembers the man who "kissed her once by the pig sty when she wasn't looking and never kissed her again although she was looking all the time."

After the disappointing reception of his second novel, Buechner left a teaching position and moved to Manhattan to focus on his career as a writer. It was there that his life took an unexpected turn. Buechner had been baptized in his grandmother's church as a boy and had hardly set foot in a church after that, but he began to worship at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. One Sunday George Buttrick, the renowned minister of the church, preached a sermon in which he compared the recent coronation of Queen Elizabeth to Jesus' refusal of a crown from Satan. Buttrick noted that Jesus is a king nonetheless because he is "crowned in the heart of the people who believe in him" and that coronation takes place "among confession, and tears, and great laughter."

Buechner recalled, "At the phrase *great laughter*, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great Wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea. Tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face. . . . It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along, which I had only just then stumbled upon."

A few days later, Buechner visited Buttrick in his office and shared his experience. He wondered if he should respond by attending seminary. At first, Buttrick was not encouraging, saying that it would be a shame to trade a good novelist for a mediocre preacher. (Neither could have imagined that Buechner would go on to become both a great novelist and a great preacher.) As the conversation proceeded,

however, Buttrick conceded that the stunned and searching young man in his office might be onto something. He drove Buechner uptown to Union Theological Seminary, where Buechner enrolled.

Upon graduation, Buechner was ordained a Presbyterian minister (because Buttrick was Presbyterian, he said) and became chaplain and chair of the newly formed religion department at the Phillips Exeter Academy. At the prestigious boarding school, boys of privilege communed with other boys of privilege in preparation for taking their presumed place in society. As a person of privilege himself, who attended another elite prep school (Lawrenceville), Buechner knew this crowd well. The Exeter students were jaded and world-weary, in a distinctly adolescent sort of way. Many of them embraced the moniker “nego,” which meant they were “negative, against, anti, just about everything.”

This was the congregation Buechner addressed at chapel services. The fact that chapel was compulsory only compounded the challenge. Buechner was determined, however, to gain a hearing for the Christian story. He later wrote, “My job, as I saw it, was to defend the Christian faith against its ‘cultured despisers.’ . . . To put it more positively, it was to present the faith as appealingly, honestly, relevantly and skillfully as I could.”

The sermons that were fashioned in that cold crucible (published in the volumes *The Magnificent Defeat* and *The Hungering Dark*) display the kind of imagination and freshness that releases the allure of the gospel. In learning how to preach to the “negos,” Buechner was discovering how to preach to the rest of us: “It seems to me there is an Exeter student in each of us, even those of us who are churchiest and most outwardly conforming, who asks the ultimate question, ‘Can it really be true?’ and every time I have ever preached, I have tried to speak to that question.”

From those earliest days, Buechner’s sermons were so beautifully crafted, the language so vivid and rich, I found that I could not read them before preaching on the same texts. After all, what else could be said except what Buechner said in just the way he said it?

Chaplain at Exeter ended up being the only position of religious leadership Buechner would occupy. After nine years there, in 1967 he moved to Vermont to devote himself to writing full time. It took him a while before he knew how to describe his vocation. Eventually, he settled on, “I am a minister who writes books.”

During his early days in Vermont, he wrote in a church school room in a local church, donning a jacket and tie to remind himself that this was his job and he was going to work. And go to work he did, publishing at the pace of a new book each year.

Buechner wrote some extraordinary novels during this time. Many of them reflected the influence of one of his favorite novels, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, in which the "whisky priest," in spite of his glaring flaws, is an instrument of the holy. Buechner wrote four books—later collected into a single volume, *The Book of Bebb*—in which the protagonist, Leo Bebb, is the head of a religious diploma mill, an ex-con, and a most unlikely saint. *Godric* (Buechner's greatest novel) and *Brendan* are fictional renderings of the lives of canonized saints with feet of clay. *The Son of Laughter* tells the story of the biblical character of Jacob in all his rascality, who, in spite of being a cheat and a liar, is God's chosen instrument.

Buechner blamed his ordination for preventing his novels from being more critically and commercially successful: "It was the kiss of death, in a way. When book reviewers saw that I was a minister, what they read was not the book I had written, but the book they thought a minister would write." At the same time, he credited his ordination with giving direction to his vocation as a writer: "It gave me my subject and my passion, and if I hadn't been ordained, who knows how things would have turned out. I would have written the same kinds of books everyone else writes and on the same kind of subjects. And there is really nobody else I know of who is writing the kinds of books I'm trying to write."

Interspersed with his novels, Buechner published books of popular theology. Two volumes (*Wishful Thinking* and *Whistling in the Dark*) offered fresh definitions of common words. Another (*Peculiar Treasures*) blew the dust off familiar Biblical characters and introduced the reader to more obscure characters as well. One book (*The Faces of Jesus*) helps the reader look anew at Jesus.

To call these works "popular theology" is not to dismiss them as trifles, for they are anything but insubstantial. Buechner was an apologist of the highest order. He had the skilled preacher's gift of making theology accessible. As a delightful bonus, in this genre Buechner's writing could be playful, generously sprinkled with bon mots:

"Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving."

"It is about as hard to absolve yourself of your own guilt as it is to sit in your own lap."

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

In midlife, Buechner turned to memoir, albeit reluctantly. In a letter written before the publication of the first volume of memoir, he likened it to “showing your baby pictures to strangers.” He was led to memoir through confronting his own sadness and grief. When one of his daughters suffered from anorexia, he entered therapy and through that process began to examine his life more intentionally. In particular, he grappled with the impact of his father’s suicide.

One morning, when Buechner was ten years old, his father had looked in on him and his younger brother playing in a bedroom and closed the door. When Fred opened the door, it was to a whole new world in which his father was no longer alive. He wrote, “The click of the latch as I turned the knob was the first tick of the clock that measures everything into before and after.” The subject of suicide appeared regularly in his earlier work, but in *The Sacred Journey*, the first of his four volumes of memoir, Buechner reflects at length on his father’s suicide, which he called “the formative moment of my life.”

Some of Buechner’s best writing is found in his memoirs. They are unflinchingly honest, particularly in his accounts of the painful aspects of his life, but never without hope. Buechner never stopped searching his own life for clues to the presence of God. This quest became one of his overarching themes: “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.”

Memoirists can be prone to self-indulgence, but not Buechner. He said in an interview, “My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours.”

Buechner’s ability to find the universal in the particular helps account for a remarkable exchange he had with Maya Angelou. In 1992, the two authors shared the dais for lectures at the Trinity Institute in New York. Buechner spoke first, based on the memoirs he was writing reflecting on his childhood, which included images of his privileged background. When Buechner finished, the emcee said, “Ms. Angelou will now tell her story, and it will be a very different story from the one that you have

just heard from Frederick Buechner.” After all, Angelou, a Black woman, grew up in abject poverty in the deep South. Of course her story would be different.

When she got to the lectern, however, she began by saying, “I have exactly the same story to tell as Frederick Buechner.” Her response delighted Buechner, and they became good friends.

I missed my first opportunity to meet Fred Buechner. In February, 1977, I was a first-year student at Yale Divinity School when Buechner came to campus to give the Beecher Lectures on preaching. I was out of town at the time. When I returned to campus, it was all abuzz about the lectures I had missed from the author I had never heard of. Students commented on his leading-man good looks, the timbre of his voice, the rhythmic cadences of his speech. Most of all, of course, everyone seemed intoxicated by his words, his fresh and elevating understanding of what it means to preach. After attending those lectures, Barbara Brown Taylor said, “Dear Mr. Buechner, you rearranged the air.”

When I had a second opportunity to meet him, I was not going to miss it. About two years after his Beecher lectures, Fred was a dinner guest at my parents’ home. He was to preach the next day at the church where my father was pastor. By that time, I had read his Beecher Lectures (published as *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*) and every other book of his I could get my hands on. I would later learn that Fred was quite shy and would much prefer to be in his study writing, rather than be a guest preacher. One would never have known that from our meeting that night, however. The conversation flowed easily. Fred was gracious and funny. At the end of the evening, he said to me and my wife, Karen, “If you ever find yourselves in Vermont, I would love to see you again.”

In short order, we managed to find ourselves in Vermont. Fred and his wife, Judy, lived on a hillside farmhouse, overlooking the lush and undulating hills that surround it. It looked like a working farm, complete with a red barn and silo, as well as a pig. It turns out the barn was a playroom, the silo had been converted into three stories of rooms—including a round study filled with books—and the pig was a pet.

Later, when Fred and Judy moved to another house on the property, he built what he called the Magic Kingdom, a separate building to house his large collection of books. It was Fred’s *sanctum sanctorum*. This is where he wrote every day, writing with felt-tip pens on yellow legal pads. There he could be surrounded by the books of his

favorite authors, including Graham Greene, Anthony Trollope, and L. Frank Baum. Many were valuable first editions.

When he first showed me the Magic Kingdom, I asked the stupid question, “Have you read all of these books?” He replied, “Well, why would I want to do that?” Fred was an inveterate reader, but for him books were also something to have and to hold, liked loved ones.

Fred did not worship in a church regularly, saying, “Most often when I go, I am bored out of my wits.” He recounted that he told the congregations he would visit: “The best thing that could happen to your church is for it to burn to the ground and for your fax and email machines to be burned up, and for your minister to be run over by a truck so that you have nothing left except each other and God. And then I say if you want to know what the original church was like, go to an AA meeting.”

Not all of his assessments of congregational life were as grim. Fred was also capable of warm encouragement, such as when he wrote to me, “I’m delighted you have not yet decided to go into some more useful line of work, like sausage stuffing.” And, at least sometimes, when he attended worship his response would not be boredom but something more like awe.

In a letter he wrote after preaching at my installation at First Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) in Burlington, Vermont, he said, “I found it moving and illuminating and true in ways I would never have guessed—the sense I had throughout that every step along the way something profoundly *real* was happening. It was very concrete, very human, very much of this world, but I kept sensing too that somewhere in the thick of it the kingdom itself was glimmering through.” The author who was always encouraging his readers to look for God in surprising places in this instance was surprised to sense God’s presence in worship.

Fred had a particular gift for friendship. He maintained friendships from every stage of his life. He had known one of his closest friends, the poet James Merrill, since boarding school days, which was reflected in the way they addressed each other. (Merrill was always “Jimmy”; Fred was “Freddy.”) As wide as his circle of friends was, however, he was willing to widen it further to include someone like me, a young pastor who was almost 30 years his junior.

If someone wrote Fred a letter, he would respond, sometimes at length, writing on whatever kind of paper was handy. (Of the two dozen or so letters from Fred I saved,

no two are written on the same kind of paper. I half expected the next letter would be written on the back of a dry-cleaning receipt.)

In addition to his books, through the Frederick Buechner Center Fred has a remarkably robust online presence. When he was 95 years old he had 2.2 million followers on Facebook and 380,000 on Twitter. Fred appreciated the irony because he knew nothing about social media—he never even had an email account. His preferred communication tool was a felt-tip pen.

On April 5, 2006, the Washington National Cathedral hosted a tribute to Fred. Hundreds of people filled the nave of that soaring structure for what would turn out to be one of his last public appearances. The atmosphere was decidedly different than it is for the state funerals and other solemn occasions that take place there. The audience seemed to crackle with anticipation. After Fred was introduced, he spoke for a bit and read passages from his sermons, his deep and resonant voice somehow managing to fill that cavernous space. Then some well-known preachers offered words of tribute, followed by a panel discussion, including the honoree.

Not long into the discussion, it was obvious that Fred was restless. Then his restlessness curdled into irritation. He bristled at some of the questions. He shifted in his seat, looking around as if desperate to find the nearest exit. Then this master of words spoke sharply about the limits of words:

I am the oldest person on this platform. This is my day, my tribute. I have a feeling we have talked enough, that we need silence. Can we try that? Does everybody wish we could stay and talk another 25 minutes? Well, if you want to give me what I want, that’s what I want.

It was his reprimand. It was his summons.

Many of those in the audience seemed shocked by this abrupt turn. And then, the one who advised us to listen to our lives led us in what became a time of deep and richly textured silence that went on for minutes. The silence was brought to a close by Fred’s sonorous voice, no longer evincing the sharp edge of irritation. Rather, he spoke with a reflective tone:

> I will be 80 on my next birthday, and as you approach that extraordinary age you can’t help but think about the end of your life, obviously, and

> what, if anything, happens next. Of all that you lose, all that you have lost already, in the way of people you have loved, places, things. But that’s not the end of it, I do believe. I wrote a novel about an old saint, an 11th-century English saint named Godric, from whose mouth came words that have become precious to me. I put them in his mouth, but I don’t feel that way. It is as if he put them in my ear. Let me end with that: “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found. And all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.”

It was his benediction.