Ordained to write: An interview with Frederick Buechner

by Richard A. Kauffman in the September 11, 2002 issue

Frederick Buechner, 76, is a Presbyterian, but he attends an Episcopal church. He's ordained, but he's never been a parish minister. His first book (A Long Day's Dying) *was not supposed to sell many copies, but it turned out to be the only best seller of the 32 books he's published. In fact, this novel held such promise that some predicted he would become the next Henry James. Instead, he's carved out his own unusual literary niche, including memoirs, theological writings and fiction, developing a loyal following along the way.*

Here's another contradiction: he doesn't consider himself an evangelical Christian, yet evangelicals love his writing. The evangelical Wheaton (*Illinois*) *College, in fact, has become the repository for his papers; they reside alongside those of Madeleine L'Engle, not far from the Billy Graham Center, which honors the figure with which Wheaton is most closely associated.*

"*I'm a Christian writer in the sense that somebody from this country is an American writer; it's no more complicated or sinister than that," Buechner says of himself.*

His latest book is Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought to Say) (*HarperSan Francisco*), *just out in paperback. It reflects on life's most perplexing questions as raised by some of the writers who mean most to Buechner: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mark Twain, G. K. Chesterton and William Shakespeare, whom he classifies as "vein-opening writers" because they pour their own life into their writings.*

I recently spoke with Buechner when he was in Chicago on a speaking engagement.

In a number of your writings you've discussed your father's suicide and your daughter's struggle with anorexia. Why disclose those family secrets?

My father's suicide was the formative moment of my life. When I wrote that first memoir (*A Sacred Journey*), I wondered: how did I get to be who I am? How did I get to be a minister, having grown up in a family that had no connection to the church? I looked back for signposts, for whispers from the wings; and one of the events that became most vividly alive was my father's suicide, which has a great deal to do with

everything I've become. It happened when I was ten years old, 65 years ago. I still live with it every day of my life. So writing about my father's suicide was an attempt to understand myself.

My daughter's anorexia was one of the most horrific things, and yet in the long run one of the most grace-filled things, in my life. She came so close to death that the hospital called saying if they didn't feed her through a tube she would die. Her meddling, loving, caring, trying-to-fix-everything-up father was 3,000 miles away. I was so much a part of her problem. Then she joined AA, because her illness involved drinking, and AA gave her a leg up out of the abyss. She's now become my role model. She's married, has three children and was ordained to congregational ministry not long ago.

Isn't there a chance that in telling family secrets you risk breaking a sacred trust with family members?

I asked permission of my daughter. I didn't try to tell her story, I simply shared the effect it had on me. My mother was angry that I wrote about my father's suicide, even though the first time I told about it was in a very disguised form in a novel (*The Return of Ansel Gibbs*). But I think it was just as much my story to tell as it was hers not to tell. It's very healing to write about it; you can't keep a thing like that bottled up.

In your latest book, *Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought to Say),* you start out with Red Smith's observation that writing is very easy: you just sit down at the typewriter and open a vein. Do you consider yourself a vein-opening writer?

Yes, I'm writing out of my passion, my sense of wholeness and despair. I'm writing out of the deepest parts of who I am as a human being.

In your nonfiction you are very much in touch with your inner life and you allow yourself to be very transparent—a rare quality in men. Is there a difference between your fiction and nonfiction in that regard?

Being open is part of my vocation as a writer. When you sit all by yourself in a room searching your inmost self for things to write about, it leads to disclosing what you find.

In both my fiction and nonfiction I’m trying to be as honest as I can to my own experience—my own experience of God, my own experience of the absence of God, my own experience of what it is like to have children.

In a 1983 Christian Century **interview with you, it was noted that you dwell very much on the inner life, but you have little to say about the "outer world." Is this still true?**

Yes, I think so. I don’t write novels about what’s going on in American society or what’s going on in the Middle East. My perspective would be worthless. I’m not preoccupied with the Middle East.

Do you think that by going inward you also are making connections with other human beings?

Of course. Once I lectured with Maya Angelou. First I told my story. When the moderator introduced her, he said: “You will now hear a very different story from Maya Angelou.” She’s black, I’m white, she’s a woman and I’m a man, and she grew up in abject poverty. Angelou got up and said, “He was wrong. I’m going to tell exactly the same story that Fred Buechner did.” We all have the same hopes, fears, doubts, the same shivers in the night. It’s not the preoccupation with Fred Buechner that helps. Who gives a shit about me? It’s the preoccupation with the human condition that matters.

You once commented on your dual role as a writer and a Presbyterian minister without a congregation, saying that your readers are your parish. What does it mean for you to think of your readers as your congregation?

I’m glad I have a congregation. I’d hate to be a minister who didn’t have anybody listening to him. I wish I could see my congregation. I wish I had more human contact with them than I do. But I hear from them. I’ve gotten an awful lot of letters from people who have said one way or another, “You’ve saved my life. You’ve saved my faith.” Many of the things that ministers are involved with in the church I wouldn’t be very good at. The one thing I’m good at is words. And that’s been my ministry.

Do you envision a particular audience when you write?

I always hope to reach people who don’t want to touch religion with a ten-foot pole. The cultured despisers of religion, Schleiermacher called them. Maybe some of my books reach them. But most of my readers, as far as I can tell, aren’t that type. Many of them are ministers. They say, “You’ve given us something back we lost and opened up doors we didn’t think could be opened for people.”

How do you account for your appeal to evangelicals?

I don’t know how to account for it. I taught at Wheaton College for a mini-semester, and my papers are there now. When I think about Wheaton College’s heroes—C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, J. R. R. Tolkien and Owen Barfield—I realize that none of them really fit an evangelical mold. They smoked and drank and did the things evangelicals can’t stand, so maybe I’m just another one like that. For all the reasons they might have to write me off, there’s something about me that endears me to them.

What was it like to teach at Wheaton College?

I can’t tell you how much I loved it. One reason was that in my part of the world people either aren’t religious or they don’t go to church much, or if they are religious they would no more talk about it than they would talk about sex. For them religion is a very private, inner thing. At Wheaton people love talking about it. I remember once hearing two students talking at lunch and one said to the other, “What has God been doing in your life this week?” If anybody raised that question in Vermont, the ceiling would fall. Such words could not be uttered there, so I found it wonderfully refreshing at Wheaton. I live in a world where even religious people don’t talk to you that way.

How do you feed yourself spiritually and intellectually?

What feeds me are the responses I get from my invisible congregation. I often get a lot of nurture from my own books. I write them because they’re the kind of books I need to read—they confirm me in things, they open windows that most books don’t. Also, I find in my old age that some of the most important people in my life are some of the most tangential: the man who sells stamps at the post office, or Kathy Frost at the checkout counter at the Grand Union, or the fellow who runs the farm near us. Such people I know only in the most casual way, yet with them I can be more myself. I talk to them as if they were my oldest friends. And I have discovered that if you talk to people as if they’re your oldest friends, for as long as that conversation

lasts they *are* your oldest friends.

Do you participate in a congregation?

I go to this wonderful Episcopal church. I don't have a close relationship with the congregation, but I do have a very close relationship with the rector, and we talk about God. He is a remarkable man; I've decided he is a good priest because he gets out of the way. Some ministers are so professional and their performance so honed that there's no room for the Holy Spirit. My rector is very loose in the saddle. He preaches wonderfully but almost as if he's forging it out of himself as he goes along. Something he's said or done often brings tears to my eyes. And that for me is a sure sign that something holy is happening.

If you're only remembered for one of your books, which would you hope it would be?

My memoirs would be in the forefront of my nonfiction, because there I've been truest to what I feel most deeply about not just me, but about the world and God. If I had to choose a work of fiction, I might pick *Godric*, a novel about an 11th-century English saint, or a book called *The Son of Laughter*, about the biblical Jacob. But if you asked me tomorrow I might say something quite different.

What would you say about the current state of publishing?

It's no longer the editorial staff who decides what books to publish, it's the sales staff. This is a big change from the days when I started writing. My first book was taken on not because anyone thought it was going to make a lot of money, but because they felt it was a good book. It was never going to be a best seller, we all thought. Ironically, it turned out to be my only best seller, but nobody had any reason to think it was going to be.

Who are your favorite authors?

Two authors have had the greatest effect on me: Dostoevsky and Graham Greene. When I was in my 20s, I read *The Brothers Karamazov* for the first time. I don't know any book that confronts more powerfully the clashing of the absence and the presence of God. It is infused with a sense of the presence of God, of holiness and mystery all around. But it also contains some of the most powerful arguments against the possibility of God. The other very influential work was Graham Greene's

The Power and the Glory. Greene's whiskey priest is a pathetic little alcoholic, adulterous, cowardly man who happens to be the last priest left in revolutionary Mexico, wandering around serving the Eucharist behind the barns so that the authorities won't get him. He's a reprehensible person in some ways, and yet, as the title suggests, the power and the glory somehow work through him so that everything he touches is in some oblique way hallowed. Ever since I read that book, every work of fiction I've written has been about a "saint" like that whiskey priest—not a plaster saint, not a moral exemplar, but a person whose feet are just as much of clay as your feet and my feet. Yet God uses that person.

Some literary people have observed that there are more Catholics and Anglo-Catholics writing serious fiction than mainline or evangelical Protestants and that perhaps the reason for this is that it takes a sacramental worldview to be a fiction writer. Do you see yourself having a sacramental view of reality?

Absolutely! My great cry as a writer of nonfiction and, in a way, of fiction has been, Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you because it is through what happens to you that God speaks: your daughter almost dying of anorexia, or your father committing suicide. It's in language that's not always easy to decipher, but it's there powerfully, memorably, unforgettably.

So you see your role as helping people see where God is breaking through in ordinary things?

Yes, helping them listen for God. Religious observances—I've often thought that's a wonderful word, *observance*. What's religious about it is that you're observant, you're keeping your ears, eyes and heart open for the presence of God.

There's a line from your *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* that has been quoted often: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." What doubts have you had?

I've had my doubts, but I've never experienced what John Updike talked about when he said that God keeps his deepest silence for his saints, a silence in which God seems to be totally absent. I've never looked into the abyss, I've never had ultimate doubts about the existence of God, transcendence or meaning. My faith hasn't involved struggle. But one thing that has changed over the years is my attitude toward death. When I was younger—say, 45—sometimes I'd wake at night with this

extraordinary sense of what it must be like to die. It was not just a thought, it was a reality, like bumping into a blank wall—a sense that all of a sudden there would be nothing there to think with or react to or be. I can't even think of an adjective to describe this sense of ultimate finality. I never have that anymore because something keeps feeding me. I don't really think about death. I hope to heaven I don't drag out my days in a nursing home drooling in front of a television set. When I do think about death now, I think of Julian of Norwich saying, "All will be well, and all manner of thing will be well."

Is there something you'd still like to accomplish in life?

Just to go on doing what I'm doing, and seeing my grandchildren. They are the great joy of my life, apart from my work. They're the light of my life, and I'd love to be around long enough to see them grow up. They're all so young—the oldest is eight. Maybe I've got another 15 years, which means I could even see my grandchildren get married—and that's one of the things that makes me hold on to my life.

As you, **an ordained Presbyterian**, **look at the mainline Protestant world, what gives you hope? What concerns might you have?**

I'm a Presbyterian by accident. I had to be something, and I chose to be a Presbyterian because of a man named George Buttrick. He was a great preacher. And it was in his church that I was moved to the core of my being to the point where I simply had to go to seminary, and one thing led to another. Buttrick's preaching transformed me. Here was a very intelligent man speaking authentically out of the truth of who he was. He was an opening vein, so to speak, and I just thought, I've got to know more about what it is that has given him this tremendous source of insight into life, and vividness and truth.

But I've never taken any part in the life of the church as a church, and I've never served a Presbyterian church. I'm out of touch with Presbyterians. My own experience in church for a long time was a very negative one. I found the sermons at most churches boring and without passion, without conviction. I often had the feeling they were being preached by people who had had some passion for this gospel once, but it had gotten so covered over by the busyness of running a church that it wasn't even evident anymore. So I simply went once in a while until I found my way to the Episcopal church I just described to you, where I've been given this precious thing back.

You had a conversion experience as a result of Buttrick's preaching?

Queen Elizabeth had just been crowned and Buttrick was taking off on that. His text was the temptation of Jesus where Satan takes Jesus up to a high place and says if you kneel down and worship me, I'll give you all the kingdoms of the earth. Unlike Elizabeth who accepted the crown from the archbishop, Buttrick said, Jesus did not accept the crown from Satan because it had too high a price. But Jesus is crowned nonetheless again and again in the hearts of people who believe in him; Jesus is crowned in the heart so people will believe in him amidst confession, in tears and great laughter. And the phrase "great laughter" is what did it. I wasn't even sure, nor am I to this day, what Buttrick meant by the laughter of incredulity, the laughter of relief, the laughter of joy—and Sarah's laughter when she was told she was going to have a child when she was a hundred years old. But if there was a converting moment, that phrase was it.

Then what happened?

Not long after that I went to see Buttrick, whom I didn't know at all, and told him I had to go to seminary. He said, "Well, you don't really have to go to seminary, you can just join the church. We have classes, and I'll give you books to read." And I said no. Then this pastor of a big, busy church in New York—and this moves me still—said: "Put on your hat and coat." He drove me from 74th Street and Madison Avenue all the way up Central Park, across to Broadway and 110th Street, and introduced me to the dean of admissions at Union Theological Seminary—and the rest is history, as they say. In the midst of that I went to Princeton Theological Seminary to learn Hebrew from James Muilenburg, a great professor who said, in essence, that everybody has to learn Hebrew. It's God's language. You can't be a minister if you don't know it.

Did Buttrick serve as a mentor to you?

No, I never knew Buttrick particularly well, which is a blessing. These days the minister is your best pal; from the first time you meet him, you call him Jim and he calls you Fred. It's superficial, Rotarian, palsy-walsy stuff. I can't imagine anybody calling Buttrick "George." Not that he wasn't a very warm and human man, but I wasn't looking for a best pal. I had a lot of good pals. I was looking for a priest, pastor and prophet, which, for me, Buttrick was.

Do you ever get invited to speak to church groups?

Yes. I say the best thing that could happen to your church is for it to burn down and for all your fax and e-mail machines to be burned up, and for the 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 where all they have is each other and God, and they say to each other: “We cannot live whole lives without each other and a ‘higher power.’”

How do the ministers respond to that?

I think they all know damn well what I’m talking about. I try to be honest to what I believe and not to pretend that I believe other than what I believe.

You just disparaged technology like fax machines and e-mail. Don’t you use e-mail?

I wouldn’t think of having e-mail. My word processor is my holy place, and the idea of opening it up to the garbage of the world is horrifying.