

Martin Marty's unfinished conversations

The historian's energetic affirmation of the unfinished—whether books or lives—invariably made encounters with him memorable events.

by [W. Clark Gilpin](#) in the [May 2025](#) issue

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“Books,” Martin Marty declared, “should not be considered finished products.” The year was 1998, and at that point in his career as a minister, public speaker, columnist, and historian of modern Christianity at the University of Chicago, Marty had already “finished” more than 50 books. A life, especially perhaps the manifestly multifaceted life of Martin Marty, who died on February 25, resists reduction to any single explanation. But Marty’s strong preference for unfinished books illuminates the central energies that propelled his writing, teaching, ministry, and friendships.

His energetic affirmation of the unfinished, whether books or lives, invariably made encounters with Marty memorable events. Jaunty bow ties were a perennial feature of his wardrobe, signaling that he took the occasion seriously, but not himself. He entered a room with a quick step and, just as quickly, entered the flow of your life, your questions, and your ideas. He honored the time and space of the conversation.

Marty gave the same impression on those innumerable occasions when he stepped up to a pulpit or podium somewhere. Characteristically, he once began a lecture series at Calvin College by observing, “I like to lecture on assigned topics.” Why? It was certainly not because Marty had no ideas of his own. Instead, the assignment established that space within which your interests and his interacted, exerted reciprocal influence, and expanded into something new.

When, as commonly occurred, Marty later saw a familiar face in the sanctuary, the lecture hall, or the meeting room, he had new thoughts about the assigned space that he had shared with you and new questions about the well-being of your family members, remembered name by name. Still later, when your family faced a difficult time, you were surprised—but then not surprised—when Marty rang the doorbell on Christmas Day to deliver a large, vividly illustrated book about Amish quilts, reflecting his awareness not only of your family interests but also of the metaphorical layers of meaning in a book of quilts.

Marty lived and spoke out of an ethic of respectful dialogue, recognizing the difficult choices, inherited patterns of behavior, spontaneous commitments, and ironic outcomes that mark any individual life—or the collective life of a family, religious community, or nation. That ethic of dialogue shaped a singularly important role for Marty as writer and historian. Although he made moral decisions unflinchingly throughout his career, Marty regarded the historian’s distinctive vocation as a task that preceded advocacy. The historian, in his estimation, tries to step back, observe, and interpret the long horizon of the social landscape within which we are trying to understand, appropriate, and sometimes resist those choices, inherited patterns, commitments, and ironies. By appraising the unfinished public dialogue about America’s space, time, and religion, Marty the historian distinctively enhanced the ongoing ethical and political enterprise of (to borrow one of his book titles) *Building Cultures of Trust*.

Marty’s commitment to unfolding dialogue blurred the line between speaking and writing, prompting him to observe that as long as books “challenge and judge us,

evoking our response along the way, they remain unfinished and open to conversation.” I first encountered this phenomenon of transforming a book from finished to unfinished when I arrived as a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1970. Marty’s standard classroom approach, from my student days through the many years that we taught together, was to identify a course theme: “Writing America’s Religious History” (1970), “The Public Church” (1980s–1990s), “Religion and Violence in American Culture” (2006). He then assigned a relevant book for discussion during each week of Chicago’s academic quarter, nine books in all. Marty had complete confidence that the students, each pursuing their own research and writing, would read the nine books from sufficiently different perspectives to augment, revise, and occasionally contradict each book’s central point. He was right. Every quarter nine more books became unfinished and open to conversation, and, more importantly, students began to think of themselves and their colleagues in an analogous way.

Marty’s heritage was Swiss, and unfinished conversations had to pay attention to the clock and stay on topic. In March 2000, shortly after his retirement from the divinity school, Marty chaired a four-day conference on religion and public life, at the end of which he and I were assigned to pull together a summary of the conversation. We worked into the small hours of the morning. At one point, Marty stretched out on the carpet and placed his wristwatch on his forehead, the alarm set for a seven-minute power nap. The alarm sounded, and Marty hopped to his feet, energized somehow, and quickly wrote his remarks for the morning’s concluding session. Not surprisingly, he did not simply synthesize the conference’s common affirmations but also identified the further questions that those affirmations invited us to explore.

Marty’s characteristic interest in the diverse voices that enlivened American public life was prominent in his journalistic commentary, especially in his M.E.M.O. column, which ran for 36 years (1972–2008) in every issue of the CENTURY. Marty’s journalism, like his books and teaching, crafted a finished product that was, in fact, unfinished and open to conversation. In one of his most common writing strategies, Marty created an unfolding conversation between a book, himself, and any reader who wanted to engage the two.

[In his column for November 30, 2004](#), for instance, Marty began with two seemingly disparate figures, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Plutarch: “In the last letter Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, he asked, ‘Father, could you get me from the library Plutarch’s *Lives of Great Men*?’ We do not know if the book ever reached the captive.

I hope it did; few books could have provided more comfort.”

Not content to converse only with Bonhoeffer and Plutarch, Marty quickly introduced another voice: Sam Crawford, a native of Wahoo, Nebraska, Hall of Fame baseball player, teammate of Ty Cobb, and—you guessed it—avid reader of Plutarch. Marty concluded by inviting his CENTURY readers to join Plutarch’s diverse modern fan club. Conversations were unfolding, sometimes among individuals like Plutarch and “Wahoo Sam” Crawford, unfettered by time and place yet nonetheless collaborating in building cultures of trust.

In another writing strategy, Marty launched a conversation not by citing a book but by pausing over a single word, such as *morale*, *project*, *empire*, or *secular*. Marty’s fascination with the individual word, its nuances and contextual connotations, points to the aesthetic dimension of writing intended to challenge, evoke, and open conversation.

For this reason, poetry exerts energy throughout Marty’s work. Seldom did a book or essay depart his desk absent a quotation from or allusion to a poem. *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (1983) drew its title from a poem by John Crowe Ransom. The choice of individual words matters in a poem, and the words are simultaneously vivid and open to multiple meanings. Poems expect sympathetic collaboration from their readers, an act of mutual exploration. The evocative capacity of words prompted Marty to paraphrase Wallace Stevens: “we live not in a place but in a description of a place.” From the poem’s verbal artistry, Marty moved readily to the visual artistry of the photograph, and he and his son, photographer Micah Marty, collaborated on a memorable book series that reflects on the places and seasons through which we humans pass on our spiritual journeys.

I began this essay with a sentence from *The One and the Many* (1998), a book in which Marty pondered the power of story to provide coherence not simply to one’s personal life but to the associated life of a diverse nation. While he celebrated the power of stories to shape identity and motivate action, Marty worried that in the United States—a geographic space into which many peoples and many stories had migrated across millennia—two forces were working to foreclose the unfinished conversations among citizens who had their stories to tell. He assigned the label *totalist* to those who insisted that “a nation-state can and should be organized around a single and easily definable ideology or creed.” By contrast, a *tribalist* resisted efforts to impose a single dominant story and argued that “only the peoples

and groups to which one naturally belongs, or chooses to belong, or even invents as new constructs, can provide coherence.”

Despite their differences, totalists and tribalists shared an inclination to begin with a finished story. In Marty’s estimation, America was thus “a delicate venture” to converse across boundaries and over walls, and he wore his Swiss-Lutheran-from-Nebraska heritage both lightly and brightly because it opened rather than foreclosed the opportunity to share stories. Out of this ethical commitment, his writing and public speaking analyzed and envisioned the places and spaces in which diverse citizens associate to “bring about and exemplify a kind of conversation among disparate voices that converge on a single theme.”

In classroom, lecture hall, sanctuary, and society at large, Marty encouraged these converging conversations. For him, conversation was collaborative curiosity about one another, the pasts we hold in memory, and the possible futures we envision. *The One and the Many* ends with an appeal to begin what will remain unfinished. If groups each “represent their story in its true distinctiveness and amplitude,” they will be harder to forget, to dismiss, or to reduce to stereotypes, and “there will be some chance that hearing and understanding can begin to occur.”

An excellent point, Marty, and I would add that . . .