



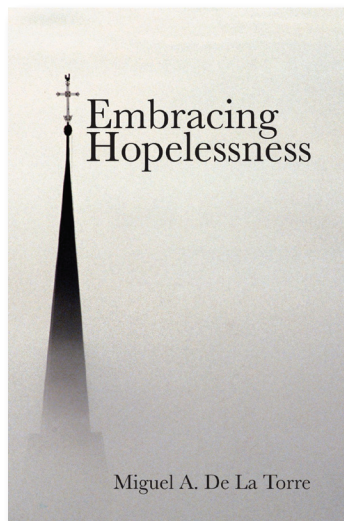
Book Reviews

January 2022

Section Editors: Craig Nesson, Ralph Klein, Troy Troftgruben

Review a book!

Currents in Theology and Mission is seeking to expand its number of regular book reviewers. If you have interest, please send name, contact information, and areas of primary interest to currents@lstc.edu.



Embracing Hopelessness. By Miguel A. De La Torre. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-5064-3341-7. xv & 175 pages. Paper. \$27.00.

Miguel De La Torre ventures into the abyss of hopelessness in this third book of his trilogy. Although the third, it can be read as a standalone text. As the title suggests, De La Torre wrestles

with responses to evil and suffering while ultimately advocating for hopelessness. At first, White readers may be appalled by what De La Torre proposes. But that is precisely why he writes: to challenge the predominant Eurocentric views of hope and responses to suffering. De La Torre repeatedly says that blind hope leads to ignoring the omnipresent suffering and pain. Instead, De La Torre commandingly says “f*ck it” and suggests a theology of desperation, leading to hopelessness. This means not to give up on life, but to embrace one’s surroundings, accept defeat, and persevere in the face of it.

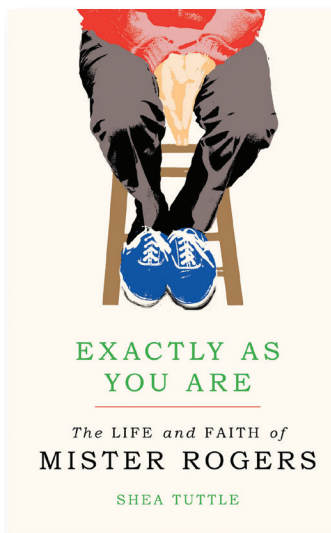
De La Torre begins each chapter with a vignette of a tragedy, such as the DMZ between North and South Korea, the Sand Creek Massacre by U.S. troops in the nineteenth century, and the first Nazi camp outside of Dachau. The author encourages dialogue with another person to engage that chapter’s ideas. Both of these add significant value to the text, especially when used to tie in the rest of the chapter’s ideas. De La Torre brings together the book’s theologies into an “*ethics para joder*” (150). Using the vignettes and conversation partners, De La Torre accentuates his point to have “hope against all hope” (156).

De La Torre’s text can offer pastors and other readers a new perspective on the ever-present problem of evil. He does so not to give answers, but as a new way to view it—a perspective not from

a theologian so much as from a person of color and immigrant. This perspective breaks open Eurocentric theologies that deny pain and suffering now, and that defer to the eschaton to make up for all the suffering, death, and evil which affects all, but especially the disinherited. This theology reinforces lessons taught in Clinical Pastoral Education, such as sitting in the pain with others. Also, the book emphasizes the Theology of the Cross, which confesses that God in Christ Jesus suffers with us.

This book would benefit from further exploration of supporting biblical texts and how the Triune God is active in and through this theology. However, De La Torre ties in the crucifixion, but not as a blind hope! It would have benefitted the curious reader to have footnote-style citations instead of parenthetical ones. In conclusion, De La Torre more than satisfactorily explicates and defends his theology. A worthy read.

Anthony G. Windau, M.Div. Student
Wartburg Theological Seminary



Exactly as You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers. By Shea Tuttle. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7655-3. Cloth. 195 pages. \$23.99.

Shea Tuttle’s recent examination of the life and faith of Mister Rogers offers complex portraits of the remarkable development of Fred Rogers into the television

host known for wearing cardigans and sneakers. The eighteen chapters of *Exactly as You Are* transition back and forth from Fred’s personal narrative as child, college student, minister, musician, husband and father, and television producer to Fred as the host of *Mister Rogers’s Neighborhood*. She highlights how Fred’s life experiences shaped his understanding of children and their need for a television program to help them make sense of the world around them, to know they are loved and learn to love others.

Stemming from his theological and ministerial training, Fred saw acceptance of each individual as a core principle of the show. He insisted that God’s creation was good and every person is invaluable and loveable. Fred sought to instill to each and every viewer that they are loved and that their neighbor is lovable too (58). Fred’s work on *Mister Rogers’s Neighborhood* embraced difference. Difference was a reality and “an integral part of any neighborhood” (111). Difference of race, gender, and ability were incorporated into the show, but, Tuttle notes, Fred’s own life experiences and openness to some forms of inclusion were

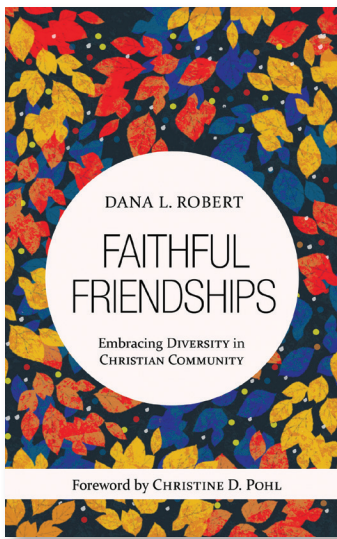


limited (119). Fred wanted children to feel included and sought ways for them to see characters on the show who looked like them. He also wanted children to encounter people who were not like them. He wanted children to experience difference in *Mister Rogers's Neighborhood* so that they might learn to respond to difference without fear. Every invitation into Mister Rogers's neighborhood was beckoning into a world of welcome and acceptance founded on Fred's Christian convictions.

An important theme of this book is Fred's insistence that feelings are important. Fred knew that emotions like fear, anger, loneliness, and happiness are all very real for children and he "worked hard to be with children in their feelings" (14). Tuttle connects Fred's desire to abide with children's feelings with the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Just as God entered into the world in the person of Jesus, so too did Mister Rogers enter into the emotions that children experienced and explored those feelings alongside his viewers. Through his many songs and storylines Mister Rogers taught his viewers that feelings are good, they are part of being human, and that he often felt those same feelings too. Fred gave voice to these feelings and taught his audience to find constructive ways to grow amid those emotions. Tuttle explains Fred's reasoning: "If we are going to develop generations of emotionally intelligent adults, we must address the emotional needs of the children who will become them" (93).

Tuttle's account does not gloss over the rough edges of Fred Rogers and offers some critiques of his personal interactions and programming choices. This balanced portrayal acknowledges Fred's personal shortcomings while also calling on the reader to regard Fred as Mister Rogers asks us to regard all others, to love them exactly as they are.

Kyle A. Schenkewitz
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Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community. By Dana L. Robert. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-8028-2571-1. Paper. xv & 210 pages. \$19.

Dana L. Robert's *Faithful Friendships* is an investigation into the character of Christian friendship. Central to this book is the claim that

cultivating Christian friendship entails a careful and intentional embrace of diversity. Bolstering her theological project, Robert offers a panoply of examples that demonstrate Christian friend-

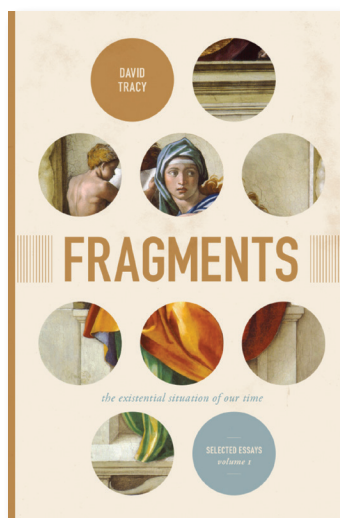
ship in real lives. Planted in the fertile soil of Christian love, these cross-cultural friendships grow from a small seed into a tree that gives life to others.

Robert's introductory chapters center upon particular dimensions of friendship drawn from the life of Jesus. Robert asserts that "the original model for Christian friendship is thus the life and mission of Jesus himself" (13). She then traces Jesus' relationship with his disciples in the Gospel of John and teases out themes of remaining, mutuality, and accompaniment. Interspersing contemporary examples that draw out these dimensions, Robert also points toward the timelessness of friendship with Jesus made possible by the resurrection. The following chapter centers upon three case studies in cross-cultural friendship that built holistic relationships motivated by Christian love. Robert demonstrates how Christian understandings of friendship bridge cultural differences, provide the necessities of life for strangers, and stand against discrimination and oppression.

The remaining chapters integrate stories that illustrate friendship as being present with others, friendship as enduring exile from home and family, friendship as embracing struggle, and friendship as experiencing joy. Through each chapter Robert elaborates on the understanding that "embracing diversity through friendship celebrates what it means to be children of God" (4). Among the stories of friendship, she includes accounts of assisting prisoners and their families in Japan, building a Christian ashram in India, embracing exile from community members in China, struggling against racism in the American south, and the joy of daily life with a person requiring constant physical care. These stories illuminate the deep bonds uniting people from diverse backgrounds in Christian community. In the final chapter, Robert reflects on the challenges of developing friendships of equality and humility today. For an American audience, she notes that "humility and self-emptying are preconditions for friendship with persons of other cultures and religions" (172).

It is impossible to avoid being captivated by the narratives that fill this book. Robert has drawn deeply from the global history of Christianity and Christian mission to demonstrate how intimate and transformative friendships have shaped the lives of individuals. With brevity and clarity Robert provides the essential historical and political contexts for the narratives. Most readers will encounter new accounts of love and commitment that will leave them wanting to know more about these amazing lives and the relationships that transformed them. This is an excellent book for church groups or seminary classrooms seeking to better understand Christian friendship, especially in a cross-cultural framework.

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Fragments: The Existential Situation of our Time. Selected Essays Volume 1. By David Tracy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-2265-6729-7. 418 pages. Cloth. \$39.00.

The long-awaited new volumes by renowned theologian, David Tracy, have appeared now as two collec-

tions of essays, *Fragments* and *Filaments*. In this first volume, Tracy demonstrates the range of his philosophical interests in service of theology, particularly his profound attention to hermeneutics. About the title of this book, Tracy writes: “Frag-events (a neo-logism—fragmentary and fragmenting events) negatively shatter or fragment all totalities, even as they are positively open to infinity. Fragments, therefore, can play an important role in a world still largely trapped in oppressive economic, social, political, and even cultural (including religious) totality systems that oppress whole people—especially the poor in all societies” (1-2). Chapter One elaborates on fragments as “the existential situation of our time.” Little might the author have known how prescient this comprehension of unfolding historical events!

The book is organized into four parts: 1) The Existential Situation of Our Time, 2) Hermeneutics, 3) Publicness and Public Theology, and 4) Religion, Theology, and Dialogue. Although significant threads tie the volume together as a whole, one can read the chapters according to interest, not only in consecutive order. Several of the chapters involve close readings of philosophical texts. Part 1 takes up a central metaphor for God as “the infinite,” responses to horror and suffering, tragedy and religions, and mysticism. Part 2 explores the literature of hermeneutical philosophers (especially Heidegger, Gadamer, Levinas, Derrida, and Ricoeur) to revisit and expand his own earlier contributions, including in the direction of interreligious dialogue (Chapter 7). Tracy continues to advocate for “the model of conversation-dialogue” as the most compelling hermeneutical approach, which he tests against other alternatives. At the same time, he makes clear the value to hermeneutics of the ethical impulse, in Derrida for example, for the insistence on forgiveness, hospitality, and justice.

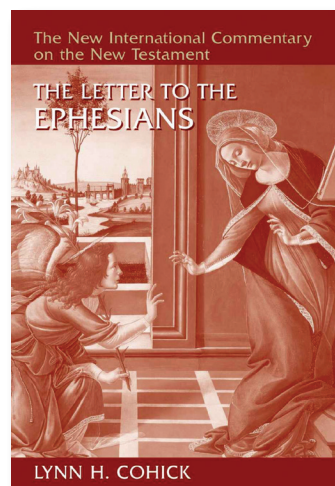
Part 3 provides the most direct interface with the vocation of doing public theology. Tracy values the method and contributions of liberation theologians as original forms of public theology, bringing them into critical conversation with the theory of communicative action by Habermas: “The dialogue of communicative action in the public realm is the exact counterpart of the

solidarity in action that these new theologies justly foster” (249). In this interaction, liberation theologies could arrive to a more adequate “critical social theory.” Tracy continues to adapt Tillich’s correlational model of cultural analysis in creative ways, bringing into conversation diverse perspectives.

Tracy’s discussion of the value of the contemplative, mystical, and prophetic dimensions for enriching public reasoning in Part 4 (especially, Chapter 11 titled “Religion in the Public Realm”) expands his earlier work on theological method. Especially noteworthy is his account of the compelling authority of “classics” for constructive theology: “The classics of any culture have always functioned culturally as phenomena in the public realm of a particular culture through their disclosive and transformative possibilities” (278). Attending to works of art adds an essential dimension to the ethical-political emphasis first thematized by practical theology: “An aesthetic-ethical correlation should, in turn, aid the further development of mystical-prophetic practical theologies” (291).

The fragments highlighted in this review give a glimpse of the rich feast offered by Tracy in his selected essays. Each chapter concludes with recommended bibliography for further study. We can be grateful for the insightful essays collected in this volume from one of America’s leading theologians.

Craig L. Nesson
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The Letter to the Ephesians. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. By Lynn H. Cohick. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6842-8. xlvii & 475 pages. Cloth. \$55.00.

Lynn H. Cohick is Provost, Dean, and Professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary in Chicago. She has written several books on New Testament and Women in Earliest Christianity, including *Christian Women in the Patristic World* and a commentary on Philippians (Story of God Commentary series). This volume contributes well to the New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) series as work that is exegetically careful, well-engaged with scholarly literature, and thorough in consideration.

At the start, Cohick acknowledges that her conclusion about authorship “shapes my assessment of the epistle’s meaning and purpose” (xv). She argues constructively for Pauline authorship,



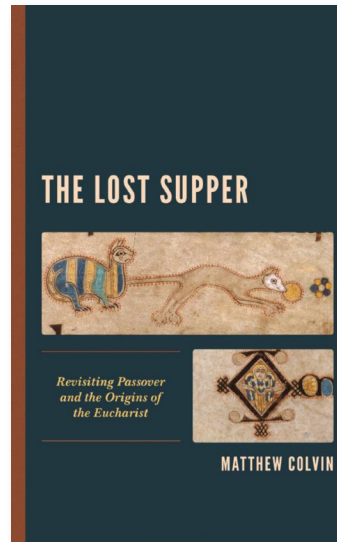
carefully considering various evidence and proposing that the “Paul” by which we evaluate disputed letters is more “a scholarly construct at odds with what we know about letter writing and authorship discussions in the ancient world” (3–25, here 25). Cohick holds that the simplest scenario is likeliest: Paul wrote the letter from Rome to a congregation of primarily gentiles in Ephesus to encourage their faith and holy living. She includes background on first-century Ephesus, including relevant data from Acts that is potentially informative (34–44). The commentary’s robust Introduction concludes with a sketch of the letter’s theology and ecclesiology, suggesting any consideration of its Christology cannot easily be separated from considerations of God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The commentary discusses Ephesians by sections, with occasional excursions on topics needing elaboration (e.g., “The meaning of *Kephalē*,” 130–32). Cohick regularly considers relevant passages from elsewhere in scripture, especially Paul’s letters. While espousing Pauline authorship, she revisits competing claims throughout in ways that address critics well. She pays careful attention to the Greek of Ephesians, highlighting subtleties like repetition (85–86), alliteration (139), and syntactical imprecision (142). Cohick also reads texts about Jew-Gentile relations with keen sensitivity to historic misinterpretations of supersessionism (168–71, 189–92).

Characteristic of this commentary is the rich historical background Cohick brings to her interpretive work (e.g., excursions on body metaphors, household codes, and slavery in antiquity, 135–39, 342–48, 391–400). An example of this is her engagement with the “armor of God” passage (6:10–17), aided by extensive background about Roman military resources and practices that presumably would have been familiar to the letter’s first hearers (409–27). Similarly, she engages tough texts like the Household Code of 5:21–6:9 with emphasis on how it compares with other ancient codes, ultimately concluding with appreciation for the letter’s constructive claims, without washing over harmful interpretive trajectories. Like most commentary volumes in this series, the engagement with secondary sources is current, substantive, and well-rounded.

To my eye, this volume has all the makings of a leading commentary on Ephesians for years to come. While in some ways traditional (authorship, more appreciation than criticism of scriptural claims), Cohick’s interpretive work consistently reflects careful reading, clear reasoning, historical awareness, well-rounded scholarly engagement, and sensitivity to problematic interpretations. As such, it is a model NT commentary of substance—and the very first in the NICNT series by a female author. For years I have valued Cohick’s historical work on women and social realities in antiquity. I now value her exegetical work, certainly on the letter to the Ephesians.

Troy M. Troftgruben
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The Lost Supper: Revisiting Passover and the Origins of the Eucharist. By Matthew Colvin. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-9787-0033-8. xiii & 173 pages. Cloth. \$86.76.

Colvin, a presbyter in the Reformed Episcopal Church, states his aim to argue against scholars who have rejected the Passover as an explanation for understanding the Last Supper recorded in the Gospels. More positively, he is concerned to vindicate the claims of Robert Esler (1925) and David Daube (1963) that the Passover is vital for understanding the Last Supper and, consequently, the Eucharist.

This relatively short monograph has eight chapters packed with information and thorough argumentation. In chapter one, Colvin uses two examples from the Gospels—the Garden of Gethsemane incident in Mark 14 and the Samaritan woman in John 4—to demonstrate the benefits of consulting rabbinical sources that often contain cultural understandings contemporary with Jesus’ day.

In chapter two, after summarizing the views of Esler and Daube, he argues that “this is my body” refers not to his body but rather is speaking figuratively of himself; hence “this (the bread) I am myself” (33). Chapter three tests the thesis of Esler and Daube by looking at additional philological and historical evidence in support of their conclusions such as the use of bread in rabbinical literature, in key NT passages (for example, 1 Cor 5, 10; the Lord’s Prayer), and in the thought of the second century bishop, Melito of Sardis. He concludes that prior to Christianity the Passover was understood in Judaism as a messianic meal.

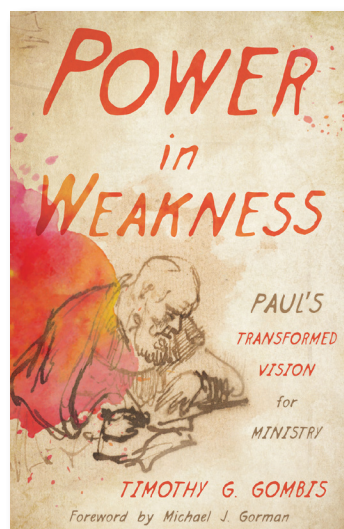
Chapter four explores layers of meaning found in the Last Supper, concluding that Jesus was telling “the story of God and Israel” (92) and the role of his disciples in this story. Chapter five turns to misunderstandings of the Last Supper in church history, specifically medieval understandings and later Reformed appropriations of it. Chapters six and seven look at John 6 and 1 Cor 11, respectively. Regarding the former, Colvin argues that John 6 was not concerned with sacramentology but with the story of Israel; regarding the latter, Colvin presses against an individualistic and thus introspective interpretation, arguing instead that God’s discipline applies to the church as a whole, because it was a meal to be shared by the entire church. He concludes with a chapter addressing practical concerns. Notable here is advocacy for the inclusion of infants and small children in the meal



because, as a ritual meal, why would they be excluded?

Overall, there is much food for thought in this volume. Colvin interacts in detail with the historical background, giving special attention to rabbinical literature. He makes a compelling case that the Last Supper and therefore the Eucharist is best understood as a messianic ritual meal, drawing from the Exodus tradition and the Passover. Yet, the major drawback of his treatment is that he pits this Jewish understanding of the Eucharist against views that see Christ's presence in the Eucharist, which means that only the memorialist view is consistent with his approach. This is a problem for two reasons. It fails to take seriously (1) the exegetical insights and (2) theological concerns of Reformation understandings of the Eucharist. Regarding the latter, Colvin's monograph is typical of work in NT research which unfairly or only partially interacts with systematic-theological concerns and insights. Instead, we suggest that his positive insights contribute to and fill out rather than contradict and undermine Reformational approaches to the Eucharist. Despite this limitation, I highly recommend this book for its quality of research and thoroughness of argumentation.

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***Power in Weakness:
Paul's Transformed
Vision for Ministry.*** By
Timothy G. Gombis.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
2021. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7125-1. 168
pages. Paper. \$25.00.

This book is very readable and highly recommended. It addresses a limited and significant subject about which the author is passionate and

knowledgeable. Gombis offers a convincing and imaginative biblical perspective as well as contemporary experience of the church. His well-argued thesis is that the church (and especially its conservative evangelical incarnation known by his service as a New Testament professor at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary) suffers from pastoral and lay leadership that is beguiled by principles and practices drawn from the world of business, education, and politics. These focus on institutional power, image maintenance, and credentialing to the neglect of a genuinely “cruciform” way of being church as a community of the resurrection, taking its inspiration from St. Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

I remember years ago hearing a noted New Testament professor speculate that Saul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (described by Paul in Galatians 1 and by Luke in Acts 9) might be interpreted in relation to the “kenosis” hymn which Paul quotes at length in Philippians 2, which was likely a baptismal hymn of the early church. It was suggested that the “kenosis” hymn of Philippians 2 may have been a piece of Ananias’ catechesis of Saul/Paul referenced in Acts 9. While the author does not pursue this suggestion, it is consonant with his thesis about the cruciality of this whole episode for Paul’s ensuing “call” to gospel ministry, what Krister Stendahl described as his “conversion” occasioned by his confrontation with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Gombis highlights the “kenotic” mind-change which lies behind the radical alteration in ministry style that Paul introduces in Philippians 2 with the invitation, “Let the same mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus...” (5).

The author devotes the remainder of his book to detailing this radical transformation in Paul’s style of ministry pre- and post-Damascus Road. He first analyzes Saul’s self-described “coercive” and supremely self-assured identity as a Pharisaic persecutor of the church who lists his credentials as a “Hebrew born of Hebrews” in Philippians 3:4ff and thereby habits of mind and aggressive behavior all too common among church leaders of our own day. These are, like Saul, all too sure of themselves and the purity of their motives in aiming to take their churches “to a new level.” Gombis offers a scathing indictment of the contemporary church’s fixation on “church growth” and on clergy fascination with status and credentialing issues (including a critique of the value of the D.Min. degree).

A “cruciform” style of ministry exemplifies that “power in weakness,” which Paul promotes in the early chapters of I Corinthians as “the foolishness of the cross” rather than the “wisdom of the world.” The conflict that divides the church and its ministry in so many places is illustrated through numerous personal tales that many of us will sadly recognize from our own experience. It’s good to encounter this honest diagnosis rooted in a biblical perspective that also offers a prognosis hopefully expressive of an authentic theology of the cross.

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Speaking Peace in a Climate of Conflict.

By Marilyn McEntyre.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7814-4. 205 pages. Cloth. \$21.99.

Without explicitly mentioning the communication style of the 45th U.S. President, Marilyn McEntyre has written a book to instruct her readers in savvy ways of speaking (and thinking)

that is devoted to transcending the prevalent conflictual style in both social and public media. As such, it can be seen as a timely update to her popular book of a decade ago, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*.

In a dozen short chapters, the author's strategy is to assist us in the quest to speak and write with "convicted civility," as Richard Mouw calls it (5), by offering examples of other writers who model the kind of "writerly sensibilities" from which we have much to learn. Among the imperatives are: "Don't Rely on Webster's," "Unmask Euphemisms," "Embrace Your Allusive Impulses," "Tell It 'Slant'," "Find Facts and Check Them" (in which she provides a handy list of fact-checking websites), and "Mind Your Metaphors." Chapters begin with reflections about each imperative by liberally discussing favorite authors before concluding with brief sections on examples selected for closer exemplification. In the chapter "Laugh When You Can," Anne Lamott is highlighted as an author whose humorous writing "makes faith more accessible, imaginable and appealing" (166). One wonders, in reading Lamott, "whether the living water Jesus promised might have a little fizz to it" (166).

At the end of the book, several questions for discussion are provided together with a useful bibliography that allows the reader to follow up on the author's reading suggestions. It is a sign of our times that there is a market for books like this, addressing what might be identified broadly as our present rhetorical climate. Thank goodness that humane and well-read folks like Marilyn McEntyre are willing and able to come to our aid!

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