

Words to Live By

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Writers are celebrated for the ways, both obvious and subtle, in which they reach and inspire their readers. Yet rarely do we consider the sources from which authors themselves draw inspiration. Earlier this year, Bill Moyers, Jim Wallis, Peter Matthiessen, and Doug TenNapel—four writers who have long energized diverse audiences with their words—came together for a writers' symposium at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, where they spoke about the ways in which spirituality informs their work. Despite their different backgrounds, experiences, and chosen mediums, these four authors share similar concerns at the heart of their creations— whether an essay on politics, a television series on life's origins, a narrative reflection on our place in nature, or a comic book on dinosaurs.

Bill Moyers, perhaps best known for his Public Broadcasting Service series "NOW with Bill Moyers," is no stranger to religious themes. He has successfully addressed plenty of them through popular television series like "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth" and "Genesis: A Living Conversation," both of which later became books. His most recent book, *Moyers on America: A Journalist and His Times*, brings together some of his earlier reflections on religious matters, such as the many interpretations of the Bible and how Americans, despite their many different faiths, can come to a place of mutual understanding.

Moyers, now seventy-one, has long championed the less powerful members of society—an approach to the world he developed first at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and later while serving as an associate Baptist minister and in the Peace Corps. Through his PBS programs, he exposed corruption in government and in the chemical and sports industries, and warned Americans to watch out for ideologues in big government and encroachments on constitutional rights by big business.

Moyers draws a connection between the tax cuts introduced by President George W. Bush and passed by Congress earlier this year—cuts that benefit mostly the wealthiest Americans—and the scriptural account of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple. "The money-changers were taking advantage of the poor," Moyers says, while more recently, "the religious and political leaders were working together to make sure they were taking care of themselves at the expense of the poor. That should make us angry today, too."

Though he believes Scripture is relevant to public discourse, he decries the ways in which some have twisted religion to justify their actions. He notes as an example the "rapture index"—a composite score based on activity in forty-five categories, including the economy, famine, and floods—which is believed to indicate the nearness of the end of time. This idea, made popular by the best-selling *Left Behind* series, has been used

as a rationale for, among other things, abdicating responsibility for environmental destruction, since it is said that this destruction will precipitate the second coming of Christ and the ascension of true believers into the kingdom of heaven.

Moyers believes corruption of religion has reached the highest corridors of power, and has not been afraid to criticize this. "The delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe to sit in the seat of power in the Oval Office and in Congress. For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly of power in Washington," he said upon accepting a Global Environment Citizen Award from Harvard Medical School last year. "Theology asserts propositions that cannot be proven true; ideologues hold stoutly to a worldview despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality. When ideology and theology couple, their offspring are not always bad, but they are always blind."

Earlier this year, Jim Wallis, founder of the ecumenical social action group Sojourners and editor of Sojourners magazine, earned acclaim for his critique of the religious right. In his best-selling book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, he criticized the religious right for focusing on issues like abortion and gay marriage to the exclusion of anti-poverty and social welfare initiatives. Wallis' call to broaden the "moral values" discussion to include the implications of environmental degradation, the war in Iraq, the response to terrorism, and poverty has earned him something close to pop icon status. U2 frontman Bono gave *God's Politics* a glowing review, and since the 2004 presidential election campaign, Wallis has appeared at concert halls throughout the country with the likes of the Christian music group Jars of Clay and country singer Emmylou Harris.

For the fifty-seven-year-old Wallis, the inclination to link the religious to the political dates back to his days as a teenager in the Detroit area, where he asked local church leaders why there were no blacks in their congregations. He was told that people who ask such questions only get in trouble. "I guess that was a prophetic statement!" exclaims Wallis, who has been jailed more than twenty times for protesting social injustices. Still, his role model remains Martin Luther King Jr., who, by holding the U.S. Constitution in one hand and a Bible in the other, convinced Wallis that successful social movements must have their roots in spirituality: "King said, 'The church should never be the master of the state, it should never be the servant of the state, it should be the conscience of the state.'"

Wallis believes that politics should transcend traditional notions of "right" and "left," rooting itself instead in universal compassion and commitment to others. In his 1995 book, *The Soul of Politics: Beyond "Religious Right" and "Secular Left,"* and his following book, *Who Speaks for God?* Wallis notes the Bible's many references to taking care of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the imprisoned, and says we are called upon to look out for one another. In his newly released *Call to Conversion: Why Faith Is Always Personal but Never Private*, Wallis repeats his call for governmental policies based on the values Jesus preached.

Wallis has been criticized by some members of the religious right for the relative liberalism of his moral values and for not speaking out loudly enough against abortion. But he insists that by narrowing the discussion to merely one or two issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, little room is left for bigger ones, such as our responsibility to all of creation. “By not including the environment, capital punishment, war, and economic justice in the discussion about abortion,” Wallis says, “the conservatives are saying, ‘We care about you until you are born. After that, you’re on your own.’”

Peter Matthiessen, a longtime Zen Buddhist, conveys a similar concern for the environment and marginalized people. Most of his books address the tenuous balance between human existence and the survival of wildlife and habitats. With ever-expanding development and growing hunger for natural resources, the delicate relationship is in danger, he says.

Whether writing about a little-known species of bird, a mountain peak, or a forgotten human civilization, Matthiessen, now seventy-eight, continuously communicates his respect and admiration for each of his subjects and for the interconnectedness of the natural world.

While working at a summer camp in Connecticut as a teenager, Matthiessen became interested in writing about species at the mercy of more powerful forces. Having come from a background of privilege, Matthiessen recalls watching with astonishment as a group of youngsters from the inner city ate their dinner “as if they had never seen food before. The entire time they wolfed down their food, they looked behind them, over each shoulder,” he remembers. “I found out later that they were used to having to protect their food from someone else at the table taking it away from them. That started my interest in groups that had to struggle to survive.”

His time as a Buddhist has deepened his understanding of the connection between human beings and all other species, he says, and has contributed to his sense of obligation to be mindful and responsible to all of creation. It also has lent him a painstaking attention to detail that has sharpened his skill as a writer. Describing the sandpiper bird in *The Shorebirds of North America*, he writes: “One only has to consider the life force packed tight into that puff of feathers to lay the mind wide open to the mysteries — the order of things, the why and the beginning. As we contemplate that sandpiper, there by the shining sea, one question leads inevitably to another, and all questions come full circle to the questioner, paused momentarily in his own journey under the sun and sky.”

Although Matthiessen will speak only sparingly about his spiritual practice, his philosophy can be gleaned from parts of *The Snow Leopard*, the telling of an odyssey through the Himalayas during a period of grief and spiritual searching that earned him the National Book Award for general nonfiction in 1980. “Today, science is telling us what the Vedas have taught mankind for 3,000 years, that we do not see the universe as it is,” he writes. “According to Buddhists ... this world perceived by the senses, this relative but not absolute reality, this dream, also exists, also has meaning; but it is only

one aspect of the truth, like the cosmic vision of this goat by the crooked door, gazing through sheets of rain into the mud.”

Serious and spiritual messages come embedded in all shapes and sizes, including the comic books and video games of American artist and animator Doug TenNapel. His first successful graphic novel, *Creature Tech*, which is now being adapted for the big screen, combines themes of alienation, love, and social acceptance in the setting of a small community. His latest work, *Earthboy Jacobus*, is about a lonely man who crashes his car into a flying whale and finds a boy from a parallel universe. It also deals with love and social acceptance and the possibility that life is not always as it seems.

Most of TenNapel’s writing is influenced by years of reading the Bible. “We writers write what we know,” he says. “Part of the Christian symbolism or philosophy that comes out in my work is that I’m incredibly familiar with Bible stories—the nature, the cadence, the message. It would make sense that as I tell stories, I would naturally steal elements of this moral system and incorporate it into my work. It’s part of my culture, my identity, my vocabulary, as I think about why characters do things or how events happen.”

The thirty-eight-year-old TenNapel feels that most great narratives have their roots in the dominant story of the New Testament. “Specifically, the story of Christ is *the* hero’s journey,” he says. “God wrote this tale in the DNA of planet Earth. The most popular stories of all time have a hero of humble beginnings, who blossoms before a community of adoring but oppressed peers, only to be sacrificed to save the community that is destined to die without his spilled blood. Often, the hero resurrects in a new, pure adult form.”

He points to Gandalf of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; Bruce Willis’ character in the *Die Hard* movies; and Neo of *The Matrix* as examples of the universality of this kind of hero. “Hollywood loves it when a hero or his sidekick dies at the end of the second act so that some group can live,” he says. “No matter if the reason is godless evolution or the gospel truth; we all agree that this form of Christ story has wide appeal in our most successful civilizations.”

TenNapel experiences some tension in the entertainment world when he tells people he is a conservative born-again Christian. Although his books have been well-received, he believes he has lost work because his religious and political beliefs are well-known. Even though he produced the highly successful video game “Earthworm Jim” and, later, “The Neverhood” for Steven Spielberg’s Dreamworks, he says that potential collaborators in Hollywood tend to cast a skeptical eye. In the end, though, he is less concerned with how he is perceived than with holding on to the sense of purpose that guides him.

“My work ethic is a huge factor in what separates me from my peers who might use fear, greed, and vanity as an ultimate motivation,” he says. “To be sure, I am full of fear, greed, and vanity, but I have a higher calling that ultimately sustains and inspires my workday.”

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