

CHAPTER 8

**Review of
Fighting for Social Justice:
The Life Story of David Burgess,
by David Burgess with Foreword
by Bill Moyers**

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Dorothy Day, the Catholic social activist and cofounder of the *Catholic Worker* movement wrote, "going to confession is hard." In the Preface to her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, she likened the writing of one's life story to a confession "because you are 'giving yourself away'." Giving yourself away is hard. But for Dorothy Day, if you love, you will want to give yourself:

You write as you are impelled to write, about man (sic) and his problems, his relation to God and his fellows. You write about yourself because in the long run all man's problems are the same, his human needs of sustenance and love. I can write only of myself, what I know of myself, and pray with St. Augustine, 'Lord, that I may know myself, in order to know Thee.'

In the spirit of Dorothy Day, David Burgess writes his life story, a confession, yet points us to the presence of God in his commitment to social justice.

Specifically, Burgess states that the intent of his book is his hope that his story can be useful to younger Americans. He admits in the Epilogue that he cannot fulfill the usual expectation of an autobiographer to summarize his or her accumulated

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wisdom with the hope that the future generations will be wiser. He says he feels "less like a wise man and more like a scientist who has made some important discoveries but knows that many others remain hidden." This statement strikes the balance he has sought throughout the book. He wants to avoid a triumphal view of his life but not with false modesty. I think Dorothy Day was right, the genre he achieves is a confession. He is in good company with the Saints of the Church. This balanced approach permeates the tone, content, impact and thus the real value of the book for the reader.

First, the tone: Bill Moyers in his Foreword to *Fighting for Social Justice*, states that Burgess epitomizes his idea of a Christian pilgrim, imitating Christ. But Moyers points out that Burgess is "too honest about his imperfections to claim distinction in attaining this aspiration. By his own admission he is an ordinary man." But as Moyers reminds us, quoting G.K. Chesterton, "All men are ordinary men; the extraordinary men are those who know it."

My favorite illustration of Burgess straightforward "ordinariness" is his account of embarking on a new career late in his life as the pastor of two struggling blue-collar churches in Newark in 1979. He had just retired from a remarkable career in the Foreign Service and the United Nations. In both capacities his focus was to serve the poor. In the Foreign Service he was the labor attaché in India and later he headed up the Peace Corps in Indonesia. At the UN his assignment was with UNICEF in East Asia and then back in North America. This work spanned the period of his life from 1955-1977. It was a heady time, working with many powerful and famous people; but the Newark churches brought him back full circle. As a seminary student at Union Seminary, and for the period from 1944 to 1955, he was active in church and union sponsored labor organizing. First, he and his wife Alice were missionaries to migrants. This was followed by a three year stint as the chaplain to the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union. CIO union sponsored labor organizing and work with the Fellowship of

Southern Churchmen filled out the most formative years of his early life.

It was not surprising then that he "returned" in his later life to that which gave him some of his life's greatest satisfactions. Listen to the tone of his own voice as he tells his story of this new vocation in Newark:

Now all I had to do was figure out how to be a pastor. I had remained very active in the churches in the thirty-two year since I had left the formal ministry, by teaching adult Bible classes and occasionally delivering sermons at the request of pastors. But now I felt I was starting from scratch... I reviewed the yellowed notes I had taken in my preaching course at Union Seminary [from Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick]. I still recall vividly his advice about preaching. It boiled down to this: Start with a paragraph stating in simple words the central theme of your sermon. Then make three illustrative points to clarify your theme and close with a brief summation of your sermon's theme. Before you choose a sermon theme and readings from the Bible, imagine in your mind and heart the faces of the men, women, and children you will be preaching to. Recall what you already know about their fears, hopes, faith or lack of faith, their joys, doubts, and sadness which you have discovered during your visits to their homes and your conversations with them elsewhere. Be keenly aware of your own fears, hopes, faith, or lack of faith which are often parts of your life experiences. Try to keep your sermons to twenty minutes or less. In order to have continuing eye contact with your congregation as you deliver a sermon, preach from an outline rather than reading a text.

This conveys to me a person willing to acknowledge his reliance on others. He was aware that he was "starting from scratch" and needed help. His use of the "yellowed notes" from seminary is a self-disclosure that others may have tried to minimize. But he offers it as straightforward and honest comment, perhaps even a confession that he was just an ordinary man trying to do his best. Much like the awareness required for

a good sermon, it is clear he entered this new phase of his life keenly aware of his fears, hopes, faith and lack of faith.

Next, the content: The book is rich in stories that help us understand our own history in the Twentieth Century. It is a history of struggles for social justice. It is a reminder that there are victories; and that there will be more victories. Fundamentally, Burgess helps us honor the past struggles and the need to be realistic about the tenacity necessary for success. He calls us to recommit ourselves daily to fight the "principalities and powers" in which we participate that diminish the human soul. In looking back over some of the defeats (and there were defeats) in his struggle for social justice, he took heart in the words of Norman Thomas, the erstwhile socialist candidate for president: "There are no lost causes, only causes that have not yet been won."

One of Burgess' most significant victories which gave him a "thrill" the rest of his life, was the battle to save Delmo Homes in Missouri in the mid forties. Delmo Homes were government built homes for sharecroppers and tenant farmers. They were managed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The ten-month campaign to allow and find the means for the residents to purchase these homes, in one of the richest cotton growing regions in the nation, included protests, citizen and media pressure, White House lobbying and good fortune. With tenacity it became a showcase organizing effort that helped inspire other activists who visited David and Alice at their home in the Delmo project. Again in his own words we get a sense of some of the ingredients of a successful fight for justice:

We began to believe that our major obstruction was none other than the new president himself [Harry Truman]. We recalled that as a senator, Truman was narrowly reelected in 1940 in part because of solid support from the ruling [political] machine in Kansas City and from cotton plantation owners in southeast Missouri.... In early 1945 Truman, then vice president, had assured local planters that they would soon get

the chance to purchase the ten projects.

But Burgess had some cause to be optimistic. He was aware that Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace had endorsed selling the homes to the current residents. Also during a protest trip to Washington D.C. with a delegation of Delmo residents, Burgess was able to gain the helpful advice from Pete Hudgens, a deputy administrator in the FSA. The inside information Burgess received from a New Deal lobbyist was that Hudgens was "the only honest man left in this agency." Hudgens counseled the delegation to begin an escrow account from money collected from the residents. A new organizing committee managed this account. He also advised to begin a high profile lobbying effort from prominent people in Missouri. The advice was followed. The new organizing committee soon received supportive editorials in the Washington Post, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the St. Louis Star. Buoyed with this optimism they submitted a bid for \$143,225.

We held our breath and quickly got the news we had expected: Hancock [FSA Administrator] rejected our offer. He told the committee that in the future he would not consider any bid under \$385,000.

In desperation, I called on a family friend, Sherwood Eddy, an aging Christian evangelist who back in 1905 had helped persuade my father to turn aside a lucrative banking job and become instead a low-paid YMCA teacher in Japan. I asked if Eddy's own Cooperative farms in Mississippi, would make a higher bid on behalf of the soon-to-be-incorporated (I hoped) Delmo Housing Corporation. After lengthy telephone conversations with [Episcopal] Bishop Scarlett [Committee Chair] the foundation's board members, at Eddy's urging, agreed to place a bid for \$245,000.

Hancock rejected this bid too. He claimed it was below his minimum. He gave Eddy only twelve days to submit another

bid. The letter he sent to Eddy warned ominously about the firm deadline. If it was not in by that time, he was "obligated to take other action immediately by way of liquidation."

I telephoned our friend Pete Hudgens [FSA's deputy administrator]. Ever willing to help, he counseled that we remain calm and submit in the next ten days a slightly higher bid....[After the new bid was submitted and] hearing that it was not much higher than the rejected one, many of us on the scene were again fearful and apprehensive. We proved to be men and women of little faith. On November 12, 1945, Hancock sent a telegram to Eddy announcing that the FSA had accepted our offer. I still have a copy of the telegram. Many years later, it still gives me a thrill to read it.

Even though Burgess' role in this struggle was one of many, it proved to be crucial at strategic points. He was able to make key contacts to help sustain the effort. He is proud of his role. No false modesty. There are numerous lessons that can be learned from this fight. We could assess that we have to be committed over the long run to be successful. Burgess also seems to want us to understand that it takes many individuals doing their part to succeed. We do not need to do it all. He is careful not to overstate his role. He is not self-triumphal. There may be other lessons to be learned. In fact the book is full of insights and wisdom for each of us on every page. Some of these lessons are clear in Burgess' writing and intent. But most of them are implicit in his stories for us to draw out our own lessons. If we harvest his experiences with our experiences, the result will be a bounty of lessons.

This leads me to the vital impact of the book and its value for the reader. Though Burgess is aware that he personally cannot summarize the wisdom for the future generations, what he has provided us is even more significant. He has written an honest reflection—a reflection that will intersect and connect

with each of our personal histories. In Day's terms, it is a reflection about human concerns that are the same for all of us, our need for sustenance and love. The book is a window to the human soul. But it is also a mirror by which we can look at ourselves. We can celebrate our own victories. We can challenge ourselves to pursue "causes that have not yet been won."

In the mirror I could personally see myself as a seminarian grappling with the same issues of war and pacifism. For Burgess it was WWII. For me it was Vietnam. I could also celebrate his efforts to establish urban ecumenical ministries to serve the poor. Newark, New Jersey for him. Arlington, Massachusetts and Berkeley, California for me. There are civil rights and human rights struggles that span Burgess' generation and my generation. There are mentors who were significant to each struggle in which Burgess participated. In his mentors I see my mentors. Some of his mentors became mine, even if only through books. Reinhold Niebuhr provided each of us insights to build a social analysis that understood the possibilities and the demons of power. Through my reading of *Fighting for Social Justice*, it is clear this book provides a mirror in which to take a good look at yourself.

Two challenges emerge. Each of us must tell our story. We do not need to write an autobiography, but we do need to communicate the importance of our past struggles to help inform future activism. Secondly, we need to remain diligent. There are new causes that demand our attention. As Burgess points out, there are very few places to sign up for justice work. Social justice commitment is not communicated in our mass media. However, each of us is a registration point for enlisting others and ourselves in important work. We have recently experienced a sad illustration of how our democratic institutions do not serve the interests of all citizens. During the 2000 presidential election, regardless of one's candidate preference, we had a breakdown of electoral, legislative and judicial institutions. These institutions are heavily weighted to

the advantage of those with economic power. The commercially driven mass media were also part of the problem. Throughout the post-election coverage little was done to educate us about the disenfranchisement of millions of Americans. It was too focused on which candidate won. As we now know, the American people were the losers.

This is not a new problem for the United States. Burgess tells us many stories that show how compromised and captive our institutions were to anti-democratic influences in the past. He has a poignant personal story about his FBI background check for the Foreign Service at the height of McCarthyism. The Vietnam War also exposed our government for duplicity and unjust activities worldwide to stem the communist threat. What is our challenge today? We need to energize a new movement to foster a civic debate that can lead to a reform of our institutional life. These institutions need to be more responsive to the will of all citizens. Our democracy is at a crossroads. We need leverage points to make sure our national actions will be more responsible on the global stage. Globalization as defined by large economic interests will leave behind most of the world's population. What will be the key to a new movement for greater democracy in the US and abroad?

If Burgess' book is a mirror for taking stock of ourselves and a window to problems that have beset humanity for all time, what do we see in this mirror? What do we see through this window? The message of this book is a religious one. Like Day, this book documents Burgess' attempts to know himself in relation to God. This journey inspired his activism and helped him grapple with problems in his personal life.

He reflects on moments when he "experienced flashes of the reality of God." The first was in 1939 at the precipice of WWII at a youth conference in Amsterdam, Holland. "I stood among fifteen hundred delegates from seventy-five nations at the World Conference of Christian Youth, as we recited the Lord's prayer together, each in his or her own tongue. I felt then the presence of God in our midst." Next was in 1941 when

struggling with his unworthiness to become a Christian minister. He was reading a passage from Martin Dibelius's book *The Sermon on the Mount*: "the personage of Jesus is like a signal that here is another world and that the other world is moving toward the earthly world." He then found himself on his knees by his dormitory bed, "praying and thanking God that amidst despair he had broken into my troubled life and given me new hope."

Four other occasions were significant moments for Burgess. Again he highlights the 1945 telegram from the head of The Farm Security Administration when the bid of the Delmo Housing Corporation had been accepted. "I wept and rejoiced, thanking God for this unexpected triumph of poor people over the cotton barons." Then in a very personal remembrance he recalled the recovery of his wife's addiction to alcohol. "I knew again that God was that mysterious power who had touched her life, my life, our family's life, and the lives of the members of Alice's recovering fellowship." In Newark in 1989 with another housing victory for the poor he rejoiced. "One more time, God's justice had triumphed over the principalities and powers." A month later he suffered a heart attack. "In my hour of need I felt enveloped by his divine love."

This spiritual journey is continuing today for David Burgess. He now feels he is belatedly able to forgive his former adversaries. "I truly forgave, without anger or resentment, those who had obstructed me." It was the words of Rachel Carson that helped him place himself in the hands of "our compassionate God and to live a redeemed life free of guilt, regrets and self-condemnation and full of love, sensitivity, and forgiveness." She makes a distinction between wonder-filled children and alienated and spiritually dead adults.

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful and full of wonder. It is our misfortune that for most of us the clear eyed vision and the true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring are dimmed and even lost before

we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy that is supposed to preside over the christening of children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.

This sense of wonder Carson writes about and which has inspired Burgess, seems to me to be the spirit that should motivate a renewed activism for human rights. Through a wonder about God's creation we should begin our work. Where we have lost this sense of aliveness, mystery and thankfulness, we need to bring it back.

For many of us to whom much has been given, this is a choice we can make. It is nothing short of a sin if we choose to be dead to ourselves and our world. Where this sense of wonder has been taken away from others, we need to recommit ourselves to its restoration. When the right to love and be loved or when the right to sustain or be sustained is denied we are all diminished. This is diminishment that can come in the form of discrimination, poverty or disenfranchisement.

Let us write a new life story together in the Twenty First Century that combines social justice activism with a sense of divine wonder. Or in the spirit in which David Burgess concludes his book by evoking the words of Isaac Watts' hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," let us begin again, once more, forever:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far to small;
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all

Thank you David for the window into the soul of humanity. Thank you also for the mirror that can lead to our own hard confession. A confession that is faithful to love and beginning each day with a commitment to fight for social justice.