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Articles

THE SOCIAL EDGE INTERVIEW: AUTHOR CURTISS PAUL DEYOUNG

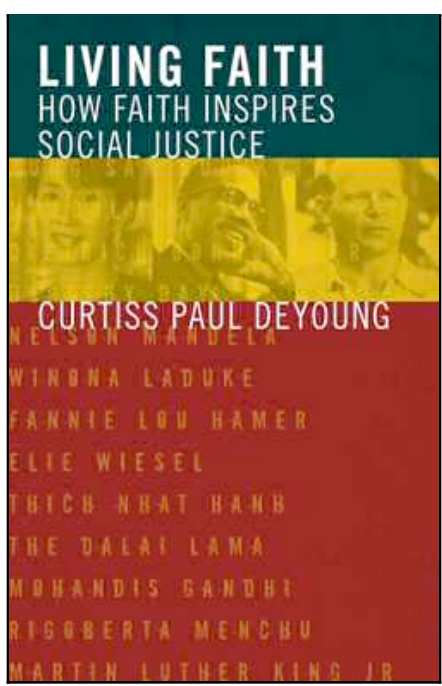
by Gerry McCarthy

Curtiss Paul DeYoung is a Professor of Reconciliation at Bethel University in Saint Paul, Minnesota. An ordained minister, he has served at congregations in Washington DC and New York City.

De Young is a long-time activist who worked at the Covenant House Times Square for homeless and runaway youth in New York City. He is the author of numerous books, including: United by Faith and Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge, Our Only Hope.

His new book Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice was recently published by Fortress Press. I reached him in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Gerry McCarthy: In *Living Faith* you write that: "Faith-inspired activists live and practice their faith in ways that do not recognize socially constructed boundaries. They strive to transcend race, culture, class, and other artificial limitations. Mystic-activists do not divorce faith from political action for social justice; they do not separate present reality from a hopeful vision for the future; and they view the boundaries of religion as permeable." Can you talk to me about this? Transcending artificial limitations like culture and class is a particular challenge in Western societies isn't it?



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Curtiss Paul DeYoung: Yes --race, culture, and class are boundaries that most of us don't cross with any regularity, possibly because we live such segregated lives from each other. That's one thing that stood out as I looked at these folks I called mystic-activists. They seemed almost compelled to get to know people who were from different contexts in which they were living in. At some point (although I'm sure it wasn't this way initially) they began to do this with great ease.

For example: You find an Oscar Romero more and more throughout his life as an educated elite cleric, spending much of his time at the margins of El Salvador with the poor and oppressed and feeling very much at home there.

You see Malcolm X --in the last days of life-- urged by his Mecca experience to begin to reach out to those who he had considered unlike himself (and uninterested in connecting to). But moving by his faith and a greater understanding of what it means to be human, he found himself --particularly in the last few months of his life-- out on college campuses and intersecting with white students. That's something that was unusual for him.

You see this across the board with these mystical-activists. It's this ability to connect with folks. It's as though these distinctions began to have less meaning. What I found particularly interesting was their ability to cross the divide of religion and religious tradition. It's fascinating because what we need in today's world are people who can become bridges across religious traditions. Who are the people who seem to be able to do that? It's the traditional mystics who relate to God simply as God --not as defined through religious tradition *per se*.

Then you have activists who come together because they're focused on a particular cause. They're able to cross these boundaries, because they share a passion around a particular cause whether they're addressing poverty or other social injustices. I thought: Here's a group that's pulled from both of those places --mysticism and activism. Maybe that explains why they do this with such comfort.

GM: Do you think mysticism is often misunderstood in our culture?

CPD: Yes. It was a point of discussion with the publisher on whether I should continue to use the term in the book. We decided to continue using the term (so people could have some sort of definition) but not to put it in the title of the book.

The term mystic is used in a variety of ways. Some people have this image of someone that's otherworldly and disconnected to what's happening in reality. Some people would see mystics as crazy people who sit on poles,

or who would pull away and you never see them again. Others define it simply as the New Age spirituality. It has a lot of various perspectives. Part of the reason for choosing to use the term was that I was trying to speak about the quality of the faith experience in the lives of these activists. It just didn't seem like faith-based, religious, or spiritual was capturing it (and those terms are loaded too).

I began to think there was a depth of experience and a vibrant faith I was trying to capture. Mystic became the best term for it. But by connecting it to the term activist it made sure that we weren't saying these were folks who withdrew. They might withdraw for a period of time to be re-energized. But they're people who are engaged.

For the most part, the people I looked at are activists first. But they need a sense of this idea of mysticism to continue to refresh and inspire them in their activism.

GM: Has there been any reaction to the term mystic-activists that surprised you?

CPD: As I talked to people about the term it made sense. Most of the people I've engaged with around the book have been activists who have been energized by their faith to do this work, but they've never had someone say: This is what this means. This is what you're doing.

I was in Los Angeles a couple of months back with an interfaith activist network talking to them about this. They became energized when I used this term. It's not my term. I borrow it from Alton Pollard as he described Howard Thurman who was much more a traditional mystic like a Thomas Merton. These are folks who (from their point of mysticism) spoke to the world of activism. But it goes the other way as well. So it has been an affirming term, as people have understood it.

GM: You have a wonderful passage from Aung San Suu Kyi in the book. She explains that: "The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development...Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the old iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration." We usually don't think of changing mental attitudes as revolutionary do we?

CPD: One of the things that has drawn me to her thinking on this (and others like Martin Luther King Jr. who talked about a revolution of values) is that when you see a revolution occur and then the new leaders become as corrupt as the previous, you ask: Where was the change and revolution? What she is beginning to speak to is that a revolution has to be deeper than just a change of government, politics, and even policy. It has to go to the foundation that creates the worldviews and perspectives that we have. There needs to be a change at that point.

We talk about mental attitudes, perspectives, and ways of thinking --because so often the revolutionary of yesterday is the dictator of today. If we don't change that, we're never going to have true revolution in the sense that brings social justice into our political system.

GM: In the book, we learn that in 1930 Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent a year studying theology in New York City. You describe this as a pivotal moment for the transformation of his worldview. Can you talk to me about this?

CPD: Bonhoeffer goes to Union Theological Seminary to study, and while he's there he meets an African-American student and develops a friendship --which in the 1930s is not a common occurrence in the United States, let alone for someone from Germany.

Frank Fisher is the other seminarian's name. He's doing an internship at one of the leading churches in Harlem --the Abyssinian Baptist Church (which is still a leading church today). Bonhoeffer goes with him and experiences the worship of the church, which is something that he has never experienced or seen before. But he does more than that. He stays. He continues to worship in the congregation. He gets involved in the life of the church. He teaches Sunday school and becomes involved in the youth group. He also finds his way into people's homes.

Then Bonhoeffer begins to do this broader study of the experience of race for African-Americans here in the United States in the 1930s. Through the lens of his study --but even more so through these relationships-- he gives an amazing glimpse of the situation that African Americans are facing around racism in the United States. This is unusual for someone who is white, and completely unexpected for someone who is visiting from Germany for a year.

What this does for Bonhoeffer is that it gives him a new additional lens. As he returns to Germany he takes this lens about racism in the United States and --all at once-- he begins to see the parallel in Germany under the Nazis and what's happening to the Jews and the rampant anti-Semitism that's intertwined with his own Christian theology (and that of his Church) in the same way that racism got intertwined with Christianity in the United States. He begins to see what's happening, and it mobilizes him in a way that's unique among even Christian leaders who challenged Hitler in Bonhoeffer's growing passionate commitment to Jews. I use that as a broader way to think about how we're able to see life from the margins, and how that will transform our worldviews. Because I noticed that in most of these activists that I looked at, they'd had some kind of an experience with people who were struggling against injustice. It wasn't just a one-day experience. It was an immersion experience that radically changed the way they thought.

GM: You write how Bonhoeffer re-imagined faith in a world that had experienced an apathetic, corrupt, and sometimes even demonic religion. When the Nazis incarcerated Bonhoeffer, he wrote from prison that: "Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life...." What was Bonhoeffer coming to at this point in his life?

CPD: Bonhoeffer uses a term "religion-less Christianity" which seems strange, and almost a bit offensive at first glance. But I began to look deeper into this, and to think about the situation he was in. He is in prison, but he hopes to live and be a participant in the church post-Nazi Germany. He begins to face the reality that the church in Germany (by and large) has been completely compromised because of their alliance with the Nazi government.

So how would Christianity hold any attraction or integrity? How do you deal with a Christianity that has been so corrupted (as Bonhoeffer says)? I suppose it was the same question for Dutch Reform Christians in South Africa as they began to face the reality of what happened by embracing a partnership with apartheid. Or it could be any situation where Christianity or any religion becomes married to nationalism.

Bonhoeffer begins to think: What would a faith look like freed from its institutions? He uses religion as a way to talk about institutional religion. What he comes up with in the interim is this re-imagining that would occur. He said there were two essential things that needed to happen. Prayer --which is the mystic. And social justice --which is the activist. Bonhoeffer is calling for what I see in many of these activists: The idea of mystic-activists. This faith is all about looking for social justice and being rooted in a deep relationship with the divine. Bonhoeffer doesn't live to see that come forth. He's also highly misunderstood in the early years after his death. But as we've begun to see other situations in the late twentieth century (Rwanda, South Africa, and some of the ways militant Islam has married itself to nationalism) then you have to go back to Bonhoeffer and say: He's speaking to our times. Perhaps even in the way we see conservative Evangelical Christianity

aligned so much with our own government in the United States.

GM: In the book, you speak about social justice and reconciliation together. Why is it important that we talk about these at the same time?

CPD: I've been to South Africa several times. There are also some South Africans in my research as well. The anti-apartheid movement tends to use the terms quite easily together. Sometimes they'll talk about social transformation almost interchangeably with the term reconciliation. They're talking about the social dimensions of reconciliation. Obviously reconciliation has individual dimensions in our relationship with God and each other as well. But conflict resolution studies are now beginning to use the term reconciliation more and they're saying: What if we do achieve justice? What if we do achieve peace? Is that enough? Or do we know how to actually live together?

Reconciliation speaks of the relational dimensions of social justice ultimately. If it's on an individualistic way of viewing reconciliation, then it's our just relationship with God or our just relationship with each other. But on a macro and social level, it's the relational component that then begins to weave us together as neighbours and community.

Just reconciliation by itself doesn't necessarily imply or call for (in the mind of many people) the idea of social justice. Sometimes it implies just more of an individualistic perspective or it just feels empty. In the people that I looked at in this book, there's this passionate commitment to social justice causes. But in many cases there's a relational side too, where people are developing the kinds of relationships they were calling for in the work for social justice. I just saw social justice and reconciliation hard to divorce from one another.

GM: So people can be working for social justice in a community, but still face the uneasy prospect of not being reconciled to some people.

CPD: We can be really issue-focused, but not living it out in our relationships. By putting these words together it gives us a more holistic way of endeavoring toward social change.

GM: You write about the importance of networks of interfaith relationships. Can you speak to me about this?

CPD: During the last part of writing this book I've had the chance to be in Palestine and Israel. I've also been aware of the role of religion in conflict in the world, and how diverse we're becoming religiously. We talk about racial reconciliation and we need to have conversations where people cross the lines of race, culture, and class. But how many of us know people of other faiths? It's this dynamic of being able to live and work together in our society. At a personal level (but also for those of us who are social justice activists at a level of working for social change) we need to be in connection and relationship with each other. It's not happening automatically. It's something we have to make an effort to do.

In the final epilogue in the book, I suggest some ideas. Many of these come from Rabbi Marc Gopin and some of his works. There's the idea that some people will build these relationships around shared study of scripture or conversations about traditions. As we also work for justice together, it seems that all of our texts are calling us to that. That's what I saw with these mystic-activists who I studied. They often found they had more in common with each other than they did with people in their own religious tradition. Which was interesting. That said to me: There's something in this that should be speaking to our time and our needs. Because as conflict around the world has much more of an overlay of religion to it, we need to have relationships already in place to be able to address this.

In Sudan, the Muslim-Christian divide there is part of what's keeping that

whole situation of genocide in place. If we had a well-developed ability to interact across religion (and we had activists who were coming together from both Muslim and Christian perspectives to speak on that issue) it seems like we could make progress.

GM: What are some the challenges mystic-activists face in North America today?

CPD: We need to be building more ways to be interconnected and interdependent with each other across religious traditions. Because the challenges we face --whether it be around issues of poverty or race (or the various aspects of poverty) don't seem to be going away. What's happening in North America is that we're becoming a microcosm of the rest of the world. Most urban areas across the world are now very diverse. Now our medium-sized cities and even rural communities are becoming diverse. Mystic-activists can play key roles in both this move toward reconciliation and this call for social justice. I wish life was getting easier and we could say the mystic-activist could look forward to retirement. But for our own generation it's still a long-term project.

GM: Where do you see signs of hope among faith-inspired activists working for social justice today?

CPD: Among this generation of college students, particularly many who are coming out of more conservative evangelical homes (where their faith leaders haven't always talked about social justice) it seems this generation is awakening to the fact that social justice is a core part of their religious faith. They're trying to figure out what that means and how to move forward on that. But I'm encouraged by the numbers of young people that are awakening to this sort of connection between their faith and working for social justice. That's encouraging for the future. The lead has been the environment, but it's been issues around Darfur and poverty in our own country and around the world. They're seeing that it's not enough just to be about charity. You also have to be about justice.

Another sign of hope I've seen has been in Israel and Palestine. It's under the radar screen still, but there does seem to be a lot of interfaith conversation and relationship building. There's a group called the Jerusalem peacemakers. I'm particularly encouraged by their work. People are actually worshipping and connecting together. In a sense they're saying: It may be a long time, but at some point they believe peace will come to Jerusalem and when it does, we need to already have some experience in being in relationship with each other. We already have to have some sense of community developing.

It's this idea that while we're working for social justice we're also preparing for what happens when justice does come. It's a great way to think --and it's one that we rarely see in our world today.

Gerry McCarthy is Editor of The Social Edge.

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