

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Philosopher shares lessons from 'a life of learning'

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I still remember the first time I met Nicholas Wolterstorff in 1980. Already, at age 48, he looked and was distinguished. He looks more distinguished now, for sure, with his shock of hair whitened and his visage wizened by wisdom and age and suffering. At the time, he was professor of philosophy at Calvin College; he later became Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University. He earned his position at Yale by his immense learning, countless books (that he wrote, not read) and excellent teaching.

He earned his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1956, the year I was born. After Harvard, he taught at Yale and England's Cambridge University; he returned to Yale in 1989 when, as I like to say, I replaced him at Calvin. But no one could or would replace him. I knew that already, the first time I met him in 1980, when I was in the first year of my Ph.D. program at the University of Notre Dame.

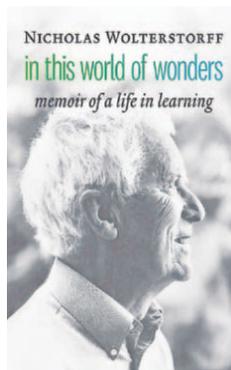
Professor Wolterstorff had come to give a talk at Notre Dame and I joined him at a reception after. I was eager, too eager, to meet him. A little scared, honestly. He already was one of the greatest philosophers of religion of the 20th century and, with Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, had developed an entirely new and exciting defense of the rationality of religious belief. I had read every one of his books and articles. I was a newbie graduate student and I was going to meet the master.

It's usually better not to meet one's idols. I remember when a world-famous professor arrived at my house around midnight for a party — just as all of the other guests were leaving. He had long, unkempt hair and it looked like he had used his white T-shirt as a napkin. When my wife saw this unkempt and extremely late professor at our door, she turned to me and said, "Kelly, you'd better come to the door and take care of this homeless person."

This professor stayed on into the night long after all of the other guests had left, drinking our whiskey and glancing up from checking his cellphone every 37 seconds. We seemed to be distractions. He was famous all right but didn't make me feel, well, special. I preferred meeting this professor in his impeccable writings, not in his peccable trousers.

Professor Wolterstorff's work is both wide-ranging and wise, including the most complicated defenses of abstract philosophical issues and sensitive discussions of the relationship of love and justice. His most widely read book, "Lament for a Son," is a poignant and intensely personal reflection on the untimely death of his 25-year-old son, Eric, in a mountain climbing accident. In "Lament," Professor Wolterstorff bares his soul, like few philosophers before him, as he grieves for his son and wrestles with God. If you haven't read this book already, run out and buy it and read it. You will be immensely rewarded for a modest expense of time.

Maybe experiencing suffering enlarged Professor Wolterstorff's expansive sympathy for sufferers. His concern for love and justice has never been merely academic. When he heard the cries of the oppressed, he walked alongside them and worked with them for peace, most notably in apartheid South Africa and bitterly divided Israel-Palestine.



Nicholas Wolterstorff is a Christian philosopher whose many books include the memoir "In This World of Wonders."
Submitted by Douglas Kindschi

IF YOU GO

What: "Conversation with Nicholas Wolterstorff"

When: 7 p.m. June 3

Where: Grand Valley State University's Eberhard Center, 301 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

Registration: Free at InterfaithUnderstanding.org

Years later, I played soccer on teams with Professor Wolterstorff's son, Chris. Chris was faster than most of us and in better shape. In our old farts league, that makes him a lot better! Unlike many former high school or college soccer players who still thought themselves great, Chris was the consummate team player.

Being part of a team is foreign to contemporary academic philosophers. Maybe every academic discipline is individualistic and competitive. I don't know. But philosophy sure is. Arguments, the stock and trade of philosophers, are war: We shoot down arguments, defend our positions and attack weak points. Makes a young philosopher constantly wonder/fear if he or she really counts.

Professor Wolterstorff is a Christian philosopher — Christian modifies both the content of his character and his research. As a follower of Jesus, he is compassionate and generous and on the side of the poor and the dispossessed. He seeks the flourishing of everyone in God's radically inclusive and just kingdom.

So I should not have been surprised that when I met him, he was kind and solicitous. But I was. And I should not have been surprised when he enthused about my ideas and writings and encouraged their publication. But I was. And I should not have been surprised when, years later, he would walk alongside me through my own suffering and grief. But I was. Nicholas is a surprisingly consistent Christian philosopher who makes you feel like you count, like you are on his team, and he is on yours. I like being on Nicholas' team.

Wolterstorff's latest book, "In This World of Wonders," is, as the subtitle states, a "Memoir of a Life of Learning." Join us for conversation with him June 3.

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