

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Bringing grief, justice into the work of a philosopher



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"I was being called by God to put justice on my agenda."

So writes Nicholas Wolterstorff in his newest book, "In This World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning." Wolterstorff, who speaks Monday at the GVSU Eberhard Center, is a world-renowned Christian philosopher who lived most of his adult life in Grand Rapids. His memoir, he acknowledges, is not an autobiography, nor is it based on a journal that he says he never kept. It is, he writes, a "series of vignettes, more or less following the order of my life ... events and situations that were formative for me ... and contributed prominently to the shape my life has taken."

He shares his life growing up in a small Minnesota town, his discovery of philosophy and the "big questions" while a student at Calvin College, and his graduate work at Harvard. He even confesses his role in some student pranks in his undergraduate years. The vignettes include his formative early teaching at Yale University with his friend and colleague Al Plantinga, leading up to his 30-year career teaching and practicing philosophy at Calvin, before returning to Yale.

His vignettes on marriage and family life add a very personal aspect to this very readable book. In the chapter titled "Living with Grief," Wolterstorff shares his struggle with the death of his son Eric, from a climbing accident in the Alps. The struggle was recounted in his earlier book "Lament for a Son," which he explains is "not a book about grief — it's a cry of grief." He is left with lots of questions and few, if any, answers. He writes, "I am not angry at God but baffled and hurt. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question."

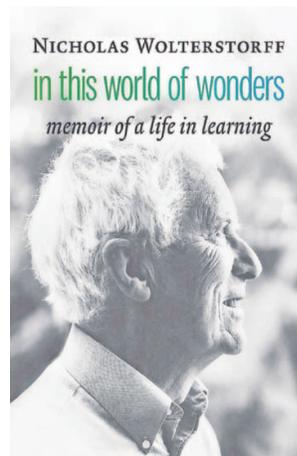
Wolterstorff recounts that he knew little of grief before his son's death. He writes, "I understood nothing about grief, other than I would not be grieving over Eric's death had I not loved him. Grief was the price I was paying for love." At Eric's funeral, Wolterstorff's friend Rabbi Phillip Sigal read from the Hebrew Scriptures about the endurance of faith. Wolterstorff acknowledges his faith did endure, "But it would become a different kind of faith, a faith that incorporated Eric's death and my grief. And that would reveal to me a different kind of God, more mysterious. ... Faith, at its core, is not belief but trust."

In his chapter on "Awakenings," he recounts his experience at a conference in South Africa that changed his life. He heard firsthand from the black and colored delegates "describing in moving detail the indignities daily heaped upon them by the official and unofficial segregation that pervaded South African society. ... They cried out for justice." It was through their voices that, Wolterstorff writes, "that God addressed me. ... I was moved by this cry for justice."

At the time, Wolterstorff's teaching had been concerned with issues of art, aesthetics, liturgy, education and various topics in philosophy. "Now," he writes, "God had added justice to my agenda." He returned to South Africa a number of times and began writing and speaking about justice, especially in the South African setting. These developments led to his book "Journey toward Justice."

Wolterstorff asks why he was so affected by the experience in South Africa while not similarly affected by injustice in his own society. One part of the answer "was the fact that the oppressors were members of my own religious tradition, the Reformed tradition of Protestant Christianity — more specifically, the Dutch Reformed tradition. ... I was angry. They had hijacked my tradition. Or if they represented the authentic tradition, I would have to repudiate that tradition."

But he goes on to reflect that "hear-



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. Monday

Where: Eberhard Center, GVSU, 301 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

Free Registration: InterfaithUnderstanding.org

ing the voices and seeing the faces of the oppressed ... evoked empathy in me. Not pity. Empathy. I felt with these oppressed people. I did not just gain knowledge of their situation, but I identified with them emotionally." It was not just a religious or moral duty.

As he continued his exploration into how to "articulate a socially progressive version of the Reformed tradition," he used Michael Walzer's book "The Revolution of the Saints." Walzer writes about the 16th and 17th century English Puritans who saw themselves as "responsible for their world ... and responsible above all for its continual reformation. Their enthusiastic and purposive activity were part of their religious life, not something distinct and separate."

Wolterstorff distinguishes between "world-averse Christianity and world-formative Christianity," both "acknowledging that there are things deeply amiss in our social order, but differing in their response." The former focuses attention on getting to heaven, while "The response of world-formative Christianity is to hope for a new day while trying to change the social order so that it comes closer to how it ought to be."

Wolterstorff, after studying the Hebrew prophets, proposes the goal of social activity as "justice-in-shalom." He also notes that shalom is not best translated as "peace," but as "flourishing." He continues, "Shalom is flourishing in all one's relationships: with God, with one's fellow human beings and their creations, with the natural world, with oneself. The chief reason the prophets so often connected justice with shalom is that shalom incorporates justice; injustice is the impairment of flourishing."

It was this understanding of shalom that brought together what had appeared to be the fragments of his various studies and pursuits. He concludes, "What unites justice, aesthetic delight, worship, and the theoretical understanding is that they are all dimensions of shalom."

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