

BOOKS

Reflective collection of wisdom stories

Ruth Whitehead



One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World

Margaret Silf
Lion Hudson Plc
£9.99

St Francis of Assisi is credited with the words: "Lord grant me the serenity to accept the

things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." It seems the search for wisdom is a universal and timeless search. So what better way to acquire some wisdom than by reading some universal and timeless stories?

Margaret Silf, a Scottish writer and retreat leader, has brought together this varied collection of stories from different cultures. Because she has largely re-written them, they bear the hallmark of her own style, but since that style is clear and concise, this is no bad thing. I really enjoyed dipping into the book, which is grouped around themes such as "warnings", "destiny", "the art of living true" and "sacrifice". All are short and to the point and leave you reflecting on their meaning.

As someone with a fairly large collection of "thought-provoking" stories, I found some of these stories familiar, but the majority were fresh to me. Here, for example, is one of them: two monks, Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. They met a lovely girl in a silk kimono, unable to cross. Lifting her in his arms, Tanzan carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak until that night: "We monks don't go near females – it is dangerous. Why did you carry her like that?" Tanzan replied: "I left the girl there – are you still carrying her?"

I can imagine preachers and teachers wanting to use these stories with groups of all ages – either read straight from the book, adapted as small sketches, or retold. Or of course you could just read them, reflect on them, and increase your own wisdom!

Ruth Whitehead is a United Reformed Church minister at the Whittlesford/Pampisford ecumenical partnership and Duxford United Reformed Church in Cambridgeshire

Riveting call for economic justice

Philippa Linton



Borrowing from the Future: A Faith-Based Approach to Intergenerational Equity

Ann Morisy
Continuum
£12.99

Ann Morisy is the keynote speaker at this year's United Reformed

Church Education and Learning Conference in December. As someone who doesn't read a lot about economics (or theology, come to that), I found her latest book to be a thoroughly engaging, even riveting, read.

She tackles head on, from a Christian perspective, the looming juggernaut facing society: the stark fact that the baby boomer generation (born in the decade after the second world war) is about to benefit hugely from the economic system at the expense of the younger generation, who will be paying off the debt for years (actually, make that decades) to come. The crisis facing Western governments is the likelihood of not having enough money to honour

future commitments to the upcoming generation in healthcare and pensions. The baby boomers are poised to take a huge slice of the cake, whilst the future looks bleak for the rest of us – and while we were all aware of this looming crisis, the credit crunch of 2008 has brought it forward with a vengeance.

Ann Morisy challenges the baby boomers not to just take merrily from the system, but to "pay their proper dues", investing their time and money in the future of the younger generation. She calls this "compassionate intentionality" and "creating cultural capital". She also warns the younger generation against resentment – devaluing and demonising old people is a dangerous path to tread. Also, the narcissism that characterises our culture is endemic amongst all ages: we will all pay a bitter price for excessive self-indulgence.

As Ann acknowledges, some Christian readers will find her content "Bible-lite", but she seeks to persuade readers who are otherwise sceptical about what role Christianity can play, to face these issues courageously and creatively. I was personally provoked to ponder and pray on the crucial issues she raises, not only for my own sake (I am all too aware that my own generation is running out of pensionable income) but for those who will come after me. This is an important and invigorating book.

Philippa Linton is PA to the United Reformed Church secretary for education and learning

Interesting collection of useful resources

Trevor Jamison



Darkness Yielding: Liturgies, Prayers and Reflections for Christmas, Holy Week and Easter (Third edition)

Rowan Williams, W H Vanstone, Sylvia Sands, Martyn Percy, Jim Cotter
Canterbury Press
£16.99

You dare not describe a book as a "curate's egg" when the Archbishop of Canterbury and the principal of an Anglican theological college are two of the contributors. This is indeed a work of

many parts, but, happily, on this occasion, all of them are good. In addition to 30 sermons and short newspaper articles from Rowan Williams and Martyn Percy (more from the latter than the former), we also get seven Good Friday addresses from W H Vanstone and several poems and meditations from Sylvia Sands (including one which provocatively asks why Christmas nativity sets lack an inn-keeper figure).

Jim Cotter provides substantial liturgies which challenge both the priority we give to worship (three hours on Christmas Eve anyone?) and its content; providing, for example, alternatives to our habitual choices of Christmas carols and Easter hymns. He also provides both some of his own much-admired psalm translations and additional gems from a wide variety of sources, such as Thomas Merton, John V Taylor, R S Thomas and United Reformed Church hymnwriter Brian Wren. In these liturgies, consideration is given to the use of space, moving outside the church building at times and to practical matters,

such as what one might eat and drink when participating in long vigils.

This book may have many readers, though few of them will read it from cover to cover. Worship leaders, even if they do not use the liturgies in their current form, will still find many individual hymns, prayers, poems and responses that can be used for their situation. Others will find it a thoughtful aid to personal devotion at significant points in the Christian year.

Trevor Jamison is a United Reformed Church minister at Billericay, Brentwood and Ingatestone URCS, Essex

Real-life Christianity

Catey Morrison



Mustard Seed Shavings – Mountain Moving for Beginners

Steve Tilley
BRF (The Bible Reading Fellowship)
£6.99

Steve Tilley sets out to write a book on the implications of living life

as a Christian – the book that he wished he could have read when he first became a Christian. The chapters roughly follow the themes of the 10 commandments, reflecting on issues of life that crop up, and how to deal with them.

The book begins with advice for all seeking to know “the Lord your God” through listening and questioning, but with the reminder that we shall never know everything about God. On the subject of idols, Tilley challenges the reader not to be an idolater, but instead be an idol, whereby our lives point others to God. In the following chapters: unwholesome talk, taking time to enjoy God’s world and honouring others (including our parents) is dealt with.

On the topic of murder, Tilley challenges the reader to take stock and deal with whatever form of violence is present in his or her life. The following chapter, titled “Sexy Stuff”, succinctly and helpfully covers the issues surrounding the gift of sexuality within our relationships, including his opinion on the limits of what is appropriate for it to be Godly. This leads to two remaining chapters which feature discussions on true honesty: where mercy, grace, loyalty and honour get a look in as we follow the way, the truth and the life.

A BOOK I WILL REMEMBER by Graham Cook

The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith (Overtures to Biblical Theology) by Walter Brueggemann, first published by Fortress Press, 1977

Sometime in the early ‘80s, I was at a conference. It was more soporific than intoxicating. That is until a Roman Catholic monk started talking about the Old Testament in a way that made sense of the way power worked in the life of nations, and the worlds of business as well as religious institutions. Much that I had seen through a glass darkly suddenly became clear. It was a eureka moment for me. By a better understanding of scripture, I had a new insight into the way the world worked. It gave me a frame of reference for something which up till then I had only felt by instinct. By a better understanding of scripture, I had a new insight into the way the world worked. It was a framework which served me well as I went about my business as a preacher, teacher and participant in community life. When I asked the monk where he had learned such a radical yet realistic understanding, he said: “Read The Land by Walter Brueggemann.” I did, and I was enthralled.

Here was the story of the Hebrew slaves escaping from the hierarchical dictatorship of Pharaoh’s Egypt to a land where they would not be slaves but landowners. What sort of land would they create? Would it be a society that was just like Egypt but with themselves in charge and some other poor beggars at the bottom? Or, would it be a different sort of society altogether? The thread that runs through it all is: “It shall not be for you as it was in Egypt.” A radical new vision is spelled out for a new society. A vision which included: better ways of treating each other, better ways of using the resources of the land, better understanding of the law and better rules for those in power; all encapsulated in the covenant between God and the people. And yet, in the end, Pharaoh’s way did re-assert itself. The covenant was forgotten leaving the prophets to dream of a new covenant that was to come.

Graham Cook is a retired United Reformed Church minister

HAVE YOU READ A SPECIAL BOOK?



Have you recently read, or always remembered, a special book? If you would like to share your reflections on a favourite book with REFORM readers please email them to reform@urc.org.uk or write to us at the address on page 4. Please keep submissions to 350 words or under.

Tilley is probably correct in his conclusion that he has provoked more questions than he has answered, and this is largely due to the numerous issues covered. However, I think that is the sign of a good author who is happy to give readers some pointers and then leave them thinking for themselves, with discussion questions added for that purpose. So, although not a biblical or scholarly look at the 10 commandments, there is meat here in this little book that will make you think, whether you are a new Christian or someone who wants to think again about living out faith today.

Catey Morrison is a United Reformed Church minister for the East Cleveland Group of churches in North Yorkshire

Book In brief:

The Held in Hope series

Victoria Beech and the Paediatric Chaplaincy Network (Illustrated by Rhiannon Mollart), Christian Education Publications, £5.99 per book

The Held in Hope series offers three stories for children aged five to seven, tackling the insecurities faced by children living with illness, going to hospital and facing death. The books also incorporate stories about Jesus that relate to the characters’ experiences. Each story is available as a free online film where the story is read by the television presenter Bear Grylls. (visit www.paediatric-chaplaincy-network.org)

Congregational Pie

Ian Gregory
Available on request from author, £10

This anthology contains a selection of articles, cartoons and comments on the work and witness of Congregational Federation churches, taken from The Congregationalist magazine from 2000 to 2011 – the period when Ian Gregory was in editorship. To obtain a copy, write to Ian Gregory at 16 Grice Road, Stoke on Trent, ST4 7PJ or email iancongist@hotmail.co.uk

FILM

image: © Merie Wallace / Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation



Original film hinting at the importance of faith

Natalia O'Hara

The Tree of Life

Directed by Terrence Malick
Released on 8 July 2011, certificate 12A

The central joke of Spike Jonze's 2001 comedy, *Adaptation*, is the "unfilmable" film penned by its writer-hero. "After the entire history of life on the planet, in the last seconds of the montage," the hero tells his Dictaphone, "we see the whole of history: tool-making, hunting, farming, war, lust, religion, self-consciousness, yearning." Ten years later, the joke has been turned on its head by

The Tree of Life, a sprawling history of everything written and directed by Terrence Malick (*Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*). The unfilmable film has not only been made, but won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. It narrates the creation of the universe, early life on earth, the extinction of dinosaurs and the lives of a family of three boys growing up in '50s Texas. It's the most original film of the year, and the most baffling.

Named after the scientific theory that all life on earth is related, *Tree of Life* opens with Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn), a middle-aged architect, talking to his father (Brad Pitt) on the phone. He's haunted by the death of his younger brother, who died, possibly in action, decades before. The conversation sets off a string of memories, and the film becomes a rambling catalogue of childhood games, meal-times and chores. Jack finds a gun and shoots a hole in his brother's

finger, steals a petticoat from a neighbour, and ties a frog to a firecracker. Their father, an authoritarian ex-marine, teaches them to fight and doles out hard discipline, while their religious, ephemeral mother (Jessica Chastain) reads stories and talks dreamily about grace. They see a crippled man, weed the lawn, go to church and hunt for dinosaur bones.

Within this family drama is a 17-minute, dialogue-free sequence depicting the creation of the universe, the beginnings of life on earth, dinosaurs hunting, tides rolling in and meteors. It is stunningly lovely, accompanied by Latin hymns, and never explained.

A possible coda to the plot is given in the film's prologue, which quotes God's words to Job in chapter 38 ("Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation... while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?") perhaps hinting at the importance of faith given the limitations of human knowledge. At times the film also seems to demand Job-like faith from its viewers, who are bombarded with snippets of scenes, disconnected speech and even mawkish cliché (the heaven-on-a-beach section springs to mind) without a shadow of resolution.

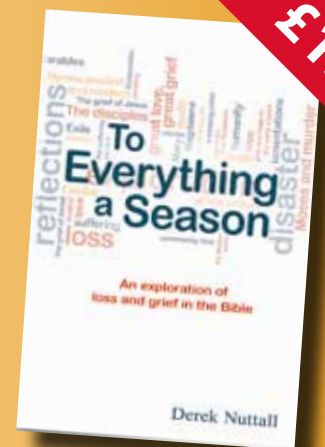
The film reunites Malick with long-time collaborator Jack Fisk, also the production designer on another recent cinematic epic, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. It is also his second collaboration with Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki (the first was colonial romance *The New World*), who with his fluid, ephemeral style looks set to become another Malick regular.

Natalia O'Hara is a news and arts journalist based in Prague

An exploration of loss and grief in the Bible

In *To Everything a Season* Derek Nuttall takes the reader on a journey through the Bible, encountering both deeply personal stories of grief and hope

The book is available via Amazon and from the United Reformed Church publishing@urc.org.uk



£13.50