JOURNEYS IN FAITH

WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW

A Simplicity of Faith
My Experience in Mourning

WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW is the person to whom Karl Barth urged Americans to listen. Stringfellow's book, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land, has since become influential because of its creative theological insight into the nation's destiny. After graduating from Harvard Law School, Stringfellow practiced law in the East Harlem ghetto, writing of that experience in My People Is the Enemy. He defended Bishop James Pike against heresy charges and collaborated with the poet and satirist, Anthony Towne, in writing The Bishop Pike Affair, and later the biography, The Death and Life of Bishop Pike. Towne and Stringfellow were jointly indicted for allegedly harboring their friend, the fugitive priest Daniel Berrigan, S.J., at their Block Island home, a matter of which they have written in Suspect Tenderness. Stringfellow's account of his endurance of pain and transcendence of profound illness, related in A Second Birthday, glimpses the community in which he and Towne shared on Block Island. A Simplicity of Faith is the sequel to that book.

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advocacy as a pastoral gift

When I first arrived in 1956 in East Harlem, I supposed that the rudimentary problem respecting the law was a failure to fully implement the existing American legal system among citizens who were economically dispossessed and who were victimized by racism. My supposition was, I soon enough discovered, mistaken. The issue, so far as the law was concerned, in the ghetto was the existence of another ruling system, distinct and apart from the constitutional and legal system pertaining elsewhere in the nation, based on coercion and the threat of coercion by those institutions and people who had commandeered the capabilities of coercion. It was a system of lawless authority, of official violence, a primitive substitution for the law. I wrote then that if such an extraordinary condition were allowed to continue and to fester, it would, sooner or later, infect and afflict the whole of this society. It has. There is a connection—direct and terrible and coherent—between the kind of regime to be found in the ghettos in the Fifties and the way lawless authority and official violence dominate the life of most of this society today. And let no one pretend that a place like Block Island has been exempt from similar issues: until only some few years ago contempt for due process of law was the most conspicuous attribute of the town’s administration.

If I hold lawyers especially responsible for the usurpation of constitutional rule in America because they, as a class and a profession, have been so lured and preoccupied with greed and apathy, I also ask myself, nearly every morning, whether my remaining an attorney condones—or appears to condone—the decadence against which I complain. Anthony and I often talked of this relentless tension that I feel in being a lawyer. Without his care and wisdom—sometimes delivered somberly, sometimes in repartée—that tension, I am aware, heightens. I do not know, now, what the limits of my endurance in the circumstances are. I am certain, however, that stoicism can be of no relevance.

A critical dimension of this tension occasioned by being a biblical person who works as a lawyer is that the role of legal advocate at once coincides with and interferes with the pastoral calling to which I am disposed charismatically. In that calling, advocacy expresses the freedom in Christ to undertake the cause of another—including causes deemed “hopeless,” to intercede for the need of another—without evaluating it, but just because the need is apparent, to become vulnerable—even unto death—in the place of another. By contrast, advocacy in the law is contained within the bounds of the adversary system, with all its implications of competitiveness, aggression, facetious games, debater’s craft, and winning per se. There have been circumstances in my experience when the advocacy of the Christian in the world coincides with the advocacy of the lawyer (as in the cases concerning the ordination of women), but there seem to be far more instances when the one interferes with the other (as in war resister cases). In part, here, of course, I am pleading within the legal profession for a more holistic approach to clients and cases than that afforded by the adversary system. Yet, more than that, I continue to be haunted with the ironic impression that I may have to renounce being a lawyer the better to be an advocate.