

## **AN INDISPENSABLE WRITER**

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Sometimes a writer will continue to speak to us over the years through his or her work. The writer can become both mentor and friend even though we may never meet face-to-face.

Poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, master teacher, Reynolds Price died in Durham, NC on January 20<sup>th</sup> at age 77. My debt to him is considerable.

When I arrived as a freshman at Duke in 1954, Price, a senior, dominated the literary scene. His work that was published in the campus literary magazine was accomplished and a treat to read. Upon graduation he attended Oxford University for three years where he studied with renowned poet W. H. Auden and David Cecil. He returned to his alma mater in 1958 to begin a legendary career as a teacher of literature and writing.

A founding member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, Price has been a part of Chattanooga's Conference on Southern Literature. During two of these gatherings, I had brief conversations with him. We had corresponded but never met previously. We talked of two professors of literature whose teaching we admired.

Price's fiction deals with poor residents of rural North Carolina who struggle to survive and to make sense out of life. It is as relevant today as when first published.

Much of Price's work is deeply religious. He opens "A Palpable God," a collection of Biblical translations: "A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo sapiens—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter." The translations from both Old and New Testaments give us fresh perspectives on familiar stories, which no longer seem predictable.

In "A Serious Way of Wondering: the Ethics of Jesus Imagined," Price considers the implications of trying to be a kind person in the most complex of circumstances.

In 1984 Price was diagnosed with a malignant tumor of his upper spinal cord. Surgery and radiation cured the cancer but left him paraplegic and in constant pain. "A Whole New Life: an Illness and a Healing" grew from this experience. I read it then immediately reread it. It is the most honest memoir of illness that I know. It is an essential volume for anyone engaged in health care in any capacity. Anyone facing the uncertainty of illness, their friends and family members, will find strength in this lovingly honest narrative.

Doctors and hospitals sometimes let Price down, focusing on their technology rather than the agony and uncertainty experienced by their patient. Aides who recognized the comfort of gentle massage began a process by which pain could be conquered. A surgeon reached beyond his professional expertise to give tender and abiding care to the man. Friends were unstinting in their love and support

during a four yearlong fight to regain a life while conquering a dependence upon pain-suppressing drugs.

During his painful recovery Price had two epiphanies, profound religious moments in dreams. Mysterious and open to various interpretations, the experiences represent spiritual turning points in the process of coming to grips with devastating disease. Recovery from illness or injury cannot be measured simply in terms of bodily function. Recovery is a matter of mind and spirit. Many care-givers do not recognize this.

In 1988 Price resumed teaching and writing. More stories, memoirs, religious commentary, and poetry followed. For a time he was a weekly commentator for National Public Radio. His final work, "Ardent Spirits: Leaving Home, Coming Back," was published in 2009.

When I attend this year's Conference on Southern Literature in April, it will be with a sense of gratitude for Reynolds Price and for what he continues to teach me.