

Books on the Bedside Table

Faith of Another Kind | BY BONNIE DWYER

If it is true that God exceeds all our efforts to contain God, then is it too big a stretch to declare that **dumbfoundedness** is what all Christians have most in common? Or that coming together to confess all that we do not know is at least as sacred an activity as declaring what we think we do know?

—Barbara Taylor Brown

My copy of Taylor Brown's book, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, is dog-eared and marked up with circles, underlinings, and exclamation points. How can one resist an eloquent preacher who describes leaving congregational ministry for an academic post, and then one of the first things that she finds in her new life is Sabbath?

Next she gave me an appreciation for spiritual poverty. "Since this virtue has all but vanished from the American church scene, it is often hard to recognize," she says.

With so much effort being poured into church growth, so much press being given to the benefits of faith, and so much flexing of religious muscle in the public square, the poor in spirit have no one but Jesus to call them blessed anymore. Yet his way endures as a way of emptying the self of all its goods instead of shoring up the self with spiritual riches. Only those who lose their lives can have them.

The title of this book might lead you to think that it will be a recitation of all the problems that plague the Christian community, but it is not. Although Taylor Brown does describe the tears that she shed over the

issues in her congregation, her love for the people of the church shines through. The point that she makes is that "church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God's presence in this world." Church is where people

gain a feel for how God shows up—not only in Holy Bibles and Holy Communion but also in near neighbors, mysterious strangers, sliced bread, and grocery store wine. That way, when they leave church, they no more leave God than God leaves them. They simply carry what they have learned into the wide, wide world, where there is a crying need for people who will recognize the holiness in things and hold them up to God.

Perhaps it was because her words were ringing in my ears that several of the books and articles about books that I picked up in the following weeks seemed to echo that sentiment. For instance, there was the article in the September 9 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* about Sigmund Freud, and how in old age this committed atheist began to see what's so great about God. For the article, Mark Edmundson drew on his new book, *The Death of Sigmund Freud*, about the legacy of Freud's last days.

There Edmundson tells the compelling story of the last book written by Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, where Freud suggests that the Jewish belief in an unseen God

gave them an advantage in all activities that involved making an abstract model of experience, in words or

Freud read Scripture as though it were poetry and learned from it accordingly.

numbers or lines, and working with the abstraction to achieve control over nature or to bring humane order to life. Freud calls this internalizing process an "advance in intellectuality" and he credits it directly to religion.

Belief in an unseen God thus may prepare the ground not only for science and literature and law, but also for intense introspection. Someone who can contemplate an invisible God, he implies, is in a better position to know himself.

Imagination, curiosity, and humility shine through in *Einstein: His Life and Universe* by Walter Isaacson. I was charmed by the genius physicist and grateful to the author not only for introducing me to a fascinating man but also explaining his theories in a very accessible manner. By the end, I was also appreciative of Einstein's relationship with God, atheist that he declared himself to be.

"There was a simple set of formulas that defined Einstein's outlook," Isaacson wrote. "Creativity required being willing not to conform. That required nurturing free minds and free spirits, which in turn required a spirit of tolerance. And the underpinning of tolerance was humility—the belief that no one had the right to impose ideas and beliefs on others."

The world has seen a lot of impudent geniuses. What made Einstein special was that his mind and soul were tempered by this humility. He could be serenely self-confident in his lonely course yet also humbly awed by the beauty of nature's handiwork. "A spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble," he wrote. "In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort."

For some people, miracles serve as evidence of God's existence. For Einstein it was the absence of miracles that reflected divine providence. The fact that the cosmos is comprehensible, that it follows laws, is worthy of awe. This is the defining quality of a "God who reveals him self in the harmony of all that exists."

Edmundson suggests that Freud read Scripture as though it were poetry and learned from it accordingly. These books may not be poetry, but I have learned something new about the value of a spiritual life filled with creativity, humility, and awe. ■

Books Mentioned in this article:

Mark Edmundson. *The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.
Walter Isaacson. *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007.
Barbara Brown Taylor. *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*. San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

Two recent books on diets and food that can inspire rethinking of what we eat.

