

From Windows Overlooking the Street

Walter Brueggemann
Decatur, Georgia

I have been pondering words from Woodrow Wilson, son of Davidson College, that he wrote while still an academic. He wrote them in 1891 in *The Atlantic Monthly*, words reprinted in the current issue of that journal. Wilson considers what it is that causes some books to become “immortal,” long-lasting in influence and stature. And then Wilson wonders about the kinds of authors who can produce such books. As an author who is well short of any book that is “immortal,” I find his words nonetheless instructive to me:

It is best for the author to be born away from literary centres, or to be excluded from their ruling set if he be born in them. It is best that he start out with his thinking, not knowing how much has been thought and said about everything. A certain amount of ignorance will insure his sincerity, will increase his boldness and shelter his genuineness, which is his hope of power. Not ignorance of life, but life may be learned in any neighborhood;—not ignorance of the greater laws which govern human affairs, but they may be learned without a library of historians and commentators, by imaginative sense, by seeing better than by reading;—not ignorance of the infinitudes of human circumstance, but knowledge of these may come to a man without the intervention of universities;—not ignorance of one’s self and of one’s neighbor, but innocence of the sophistications of learning, its research without love, its knowledge without inspiration, its method without grace; freedom from its shame at trying to know many things as well as from its pride of trying to know but one thing.¹

These words are important to me because they resonate well with the “ignorance” entrusted to me by my disadvantaged educational history. And then Wilson writes words that for me have a much broader significance:

The ability to see for one’s self is attainable, not by mixing with crowds and ascertaining how they look at things, but by a certain aloofness and self-containment. The solitariness of some genius is not accidental; it is characteristic and essential. To the constructive imagination there are some immortal feats which are possible only in seclusion. The man must heed first and most of all the suggestions of his own spirit; and the world can be seen from windows overlooking the street better than from the street itself.²

The mark of writing that has a chance of durable import, he suggests, is the consequence of a closely guarded and relished privacy for those who are not too busy networking too widely or intensely, but who make room for brooding and independent thought of a courageous kind.

Of course the readership of the *Journal* is not committed primarily to the writing

of books, immortal or otherwise. But it strikes me that Wilson's wise words may, beyond the production of books, be worth considering in two other zones.

First, it occurs to me that these words may be good counsel to pastors. There is no doubt that pastors need to be in touch with folks, to network and be attentive with all due grace to social interaction and expectation. But the church—and even more the society around the church—does not need winsome or skilled social directors. Given the power of an anti-life ideology in our society and given the temptation of the church to dumb down, the church urgently needs pastors who are thoughtful, informed, well-grounded, and alert to the connections that lie well beneath the surface. Most especially in the Reformed tradition but more generally in all old-line churches, there is an urgent need to *think* the faith. And that cannot be done by e-mail messages or the last news summary or the latest press conference or fad. There is of course great merit in being “on the street itself.” But there are limits to what can come from such engagement that stays on the surface. Beyond that, pastors will have a fresh word and a good word from time spent with the classics of the theological tradition and with enough free time to ponder connections and interfaces that one may receive from “the windows overlooking the street.” Wilson's words suggest to me a recovery of the critical intellectual task of the church, for somebody among us now needs to *think* in a society where thinking has all but disappeared.

Second, as a theological educator, I wonder about seminarians, college students, and other young people who strike this old guy as excessively “connected.” (And from that I wonder about “youth ministry” that tends to border on entertainment. We seem to forget in much of that process that we are nurturing the next wave of disciples who can stand before the authorities with the truth given us.) There is no doubt that e-mail can savage one's time and yield the illusion that one is at work or even being educated. There is no doubt, moreover, that excessive cell phone contact extends adolescence and slows the hard process of becoming free, “autonomous” moral and intellectual agents. Of course the old model of isolated learners is not one to which any of us would return. But there is a place in nurture and education for independence, risk, responsibility, and accountability. One may wonder where the leadership will come from in time to come, with enough sustained, grounded self to step out front without checking first to see that everyone else is also headed there.

I assume Wilson would not have written these words back then unless he sensed a problem with excessive connectedness. How much more now! The outcome of such connectedness may be humaneness and a gentle attentiveness; but such acute interdependence also leads to an *ersatz* therapeutic propensity that does not specialize in moral courage or daring thought. There is no doubt that Jesus regularly withdrew from the crowds, “the street,” to pray. It must also have been the case that he withdrew to ponder the tradition in which he stood and its promises, and to reread his context from the angle of that tradition. Prayer and thought go together but should not be confused with each other. They both require moral courage that will not be nourished by too much “group think.” The process of individuation matters among those who might, on some occasion, be able to say with freedom, “Thus saith the Lord.”

Notes

1. Woodrow Wilson, “How Books Become Immortal,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (January/February 2006): 58-60.
2. *Ibid*, 60.