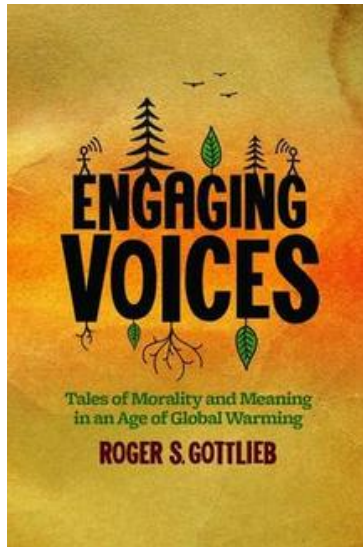


BOOK REVIEW

Gottlieb, Roger S. *Engaging voices: Tales of Morality and Meaning in an Age of Global Warming*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011.



Roger Gottlieb has chosen a strangely engaging method for presenting his *Engaging Voices*. It was slow to engage my attention until the prison setting of the first chapter, when the author's use of stories within stories, and the voices of marginalized people took hold and the rest of the book kept hooking me with bits and pieces of questions and clarity and back into more conundrums – religious, political and cultural. At times the conversations were tedious and unenlightening. At other times there are flashes of touching brilliance such as the moment the weary environmental organizer asks, “What do I care why people do the work, just as long as they do” (p.132).

The dialectical give and take was fine when not excessively personalized or universalized but drawn into the context of the wider community. Some of Gottlieb's approach was jarring while much was predictable, even simplistic. When major issues and concerns revolved back to “love” or “relationships” or a nice nature story, I began to skim. Then, one character's inter-connection with another and their common emergence (and immersion) with Nature as a matrix for their humanity, hooked me again.

Gottlieb seems to find his own voice in the voices of others, “connected” as well as dis-connected people. He invites the reader to an eyes-open understanding of our need to listen, to speak our views honestly and forthrightly, and to include “the other.” Perhaps the least inspiring chapter is 6, with its very implausible argument between professors. Nearly everyone is a caricature except, oddly, the chaplain. Chapter 7 gave a little more food for thought in an uncomfortable dinner shared by father and son. I found the son's description of the “religious types” he was working with sensible and non-judgmental: “Religious types worked hard ... and did what they said they'd do. But they rarely saw the big picture ... They were too busy trying to do the right thing today” (p.165).

In chapter 8, the image of people gathering, emptying their pain from “battered duffle bags, elegant black suitcases and tan canvas shopping bags” felt real and down to earth. Each was learning to do something meaningful and call it life, to love the earth as is and not as dreamed, to see “God” as a relationship with whatever helps you connect to the world, to see “faith” as trust in this life and that all is amazing. Though the episode with the struggling minister moaning that he “must still believe in God” was melodramatic, the persona of the Teacher visiting the Rabbi was poignant and appropriate in leading toward a closing. The final chapter (“Feeling Left Out”) once more returned to the theme I most appreciated in the book: the wise voice of an outsider nearby. The housekeeper is heard, her opinion is valued, and differing viewpoints are wound together like thriving roots.

As with many books, the closing pages could be read first and the general idea gleaned. The author defines “spiritual” as choice, humble admission of ignorance, progress on a path to ... at the very least, compassion, wisdom. Gottlieb has captured something here that intrigues but cannot be tamed. And it is out along the edges of wild truth where few of faith or even philosophy may be willing to trek.

A freethinker and former minister, Chris Highland is the author of *Meditations of John Muir: Nature's Temple* and other natural spirituality books, as well as numerous essays and blogs (www.naturetemple.net). He is a teacher, writer, and social worker.

Adapted from

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