

# A sense of place: The many horizons of Martin E. Marty

by [Wendy Murray](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

When you grow up on the prairie you learn to live with what you have. The Marty people—formerly the Martis, Swiss Lutherans who emigrated to America in 1869—had dirt. Nebraska dirt. They mixed it with water and made houses. They set their houses against caves and rock formations and brought organs, linens and teacups into them. In the mud houses, they sang songs to God.

They had sky, too. And calamity. They looked at the horizon and saw in the foreground a step or two. The middle ground was where possibility lay, and then, way off, beyond the horizon was eternity. When what you have are mud houses and teacups, dirt and sky, the landscape becomes metaphysical, Martin E. Marty would say. How odd, he would also say, when opposing realities come together in harmonious symbiosis, the simple and the magisterial, the earthy and the transcendent, sod houses and songs to God.

One wonders what oddness conspired to create this man—an historian, writer, editor, professor, pastor, friend and family man. At 75, retired from the University of Chicago Divinity School, he has more honors and awards and books and articles written than some towns have people.

What can be said of this “phenomenon,” as his friend Bill Moyers calls him? Well, for one, he’s putting the final flourishes on a biography of Martin Luther to be published in the Penguin “Lives” series. For another, he recently spoke at the 50th anniversary of his graduating class at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, the flagship theological school of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, with which he has shared sometimes awkward relations (Marty left the Missouri Synod during the inerrancy battles of the 1970s)—and he received a standing ovation. For another, in early July he celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination, held at his home church, Ascension Lutheran in Riverside, Illinois. (A hymn was sung there which cantor Randall Sensmeier had composed for him: “One with God before Creation; MARTY 8 7 8 7 with Chorus,”

based on Philippians 2:5-11.) And Emory University just announced that Marty will be a visiting professor there next year, directing a project on children.

Some German scholars once called him “an historical historian.” Former student John Stackhouse, professor at Regent College, Vancouver, calls him a “physiological marvel” who is “a lot smarter than the rest of us.” Mark Edwards, former president of St. Olaf College, where Marty served on the Board of Regents, says anyone who tries to compare himself to Marty in energy and intellect is “just asking for a nervous breakdown.” If there is a criticism other scholars have, it is that he has been a “consensus” historian. Richard John Neuhaus, conservative Catholic theologian and editor-in-chief of *First Things*, likens Marty’s outlook to the views of the editorial board of the *New York Times*—and that is not intended as a compliment. His son Peter Marty, a Lutheran minister in Iowa, says, “I don’t know so much what he’s like as a theologian; his intellect . . . is a given. I just know he’s a great dad.”

In his own congregation he’s simply “Pastor Marty.” The Sunday I attended he presided in the absence of the regular pastor. When a child came forward for communion, lifting her face to receive the elements, he placed his hand on her head and whispered a blessing.

There is still plenty to say about Martin E. Marty. For me, however, understanding “the phenomenon” has come not from statements made but in questions pondered. What is an historical historian? What is the significance of the sacrament? What is the meaning of the hand of a priestly shepherd on the head of a waiting child? These questions can be entertained only by understanding the life and world that shaped the man.

Marty would say that growing up on the plains of Nebraska bequeathed him in part his temperament and his metaphysical vision. His grandfather Gottfried embodied the combination of human dignity and country-farmer simplicity. Marty was perusing an old leather-bound book of the history of Platte County when he came across a photo of his grandfather. “A prince among farmers,” the caption read.

“In my grandfather’s house there was a Bible but not many other books. They worked the farm till nine at night and then conked out. But he possessed a clarity of vision one looks for in a person, an unselfish inner dignity. There was something about the aristocracy of simple people,” he says. Emil Marty, his father, attended summer school six weeks each summer. Marty and his brother and sister would get

farmed out then to grandparents and an uncle. He cherished those times with his grandfather, and they shaped his view of people, which in due course informed his understanding of history and culture.

Marty's father eventually became principal of the local high school, earning the moniker "Professor Marty" and making the Martys "a status family." Though as poor as everyone else during the Depression, they "didn't know it," Marty says. "We had a garden. The neighbors were good friends. We didn't feel deprived. It was a very sheltering environment."

His father was no less an influence. "He was endlessly reading a book—Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman." A devout Missouri Synod Lutheran, his father gathered the family twice a day for Bible reading: the psalms "and a little exegesis" in the morning and Bible stories and a chapter in the evening. "We'd go over it relentlessly," says Marty. "I think of the Bible's strange stories like those of Tamar and Ahab. . . . [My parents] simply trusted. There was that sense that, 'Well, there it is.'"

Marty credits his well-attested high energy level to his mother, Anne Louise Wuerdemann Marty. He is up at 4:45 a.m. to read four newspapers (take a guess) and the Moravian Daily [Bible] Texts ([www.moravian.org](http://www.moravian.org)) before retreating to his studio around 7 to write. He walks 10,000 steps a day—he counts—and takes a seven-minute nap after lunch during which he listens to the BBC and then can recount the topic of discussion and quote the participants. Anne Marty became a world traveler later in life largely because of Marty's annual gift of a ticket to anywhere. She traveled with religious groups and would return making comments like "the Baptists pray better than we do," or "the Methodists know the Bible better than we do," says Marty. "We were brought up in a world where only Missouri Lutherans were saved and prayerful. So she got bashed around ecumenically" by these trips, he says.

He entered prep school in Milwaukee at 14, leaving the plains of Nebraska for good. He attended college at Concordia and Washington universities; after doing graduate work at Concordia Seminary and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he completed his doctorate at the University of Chicago.

How odd, he would say, that the first time he saw Elsa Schumacher, while he was playing the French horn at half-time at a Washington University basketball game, he

said to the friend next to him: "I don't know who that is, but I'm going to marry her." And so he did, in June 1952. They had four sons and took in two foster children, a boy and a girl, who remain full members of the Marty clan. One year they also took in two boys from Uganda, which meant for a time they were raising seven boys between the ages of eight and 14. How odd that after his beloved Elsa died of cancer he would end up marrying Harriet Julia Meyer, the widow of his college roommate, Don Meyer, who also had died of cancer. Harriet's daughter has been added to the Marty brood. Between them they have seven children and nine grandchildren.

Marty loves Great Plains novelists like Wright Morris and Willa Cather. It was from Morris that he came to understand the plains as a metaphysical landscape. Morris has said, "Where there is almost nothing to see, there man sees the most. . . . In the dry places men begin to dream." Marty's dream led him to the study of human activity as it plays out in culture and history, and the landscape has been his guide. He embraces a notion of José Ortega y Gasset: "Tell me your landscape and I'll tell you who you are." Marty also draws heavily upon insights of philosopher George Santayana, who possessed a strong sense of place. "For the freest spirit must have some birth place, some *locus standi* from which to view the world and some innate passion by which to judge it," said Santayana.

Marty's "landscape" has shaped who he is and how he perceives his world. He gave a commencement address in Nebraska last spring. "I'm an ornery commencement speaker, and I told them my title was *Horizontverschmelzung*, which translated means 'fusion of horizons.'" He began: "Horizontverschmelzung is a concept of the phenomenological philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, a hermeneutical principle used for heuristic purposes." Then he added, "This has to be the worst opening sentence used in any commencement address anywhere." Once he regained his hearers, he went on to explain how even in today's transient world, where people are dislocated and disenfranchised from a *locus standi*, horizons matter because "moving, too, occupies space. Even the child who moves often early on is picking things up that stay with him or her."

He finds it fascinating that the two primary objects one can find on the dashboards of American Catholics today are a statue of St. Christopher (saint of travelers) and the Holy Family, which was "always on the move." A sense of place, even if there is movement, "has everything to do with the study of religion," which is why he titled his major work on the history of religion in America *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: Five*

*Hundred Years of Religion in America* (1984).

In order to understand events historically, he would say, one must also see them horizontally. “Horizons actually place the physical: the horizon sets up foreground, middle ground, and infinity. I do not believe in environmental determinism,” he is quick to add, “but you pick up themes from your sense of place and relate everything to that.” For Marty it was the Nebraska sky and the vast plain. “I remember my uncle one night, in 1936 or ’37, at the pitch of the drought, driving around in his old car from farm to farm. Then an hour later the hail came and bashed the whole crop. There was that sense that we were under the big sky and there was open possibility,” which also meant the possibility of calamity.

In the summers when his kids were young the family would pile into the car and go west. “People dread driving across Nebraska,” he says. “I love it. My son Micah once said that his fondest childhood memory is of when the five little boys would be asleep in the back of the station wagon crossing Montana and then they would wake up and look out on the stars at 3:00 a.m. and smell coffee and hear music and listen to Elsa and me talking quietly, lovingly, serenely, as if the kids didn’t exist. What security they got from that, and seeing the open sky and the stars from there to there.”

The serene picture of Marty and Elsa talking was shattered when she contracted cancer. Her doctor said to Marty, “If you love this woman, cancel 1981.” The winter after she died in September of that year Marty wrote a book departing from his usual historical and cultural themes. *A Cry of Absence* (1983; revised, 1993) is a devotional and meditative reflection on the psalms and the silence of God in the midst of loss. “A drip comes from the bath. Now and then a floor creaks as the house adjusts to the cool of early morning. The years die like a murmur and the sounds one year has made will be forgotten with those of the million years before.”

Psalm 88 in particular he calls “a wintry landscape of unrelieved bleakness.” When Elsa would need her chemo medicine in the middle of the night, Marty would rise with her and they would alternate reading a psalm; she’d read the odd numbers and he, the evens. When it came his turn to read Psalm 88, he passed over it. She said, “What happened to Psalm 88?” He said, “I didn’t think you could take Psalm 88. It’s a bleak psalm.”

“She said to me more lovingly than the psalms, ‘Who do you think you are to decide what I can take? The light ones don’t mean anything if you haven’t walked through the dark ones.’” Near the end of *The Cry of Absence*, he writes, “After the astonishing recognition of trust through the passage of time, it would be tempting to close the Book of Psalms, take the rest of the day off . . .”

A day off, maybe, but never a sabbatical. Of the 34 years he taught at the University of Chicago, he missed only 12 classes and seriously considered whether he should miss class to receive the National Medal of the Humanities at the White House in 1997.

Marty defines his vocation as an historian by citing R. H. Tawney, who said, “I find the world very odd and I want to know how it got that way.” For Marty the oddness factor has been articulated by Reinhold Niebuhr’s concept of irony as outlined in *The Irony of American History*, written at the beginning of the cold war. Says Marty, “He based it on the text Psalm 2 verse 4, ‘. . . the princes of earth take counsel together and he that sitteth in heaven shall laugh.’ To have irony you have to be an agent of something, which then goes partly wrong, and something in you contributes to that wrongness. For Niebuhr, there is ignorance inside our knowledge, vice inside our virtue, insecurity inside our security. It’s going to go wrong and that’s the decisive moment. That is what I see in everything I write as an historian.”

“An historian has nothing to do if there’s not a trace. If something happened and there’s not a monument, or a footprint, or a text, you can’t know anything. And the bias of that first text already keeps us from getting to the event,” he says. “What I’ve tried to do as an historian and—if I’m a theologian—as a theologian has been to peel away the take-it-for-grantedness of the world. We tend to take for granted that things should be this way and don’t look under the surfaces.”

He earned the title “historical historian” at a conference in Tübingen in 1980. The sponsors didn’t know how to categorize the man from Chicago who taught in a history department, a humanities department and a divinity school. To secular historians, Marty is a mystery since he interprets history as the cumulative effect of “decisive moments” and, retrospectively, the arena in which to discern the subtle and sometimes not so subtle movements of God.

Not everyone concurs with Marty’s interpretations. Duke Divinity School’s professor of theological ethics Stanley Hauerwas says: “His histories tend to tell the American

story within the consensus [of other historians]. I'd like to see Marty think more clearly about U.S. foreign policy and its implications for how Christians ought to think about war and the strong direction of America becoming an empire. And I'd like to see Marty say something about abortion."

Another critic—they are hard to find—is Richard Neuhaus, who says: "On most issues that have greatly agitated the church for the past 50 years"—meaning issues like marriage and family, abortion, sexuality—"Marty has not taken a clear stand." Fellow Nebraskan Robert Benne, who teaches religion at Roanoke College, adds that Marty has always been "temperate, moderate and respectful. He hues to the center with a vengeance, and this prevents him from putting forth bold controversial theses."

A peculiar aspect of Marty's massive writing output is that it has been done largely in response to others' requests. Marty has frequently appropriated a term from French philosopher Gabriel Marcel to describe his own approach: *disponibilité*. It means "disposableness," being at the disposal of others and God. "It explains the welcoming people feel when they meet him, and it also explains his career," says his former student, John Stackhouse. Stackhouse admits that sometimes he's wondered why Marty allows others to set his writing agenda, but he has come to understand it as Marty's sense of *disponibilité*—"being at the disposal of the need of the moment."

The *disponibilité* has aroused consternation among some within Lutheranism and elsewhere, including fundamentalists and some evangelicals, who have felt his open spirit and unifying bent have represented more a capitulation to the wider culture than a championing of the faith in the context of that culture. Some have called him a "charming compromiser" who only occasionally uses his M.E.M.O column in the *Christian Century* as a bully pulpit on controversial issues. Stackhouse demurs: "I see it as his being faithful to a particular calling, and he has done it well. He has been a master of negotiating a wide range of communities without compromising his integrity," he says. "He has been the go-to person [by the mainstream media] on issues related to religion and culture since the 1960s. That is an astonishing run in the public eye."

Lutherans are built for paradox," says historian Mark Noll, who teaches at Wheaton College. "Martin Marty is bivocational: he is a modern academic and a Lutheran minister." The irony is not missed. His Lutheran theology shapes, deepens and elevates his historical vision. It is Luther's "theology of weakness that confounds the

world,” says Marty. “Luther did a lot of terrible things, but he did have that sense of power that comes out of weakness.” Luther calls it seeing “the hind parts of God,” or perceiving God in history but “from the rear.” This sense of historical irony and God’s self-revelation through hind parts explains in part why one of Marty’s favorite Bible texts says, “Our lives are hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

Marty rallies around Luther’s daring proclamation, *pecce fortiter*: sin boldly. As Luther put it in a letter to Philip Melancthon:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach true grace and not a fictitious grace. If grace is true, you must bear a true and not fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. BE A SINNER AND SIN BOLDLY, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death and the world.

Luther’s advice was to act boldly, even though you know you are a sinner. Be totally dependent on grace, for it is grace that frees you to act. Speaking of his father, Peter Marty says: “He lives confidently and joyfully. You can’t stop him with grief. You can’t stop him with mean-spirited people.” He is a happy Lutheran, in other words.

During a recent photo shoot, the photographer told Marty that all he knew about Lutherans was the sense of guilt-vexed people he derived from *Prairie Home Companion*. “I love Garrison Keillor,” says Marty, “but I can’t think of anything further from the truth.”

“I don’t know what happened in transit [to America]. The guilt syndrome got injected somewhere on the Atlantic passage. But Luther himself, when one of his young disciples was in depression, would counsel: ‘I want you to play games, I want you to dance, I want you to drink, but not too much. I want you to laugh.’ Luther was capable of great depression. But music would lift him and [his wife] Kate would lift him. For him, God is hidden behind the revelation, God is hidden in the revelation. God is revealed in a baby and in the weakness of the cross. At the same time, God has trumpeting angels. Who God is [for Luther] is an extremely broad spectrum and to narrow it was a crime. Melancthon was the great narrower, saying almost like T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, ‘Do I dare? Do I dare?’ Luther said, ‘Oh, get over it.’”

Marty and R. Scott Appleby were asked by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1992 to undertake a study of fundamentalisms around the world. One of



the many resulting books, *The Glory and the Power*, was companion to a film series and radio documentary of the same name aired on PBS and NPR. The writers used the opportunity not to level blows or undercut the legitimacy of fundamentalist convictions, but to call for fairness and to validate the religious impulse that motivates people to act in the public arena. The authors concluded:

“Fundamentalists, one hopes, will come to see why most will fail to convert, share their identity, and coalesce with them in power moves. . . . Conversation permits people to be themselves while hearing others and remaining open to certain measures of change in the give and take which sustains human life.”

“Marty is known as a [religious] map-maker par excellence in American religious history,” says Stackhouse, “but he’s always undercutting his own maps. Marty shows that individuals and groups are more complicated than any labels we can put on them. It’s like that wonderful quote of Alfred North Whitehead’s: ‘Seek simplicity and distrust it.’ That’s a good epigraph for Martin Marty.”

Noll adds, “He continues to be a very catholic and fair intellectual mediator. He made a place at the table for a lot of people who had been left out in the servant’s hall,” meaning, for example, Catholics, Orthodox, Baptists and evangelicals. “These groups were not being studied until Marty took students who wanted to study these traditions. Today, they are being studied.”

Which takes us back to the landscape business. One stands on the prairie, faces the horizon and considers the next step, and it comes in a sort of unifying sensibility—a sense of perceiving the whole scope of things. Marty operates from that place. He sees all human beings as fellow pilgrims on the landscape of history and valid players in the bigger picture. The clarity of vision and sense of dignity in simplicity bequeathed to him from the prairie has won him a hearing among would-be skeptics who might otherwise shrink from his Lutheran convictions. He does not and would not position himself as an advancer of one line of argumentation or of one side of a controversy. He is like the farmer who teases a harvest out of an unruly crop, working with the disparate pieces till they come together to bring fruit. He’s an orchestrator, or unifier, the way an old homesteader would take dirt and water and bring them together to make bricks.

He has validated to an otherwise skeptical public the place of religion in public discourse. One of his most significant contributions, says Noll, has been his “promotion of discussion of topics that often were a means of conflict and exclusion.

That contribution goes beyond the historical sphere. Marty has always emphasized that religion is important enough to talk about.”

Marty has yet to write the book he wants to write. He told me, “Two people have written one book called *The Sense of Presence*, and another man wrote a book called *The Presence*. I’m not a metaphysician, and I wouldn’t try to get behind the screen, but I wonder [for example], Why did Jesus come to you that time?” He was referring to a conversation we had about my spontaneous and unsolicited conversion. “What happened? A book about that is in me somewhere, but I don’t know if it will ever happen.”

Lately he’s been reading the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz, whom he calls “the greatest poet of the century.” Milosz, a native of Poland, is “a kind of implicit Christian,” says Marty. “He agonizes about the resurrection—‘Do I believe it? Yes, I believe it. But do I believe it?’ His work is a positive affirmation in the face of horror.” And so, adding to his list of confounding oddities, Marty reflects, “How odd that hope survives.”

In the aftermath of September 11, he has been in high demand to help Americans understand fanatical Islam. In the *New York Times* of June 2 he is quoted as saying, “We’re seeing now that religion is not an innocent force in the world.” At the same time, he is the spokesperson in a special video for children titled “*I Am with You Always*, made also in the wake of 9/11, who says, “It is good to hear the words, ‘Fear not’ from the one who said that so often, Jesus, whose name we know. Fear not the waves,” he says to the children sitting about him. “Fear not the dark. Fear not the enemy. I will be with you.”

It is a warm spring day and Pastor Marty is presiding at Ascension Lutheran Church. He wears a white robe and a colorful woven stole. He sits on the floor with the children for their sermon. “Jesus talks about the sand so I brought kitty litter,” he tells them. He is trying to demonstrate how important it is to build our spiritual foundation not on sand but on the rock. “If you dig deep enough in sand you get support,” one child says. Pastor Marty answers, “I think I just heard a sermon. The point is . . .”

The point is about foundations, about Jesus. He preaches from Romans 1:17, the text Luther hated, then loved: “I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the righteousness of God.” Luther said, “I hate that God.” Pastor Marty explains that at first Luther hated the verse, but it rescued Luther from “his extremely disturbed conscience.”

Luther realized God's righteousness was not the active kind that destroys people in condemnation, but "the passive righteousness that is a gift. What God is, God exchanges for us; what we were, God takes upon himself in the suffering of Christ." He calls it "a joyful exchange" and likens it to dipping one's hand in the baptismal font upon entering the sanctuary. "You dip your hand, make the sign of the cross, and leave all sins at the door," he says, for—Marty would also say, following Luther—our lives are hid in Christ and we are clothed in the righteousness that God himself drapes over us like a robe.

Luther said the most important words of the sacrament of communion are "for you." And so we stand, draped in God's righteous robe, our hands ready to receive the bread and the cup from the historical historian, the editor and writer, the professor, the friend, the pastor who says, "The body of Christ for you."

What is an historical historian? The one who tells us who we are based upon what ground we stand on. It involves footprints. And feet. And dirt. And sky. The place in between and its legitimate players. It means seeing beneath the surfaces. What is the sacrament? The presence of God from the rear, the astonishing recognition of trust that he is near, so we need not fear the darkness, nor the land, nor the sky, nor the empty space awaiting the human step. What is the hand of a priest on the head of a small child? The affirmation of that trust, and the recognition that there is blessedness in that hand, there is promise. It is a joyful exchange, a minister with a child, an historian with the world where a hidden God is at work.