

World makers: A new way of seeing and naming

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

The people who have the best background for becoming pastors in today's church are high school foreign language teachers," Stanley Hauerwas declared during a recent discussion between Duke University faculty and seminarians.

"Why?" people asked in puzzlement.

"Because the most important thing pastors do today is language instruction. It is their duty to teach people a new way of naming the world, to teach them a vocabulary that is Christian."

Bill Moyers's series on dying, aired on PBS last year, taught me that we have lost a language for talking meaningfully about the end of life. People try to confront their deaths with a mixture of psychobabble, sentimental wishful thinking, and the assertion that they are still in charge. About the best most of us can say about the end of our earthly existence is that it ought to be, in the words of the series' title, "On Our Own Terms." Through self-deceptive language we nourish the illusion that death is a matter of choice, and therefore somehow meaningful.

One of my students made a pithy comment recently: "Modern American people have psychological problems because that's the only kind of problem we're still allowed to have." Another added, "Those are the problems that the government will pay for." When my spiritual forebears were having a bad day, they might have said, "God has his hand upon me, leading me somewhere I do not want to go." The best I can muster is, "I'm depressed." We lack a language worthy of our lives.

Early in my ministry I visited in the hospital a parishioner who had just given birth. The doctor came into the room to tell her and her husband, "There are some problems with your baby boy. He's been born with Down's Syndrome, and he also has a respiratory condition. We could correct it, but I recommend that you consider just letting nature take its course."

The couple seemed confused. “If the condition can be corrected, then we want it corrected,” the husband said. His wife nodded in agreement.

“You must understand that studies show that parents who keep these children suffer from a high incidence of marital distress and separation,” the doctor said. “Is it fair for you to bring this sort of suffering upon your other two children?”

The mother replied, “Our children have had every advantage. They have really never known suffering, never had the opportunity to know it. I don’t know if God’s hand is in this or not, but I can see why it would make sense for a child like this to be born into a family like ours. Our children will all do just fine. When you think about it, raising our new son is really a great opportunity for our family.”

One of our duties as pastors is to renarrate people’s lives in the light of the story of Jesus. This rescripting shows us how our ordinary lives are caught up in the great drama of salvation. We have become victims of narratives inadequate for the truthful living of our lives—narratives derived from psychology, economics, sociology and other secular means of defining ourselves and what happens to us. But through teaching us a new way of seeing and naming, through new words, pastors can create new worlds for us. Through words we enable people to fit their lives into the plot of God’s story, and thus to turn those lives into pilgrimages.

“Pastor, I hope you can help them get real,” the doctor whispered to me during that long ago hospital visit.

“Oh, doctor,” I wanted to say but didn’t, “they are real. They are living in a world more real than yours, a world defined by God.”

As Walter Brueggemann once told a group of pastors, “You preachers are world makers. Through words, you make new worlds.” Then he added, “And if you won’t let God use you to make a new world, then all you can do is to service the old one. And that’s no fun.”