

Meeting people where they are

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

July 23, 2014

Last week, I visited with friends in Nashville and made the trek to the [Parnassus](#), the bookstore owned by Ann Patchett. And, as I had hoped, it was an entire store filled with well-selected books that I wanted to read. Even the religion section. The sales associates were knowledgeable and had an informed review of every book we purchased. I breathed in the rare beauty of the moment. There are only big box stores in Chattanooga—Barnes and Noble and Books-A-Million. So, every time I visit a decent-sized city, I try to visit their independent stores—[Politics and Prose](#) in D.C., [Malaprops](#) in Asheville, or [St. Marks](#) in New York City.

As I stroll the shelves, enraptured by the smell of real paper and binding glue, I think about the transformations in publishing. Independent stores are an endangered species. Big box bookstores are no longer buying hundreds of books and destroying the un-purchased copies (it was cheaper than shipping them back to the publisher). Big stores are being threatened by Amazon. Amazon was great, until they became so dominant that they start [bullying publishers](#).

I'm saddened by many of the changes, but I also know that my own habits don't always support my aspirations for the book industry. Typically, when perusing religion, once a person reads all that Barbara Brown Taylor and Nadia Bolz-Weber has to offer, she quickly slides into the glossy-teethed televangelists and FOX News anchors pawning their wares, and there are not a lot of options.

So, when I'm not reading uncorrected galley proofs for endorsements, I'm usually downloading Kindle books (because they're quick, accessible, and don't hurt my back when I travel). I listen to a lot of audio books. After trying to navigate the frustrating publisher sites, I often buy from Amazon. I sometimes buy the same book two or three times, in different formats.

There are so many conflicting messages about how people consume information. Writers of books decry the Internet, because it has altered our habits so drastically.

Writers get angry at people who write for free—thus driving down the value of words. But nowadays, when a writer is starting out, he almost has to write for free in order to build a platform.

As a consumer who reads outside the mainstream and doesn't always have access to a seminary bookstore, the Internet has allowed me to buy many more books. And I learn about books that I want to purchase from blogs, Twitter, and Goodreads.

The literati get frustrated that people spend their time looking at YouTube cat videos, instead of enjoying great literature. They worry about future generations. But as I watch my teen daughter carting around her tomes (she eschews digital books), I'm not so sure the concern is completely warranted. I never had access to the amazing work she does. Since Harry Potter, Young Adult literature is on the rise.

And Newspapers? Well, I got in the habit of reading the *New York Times* when I was in seminary, working at the library. And that's a tough habit to break. But I did have to break it, because when I moved to South Louisiana for my first call, the subscription price was far too expensive. Now, I can get it. It's not as expensive, and I can access it from home or any hotel I might be in that week.

I use Twitter to get news that's not covered in traditional media. I understand it's unreliability, but it can be a good source of subversive news or racial-ethnic concerns. I can usually access the other side of the story, like what's happening in Palestine.

So where is all of this going? What does it mean for authors? What does it mean for religious leaders? No one knows for sure, but newer authors are pretty adept at moving back and forth from blogs, Twitter, to books. They can create hashtags as well as treatises. They understand that it's their responsibility to find people and communicate with them where they are.

Most of us who work in a church can see parallels between bookstores and church. We had small, physical spaces in which we met and built community. We watched as big-box churches moved in, allowing for many more options, but individuals became much more anonymous in the process. Now, we know there are a growing number of people who are leaving church, but the search for God is still happening digitally.

Now the question will be, can we meet people where they are? As pastors and communicators, we know the beauty of the church. Many of us are determined to preserve it. But we also need to be able to reach people in other formats, so that

they might be drawn into deeper relationships with God and a community of faith. We need to keep honing our skills, learning to spread the good news through sermons, sites, and 140 characters.