

Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought to Say), by Frederick Buechner

reviewed by [James Yerkes](#) in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

If this is not Frederick Buechner's valedictory volume it surely could be, given the pathos of his "Afterword": "If somebody a while back had offered me a thousand more years, I would have leapt at it, but at this point I would be inclined to beg off on the grounds that . . . the eventual end to life seems preferable to the idea of an endlessly redundant extension of it." He does, of course, regret not being around "to see what becomes of my grandchildren," but his comment then moves to the tragic side: "They say we are never happier than our unhappiest child, and if that is expanded to include the next generation down, the result is unthinkable."

Buechner's sentiments are not gloomy, but they are clearly chastened--a poignant attempt at transparent moral realism by a religious man now "pushing seventy-five." And there is "sadness in thinking how much more I might have done with my life than just writing . . . If I make it as far as St. Peter's gate, the most I will be able to plead is my thirty-two books, and if that is not enough, I am lost."

There is still autobiographical energy behind this book: "Over the last fifty years or so I have both directly in my various memoirs and indirectly in my novels tried to deal with as best I could--to understand as fully, to lay to rest as finally--the dark shadow that my father's suicide continues to cast over my days even now that more than sixty-five years have passed since it occurred in my childhood," Buechner states. Though his intention in this book was "to shift my gaze from the inward to outward, to the shadowy side of lives other than mine," it is clear that he continues to pursue the meaning behind the early trauma that darkened his life.

He does so by focusing on the "open-veined" outpourings of personal darkness in the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mark Twain, G. K. Chesterton and William Shakespeare. "What brings them together here," he says, "is that in at least one work apiece, it seems to me, each of them wrote in his own blood about the darkness of life as he found it and about how for better or worse he managed

somehow to survive it, even to embrace it--Hopkins in the 'terrible sonnets' of his final years, Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, G. K. Chesterton in *The Man Who Was Thursday* and Shakespeare in *King Lear*." The last line of *King Lear* gave him his title: "The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

Buechner pursues each writer's use of autobiography, fiction and metaphor to plumb the numbing problem of evil each encountered in enduring traumatic life losses--ruptured moral innocence, leading to the dark abyss of depression in Hopkins and Chesterton, and the untimely, tragic deaths of children, leading to dark despair in Twain and Shakespeare. What makes Buechner's essay on each so richly insightful is his uncompromising honesty about what even, or especially, religiously committed people actually feel--feelings only a fellow wanderer in such darkneses could really encompass.

Buechner plumbs the standoff so aptly phrased by Chesterton: "Bad is so bad we cannot but think good an accident; good is so good, that we feel certain evil could be explained." For Buechner there is no theoretically failsafe "answer" to the problem of evil, only a naked sense of compatriot, "vein-opening" suffering which ennobles those who experience it and who find themselves surprisingly renewed by what Chesterton called "the unconquered adoration of goodness."

Buechner's writing has some awkward patches, especially when he discusses the intentions behind Hopkins's sonnets, and his interpretation of Shakespeare's religious perspective is speculative and open to serious question. But one lays down the book sharing his sense of "unexpected encouragement." Who can argue with his witness? "Take heart, I heard [Hopkins, Chesterton, Twain and Shakespeare] say, even at the unlikeliest moments. Fear not. Be alive. Be merciful. Be human. And most unlikely of all: Even when you can't believe, even if you don't believe at all, even if you shy away at the sound of his name, be Christ."