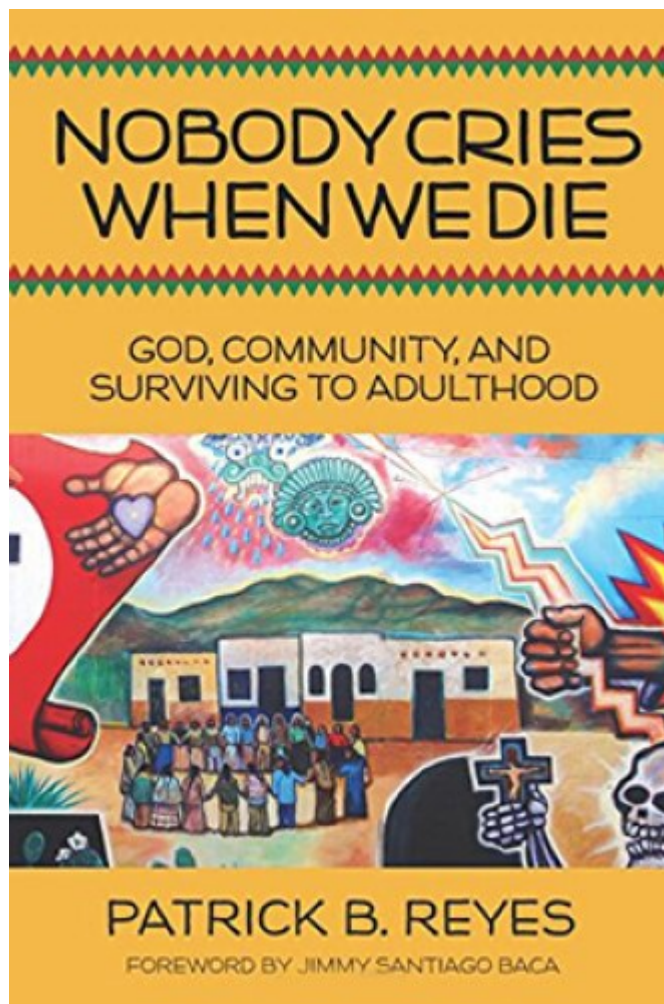


The vocation of surviving

Patrick B. Reyes reflects on the soils that have sustained him—and those that have poisoned him.

by [Robert C. Saler](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Nobody Cries When We Die

God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood

By Patrick B. Reyes

Chalice Press

Patrick B. Reyes offers one of the most arresting insights I've ever read regarding how institutions of theological education interpret experiences that fall outside the white, middle-class norm. Reyes says his seminary classmates "wanted my story, but they didn't want the voice and body that came with it. They wanted me to be the narrative, while they got to be the theory."

As a Latino boy, Reyes grew up surrounded by violence in his Southern California home and in his neighborhoods—violence perpetrated not only by gang members on the street, but also by those who were supposed to protect him, including the police and adult men in his home. Yet he kept faith with his family, friends, and those alongside whom he labored in agricultural fields.

Meditating on the various "soils" that sustain people, Reyes credits his grounding for giving him the perseverance to get through seminary and doctoral work. Eventually he finished his education as a theorist of Christian education and attained a series of administrative positions by which he could shape the very spaces of theological education that once were closed to him. He currently serves as director of Strategic Partnerships for Doctoral Initiatives for the Forum for Theological Exploration.

The book is not a feel-good story about successful assimilation or beating the odds. Rather, Reyes wants to frame vocation first and foremost as survival—defined as living into the fullness of humanity intended by God—and on that basis critique the way vocational discernment, especially for people of color, too easily becomes acquiescence to the status quo. Soils do not simply sustain; sometimes they also poison. As Reyes says about his time as a farmworker, "those footprints in the soil that led out to the rows of lettuce were not just the steps of God within my community; they were also the constructed steps of colonialism, oppression, and marginalization by dominant culture."

Discerning the conditions behind the soils in which we are planted and choose to plant ourselves is a matter of life and death. The task of vocational discernment, in its fullest sense, is about this struggle. If survival initially seems too modest a nail on which to hang such a lofty goal as vocation, then we have not fully considered how

rich and multifaceted a challenge survival is for large sectors of the country and the world.

This book is not a straightforward memoir. It's an invitation for readers to engage in multiple imaginations—biblical, theological, theoretical, and narrative—as they place their call to survive in a world bent on death within God's call to establish justice and heal creation. At times, the intermingling of these various sources and genres is jarring. In the middle of a chilling description of violence, for instance, Reyes breaks off and considers at length a biblical motif or an image from literature. At first I found myself frustrated by what I took to be distractions from the main action of the book. However, I began to suspect that this genre clash is intended to produce exactly the sort of salutary disorientation about how our individual stories fit into God's larger narrative for which Reyes argues. The very mode of separating our story, God's story, and the world's story is part of the problem. Allowing the Spirit to blur those lines is part of the goal of discernment.

As a theological educator, I can tell a book has impacted me superficially if I can quote it and declaim on it with uninterrupted confidence. I can tell that it has impacted me deeply when it causes me to come up short, to stutter, to check myself, to talk less, and to listen more. Reyes's book has brought me up short—sometimes mid-lecture—multiple times. I count that as one of the many gifts this book brings to the church's conversation about vocation, justice, and discernment.

Under Reyes's tutelage, readers may be troubled as never before about the challenges of making spaces of education and formation attuned to God's call. Readers may also be hopeful like never before that those challenges can be met with fidelity and imagination.