

Eugene Peterson: Pastor, poet, and friend

Peterson has influenced my pastoral life and mind more profoundly than anyone else.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue



Eugene Peterson lecturing at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle in 2009.
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One of my favorite professors in divinity school said during one of his lectures on Isaiah: “If you want to become a better preacher, become a deeper person.” I’ve never forgotten that line. Over the decades it has grown in significance as new insights and people continue to shape the development of my character.

None of us is born with depth of character. Babies in a maternity unit aren’t known for their care and interest in other people, their commitment to important values, or

their quiet mind for serving the Lord. We cultivate depth over time, usually thanks to certain people who influence us in notable ways.

In my case, one figure has influenced my pastoral life and mind more profoundly than any other. Here's a quick sketch of three lessons I've learned from this man, shared in the hope that they might connect with some dimensions you may be cultivating in your own life.

First, the kind of person we are at the center determines everything else about us. The choices, commitments, and decisions we make stem from who we are from the inside out. If there is no center, this friend often declared, there is no circumference either. Life becomes a drifting enterprise with no sustaining purpose. It may be possible to fake a rich inner life supposedly centered on God, but only for a short period of time. Eventually, the paltry character of that life will emerge. Even if we worship politely and behave correctly, the nature of our lives will end up anemic and trivial if we move God to the margins.

Second, I learned from this person never to look for shortcuts when seeking to be the kind of person God desires us to be. To know Christ as a living presence in our own lives requires a long and patient obedience. God-chatter that sounds vaguely religious won't create intimacy with God. Nor will superficial pieties that seek to extract something from God. It's only when we join our sin and ignorance to God's work of shaping salvation that we discover intimacy with God as a way of life.

Finally, I learned that there's no wholeness to life until we let go of the idea that the Christian life is a self project. Although the spirituality of me, or selfism as this mentor calls it, is rampant in our do-it-yourself culture, abundant life comes only when we embrace community. We should pray that we might eventually get so fed up with our own self-importance that we end up following the One who can help us think more generously about others than ourselves.

The man to whom my life and pastoral imagination are so indebted is Eugene Peterson, who was equal parts pastor, poet, and friend to everyone he met in person or on the page. Blessed with a soft, raspy voice and a huge smile that made his eyes squint, Eugene had gravitas. His spiritual life was as deep and anchored as any I've ever encountered. Was he born that way? I doubt it. He was graced in untold ways by mentors along his path, and by a God who helped him become all that he had it in him to be. Delight in the resurrection, Eugene. Thanks for your humble example.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Lessons of a centered life."