

By Nancy C. Lee

Walter Brueggemann was my treasured teacher, mentor, colleague and friend for 35 years, starting from when I studied with him from 1990-93, when he was my Th.M. (Master of Theology) advisor in the field of Hebrew Bible at Columbia Theological Seminary, near Atlanta. We remained close and in touch ever since, including after I earned my Ph.D. and began my first full-time teaching appointment 26 years ago here at his alma mater, Elmhurst University.

It is with the profoundest gratitude to him that I try to convey how important he has been to me, and to so many others, for the generosity of all that he has given us. Dr. Brueggemann was an endlessly energetic and inspiring teacher, and gifted speaker, who had a profound impact upon my own formation and on thousands of his students, audiences and readers. He also significantly helped to move the academic discipline of biblical studies, which sorely needed a sea change, beyond necessary methods of historical criticism toward newer important methods that have made biblical scholarship more engaged with real-world issues—through rhetorical, sociological, literary, theological and various liberationist approaches.

Both widely read and ever inspired by the biblical prophets—their speaking truth to power and their social justice concerns—Walter Brueggemann became an internationally recognized and prolific author (of more than 100 books!). And he became a beloved model for ministers, professors, Bible readers and social activists as he creatively espoused the generative, rhetorical power of ‘the text’—and, as a matter of faith, of the power of the God of the text, that make possible an “alternative consciousness” to the larger society with its excesses and failings and oppressive injustices.

Like Reinhold Niebuhr also inspired by the prophets, Brueggemann could criticize the excesses and missteps of both “the right” and “the left,” yet also challenge and show compassion for both. Indeed, in the last 50 years, Walter Brueggemann has become as well-known and influential among faith communities in the U.S. and abroad as the Niebuhrs were in their time.

Widely noted for his scholarship on the importance of biblical “lament,” Brueggemann wrote in his now-classic work, *The Prophetic Imagination* (still read every semester by my students), of the need for a prophetic consciousness that imagines an alternative world to dominate society, which embraces the pain of people’s suffering and gives them a voice. He wrote, “Bringing hurt to public expression is an important first step in the dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge.”

In recent years, Brueggemann prophetically addressed head-on issues of political corruption, racism, poverty, gender injustice and climate change. At 92 years of age, he was still writing blogs on current affairs. The endless insights of his work will continue to be relevant for as long as these issues remain with us, and for as long as good people aim to make the world a better place.

*Nancy C. Lee, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized biblical scholar and a professor in the Elmhurst University Department of Religious Studies.*