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Dr. Willie Parker's moral evolution

Memoir weaves together racial, religious and reproductive justice

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Dr. Willie Parker is an obstetrician/gynecologist who has been in the public eye for years. A "Life's Work" is a bold and brave memoir that justifies his ongoing advocacy and activism for abortion rights.

Parker provides abortions in the South, mainly Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. In 2009 he decided to dedicate the rest of his career to the practice of safe and dignified abortion care. This book is about his journey and arrival both physically and mentally to this time in his career. What I find captivating about his journey is the religious and moral arc. He writes that while some Christians believe they must conscientiously object to abortion, he believes that he has a moral or religious obligation to provide compassionate care.

My copy of this book is signed by the author with the phrase, "Women matter. Thanks for caring." I think this nicely sums up how Parker feels and writes about his work and passion. Full disclosure: I have met Parker and am a fan of his advocacy and work. I am also a physician. I have a few more disclosures, but this is a review of Parker's memoir, so I'll stop here.

In the prologue titled "The Women," Parker shares stories from his clinic, but

also introduces his Christianity and dedicates the book to the women who want abortions. It is apt that he starts the book this way, and in fact he centers his patients and others in his life throughout the book.

Parker tells of his religious beliefs, his family and upbringing and his experiences as a doctor to explain how he arrives at his views. He writes about his deep commitment to social justice and his admiration for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, it is in part by reading King's interpretation of the "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" that Parker realized his future. And this is all just in the first chapter, "Conversion."

In subsequent chapters, Parker shares intimate details of his life growing up in a small mining town in Alabama. We follow his education, and in a chapter called "Dreams," he gives us a sense of how it felt to balance his religious beliefs with his love of science. A mentor encourages him to be a doctor, which was the first time he considered merging his interest in building relationships, helping others and studying science, which led to his career choice.

Parker also writes about race and racism throughout the book, from being raised in black churches to his experiences being overlooked as the physician due to the color of his skin. His powerful writing reinforces

the notion that racial justice and reproductive justice are intimately related. "It was not lost on me, an African American man from Birmingham, Alabama, descended from slaves, that new legislation aimed at telling women what they might and might not do with their own physical bodies looked a whole lot like men owning women's bodies."

One thing that is refreshing about this book is the strong thread of feminism coming from a man. He uses examples from his upbringing where teenage girls (or unmarried women) were stigmatized because of a pregnancy, but the boys and men who fathered the children were not.

Parker provides an interesting background on the history of the politics leading up to the present day, including how the Republican party evolved to its current views on abortion. He criticizes Democrats for their contribution to the rhetoric of women as victims rather than deserving of liberty and privacy. What I have found powerful about the way Parker both writes and speaks is the humanism and dignity he gives to his patients above all else. He expresses his frustration with the current state of politics when he asserts, "The political conversation about abortion has obliterated truth and crushed any nuanced understanding of what it means to live a human life."

I also appreciated that he readily describes abortion procedures in a way that is easy to understand and medically accurate. This is a particular skill set that I'm sure anyone who has ever seen a doctor can appreciate. There are a lot of myths and misunderstandings about what having an abortion entails, so it is worth giving credit for this seemingly simple section of the book.

In "Slings and Arrows," he discusses the murder of Dr. George Tiller, an abortion provider who was killed in a church in 2009, and the risks of this profession.

Perhaps the only place where Parker's ability to humanize others waivers is in referring to the "antis" (short for "anti-choice") as he calls those who refer to themselves as "pro-life." Because I do not identify in that way, I am not sure how this would come across to someone who opposes his viewpoints. It is compelling to read that Christianity and defense of legal access to abortion are not mutually exclusive. The last chapter, "A New Theology of Abortion," is exactly that, and wraps up the book nicely in a way that feels like both an end and a beginning.

One criticism I have is that women, per se, are not the only ones with a uterus. I think at this point if we are speaking about a gender issue, such as abortion, it is important to at least mention trans, gender queer and others who are often not included or considered in the discussion when we center it purely around women. That said, I believe that Parker would likely agree with this analysis, though it is not often discussed, and the medical community as a whole has a long way to go on this topic.

Although the topics raised in this book can be challenging, the book is eminently readable, and I found myself compelled to continue chapter after chapter, even late at night. I recommend this book without reservation, and I'd move it up your list sooner than later.

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LIFE'S WORK
A MORAL ARGUMENT FOR CHOICE
DR. WILLIE PARKER

Life's Work: A Moral Argument for Choice, by Dr. Willie Parker