

“A Burning in My Bones”  
Authorized biography of Eugene H Peterson  
Winn Collier  
Book Note Dave Kraft

“More of the difference is inward, the struggle to be here, stay out of the way, and to pray without forcing anything—or running out and contradicting by action what I entered into by prayer “

“All I want to do is become a saint—but secretly, so no one knows it—a saint without any trappings. Every detail of routine and imagination, every letter I write, phone call made, gesture and encounter—gathered and placed on the altar bound—every day another trek to Moriah.”

“I feel quite detached from the compliments and praise—something that is apart from me—a gift, not an achievement.”

Most days, Eugene spent an hour before daybreak reading Scripture and a 2nd hour reading commentaries.

Eugene was always searching, always open to more, always on a quest for things that were true and solid.

During college, Eugene explained his drive and aspirations: “I like people who act like they know where they’re going. I like people who live aggressively — who have a purpose.”

Leadership, Eugene discovered, was not about a dynamic personality commandeering resources and manhandling an agenda, but rather like a coxswain in a crew race, keeping the strokes in synchronized rhythm.

Barth wasn’t indifferent to “Getting it right,” but his passion was in “Getting it lived.”

“If I were to define” (Eugene said) “what for me makes up the core Pentecostal identity, it is the lived conviction that everything, absolutely everything in the scriptures is livable. Not just true, but livable. Not just an idea or a cause, but livable in real life.”

This hunger for something radical—something so true that it burned in his bones—was a constant in Eugene’s life. His longing for God ignited a ferocity in his soul.

In a professor, William Foxwell Albright, Eugene found “One of the first men I encountered who really lived what they believed, and when you encounter someone like that, you wake up.” Eugene admired Albright because he combined a dazzling mind with a profound humility.”

Eugene said, “The people who stand out in my life are the people who don’t flaunt what they are doing and aren’t stuck on who they are.”

The academy, with its serious ideas and search for truth, had an irresistible allure, but Eugene also eschewed the pretense, the inflated egos, the shallow woodenness. The church was his home, but he often felt at odds there took with its stale formality and its too-easy disconnect from the grit of life.

Eugene mentions his wife Jan’s delight in the here-ness and now-ness of life.

His experience with those to whom he reported led Eugene to say, “The people who ordained me and took responsibility for my work were interested in financial reports, attendance graphs, program planning. But they were not interested in *me*. They were interested in my job; they cared little for my vocation.”

In response to a pastor who desired more real conversations with people in need, Eugene asked: “So, why don’t you do it—have conversations like that?” “Because,” Tom Answered with an edge, “I have to run this damn church.”

Eugene could not let off the throttle. He said, “I formed committees. I made home visits. Longer hours. A longer work week...I tried to slow down. I tried to relax. But I was afraid of failing. I couldn’t help myself.”

“This culture in which we live squeezes all the God sense out of us. I. Want to be an un-busy pastor.”

Little by little, Eugene was becoming himself. He was finding where he fit.

Eugene’s daughter Karen’s frustration over her dad’s twenty-seven nights in a row of work or meetings revealed a struggle of presence that Eugene never completely overcame. The church was good work, holy work, but Eugene didn’t always draw the boundaries he should have.

Eugene’s early writing mostly resulted in piles of rejection letters. He stuffed the manuscript for his forth book *A long obedience in the same direction* into manila envelopes and started mailing. Twenty-three publishing houses. Twenty-three rejections.

Eugene, while a man of immense discipline, was not immune to weakness or the temptation that a bottle might offer as a coping mechanism.

While speaking at a conference in North Carolina, a rousing sermon from a prominent speaker troubled him. “Slight uneasiness—is this preaching or religious drama? I guess what I am most interested in these days is holiness. I am on the watch for saints. I want to be a saint.”

“I think I have not so much been fulfilled in marriage as deepened, chastened, honed and simplified.”

The pastoral duties that once signaled commitment for Eugene had begun to signal confinement.

Eugene’s translation *The Message* required interpretation (the basis of much later critique). “Languages are not mathematical equations, they are complex and expansive modes of thinking and communicating.”

“A close friend was strongly against my going to Regent’s College as a professor and thinks I am vulnerable to guru-itis.”

Eugene was fine with silence. He felt absolutely no responsibility to carry a conversation.

Eugene wasn’t interested in most things everyone else was talking about.

Unlike most academics, Eugene was slow to offer opinions and frustrated students with his reticence to give advice.

One student observed that Eugene was never a needy professor. He was simply himself. He had things to say that of course he hoped we might hear, but he never indulged us, never sought to impress us, never kept himself aloof. He was himself, offering his presence and pointing us to God.

The more people sought after him, the more he feared for his soul. “The insidious pedestal. The seduction of celebrity. I fear a huge discrepancy between who I am and who people think I am—the prominence, the applause—there is a depersonalizing aspect to it. I know so much more than I live.” Eugene loathed the notoriety.

Eugene lived with an intensity of desire for God and holiness—a consuming desire to be holy—but this desire always loomed in front of him, always beckoned him further.

Though there were numerous Regent facility Eugene enjoyed and admired, he found the president, Walter Wright, refreshing with his lack of pretense and no concern for image.

Eugene felt that, “By and large evangelical pastors are not deficient in energy or motivation or knowledge. But they are not conspicuously attentive, really listening to the voice/Word of God and being totally and personally present with the people we meet and serve.”

At Sam’s Club one thousand copies of *The Message* sold each week. By 2003, sales of *The Message* topped seven million copies.

Eugene felt that his role with the people he served was to be their pastor, not their policeman.

In making decisions about what he would do or wouldn’t do, Eugene wasn’t concerned about burning bridges or the institutional fallout. He was his own man. He did what he thought was right.

“We have this glorious gospel to proclaim and give way and we gang up against one another and throw dogma-rocks” Eugene said.

Any hurry had drained from Eugene, as if all the distractions gave way to simplicity, purity. He had become unhurried

When Eugene was asked what he considered to be the characteristics of a saint, he had once said, “Humility, number one. Unpretentiousness, having not idea that they’re a saint.”

During his life, Eugene sold roughly 22 million copies of 38 books, translated into languages around the globe