

*Life is Mostly Edges:  
A Memoir.*

Calvin Miller

Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008. 3  
81 pages. \$22.95 U.S..

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Bestselling author and poet Calvin Miller weaves his life into a masterpiece memoir. The press release from publisher Thomas Nelson summarized the autobiography as a journey through “a myriad of experiences of a young man coming of age in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America.” The memoir follows Miller’s life into college, seminary, a small local church, a large church pastorate, and crescendos to life as an author and seminary professor. Miller has penned more than 40 books, most notable his poetic trilogy of *The Singer*, *The Song* and *The Finale*, and most recently his companion textbooks on Pastoral Ministry and Preaching: *O Shepherd, Where Art Thou?*, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, (2007 Book of the Year by *Preaching* magazine), and *Letters To A Young Pastor*.

“Given the size of the universe, the world I have lived in, my life was quite small, and I have lived it out mostly at its edge,” writes Miller. “This is not surprising, for life is mostly edges. It is small – like a postage stamp... and I like the middle of my stamp more than the edges... The middle is safe. Only the edges are dangerous, but it’s also

where we learn life's greatest truth; joy rarely erupts in the safe centers of our lives... Joy lies only along the edges." (xiii - xv) *Life is Mostly Edges* is divided into three sections: Part One: The Early Years, 1936 - 1955; Part Two: Staying Human While Being A Pastor, 1956 - 1991; and Part Three: The Professor How Like Teaching But Loved Learning, 1991 - 2007.

Part One is fascinating reading about his growing-up years in Enid, OK - living in a one-room house with his mother and eight siblings, being abandoned by his father at age four, enduring the drowning of his brother Dickie, reconnecting with his father at age fifteen, and admiring the grit and determination of his mother. The chapter about his mother (Mama, as he called her), entitled *The Woman Who Was Richer Than She Knew*, is some of the most poignant and honorable pages ever written about a mother's influence. He admired her ingenuity: "My mother owned Rumpelstiltskin's talent for spinning straw into gold." (54) He witnessed her faith: "Mama loved God...as the Lord of the free life...the God of sunrise, the God of first snow, the God who a desperate mother might call on when she was out of ideas on how to hold her world together." (57-58). He cherished her influence: "My mother was a miracle worker... Mama gave dignity to thrift... I realize now after all these years what a wizard Mama was... Mother taught us that it was God who supplied the bread, while we were the 'managers of heaven's gifts.'" (71-72).

Every preacher can identify with the chapter that closes Part One. Miller recounts his call to preach, his feeble attempts at a "first sermon," his struggles with public speaking, his first pastorate, and his courtship with his wife-to-be, Barbara. In *The Journal of Christian Ministry*

his first pastorate, he learned how to handle a crisis, he learned how to preach, and he learned a lifelong leadership lesson: “A good leader doesn’t go anywhere by himself.” (181)

Part Two picks up the pace of his life as a pastor. Miller chronicles his seminary experience, his marriage to Barbara, the birth of his children, and his journey through two pastorates. His wisdom regarding the survival of his children’s teenage years is a classic delight. He called it “the code of survival.”

1. *Discipline.* “I believe in spanking. I know that psychologists are divided on the subjects... Christian psychologists often suggest you pray first. But the few time I asked God if I should wait or do it now, he said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding!’” (247)

2. *Expectations.* “Every set of parents should have a set time...when you can plan your method of survival for the following week. At these meetings parents should discuss their levels of tolerance, and minimum and maximum penalties for juvenile delinquency.” (247-248)

3. *Freedom.* “If a child wants to run away from home, help the child pack.” (248)

4. *Caution.* “Try to keep them from being vehement about their future.” (248)

5. *Expecting the unexpected.* “Anything you think your children might do, they won’t.” (249).

Miller's pastoral experience spanned 35 years and involved three churches. The most significant stay spanned 25 years – Westside Baptist Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Miller was their first pastor. In the first three years, the new church struggled through leadership issues and congregational conflicts, climaxing with his intended resignation after only three years as pastor. However, pastor Miller stood on a Sunday morning, and shared the truth from his heart. A service of repentance broke out, and those in opposition left. He stayed 22 more years and the church grew to 3,000 members. Accepting the invitation to join the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Miller entered a new realm of ministry as seminary professor.

Evaluating the role of a professor, Miller concluded: "I had not been a teacher for a week before I discovered that what I *knew* was not nearly so important to them as who I *was*. They wanted to know *why* I taught, more than *what* I taught. They wanted me to *know* them rather than merely *inform* them. They wanted to know all about my affair with Christ more than the content of my lectures. So I discovered early on that good teachers teach what they are, more than what they know... No matter how large a class is, the entire class is reduced to two, the teacher and the learner... Teaching is an intimate art, filled with ecstasy and life. It occurs at the exact same place where humanity and divinity join to form a new incarnation of truth." (318 – 319)

Miller saved the best for last – the last chapter: *The God of What's Left*. His reflections upon a life well-lived rally around two questions: What would I do differently if I could do it all over again? and What am I doing to be sure that I am a good steward of the years I have left? For this reviewer, these last pages fired a resolve

to slow down and enjoy life more, to honor those you love daily, to babysit grandchildren more, to express gratitude to Jesus for His ultimate sacrifice, and to stop looking ahead and look around.

After nearly two decades in academics (Professor of Communication and Ministry Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Professor of Preaching and Pastoral Ministry at Beeson Divinity School), Miller wrote this memoir to celebrate his retirement. “I wanted to write this tale while I am still a mere seven decades from my initial spank on my butt, because I am now at the age when the annual inspection of the same area seems mandatory. Don’t feel sorry for me. I am in no greater danger than you are. The edge is a good address. It is a good place to remember our temporariness. It teaches us to spend our time wisely. So our last days can become our best days. Life is good. So is God. And life with God is full of glorious daybreaks. After all, it was God who gave me the courage to walk the edges of a life that was never mine!” (xvi)