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## Reviewing *The Flourishing Teacher: Vocational Renewal for a Sacred Profession*

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***The Flourishing Teacher: Vocational Renewal for a Sacred Profession.*** By Christine Bieber Lake. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. 224 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0830-85284-0 (hardcover) \$56.99

**T**he *Flourishing Teacher: Vocational Renewal for a Sacred Profession* by Christina Bieber Lake reads like a motion picture for a professor's life. From the paradoxical dread of returning yearly to what a teacher loves and then to the not-so-calming-end of the academic calendar year, this book serves as a renewal for those who belong to the sacred profession of teaching. Saturated with stories and scholarship, recommendations collide with the words of Henry David Thoreau, Kathleen Norris, and Jesus. Although this book addresses higher education teaching in general, it does not shy away from the divine entanglement in the lives of teachers.

Designed to be read linearly or thematically, the structure serves as a resource for enjoyment and a reference for enrichment. Comical stories, sad memories, diagrams for visual learners, supporting literature, and scholarly references lead the reader toward two themes—being overwhelmed and being necessary. The overview below does not follow the monthly organization of the book but lumps the content into seasons. The book's humility and truthfulness call the reader deeper into the months, the stories, the feelings, and the desire to flourish.

In the fall season, Lake reminds us that “in the month-that-shall-not-be-named” (p. 11), teachers are “preparing for a spiritual marathon” (p. 8). Teaching with purpose requires more than just organizing content and delivery modules. Lake writes on the influence of faith and practice with the same ease as she integrates literary classics into the 21st-century classroom. She highlights the importance of living a life of spiritual and pedagogical practices that lead students to belong to “a community of truth whose goal is to be in relationship with the truth and with each other” (p. 15). Lake admits this process is taxing, even from the beginning, and suggests we “think very hard about energy—not energy in general—but your [personal] energy” (p. 29). She recommends keeping an encouragement file, establishing routines,

habits, and maybe even investing in noise-canceling headphones (p. 34).

The demands of teaching in higher education include the infamous committee work. Lake highlights the extra burden this has on those with a minority representation, which for her is being a woman. In a guild dominated by white males and a pledge for diversity, a woman is in high demand for committee work. Her lesson for all of us is to learn how to employ polite refusals and “saying yes to ourselves first” (p. 48). Other strategies include personal organizational strategies such as prioritizing tasks, establishing procedures, protocols, and even the possible implementation of a work uniform.

In the long winter months, which are even longer for Lake, who lives in Illinois, she reminds us that teachers are overwhelmed and on a collision course with the Christian calendar: Advent. Productivity demands, evaporation of self, and the dreaded drama that “grades” bring to what may otherwise be a truly educational process intersect with Advent and the anticipation of hope, truth, and a savior. Lake states, “the fact that our larger culture bows to the idol of productivity puts many Christian educators in a lose-lose scenario” (p. 87). She goes further to connect this idolatry to our students by mentioning that “it seeps into our students, too, when they value grades and performance over learning” (p. 88). As for grading itself, Lake provides a short discourse on opinions, but unable to tackle the entire issue, she concludes that “grading is a whole other stocking full of coal” (p. 98). For the educator, flourishing may be fleeting.

The use of Thoreau’s discussion on “the dying of a tree’s leaves as a gift of nourishment to the next generation” (p. 75) once again reveals Lake’s expertise in literature and gift of application. Transition and crisis are the themes for the season, noticeable in the weather, the profession, or the educator’s phase of life. Between Thoreau and Jonathan Rauch, alternative narratives to those in our culture provide opportunity over crisis (p. 78). Lake recommends personal work towards mindfulness, including contemplation, *lectio divina*, and even “starting the month with some sort of advent retreat” (p. 96).

In the long, cold, barren months of the academic calendar (January and February), Lake notes “even more than in August, educators face

significant motivational challenges” (p. 119). Familiar to the veteran educator, Lake shares that in these months she “found [herself] thinking, for the first time . . . that I can’t do this job for another fifteen years” (p. 119). A few recommendations from Lake’s own experience include acknowledging this feeling and creating a “soul shelf.” The soul shelf is the go-to location in an educator’s calm place where only those things that are beautiful, nurturing, and encouraging nudge one toward receptivity and also remedy the sickness of the soul are allowed. In consistent form, Lake provides personal examples and recommendations for starting one’s own soul shelf.

In the spring months, Lake reminds us that our anticipation for spring break is unlike that of the 21-year-old college student. Before that week arrives, decision fatigue has depleted willpower. The rhythm of higher education and the academic calendar take a toll on the educator by March, and rest is surging as the primary need. With the lack of rest, the accumulation of activities, and the unfulfilling tendency spring break has on the educator versus the educated, Lake reminds us “we are not mules” (p. 149) and introduces the concept of *acedia* from what seems to be one of her favorite authors, Kathleen Norris. On *acedia*, Lake defers to Norris but includes a single phrase about the month of April that most educators will identify with: “your *eros*, your passion, has dissolved . . . you are adrift, and your engines are dead in the water” (p. 147).

Along with using one’s soul shelf and systems, Lake emphasizes rest, which is at the heart of the Sabbath, which Lake states as the “single most important spiritual decision I have made (outside of the decision to surrender my life to Christ . . . [was] the decision I made, years ago, to keep the Sabbath” (p. 159). It is in spring when committee work and the scholarly demands of research, writing, reviews, revisions, and resubmissions evaporate strength that Lake states, “We must fix our eyes on the end; the resurrection of Christ . . . no matter how meaningless and redundant our lives have grown to feel. Easter represents the very real hope of new life that is ours in Christ Jesus” (p. 146).

In the summer months, the assumption is that professors will review the year, read course evaluations, and prepare for better. Once again, Lake suggests we start with rest and “learn not to work when you

are exhausted [which] requires knowing when you are exhausted and how exhausted you really are” (p. 167). She goes further to mention that “every three or four summers you should completely stop...and do absolutely nothing... [she] calls it a ‘Jubilee summer’” (p. 172). She sums up the need for a break with the metaphor of cattle: herded around, force-fed, and purposed for production. In this chapter Lake is not only an empathizer and a mentor but also a leader advocating for the endangered unicorn in higher education called sabbatical. Perhaps no change will come from Lake as the sabbatical troubadour, but the reader is cheering her on.

The summer also includes obligations to individual disciplines, which take “time, humility, and disciplined attention” (p. 179). However, with scholarship comes imposter syndrome. Lake states, “Shame seduced envy. They had an illegitimate child: imposter syndrome” (p. 192). She recommends the reader let go of results and refers to Proverbs, which “contrasts a heart at peace with envy, instructing us that the only way to counter envy is to know who you are in Christ Jesus” (p. 192). As summer closes and cycles the reader back to August, Lake reminds us that the summer is for grace, gratitude, joy, and perspective.

To an outsider looking in at the teacher in higher education, the profession may seem to be one of overwhelming fatigue and the thirst for rest. This is the consequence of experience, honesty, and meaningful service to the profession on behalf of Lake. The purpose of this struggle, if not implicit everywhere in the stories, is also made explicit. This purpose is the student. Educators in higher education struggle because they are there on purpose. Scholarship and committee work are part of the gig, and wrong assumptions about schedules from outsiders are expected. However, students are the reason we try so hard. Lake never leaves this assumption, but fixes her aim at acknowledging, empathizing, supporting, and mentoring the reader, who will most likely be a flourishing teacher in a sacred profession.

## REFERENCES

Lake, C. B. (2020). *The flourishing teacher: Vocational renewal for a sacred profession*. IVP Academic.

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