

Story hour

by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

GOOD CHILDREN'S BOOKS do not have to be overtly religious—about Jesus, for example—to be about faithful living. Everyday books about common life can also evoke faith.

In one library excursion I stumbled on *Pink and Say*, by Patricia Polacco. It is a story from Polacco's own family, passed down to her from her great-grandfather, about a friendship between two boys caught up in the Civil War. It choked me up no matter how many times I read it with my kids.

Pink, who is black, rescues Say, who is white. Say has been wounded and is fleeing his unit. Pink's mother, once a slave on a Georgia plantation, nurses Say back to health before marauders arrive and kill her. On their way back to the battle, Pink and Say are captured. In the end, Pink is hanged; Say survives to pass on the story.

Say had told Pink that he once shook hands with Abraham Lincoln, and so Pink yearns "just one last time" to "touch the hand that touched Mr. Lincoln." They clasp hands before soldiers wrench them apart in prison.

The book is a testimony to Pink's life, to the friendship of these young men, and to the hope that bonds of

love—touching the hand that touched the hand down to today—can overcome racism, strife, bloodshed and death. The last page invites the reader to grab on and say Pink's name, Pinkus Aylee, "out loud and vow to remember him always." In doing this, readers enter a kind of covenant of peace and justice created through the practice of reading.

Each time my kids and I said "Pinkus Aylee," we traversed space and time. We were not just reading to get beyond our own world to an alternative world. We read to move "into the shoes of another, and thus ultimately to learn compassion," to borrow theologian Anne Thurston's characterization.

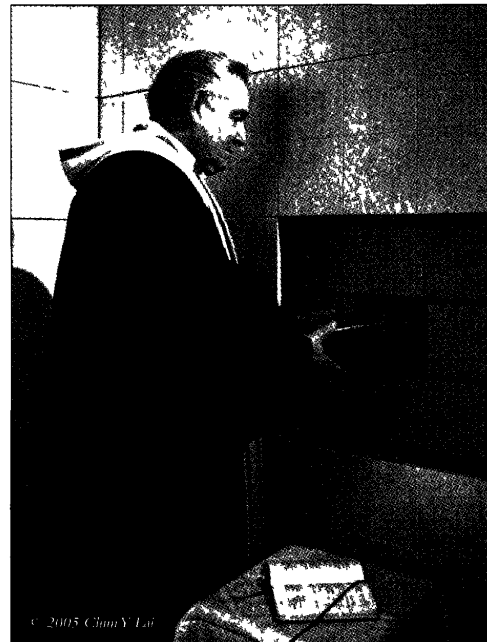
So we read for pleasure. We read to learn, grow, experience new worlds and connect to others. Ultimately we also read out of a fundamental spiritual need. We seek meaning and answers to profound questions of existence.

Years ago, when I read Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny* to my sons, I wasn't really thinking about our deep-seated anxiety over attachment and separation. But I knew my sons and I were all wondering who would leave whom first, and for how long. It was some solace to share

together a story about a baby bunny who keeps running away from his mother only to discover that mother bunny steadfastly seeks him out.

I could read along and at least indirectly tell my sons how much I love them de-

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—and all
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spite the fact that I sometimes leave them to do other things I also love; they could acknowledge how much they want both to flee and to stay immersed in that love. "If you run away," says the mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny." Whether the bunny becomes a fish, mountain climber or crocus, the mother will fish, climb or garden and "find you."

In reading Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* with my kids, I wasn't trying to tell them that they were wild or wicked (although they sometimes were). But the book gave each of us a way to deal with our "mischief of one kind and another."

Some books take on profound issues head-on, like Tomie dePaola's *Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs*. It's the story of a boy's relationships with his grandma in the kitchen downstairs and his great-grandmother in the bed upstairs. Until Nana Upstairs dies.

Sometimes the dilemmas of daily life, big and small, leave us speechless. At such times, a line from a book—a bit like a proof text from scripture—can take the place of a thousand words. Books give us some-

thing to say about life and its anger, frustration, terror, bewilderment and despair when we don't have anything else to say.

One morning, nothing was right for my son. He complained that the pancakes were burnt. He couldn't find his favorite pencil. Then I had to go and say something "so obvious" like "Maybe it's in your backpack." He resisted his father's good-bye hug as if he had a highly contagious disease. Instead of saying, "Have a good day, learn a lot, have fun," I sent him off with the only words

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that came to mind: "Bye, Alexander. Have a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Even in Australia. . . . See you this afternoon."

In my happily-ever-after version, my mention of Alexander finally makes him smile. No actual smile appeared that morning, but I like to think that under the surface he was at least chuckling a little. It had been years since we read Judith Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, but I think he knew exactly what I meant by recalling that line from the book. Some days are rotten, even in Australia. Sometimes we are just in a foul mood for no reason—and sometimes for good reason.

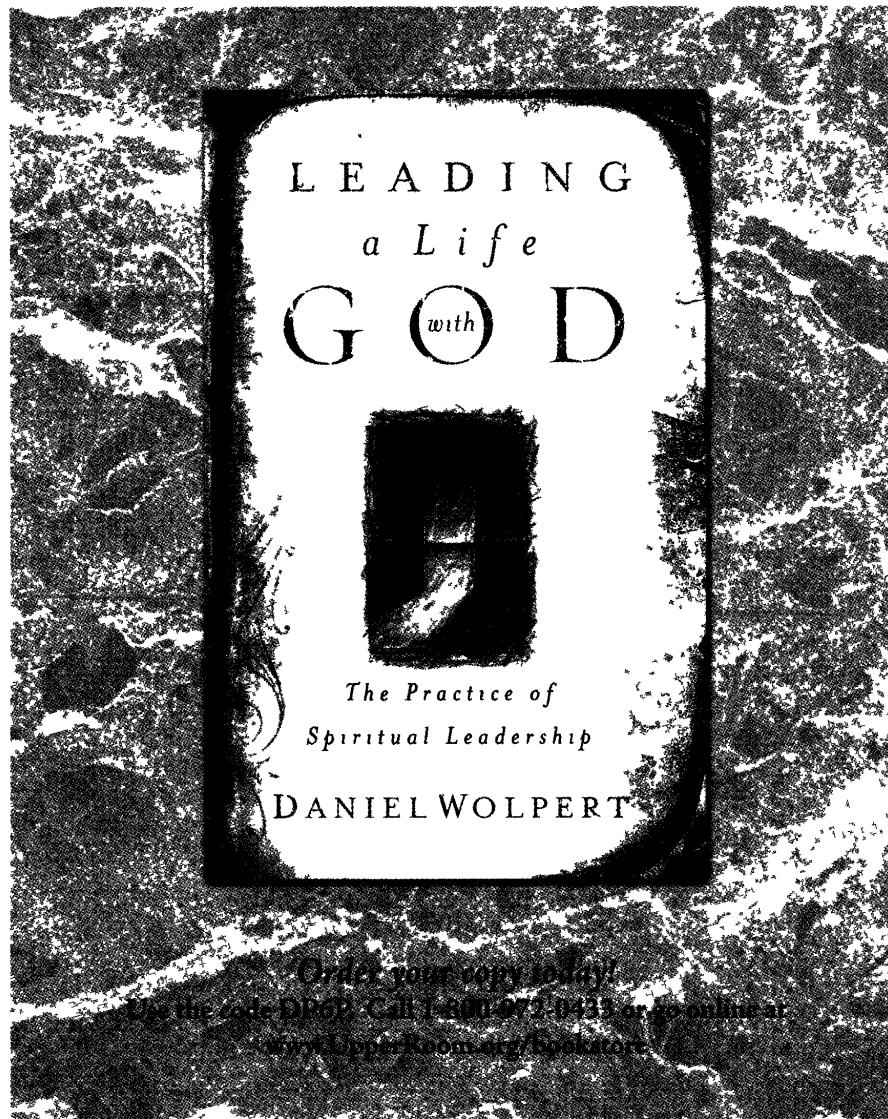
The practice of reading allows children and adults alike to find relief from suffering alone and together. Reading is cathartic. It helps us introspect, express feelings about life's most troubling questions, and understand others as we encounter them. Reading also allows us to test the limits of life, shaking up our easy answers.

The next book in a trilogy beloved by my son came out last

year. "Will you take me to the bookstore to buy it?" he asked on the day it debuted. I doubt I'd run too many errands at the drop of a hat and lay out \$22.94, especially for someone who earlier that afternoon had called me stupid. But I stopped what I was doing and headed off to the bookstore. A request to buy a book can almost always turn my heart. Nurturing readers—maybe that's my contribution to the common good honed through the practice of caring for children. Or so I thought on the way home. ■

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