

Book Review: DON'T KILL THE MESSENGER! by Donald Ray Soeken

It was a sad day when I first realized that whistleblower protection programs are necessary things, not only in a few corrupt institutions but in institutions everywhere, and that something bad in our nature wins out, time and time again, over our collective sense of fairness and justice when it comes to dealing with people who expose the truth of an institution's failings. But we're forced to face this fact—even, for example, when watching tonight's evening news: for I have to think that the fear of whistleblower retribution had something to do with those reports of faulty ignition switches not making their way up to the higher administration at GM.

Today we're very happy to bring you a book review on the topic of whistleblowing and truth telling by a man who needs no introduction: Ed Schroeder, Crossings co-founder and original proprietor of Thursday Theology.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

DON'T KILL THE MESSENGER! *How America's Valiant Whistleblowers Risk Everything in Order to Speak Out Against Waste, Fraud and Abuse in Business and Government.*

By Donald Ray Soeken.

North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.

196 pages, paperback, \$15.00

Reviewed by Edward H. Schroeder.

The subtitle tells all. Nine chapters, nine case studies, of whistleblowers who have been Soeken's clients (or is it patients?) as little Davids tangling with mega-Goliaths, about the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth.

Theologically speaking, Soeken's nine case studies confirm what Jaroslav Pelikan (my teacher sixty-five years ago) said his Slovak grandmother told him (sic!) was the "indelible character of original sin." Soeken exposes not just the "sins" of waste, fraud and abuse in business and government, but the "original sin," that primordial bent in humans to bend everything they can lay their hands on to promote their own perceived advantage. In these nine cases we see that "bent" swinging into action by those exposed when the whistle blows, swinging into action to save themselves by destroying the whistleblower.

In the Reformation era, Philip Melanchthon used the Latin term '*inclinatio*' when discussing original sin to pinpoint the primal, the original, "shape" of sinners (before they engage in any actions). The shape of sinners is like an inclined plane, he said, where everything that surfaces out from me always rolls in the same direction—to my perceived advantage and to aid and abet my agendas.

That principle shows up to the nines in these nine case studies. With their wickedness exposed, folks retaliate by exposing this *inclinatio*, rolling every stone they can get their hands on down the inclined plane to destroy the whistleblower. In most of Soeken's nine chapters, they succeed in "killing" the messengers (even though they are still breathing), because a messenger's

message, the plain truth, is a fearful truth that has to be killed if they are to survive. Kill the messenger and the message will be killed too.

It's always David and Goliath whom we meet in these standoffs, one person and some juggernaut—military contractor, the federal government, even the U.S. Marine Corps and the Library of Congress. (Yes, also the NSA—long before Snowden.) Of course, the juggernauts all have human faces. It's seldom a faceless bureaucracy that the whistleblowers encounter, but rather the real faces of real people within the bureaucracy, who are in positions of power and perpetrating hanky-panky. They all have faces and names. And to save face, they roll down the stones on the whistleblowers, Goliath-sized boulders compared to David's pebbles in the hands of the truth tellers.

Rarely in Soeken's nine cases does the pebble-slinger come out on top. One did survive:

"Unlike most whistleblowers, Franz Gayl had beaten the odds. Described throughout the national news media as a 'hero' who'd risked his career in order to tell the truth about abuses, he was now being praised at the highest levels of the federal government, including the Vice President of the United States" (100).

So why do they do it? Masochism? Not so, says Soeken. And he should know, with his M.A. in social work and his Ph.D. in Human Development—and, most of all, his twenty-seven years in the U.S. Public Health Service, a field officer at the Mental Health Study Center of the National Institutes of Mental Health in Washington, where, he tells us, "I've done my best to help literally thousands of whistleblowers in their efforts to speak out against fraud, waste, and abuse in both government and business" (vi). Now retired from a career he didn't really

choose, he ranks as America's best-known counselor to whistleblowers and has been profiled in *The New York Times*, *Parade* magazine, and CBS's *60 Minutes*.

"They're not crazy," he says, though that is the regular charge coming from the Goliaths who are exposed when they turn on the lights. They're committed to an ethics of truth, he tells us, often imprinted into them in the family of their childhood, where "Don't tell lies" was a primal proverb of daily life.

We get snippets of Soeken's own childhood too in his stories. (And he is a superb storyteller.) The shape of Soeken's own life came from a similar ethos of truth. Kansas wheat-farmer family. German and German-Russian immigrant forbears. A Lutheran communal ethos pervading the extended family. Grandfather Henry Soeken, a "formidable presence" in his life. That's how it started. And then he left the farm.

"I got lucky and won myself a football scholarship to Valparaiso University," he tells us, where, when off the gridiron, he wound up doing a theology degree (!), which "though I never imagined it at the time...would also help to provide the inspiration for my decision to specialize in counseling truth tellers who 'crash and burn' because of psychic stress that invariably accompanies the act of going public with reports of wrongdoing" (8).

Fast forward through grad school and getting a job in Washington, D.C. "By late 1977, I had been promoted to Chief Social Worker at the U.S. Public Health Service Outpatient Clinic," where one of his tasks was administering "fitness-for-duty examinations" with folks under stress. "When I questioned the unhappy workers who'd been required to take the exams, I discovered that most of them weren't mentally ill. In far too many cases, in fact, they had simply run afoul of their bosses—frequently after blowing the whistle on some illegal or

unethical practice that was taking place at the job site.” And that’s where his career path shifted. The nine case studies are also chapters in the author’s own life.

Wilma Jefferson was the first one. Her story is chapter one. From her he heard this: “Dr. Soeken...all this happened because my supervisor made me take the ‘fitness-for-duty’ psychiatric exam. That’s why I lost my job. They rigged the results of that exam, and I am not crazy. And do you know why I was ordered to take the test in the first place? It’s because I blew the whistle on all the overtime padding that was going on in my department.”

The consequence of this conversation? “Because of her valorous moral leadership, I became inspired to help whistleblowers by doing my best over the years to provide them with psychological counseling, moral support, temporary housing, legal expert-witness help, and a dozen other services that would hopefully make their violent struggles a little bit easier. Because of Wilma Jefferson and many others like her, I became a specialist in helping whistleblowers to stand tall in the service of truth” (19). The book is dedicated to Wilma Jefferson.

Because Soeken was an insider to the system, he knew where the levers were and he put his hand to them, often using the rules of one bureaucracy to countermand the rules of another in order to rescue a victim. Most often the whistleblower still was the loser. Yet sometimes the loser wound up “winning by losing.” Winning for others, by losing for himself. Sound familiar? Like Isaiah 53 or Philippians 2?

Now and then Soeken’s storytelling tiptoes into theology. Mostly—no surprise—into left-hand-kingdom territory, where God’s scales of equity justice rule, where violations of that equity justice do get exposed—and where just deserts are called for. And where the whistleblowers themselves “rely on the law,” God’s

law of preservation, God's law of recompense, to animate their courage and determination to tell the truth.

We don't get any explicit data from Don on the right-hand-regime resources that any of his nine prophets may have had available and put to use to get a "Second Wind," a holy gust, to undergird their law-reliant truth telling. That would amount to drawing on Isaiah and Philippians. Did any of them have that additional Holy Gust, or didn't they? That's something I'd like to ask Don about. For, in the fiery furnace these truth tellers all got tossed into, did I—or did I not—see another figure sometimes standing beside them? One with the "appearance of a son of God," as showed up amidst the flames in the prophet Daniel's original case study? Then again, it might just have been the reflection of that Son, one of his brothers, there in the furnace with them, to wit, the author of this book.

Deep background for Crossings folks:

What I have kept secret so far is Don Soeken's connection with Crossings. Fifty years ago and just last year. Fifty years ago in doing that theology major at Valparaiso University, where Bob Bertram and yours truly were his teachers. "Ur-crossings" (paleo-crossings?) was the new theology curriculum that Bertram had finessed through university politics as course requirements for all entering students. Bob Schultz and I were among the planners and schemers. The prime pedagogical goal was linking faith to daily life with Biblical texts from the Sunday lectionary as groundings, and, for students thoughtful enough, linking such text-grounded faith to the daily work they'd be doing after they got their diplomas.

This book is the report card for how that all came out for Don Soeken.

Fast-forward half a century. Last year Don got the idea and then

put together all the pieces to create the Crossings Legacy Fund, something none of us old hands had ever thought of. But Don took us by the hand and showed us how it could be done. And then he did it. Said fund has already grown to six figures and is now underwriting executive director Steve Kuhl's Joshua-and-Caleb-like sorties into previously unexplored territories across the Jordan.

Don Soeken has the same magnificent obsession for truth telling that his heroes have. Makes me wonder. Was it not only Grandpa Soeken and family life on the farm in Kansas, but also that college theology major?

Which prompts the following sortie into theology and into the theology major at Valparaiso University back in Don Soeken's day.

THE ORDER OF TRUTH

Back in Don's day, the regular textbook for Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University was the English translation of Werner Elert's *The Christian Ethos*. Don Soeken took the ethics course when it was my turn to teach it. Mad young Turks that we junior faculty were, we inflicted this German professor's seminary-level textbook on liberal arts undergrads! And Don was there.

At the end of chapter three, "The Configurations [*Ordnungen*, the original German term] of Daily Life in Ethos under the Law," there come concluding paragraphs on the *Ordnung* of Truth. '*Ordnung*' is Elert's term for the what and where, the "specs" that God "ordains"—hence, *Ordnung*—for each of us images of God to live out our unique existence. The *Ordnungen* are the basic givens of a person's own biography. Namely, this particular family of this particular father and mother, these specific siblings, this place on the planet, this ethnic heritage, this specific society, this time in history, this economic system,

this government, this daily work, these multiple callings to be God's person, God's image (= reflector) at this spot in time and history.

All of these ordainings, configurations, are people-linked realities. Me and my relationships.

Underlying them all, says Elert, is the *Ordnung* of Truth. Only when truth is passing back and forth in these relationships is the relationship "in order," wholesome, nourishing, life-enhancing. Destroy truth telling in any of the *Ordnungen*—marriage, family, government, the workplace—and chaos takes over.

Worse still, the ancient enemy of the creator, the devil [*diabolos* = destroyer] takes over. Remember, Jesus designates him the "father of lies." Deception, destruction, death is the sequence in this unholy triad. Which is, of course, the ancient Biblical story of the lie replacing truth, with the Father of Lies entering human history.

That story unfolds something like this. The *Ordnung* of the relationship between creator and human creature is that the former sets the specs for the existence of the latter. Potter and pot is Jeremiah's image for this. Present in Eden are two trees. Tree of Life, tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. The Creator has the knowledge of Good and Evil, knowledge that is beyond the capacity of the human creature. Ditto for the Tree of Life with its multi-dimensions far beyond the limits of 3-D humans. "Hands off both of these. Don't try to take over the jurisdiction of either one. It's a turf beyond your abilities. You have no antennae for operating in a 4-D, 5-D, 6-D universe. To try to do so is suicide. You shall surely die. That's the TRUTH in the Creator/creature relationship."

Aha, but now comes the deceiver: "Think about it. God says

good/evil management is deity-alone turf. But you humans are already close enough, just as unique creatures, to the turf of deity. Just look once at the good/evil knowledge tree. Patently good, right? You can see that on your own. God's no-no can't be the truth, can it? He says it's deity-alone turf. Might that not mean this? If/when you take over good/evil management yourself, you become deity. Now is that something good or not?"

But it's a lie. It triggers the 3-D triad of deception, destruction, death, the tragic constants of human history as far back as we can trace it.

Each of Soeken's cases replicates the ancient Eden story. The foundations themselves are damaged—at worst, destroyed—when truth is replaced by the lie as humans interact in the multiple linkages they have with each other and with the creation itself. Also, of course, the ground-of-being relationship with the Creator. And no wonder: the Destroyer is the Father of Lies. To destroy any of the Creator's ordainings—and, eventually, the creatures in those configurations—is the Ur-agenda of the "mystery of wickedness." All he needs to do is to nudge them (us) to stop "truthing" it with one another.

That may be the "deep background," Don—why the multitude of truth tellers you have aided all these years so seldom come out as obvious winners. They are wrestling with a foe even greater than Northrup Corporation, the USMC, the U.S. government. It is God's own "old evil foe" who is in the mix, "who means deadly woe. Deep guile (= deceit) and great might are his dread arms in fight. On earth is not his equal" (Luther, verse one, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God").

Yet these nine people, with you as ally, are still alive, though battered and beaten, when you bring these chapters to closure. Who, who all, was their ally?

So tell us more, Don. You're a theologian. You surely sang (doubtless memorized!) Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" hymn already back on the farm in Kansas. Was Luther's next verse in the mix too for some of these truth tellers? Possibly transmitted by you? I wonder.

With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is,
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field forever.

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May 22, 2014