

4-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Lauren Tyler (2009) "On faith, money and giving: An author's perspective," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol52/iss1/9>

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Because Furman Matters.

On faith, money and giving: An author's perspective

There I was, in an Indianapolis Starbucks, trying to write the first sentence of my first book.

I had yet to adjust to midwestern winters, and I was freezing. A publisher was paying me to write, but all I could manage to do was sit, drink coffee and listen to other people's conversations about future leaders of the free world, Facebook and frappuccinos. The lonely cursor on the computer screen taunted me with its incessant blinking.

With my Furman degree and a Master of Divinity from Duke under my belt, I had worked for two universities running programs that focused on issues surrounding faith, money and giving. Out of that came an invitation from SkyLight Paths Publishing to write *Giving — The Sacred Art* for its Spiritual Life series.

I was 29 and had never published so much as a pamphlet, but I signed on.

So there I sat, shivering and borderline catatonic. My research was done and my outline was in place, but I lacked confidence. I decided to prolong the procrastination and start with the acknowledgments.

The first entry — before family and friends, before other universities, even before God (I figure the Almighty isn't too hung up on receiving literary shout-outs) — was to thank Furman. I wrote:

No writer writes alone. We may isolate ourselves for hours or days at a time to be quiet with our thoughts, waiting for a brainstorm or attempting to string together the best choice of words, but we never write alone. Always with us are the wisdom and ideas of those who have influenced our thinking, the voices of loved ones who believe in us, and the presence of individuals and communities who have shaped us into who we are. While this book may bear my name, it is the result and work of many people.

To the Furman Religion Department — thank you for pushing my understanding of God beyond a singular denominational construct and teaching me how my faith and reason can coexist peacefully in my soul.

Like a movie on TiVo, my mind replayed the journey that led me to this moment. At the Furman chapter I smiled as scenes flashed by, highlighting favorite college memories.

My freshman English professor, Stanley Crowe, took novices and made us into bold writers. My roommate of four years, Ashley Clark Ransom, edited every paper I wrote, teaching me writing skills my editor now praises. My advisor, Mark Woodard, let me cry in his office because I had dreamed of being a math major and was failing discrete mathematics. He instilled in me self worth and perspective. My Spanish professor, Maurice Cherry, encouraged me even though the Taco Bell menu was about the only Spanish I could comprehend. He taught me to persevere.

At that moment, I realized how much Furman matters to me.

Thus began the whirlwind of book writing — accompanied by a few surprises.

Publicity began before the first chapter was finished. A cover was designed and appeared with my bio on Web sites. The book was available on Overstock.com before there was "stock" to overstock. I felt

a deep sense of responsibility to those who were putting money down for a book that existed only in cyberspace, but I was overwhelmed by the support the publisher showed in advance of the book's completion.

The process helped my husband, Brent, and me learn hard life lessons earlier than we would have otherwise. Brent had to resort to intentional ignorance of deadlines for a while, and I developed a greater appreciation for his contributions to housekeeping.

I was also surprised to discover the bond that builds between writer and editor. My editor quickly became my friend, mentor and coach. A year into the process he delivered news that the manuscript needed to be completely reorganized but promised to work side-by-side with me to get it done.

After two years, we finally went to print. It's a shame the cover has only my name on it, because it is the product of countless people and institutions that contributed to my development.

My journey as an author embodies the sacred cycle of giving. Take my experience with Furman — I began as a recipient of scholarship money, and now I'm a donor for other students. That's what my book is about — how almost all cultures and faith traditions share in this practice and thereby enrich the lives of their givers and receivers through the constant ebb and flow of generosity.

Now people come to me for advice on faith, money and giving. A man once asked, "Why should I give money to a school that I just finished paying for only a few years ago?"

Fair question. Then my mind wanders back to the flashing cursor on the blank page that cold day in Starbucks. . . .

— LAUREN TYLER WRIGHT

The author earned a degree in religion in 2000. Royalties from the sales of Giving — The Sacred Art are being donated to the United Nations World Food Programme.



BRENT WRIGHT