

Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative. Michael Novak. Image Books Press, 2013

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With great honesty, humor and humility renowned author, theologian and social philosopher, Michael Novak shares his fascinating stories of along and active life, in his latest book. Reading his biography I became impressed by his passion, gentle joy and zest for life. His biography proclaims that we all could and should discover in this life something deeper and divine, something wonderful, even in daily, ordinary events – once we become engaged fully in it.

Michael Novak has been a theologian, philanthropist and activist throughout his long life. But ultimately he has remained a great writer, teacher and a social philosopher. Through his experiences, his humble beginnings and sensitive, poetic soul, he describes and explains the socio-economic, political and cultural marvels of our contemporary world. He taught at America's best universities (Harvard, Stanford), worked for some of the most respected politicians (Kennedys, R. Reagan) and became close friends with the most charismatic leaders (M. Thatcher, John Paul 2). Working with Jean Kirkpatrick he represented the country at Geneva and Bern peace negotiations with the then Soviet Union, working on his guiding passions – fighting poverty and advocating for human rights – through writing on virtues of market economy and enlightened democratic capitalism. In his eloquent and enthusiastic memoir, one cannot help but see a man of powerful mind, moral courage and strong convictions well worth adopting and emulating for a good, life that ultimately is the best way and fully worth living.

His book, "*Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative*" is more than an honest memoir – it is a story

of transformation: from radical left-wing socialist in the 1960s to an architect of neo-conservative movement of the 1980s. Some even compared his biography to Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, or *Sign of the Jonah* for his insights and spiritual values. In his vivid and splendid narrative, Novak takes hold of a turbulent economic and spiritual era in the United States. An era, in which Novak explores the complex events of the 20th century - forging into the new third millennium. As the author puts it, "At eighty, I look back over the events I have witnessed, and I revisit the lessons I learned the hard way. Events and facts forced me to change my mind about ideas with which my education imbued me."

Novak began his political life in the early 1960s, writing on the ethnicity (*The Rise of Unmeltable Ethnics*), a book that I read with great interest and which prompted me to know him in person. He then wrote on development and corporate economics (*The Theology of Corporation*), the most famous on free market and welfare reform (*The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*) – and the faith of the Founding Fathers (*On the Two Wings*). He has taught at Harvard, Stanford, held chairs at Notre Dame, Syracuse, the American Enterprise Institute, and lectured in many parts of the world- most frequently in Europe: Poland, UK, Spain, Slovakia and Lichtenstein. In 1994, he received one of the most prestigious awards, the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Through intense debates, experience and study, he came to adopt conservative economics. Through his studying deeply the Austrian School of Friedrich von Hayek, J.A. Schumpeter, and C. Menger, he perceived that a free-growth economy benefited not only the

entrepreneurs, but the general population. In the 1970s and '80s, he became a strong supply-sider and Reagan supporter. He's written more than 40 books. Very few have written so much, on so many topics. His works have been praised by politicians, philosophers and religious leaders – and *Sports Illustrated* magazine also hailed his *Joy of Sports* as one of the 100 best sports books of all time. Mr. Novak said: “My dream was to write about the philosophy, the theology of American culture -- and not because it was American, but because there was something different here and unique. It belonged to the whole human race, but we were pioneering it.”

Michael Novak entered academic life after 12 years of preparing for the priesthood. He left the seminary just months before his scheduled ordination. He moved to the more radical political left while teaching at Stanford University, where he was voted “the most influential professor.” He came to Robert Kennedy's attention during his 1968 run for the presidency, and worked on that campaign. “I loved working for the Kennedys, even though I didn't appreciate at the time the Kennedys' personal life. No one said anything in those days.” He left Stanford for a new Experimental College of the State University of New York on Long Island. It was there, among “some real whacko students and some real whacko faculty” that his political right turn began. “I was radical, but they were destructive,” he explained. “I supported very strongly the War on Poverty,” he said, “and then it just went belly up. Crime went up 600 percent. Marriages fell apart at unprecedented rates. Marriages didn't even form. And I thought, ‘This is crazy I can't keep supporting that.’ So I became more conservative.”

“It just seemed to me that the ‘preferential option for the poor’ was just a disguised way of saying more government funds to give to the poor and keep them dependent. Keep them like on a plantation. Keep them like Animal Farm.”

“One of the great blessings of my life was

the friendship with John Paul II. He called me publicly, several times, his friend, and I had an open invitation to come by for a meal if he was free.” Although Michael Novak had served for years on the Ave Maria University board of trustees, he didn't spend a great deal of time in Ave Maria until 2010. “After my dear wife Karen died in August of 2009 . . . I began to realize I wanted to sell the house in Washington. I started sending my books to AMU. Then the former AMU President Nick Healy said to me, ‘Michael, your books are here. Why don't you come down?’” “I really have loved it,” he said. “I have enough strength to do a course a semester and the university provides somebody to team with and teach it with me which makes it a lot easier.”

Engagingly, writing as if to close friends and foes, Michael Novak shows how Providence placed him in the middle of many crucial events of his time: a month in wartime Vietnam, the student riots of the 1960s, the Reagan revolution, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Bill Clinton's welfare reform, and the struggles for human rights in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also spent fascinating times, with inspiring leaders like Sargent Shriver, Bobby Kennedy, George McGovern, Jack Kemp, Václav Havel, President Reagan, Lady Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II, who helped shape—and reshape—his political views.

Yet through it all, as Novak's sharply etched memoir shows, his focus on helping the poor and defending universal human rights remained constant; he gradually came to see building small businesses and free democracies as the only realistic way to build free societies. Without economic growth from the bottom up, democracies are not stable. Without protections for liberties of conscience and economic creativity, democracies will fail. Free societies need three liberties in one: economic liberty, political liberty, and liberty of spirit.

Novak's writing throughout is warm, fast paced, and often very beautiful. His narrative power is memorable.

I was fortunate to work as intern and an assistant for Michael when he was writing his opera magna: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (published in 1982 and widely translated into many major languages). When he worked for political candidates, he coined some great phrases, such as for example; “New Frontier” –adopted by JF Kennedy. Working on ethos of capitalism, he has introduced modern concepts such as: enlightened self-interest. In the modern market economy, he recognized the critical role of the entrepreneur, the concepts of risk and reward, trust and ethics. He introduced first the positive notion of “enlightened self-interest, in contrast to that of A. Smith’s sheer “self-interest”. Also, reading all of Pope John Paul II ideas have contributed immensely to the final shape of his grand book. Novak always sought diversity of views and opinions. He held at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) monthly discussions on current socio-economic, cultural and philosophical events. He always invited leading experts in their field. He liked to have an agora for great ideas and debates. These discussions provided fertile ground for his creative writing. I still remember very vividly, when Michael used to repeatedly emphasize the essential need to think clearly. He liked to quote Jacques Maritain’s famous dictum: “ you need to distinguish in order to discern”.

When asked about the changes the way we approach economic issues, he replied:

“The only way the poor will be lifted out of poverty is if they can start businesses that bring economic growth to the bottom.” He invites readers to see life as it is and can only be seen after years of contemplation, reflection and long cumulative experience. He invites us to examine life, to see the world anew, and share his delight in aging, with the wonders of growing in wisdom and accepting life’s good and bad moments.

Charting his slow shift from left to right, Novak explains how he came to see the guiding passions of his life—fighting poverty, advocating for human rights—as better served

by an enlightened capitalism and by democratic politics that restrained the well-intentioned but too often disastrously heavy hand of the state. His conversion cost him some old friends on the left, but it seems impossible to ascribe these ruptures to Novak.

As a founder of The Catholic Thing, he writes: “I witnessed with my own eyes the almost immediate results of the switch from Carter’s economic policies to Reaganomics.” Entrepreneurship not only expanded dramatically, it boomed. Reagan’s incentive tax with business friendly regulatory regime gave rise to numerous small businesses, with employment soaring. The favorable climate suddenly propelled both creative innovations with the emergence of new, high technologies. Novak’s influence and recognition rose as well. So much so that, although his impressive writing continued, and he took yet on another career, that of a diplomat, an ambassador, negotiating with Russians on behalf of President Reagan, and later also for President Clinton.

Culture, he writes, is more important than either politics or even economics. Culture, more than the hot-button issues of the day, is what touches every heart and stirs every soul. Especially in its moral and ethical dimensions, culture is what animates the decisions of many people. After all, is not the Creed but a profound, cultural statement? Convictions, shared Creed and conservative values brought three pivotal persons close to work together effectively oppose communism. These people he came to admire, respect and know as his close friends: Reagan, Thatcher, and Wojtyla – all of whom he portrays with great insight. As in Jeane Kirkpatrick’s statement to him that Ronald Reagan was “the most secure man in the presence of a woman that she had ever met.” He concludes the book by describing the role he played in helping clarify certain points in the pope’s great encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*. “When it comes to life the critical thing,” G.K. Chesterton said, “is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.” Michael’s story of his fascinating

journey of life - epitomizes this Chestertonian attitude of gratitude and wonderment.

Perhaps this is why his writing is so wonderful. I highly recommend this fine memoir full of rich events, concluding with his friend, John Paul the Great, who so greatly shaped his and ours thinking. Throughout this warm, witty memoir, he comes across as the happy

human being, a magnanimous man interested in truth. Searching for the best in people, acknowledging it without regard to political affiliation, he teaches us do the same. Reading Novak's journey from left to right can help find own compass, with "moral positioning system" in an increasingly complex, global world.