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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

A Pilgrim Leaves a Trail: An Autobiography

Robert Louis Wells
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In his compelling autobiography, Christian minister Robert Louis Wells chronicles his life, from childhood through retirement, with an emphasis on his search for a religious community that combines contemplation, teaching, and service to the community. Readers follow Wells as he journeys through different denominations, encounters church politics, and deals with intrapersonal and interpersonal strife.

Wells is truly a religious pilgrim, and the "trail" of the title refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson's exhortation to "go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." Wells does indeed leave a trail, as the years of his life coincide with a time of great upheaval in the United States—from the music of Elvis Presley to the Civil Rights Movement to the growing popularity of powerful mental health counseling modalities. Before some sections of his autobiography, Wells helpfully lists seminal national and international events, which aids readers in situating his story in a larger context.

The book's strength lies in the chronicling of Wells' travels through a range of faiths. Using vivid recollections, dreams, letters, and diary entries, the author masterfully describes the ups and downs of his relationship to God and to the various spiritual communities he serves. Interspersed throughout the narratives are powerful religious poems. Whether written by the author or by others, these verses gel well with the narrative, rendering the episodes in which they are embedded more poignant.

Even secular readers will find wisdom in the author's sermons and his treatise titled "Spiritual Oriented Listening," in which he talks of a pastor's need to recognize congregants' need for transcendence, relationships, meaning, and inner self. This paper contains worthwhile lessons for readers in the helping professions, no matter what their religious beliefs.

Unfortunately, Wells sometimes gets bogged down in the minutiae of his life. He devotes several pages, for example, to the political drama in one church he preaches in, going so far as to include verbatim copies of the new rules adopted by those in charge. He also mentions the names of what seems like every minister he encounters, even if they only pop up twice more in the narrative. When describing a mountaineering trip, Wells meticulously notes the height of every summit.

For other events, though, details are sorely lacking. For example, after repeatedly mentioning how difficult it is for him to relate to women, the author introduces his first wife, proposes to her, and marries her, all within two paragraphs. Her subsequent depression, their divorce, and her taking on a female partner merit even less space. The suicide of his beloved son takes up precious few pages. Such omissions are odd because those instances surely must have affected his spiritual life. The inclusion of Wells' detailed ancestries as well as an excess of personal photos indicate that the author wrote his autobiography for both family and the general public.

Though readers will find gems in *A Pilgrim Leaves a Trail*, they must sift through extraneous data and beware of gaping holes as they seek out these nuggets.

JILL ALLEN (September 4, 2010)

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