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Books about fathers and sons, just in time for Father's Day

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jun. 12, 2012 NCR Today

A Golden Voice: How Faith, Hard Work, and Humility Brought Me from the Streets to Salvation [1]
By Ted Williams (with Brett Witter)
Penguin, New York
$26 hard cover

Along the Way: The Journey of a Father and a Son [2]
By Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez (with Hope Edelman)
Free Press, New York
$27 hard cover

Two books were released in May about what it means to be a man: a father, a son and a grandfather, too. Both are apologias more than memoirs and both have a strong faith dimension and links to Catholicism and Ohio -- and addiction. The men in both books became fathers at a very young age. Their stories are extremely honest and reveal details that will surprise and inspire you, and some that may shock you as well. Both books have dual voices and are easy, swift reads that ask us to admit our humanity. They invite us to walk with these fellow travelers to discover humility and the action of grace in people's lives that will astonish you

I read Ted William's story first, the "theater of the mind" man with a voice born for radio. Ted was born in New York in 1957 and adopted by a woman, Julia, who always wanted a child, and her husband, Al, who worked his entire career in the same job for an airlines at JFK International Airport. His parents were steady, but Ted was a "pleaser" who wanted to be liked and accepted. He was raised Protestant but began going to the Jehovah Witness Kingdom hall in his teens. He went to Catholic school in Brooklyn for a while, too. From the age of 14, he wanted to become a radio announcer. He and his father never saw eye to eye.

But how many times can you read about one man's ability to drill down into 20 years of crack and alcohol addiction, jail, theft, forgery, prison and life on the streets? In Williams' account, the cycle is relentless. He is not alone, either. Along the way he marries, divorces and has relationships that yield nine children while getting real opportunities to work in radio that he blows away. Finally he meets Kathy, a young white woman, and they share a love for crack. He explains to her how to solicit men to pay for her habit while he does voice work for his. When his father dies, his family sends him money to come to New York for the funeral. He spends it all on crack, and at this point, his mother refuses to take his calls any longer.

When he and Kathy lose everything, Ted starts to take a spiritual inventory as defined by AA. He reaches for the faith he has ignored over the years, and his mantra becomes, "Acknowledge him." No, he does not change right away, but he's thinking about it.

Living on the streets, he makes a sign to beg with at the entrance of the interstate outside of Columbus, Ohio, where he moved as a young man. The cardboard read: "I have a God-given gift of a voice. I am an ex-radio announcer who has fallen on hard times. PLEASE! Any help will be gratefully appreciated. God bless you. Happy holidays."

Then Doral Chenowith of *The Columbus Dispatch* drove by in January 2011 and recorded Ted's voice, then posted the video to the Internet. This started a whole new whirlwind three-month chapter for Ted that he was completely unprepared to handle: The Today Show, Letterman, and finally Dr. Phil. After 12 days in rehab, he walked out. He was even reunited with his mother after years of separation. Then he fell apart once again. Seventeen months later, his book comes out. He is almost a year sober, but he knows he is not cured.

Ted's voice in the book is simple, direct and devastatingly honest. He is likeable most of the time, even when he hits bottom over and over and over again. If anything, as a reader, I would have liked some variation on his cyclic theme of self-destruction. Yet this is Ted's life, and he is trying to make amends for the harm he has done, the pain he has caused.

In the second half of the book, Ted's girl friend Kathy begins to write about their life together from her point of view. Certainly this breaks up Ted's story, but it doesn't add much relief. Both are on such a death spiral that it is only grace that keeps bringing them back from the brink of the abyss.

As for his own kids, he started out OK, but it did not last. He knows he has much mending to do as a father.

Ted's messages: He isn't finished yet; and keep it simple. He would rather stand with a small group of people than be on national TV, because then you can see the pain and the redemption. He can look into your eye and say from his heart to yours: Keep the faith. No matter what happens, God is good.

Ted Williams had the gift of a golden voice and he pretty much squandered it, though as much as he abused it, it remained golden, rich and warm. Martin Sheen -- that is, Ramon Estevez of Dayton, Ohio -- was blessed with the gift of acting, and worked hard to develop it, leaving home at 18 and living and working in New York on a pittance. He, too, squandered his talent by abusing alcohol and almost lost everything, including his wife, Janet, and four children, when he had a heart attack at the age of 37 while working on "Apocalypse Now" in the Philippines.

The idea for *Along the Way: The Journey of a Father and a Son*
grew out of the father-son film "The Way," released in 2011, that Martin and his actor-writer-director son Emilio Estevez made together about a man who walks the ancient pilgrim route of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. His estranged son died suddenly as he embarked on the pilgrimage, and Tom, Sheen's character, has his son's remains cremated and carries them with him along the way. In this book, in alternating linear-though-intertwining chapters, Martin and Emilio write about their lives, their art, their family and their identities as fathers.

Martin tells his story in a voice you can almost hear after so many years of listening to President Jed Bartlett on "The West Wing" (1999-2006). Calm, steady and mature, he fills us in on the background of his Irish-born mother, Mary-Anne, and his Spanish-born father, Francisco. Then came the many Estevez children, his mother's early death and the influence of the Catholic formation and education his father continued until Martin gave it all up for acting. When Janet became pregnant, she and Martin married. Martin's relationship with alcohol began around that time.

Enter Emilio, who was born when his dad was just 22 years old. Martin says they grew up together and both admit they are one another's best friends. Emilio's first child, Taylor, was born in 1984, when Emilio was 22. Taylor has a special place in the book's narrative as well as the making of the film. Emilio's daughter was born in 1986. Although Emilio set out on his own career path as well as fatherhood, he was fortunate to have had the rock-like anchor of his parents. They had an open-door policy with grandchildren and their mothers. The parents and kids were all welcome in the Sheen household, but all differences between the parents were to be left at the door.

Along the Way tells the story of a Hollywood family and the role of faith in the often-trying relationship between Emilio and his father. Emilio mentions faith many times in the story, a surprising development since father and son wrote the book apart and the stories blended after. But Martin only returned to church in 1981 -- his life until then had not been exactly a sterling example, and as Martin notes, even his wife was skeptical. Emilio is tenacious in how he resists his father's Catholic faith -- again, a surprising admission given how well the spiritual journey is depicted in "The Way." I was getting a little tired of him harping on this one note until the very end, when Emilio writes, "After fifty years my father and I arrived at a place of comfortable peace with each other despite our divergent views about faith. ... Twenty years ago, I wouldn't even have entertained a discussion about spirituality or faith, but as I get older and more in touch with my morality, I am more open to dialogue. That's been a surprise for me, but one that I welcome."

Somehow I think many fathers and mothers -- and sisters and brothers -- would be happy to hear this from their children and siblings.

Happy Father's Day.

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