

Book Review: Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Radical Belonging

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Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Radical Belonging by Ben McBride is a deeply impactful exploration of justice, community, and the complexities of racism and inequality in contemporary society. This work captures McBride's experiences as a pastor and activist, (p.5) providing readers with profound insights that challenge the status quo and provoke a reexamination of what it means to truly belong in an increasingly divided world.

Set against the rich but tumultuous backdrop of Oakland, California, McBride's narrative begins in what he describes as the "Kill Zone," an area marked by gun violence and systemic oppression that serves as both a personal and symbolic setting for his work (pp. 88-89). This locale is not just a geographical reference; it embodies the deeper societal issues that affect marginalized communities across the nation. Through McBride's evocative storytelling, the reader gains an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by these communities, creating a microcosm that reflects the broader struggles against systemic injustice. His recounting of pivotal events, such as the aftermath of the Ferguson uprising, illustrates the larger dialogues around race and justice that have reverberated throughout the United States, demonstrating how local struggles can reflect national narratives. (p. 2)

One of the key themes in McBride's writing is the concept of "radical belong-

ing” (p. 46). In a world where division and biases often define interactions, he insists that achieving genuine community requires confronting uncomfortable truths and actively engaging with those perceived as adversaries. This is where the book transitions from a personal memoir to a profound call to action. McBride draws inspiration from civil rights pioneer John Lewis, who famously advocated for “good trouble”—the idea of acting against injustices rather than remaining passive or complacent (p.11). McBride urges readers to embrace this idea, recognizing that the fight for justice necessitates courage and a willingness to engage with complex, often uncomfortable realities (p.104).

What sets *Troubling the Water* apart from other activist literature is McBride’s focus on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of this work. He emphasizes that societal change cannot occur in a vacuum; it must be preceded by personal transformation (p.107). McBride invites his readers to engage in self-reflection, asking pivotal questions such as, “Who do I need to become?” to build a world where everyone feels a sense of belonging” (p.36). This introspective approach challenges readers to look within themselves and confront their own biases, fears, and assumptions about race, privilege, and community. By doing so, McBride breaks down barriers between individual experiences and collective struggles, fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of these issues.

The personal stories that McBride weaves throughout his narrative are both poignant and powerful. They serve as a testament to the resilience of individuals who have faced profound tragedy and systemic oppression. He candidly shares the story of his own family, including the pain of losing a loved one to lynching, intertwining these experiences with broader narratives of racial injustice (p.113). By humanizing these experiences, McBride creates a profound emotional connection with his readers, compelling them to confront their own perceptions and roles in perpetuating or dismantling systemic inequality.

An innovative aspect of McBride’s work is his “Quadrant Model,” which categorizes individuals and groups based on their power and privilege within societal structures. This model delineates four categories:

1. **Powerful and Privileged:** Those who hold significant power and enjoy high levels of privilege, often having access to resources and opportunities that others do not.

2. **Powerful but Not Privileged:** Individuals or groups who possess power—potentially through political or social influence—yet lack certain privileges, such as economic wealth.
3. **Not Powerful but Privileged:** Those who may enjoy privileges like wealth or education but do not wield significant power in societal or political contexts.
4. **Not Powerful and Not Privileged:** Individuals who lack both power and privilege and frequently face systemic barriers that hinder their progress.

The quadrant model serves as a valuable tool for understanding the complexities of social change and community engagement. It helps individuals and organizations navigate the challenges of addressing systemic injustice by recognizing the varied experiences and positions of those involved. By breaking down societal dynamics into these categories, McBride creates a framework that encourages individuals to critically analyze their own positions and the implications they have for social justice work (p.18).

Critics and readers alike have praised *Troubling the Water* for its vibrant and urgent message, highlighting McBride's ability to intertwine engrossing personal stories with theoretical insights and actionable strategies. His work is recognized not just as a piece of literature, but as an essential resource for anyone seeking to engage meaningfully in today's sociopolitical landscape. The book's resonance with a divine calling for justice, particularly emphasized by figures such as Father James Martin, reiterates that McBride's message is not merely an academic exercise but a lived experience demanding our attention and action (p.62).

In essence, *Troubling the Water* stands as a profound, thought-provoking read that prompts its audience to dive deep into the complexities of belonging, justice, and the necessity of confronting societal divisions. McBride's blend of humor, provocation, and heartfelt storytelling serves to enrich the discussion on social justice, emphasizing that cultivating true belonging is not merely an aspirational dream but a critical necessity for creating a more equitable and just society.

As readers journey through McBride's insights, they are left with the powerful notion of the transformative potential inherent in radical belonging (p.46). The book challenges individuals to rise to the urgent call to action that accompanies this understanding, pushing them to engage deeply with one another in a world fragmented by inequality and division. *Troubling the Water* is not just an-

other book on social justice; it is a compelling exploration of community, identity, and the fundamental human need for connection and belonging. McBride's work is a reminder that by confronting uncomfortable truths and embracing the complexities of our shared humanity, we can pave the way for a more just and inclusive society.