

***A Parting Gift***, by Ben Erickson, Warner Books: New York, 2000) pp. 274  
[Reviewed by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt, co-pastor Concord Presbyterian Church in Statesville, NC and member of the Synod OAM committee]

Last summer, I read a short novel a parishioner lent me called *A Parting Gift*. When I finished it, I immediately thought, people (particularly folks who are committed to older adult and intergenerational ministry) need to know about this book.

The book is about the relationship between an 84 year old reclusive widower and the high school senior boy who brings him “meals on wheels”. The story opens when the young man, Josh, stops to drop off the meal and Mr. Davis doesn’t come to the door. He lets himself in the house to check on Mr. Davis, then finds him in his chair. Josh is afraid he might be dead, but he startles him awake. From that awkward beginning, they begin to have regular conversations on Josh’s visits. And Mr. Davis, who knows his own ill health will not afford him much more time here, begins to impart wisdom to his new young friend. He tells him stories, stories about what he’s learned about life and love and God.

Throughout the book, Josh listens and learns as Mr. Davis provides him with the bread of life and love—and he begins to write down the hard-won lessons of his older friend’s years. The last conversation they have takes place on a wharf behind the old man’s house on Mobile Bay in Alabama. As they stare into the night sky, Mr. Davis says, “You’ll find as you grow older and look back, Josh, that there are certain moments in your life that stand out as brightly as stars on a moonless night. They’re not always the one’s you expect either. Sometimes, like the hurricane, you’ll recognize them when they’re happening. But often it’s the little things that you weren’t even aware of at the time that fill your thoughts. I’ve tried to share some of my memories with you, but there are many more that I’ll never be able to express.”

When a shooting star streaks across the sky, Mr. Davis says, “Did you see that?” Josh nods as his old friend continues, “They only last a second, but for that moment they’re the brightest thing in the sky.” He looks over at the boy. “We’re like that, too. Here for just a fleeting instant and then gone.” (p. 257)

It struck me when I finished that book that Mr. Davis took some time from the fleeting instant of his life and used it to get connected to that young man—to make a difference to him. He sees something in Josh that the boy doesn’t even know is there. The more Josh is drawn into the old man’s world, the more his own life comes into sharper focus. And the more Mr. Davis shares, the more the old man rediscovers a reason for living and a sense of purpose he thought he had lost forever.

For me, that’s the essence of intergenerational ministry: young and old sharing the fleeting moments of life with one another—relating to one another in

work and worship, through stories and conversation—and both coming to claim their reason for living in the process. I trust that Ben Erickson's eloquent and moving tale (originally written as a gift to his son upon his graduation from high school) will both nurture your soul and reinforce your commitment to such ministry.

One last comment: as I read the book, I couldn't help but think of Richard Morgan's emphasis on spiritual autobiography. The passage on the back cover of the book speaks to the importance of such work.

"Do you know how old I am?" Mr. Davis asked the boy.

Josh tried to quickly do the math in his head, then gave up. "No, sir."

"I'm eighty-four years old. That's eighty-four springs like this one that I've seen. And in all those years I've tried to take the time to look beyond the surface of the world and deep into its heart. And do you know what's at that heart?"

The boy shook his head.

"Stories, Josh, a thousand different stories." He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees. "I've lived a full life, but I've yet to tell the stories that are in *my* heart." (p. 26.)

If you're interested in finding out more about Mr. Davis' stories and what Josh learns from them, here's a word about where you can find the book. My friend picked it up at a dollar store. I don't know if you can find it that cheap, but if you ask me, even if you can't, it's well worth ordering from your local bookstore. I also did a web search and found that it is available on the Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and the Time Warner Books [www.twbookmark.com](http://www.twbookmark.com) websites.