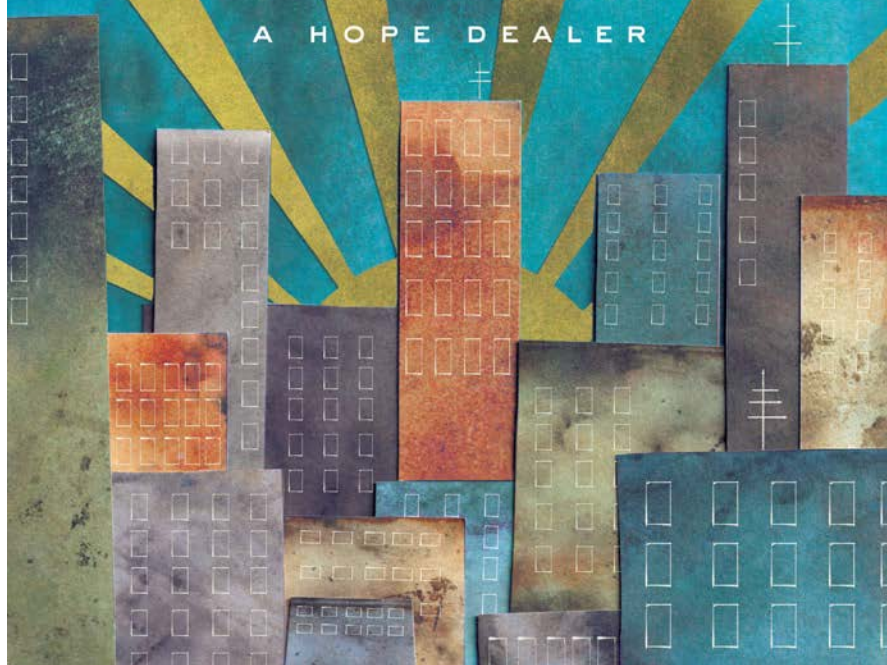


VIEWING OTHERS
THROUGH GOD'S EYES

WORTH SEEING

AMY L. WILLIAMS

A HOPE DEALER



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ONE

THE GOD WHO SEES

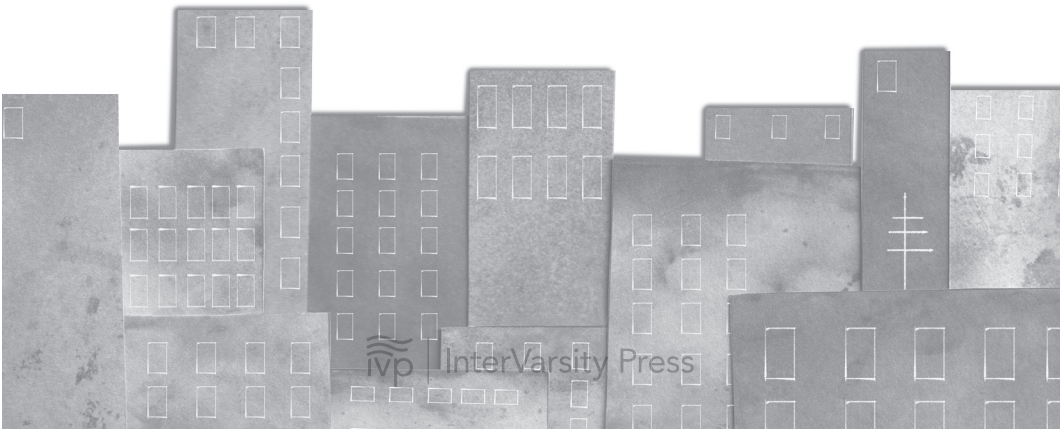
*“You are the God who sees me,” for she said,
“I have now seen the One who sees me.”*

GENESIS 16:13 NIV

“I tried to sell my soul to the devil . . . and he didn’t even want it. I’m so damaged.”

Luis has pen and paper in his hand, moving to a beat inside his head, writing rap lyrics from inside a small, cold prison cell in Illinois. Writing has become how he spends his days as he serves time awaiting the moment he returns to society and to his nine-year-old son.

“Most of my life, I felt like I was born cursed, unloved. I felt like an outcast from my family and friends.”



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Born in Puerto Rico in 1993, Luis grew up in Chicago, the baby boy among four brothers and a sister. He loved playing softball and skateboarding, but mostly he loved being with his dad. They were glued at the hip. You never saw one without the other.

Luis didn't know as a child that his father was a functioning heroin addict and a member of a ruthless gang in the neighborhood. All Luis saw was Superman, his best friend, his dad. Then at the young age of ten, he lost his father, and Luis's whole world as he knew it was gone.

"When I lost my pops I lost all hope, and at ten years old, I became my own role model. I wanted to prove to everybody that I can do it all on my own."

Luis was determined to not depend on anyone. They all leave eventually, right? If he didn't get close to anyone again, he couldn't get hurt. He decided he was going to do life on his own.

"I joined the gang when I was nine, a couple months before my dad passed. . . . He didn't know but I wanted to be like him. When he left me, I was alone and felt like I didn't need anybody."

Soon after his father's death, all Luis's brothers joined the same gang, looking for love, protection, a father figure.

"I'm one of the many who grew up in the street and had it all—cars, clothes, money, females, jewelry, all the finer things," said Luis. "But the one thing I didn't have was love or someone who wanted what was best for me. I was looking for that."

And then we met.



Every single time.

I sob huge, extra-wet tears every single time I see that scene in the movie *Freedom Writers*. Erin Gruwell is a first-time history teacher in Long Beach, California, with a class of challenging ninth

and tenth graders she is clearly unprepared for. Many of the youth are in rival gangs and fight often in her classroom. As the movie progresses, she finds a way to connect with them relationally and the classroom becomes like a family. The youth publish their stories in a book called *Freedom Writers*, creatively named after the Freedom Riders, the civil rights activists who rode buses across the South protesting the segregation of public transit.

One particular student, Andre Bryant, faces the challenge of being recruited for street life. When his brother loses a court case and faces a lengthy prison sentence, Andre chooses to go back to street life and begins skipping classes. In an assignment, Gruwell's students evaluate themselves on how they feel they're doing in the class. Andre gives himself an F. Gruwell pulls him outside the classroom to ask him why.

He responds, "It's what I feel I deserve, is all."

She looks him square in the eyes with love and fierceness. "I know what you're up against. We're all of us up against something . . . *I see who you are*. I see you. [A tear falls down Andre's face as he fights many more.] Do you understand me? I can see you and you are not failing."

We all want to be seen.

We have a need to be seen.

Not for glory or fame but because of the simple innate human need within us. Being seen makes us feel whole, complete, validated. To live in a world unseen is torture, traumatic. And yet many go unseen daily, especially those on the margins.

To be seen doesn't take much. It can be as simple as an acknowledgment or as huge as an award of recognition. But the

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seeing I'm talking about goes deeper than surface recognition. It's about seeing and accepting the humanity in everyone. It's about discovering our own worth, which allows us to see the worth in others. Seeing others through the lens of God brings healing and opens our worldview. This requires being (and staying) in the posture of a learner, listening intentionally to understand and validating the story we hear. This formula

helps us to develop compassion, and, in turn, compassion requires action.

BUT I UNDERSTAND . . .

In my calling working with youth in gangs and prison, people tend to think I am conflicted.

- I work with the shooter and the one who got shot.
- I work with the thief and the one who got robbed.
- I work with the abuser and the one who got abused.
- I work with the murderer and the family of the murdered.
- I work with the ones who harm and the ones who are harmed.

Yet I never feel conflicted. The way this works for me has been simple: I do not agree with the lifestyle those in gangs have chosen. I do not condone violence or crime. I do not like all that comes with these lifestyle choices. But I *understand*. And

understanding leads to mercy and compassion. Once you hear the stories of others, you understand how they have found themselves lost in gang culture, violence, and crime, how they have become lost in abuse, homelessness, and sex work. For some, it's a choice. For others, it's impossible to make any other choice (for example, generational gang membership).

I hope after reading this book the reader will move beyond making assumptions and judgments to listening and developing a connection that leads to deeper understanding, therefore igniting compassion and mercy.



One hot summer afternoon I was driving down a very busy Cicero Avenue. There was dead-stop traffic in both directions, so I was able to see what was going on at the side of the road. A small outreach group of about six church members was outside waving signs and yelling to the traffic, “Stop the Violence,” “Put the Guns Down,” and “Our Youth Need Us.” As I was watching, I noticed two young African American boys walking through the church protesters, and not one protester said anything to them. They walked by without even a hello. Another teen girl walked by in the opposite direction, and no one acknowledged her either. The church members were so busy communicating their message, they failed to see the people the message was for.

Most people on the margins go unseen. The homeless person begging on the street, the gang member posted on the block, the inmate locked away from society, the sex worker on the street corner, the teenager walking down the street. We have become a society that chooses not to look at those on the margins when God is *calling* us to see them. And, as

many Black theologians conclude, “There can exist no theology based on the gospel message that does not arise from marginalized communities.”¹

Marginalized communities are “those excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, and/or cultural life,” and marginalization occurs “due to unequal power relationships between social groups.”² Marginalized groups have less access to services and opportunities. “A person on the margins of a situation or group has very little power, importance, or influence”³ and receives little to no attention.

A prime example of a person on the margins was Jesus himself. He was among the oppressed, and he fought for the least of these (Matthew 25:40). In *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, Miguel De La Torre explains that “the radicalness of the gospel message is that Jesus was in solidarity with the very least of humanity.”⁴ As faith believers, this should be true for us as well. But we tend to ignore the invisible. We live in the reality of “outta sight, outta mind,” but they’re there whether we see them or not. In every city. Every street. Every field. And God is calling us to see them.

SAWUBONA

While walking down the street one fall day, I saw a tall African American boy coming toward me. He had his head down and his long thin dreads were covering his face. I spoke as we passed by each other.

“Hey, how are you doing today?” I kept walking.

He did a double-take and said, “I’m good.”

I continued walking to my car. He turned around and said, “Excuse me.”

I paused and turned back. “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Thank you for saying hi to me. No one ever does that.”

I said to him, living out my Erin Gruwell, “I see you, homie. Keep your head up!”

This is the spirit of the African term *sawubona*. This is a common greeting among tribe members and literally means “I see you,” but it goes deeper than the physical seeing of a person. This term intends to recognize the worth and dignity of each person. It says, “I see the whole of you—your experiences, your passions, your pain, your strengths and weaknesses, and your future. You are valuable to me.”⁵ When someone says, “*Sawubona*,” your response is supposed to be, “*Shiboka*,” which means “I exist for you.” This response indicates that someone’s full attention is on that person’s existence and the value they bring to the world.⁶ I imagine this is how God greets us.

The story of Hagar is a great example of this.

HAGAR’S GOD ENCOUNTER

Hagar’s story is one of God’s pursuit of those who feel unseen, unheard, unloved. In Genesis 16, both Hagar the servant and her mistress Sarai were “desperate for significance, mired in the feeling that the world saw them as deficient.”⁷

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. (Genesis 16:1-3)

During this era, it was not an uncommon practice for women who couldn't bear children to find another woman to have children for the family. The issue here was that God had made a promise to Abram that he would be a father of many generations and have an heir, a son (Genesis 15:4), but Sarai was impatient, like many of us have been a time or twenty. Sarai was embarrassed by her barrenness and gave Abram permission to have Hagar as a surrogate.

And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. (Genesis 16:4-6)

I'm sure many of us are thinking, "But she said it was okay. It was her idea. Why is she mad?" Jealousy was probably a huge factor here. And since Hagar was an outcast and a servant, Sarai felt validated in her abusive behavior. But Hagar couldn't take the abuse and fled to the desert for an unmentioned amount of time. By cultural standards, she did wrong by running away and leaving her master without his blessing: "Her actions are both illegal and immoral in the context of that culture."⁸ But she could no longer withstand the abuse.

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and

where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” And the angel of the LORD said to her,

“Behold, you are pregnant
and shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael,
because the LORD has listened to your affliction.

He shall be a wild donkey of a man,
his hand against everyone
and everyone’s hand against him,
and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” (Genesis 16:7-13)

Hagar had an encounter. A God encounter! As a woman and invisible outsider in her culture, to be seen and pursued by the angel of the Lord was a rare experience. Though she was distraught and alone, the angel of the Lord made her feel significant, worthy, and visible. She understood that God was with her and that she had a part in God’s plan. God saw her. *All* of her. And she was transformed.

After the encounter, she names God *El Roi*, the God Who

**GOD SEES US
(INDIVIDUALLY),
HE KNOWS US
(INDIVIDUALLY),
AND HE IS
CONCERNED FOR
US (INDIVIDUALLY).**

Sees. You see this theme throughout the Bible: “that God sees us (individually), that he knows us (individually), and that he is concerned for us (individually).”⁹ Hagar’s experience is one I want for all of us, especially those society has chosen to write off as useless or worthless. May we all encounter the God Who Sees.



As we walk through this journey together, we will encounter four stages of seeing.

Seeing Myself will give you insight into my journey. As a female gang-intervention specialist and juvenile justice advocate, I have never found it easy to do what I was called to do in this white-male-dominated field. We will explore my story, the challenges, where my need to be seen began, and how, despite resistance, I was able to walk in my purpose.

Seeing Others will challenge you in the mission of seeing the unseen through the lens of God by understanding the importance of story, listening, and validation, as well as the power of perception. We are in the business of seeing people—and seeing them the way God sees them. You will develop skills on expanding your worldview and stretching your limited lens. We will explore gang culture, outreach, trauma, and mentoring that matters.

Seeing Yourself will help us take a look at ourselves as we navigate this complex work of seeing. Before doing the work of seeing others, we must first recognize who we truly are and our role in the kingdom. We can then move forward to seeking and embracing our calling, even using our gift of brokenness, to impact the world.

Seeing Hope will address finding hope in hopeless places and seeing hope flourish in the unexpected. Even in loss there is hope. Seeing hope begins with building relationships, looking

for teachable moments, and never losing hope yourself. Seeing hope is being hope to others.



My hope for you throughout this book is that your worldview will be challenged and you will be able to see others, especially those living on the margins, through the eyes of God. After you hear their stories and challenges, may you develop a deeper compassion for others, especially those society tends to label and ignore. I pray that once you put the book down, your heart will explode with mercy for others who need you to see them. I pray the lessons I share will help you move one step closer to seeing others—and yourself—as God sees them.

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