

Book Review: Angels by the River By Ray Kauffman

In *Angels by the River*, James Gustave Speth provides reflections on race, environment, politics, and living on the front lines of change. Speth is the former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, founder of the World Resources Institute, and cofounder of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

He has also been administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, chair of the UN Development Group, professor of law at Georgetown University, and chair of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter administration. He currently teaches at Vermont Law School and lives with his wife Cameron in Strafford, Vermont.

Speth was born and raised in Orangeburg, South Carolina. He writes, "I never felt disadvantaged when I went from Orangeburg High School to Yale . . . and I was no smarter than a dozen other members of the OHS class of 1960." The year 1968 was fateful for the United States, and also for Orangeburg, home of South Carolina State University. Two months before Martin Luther King's death, three young black students were killed by state highway patrol officers during a campus demonstration in what is known as the Orangeburg Massacre.

Speth was a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black in 1969-1970. Over his entire life Speth found (or was found) time after time in an opportune assignment or job just as he was feeling like it was time to move on. He did not want a lifetime career doing one thing at just one or two places. Thus his organizational affiliations and accomplishments are many. He says "My accomplishments? Hardly. We are carried forward by others – generous, caring hardworking people, Angels by the river."

In discussing the consequences of carbon dioxide over the long term and climate change Speth says "Although our dominion over the earth may be nearly absolute, our right to exercise it is not." One of his jobs was leading the UN principal agency for international development assistance, the UNDP. He went to more than 100 countries, both donor and developing countries including some of the poorest and most dangerous places on earth.

He confronted a world of great suffering and deprivation. "These experiences drove home to me that I have lived a life of comfort and plenty and have done little to deserve it, most of it occasioned by being born white and male to nice parents in mid-20th century America," he writes. "The obscene disparities in economic and social conditions that we see both at home and abroad are the measure of the obligation that many of us share to be a force for change."

When he was a dean at Yale, 9/11 happened. Speth wrote an essay for the Yale Daily News in which he addressed the grieving students. To this day he believes that essay points to the course America should have taken, a course very different from the one we did in fact take. He says "I find it hard to read that piece without joining those Yale students in tears. Like the climate change issue, We Should Have Known Better."

His article is reproduced on pages 117-122 of *Angels by the River*. If one reads nothing else in this book, read this section and another, "Mainstream Progressive Reforms for America" on pages 176-178, which he quotes from another book he authored, *America the Possible*.

For nearly all his life Speth worked within the systems to change them. The next to last chapter is entitled "Ultimate Insider Goes Radical." Speth, along with over 1000 others, including Bill McKibben, was arrested in Washington, DC in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience protesting the Keystone XL pipeline.

His concluding chapter, “Some Things I Think I’ve Learned,” borrows from FDR’s last State of the Union address in 1944 – a second Bill of Rights: the right to a good job; the right to earn enough to provide food, clothing, and recreation; the right of every family to a decent home; the right to medical care; the right to protection from economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment, and the right to a good education.

Speth says these words were spoken “just yesterday, when I was two years old. . . . Whatever the sad craziness of U.S. politics in the current moment, the proposition that we should have these rights is not radical. . . . To secure these rights, and others, we need to escape the clutches of the reigning neoliberal orthodoxy. We need to build an economy and a politics that give honest priority to PEOPLE, PLACE, AND PLANET, rather than PROFIT, PRODUCT, AND POWER (emphasis mine).

In this review I have not emphasized enough the thrust of Speth’s book: Care of the environment and concern about man-caused climate change, and lack of action by the United States government and corporations.

Speth is a breath of fresh air. He writes about alarming subjects in a humble, authoritative way. He is immanently qualified to speak of imminent issues. He chronicles the failures of capitalism, yet does not stop there; he points to amends and new paradigms. His treatment of his home domicile, the South, is fair and sympathetic without accepting or condoning its prejudice and discrimination. You learn the South is both bright and dark.

Readers can get a sense of the book’s focus from the inside: Speth’s unlikely path – from a Southern boyhood to a career as an influential mainstream environmentalist to his current system-changing activism. An American tale, in all its complexity, Speth’s memoir is an inspiration – especially for readers contemplating how to make a difference in an increasingly complex world.

Lastly, a quote from George Bernard Shaw, which Speth uses on page 190: “This is the true joy of life, being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.” ~ Ray Kauffman is a recently retired historian for the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference. He lives in Albany, Ore.