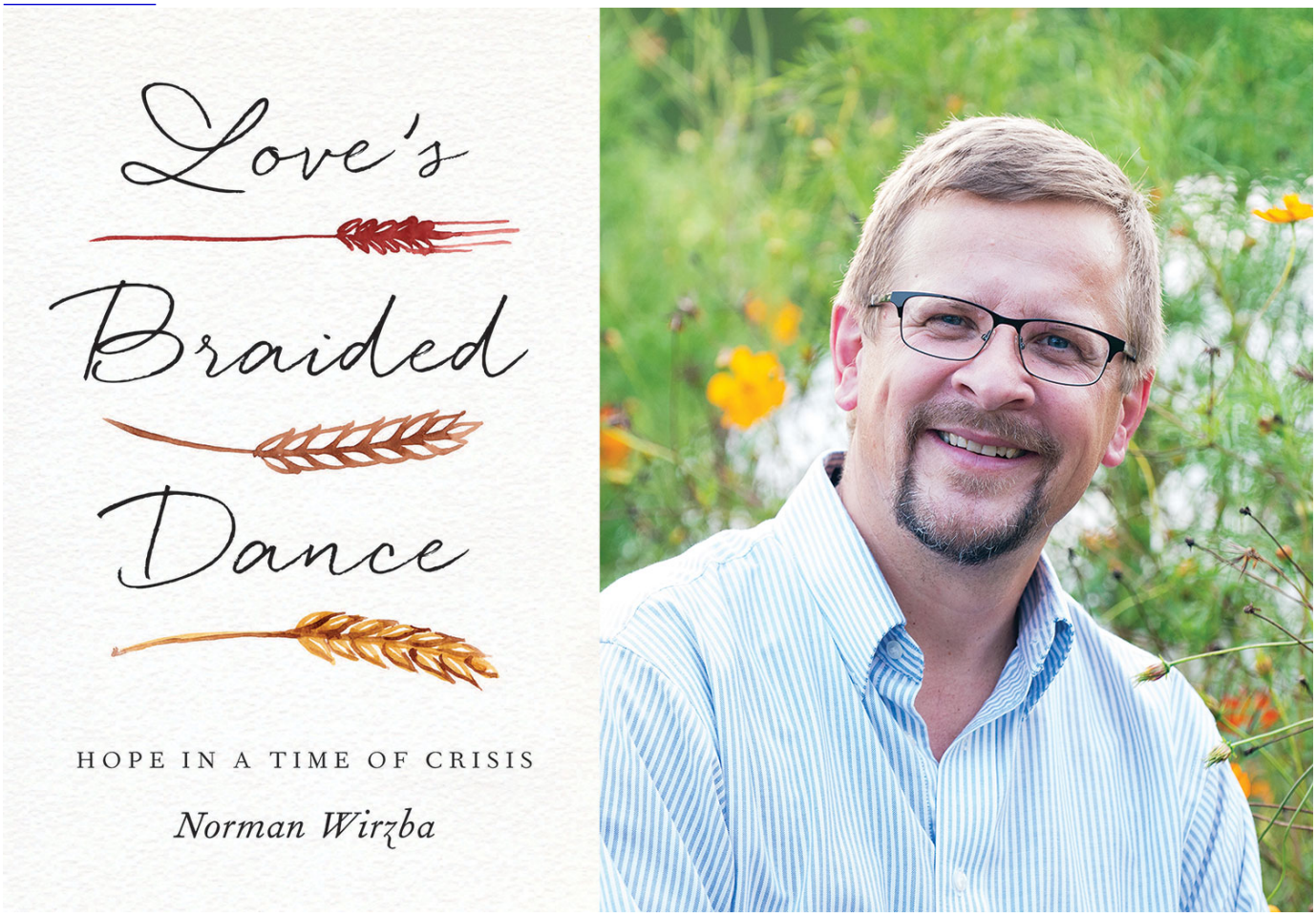
News
EarthBeat



Love's Braided Dance: Hope in a Time of Crisis by author Norman Wirzba. (Courtesy of Wirzba)

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Norman Wirzba was not expecting that his book of essays about hope would land the week before Donald Trump scored a decisive victory over Vice President Kamala Harris.

But the Duke theologian who writes about the environment is no stranger to contemplating upheavals, whether climate disasters, war, genocide or the excesses of finance capitalism. His new book, Love's Braided Dance: Hope in a Time of Crisis, offers meditations on all these cataclysms and how individuals found ways through them.

Again and again, he returns to the theme of finding hope in the yearning for a more loving world, one that propels people to give to others and to sustain the earth's creative life forces. Those hopes are not sentimental or naive. He writes about people who have gone through immense pain and suffering but have found a way to stay engaged and involved with others.

"Life's mysteries and splendors, what we might call its ever-fresh potential, are discovered as people work to be genuinely with each other, and in this work, nurture and strengthen the bonds that join them," Wirzba writes.

RNS spoke to Wirzba on the day after the presidential election. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you want to write a book on hope?

Hope is one of those really big words that I think is really important in a culture. But it had become a word that is held with a lot of suspicion. And I wanted to try to understand why. In talking with younger people — my adult children, many of their colleagues and then also students here at the university — I found they were suspicious of the term, especially when it's uttered by people like me, an older white man. A line I heard more than once was that young people are saying they're not

going to have children because they can't imagine bringing children into a world like the one we are in, and apparently the one we are heading into.

I thought this is something that needs to be thought more about because I believe hope is a valuable characteristic in a well-functioning life. I want to find a way to take their concerns seriously, but also provide them an avenue for thinking about their own futures that will sort of draw on what the best is about a term like hope. I didn't want the term hope to just disappear. It's a way of being that needs saving and cultivating, actually.

That leads right into our present moment. Many progressives are feeling hopeless watching the presidential returns. What would you say to them?

It's important to acknowledge the fear and the anger and the frustration. Those are actually important because they communicate the sense of loss, the sense of protest and the sense there is still something you love, something you care about. And when you sense that it's being taken away from you, that confirms for you that this world is still beautiful and that communities and other people are still beautiful. We need to figure out how we're gonna learn to cherish them and nurture them in a context which obviously, from a political economic standpoint, has become much more difficult.

We should not deny the frustration and the anxiety, but say, let's tap into that love and build communities of people who can help us focus that love, activate that love, because the world still needs protecting and nurturing. All of us still have people we care deeply about, neighborhoods we care deeply about, natural places we still want to see flourish. And the only way you can move forward is to keep the focus on what you love and not let the fear or the anxiety or the frustration sink deep into your bones, because when that happens, we become sick as people. And when we're sick, we can't do the work we need to do.

Climate change is a big theme throughout the book and, under a Trump administration, will likely be less of a policy priority.

Yes, for sure. I think what this tells us is that we're going to have to become much more active as citizens and we're going to need to work and build coalitions with other people and communicate as clearly as possible to business leaders and political leaders about the importance of these things. The worst thing would be to simply give over the whole of political and policy life to these very wealthy people

who now really care primarily about their own wealth accumulation rather than the good of society. Educational institutions play a major role here. We need to be places that talk about shared values, shared concerns. Faith communities of all kinds are gonna need to play a major role going forward.

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Is there anything people on their own can do too?

I think the crucial thing is to not allow ourselves to slip into a pit of isolation. That's my temptation. I want to be quiet and sit by myself and think about all the horrible things that are likely to happen. That's the worst thing to do. It's so important to connect with other people as individuals, to be assured that the things you love are also things that other people love and care about, so we don't lose sight of the love. We really need to be encouraging to each other so that we don't let that frustration and anger and fear become the main thing that drives us. And so if you've got any sort of bandwidth, now is the time to reach out to your friends, to your family members, to neighbors and start this conversation. Figure out how you're gonna activate that love. The social media platforms right now are the instruments of rage and frustration. You gotta learn to minimize some of that now. You've got to make contact with real people and spend time outside to see and smell and taste the beauty of this world so we're constantly reminding ourselves and each other about how beautiful this world and this life still are.

Do you think society is ready to critique capitalism and corporate oligarchy?

I think what's becoming clear as people look around is that the wealth inequality is just getting worse and there are precious few signs that we have the leadership, whether in business or in politics, that's really concerned enough about it. I think what's become clear also is that this obsession with a continually growing economy is doing so much damage to our places and to our communities. And I don't know what's gonna need to happen for people to say we simply have to stop the growth imperative and start thinking not in terms of quantity, but about the qualities of our relationships. There's no question the capitalist machine of ever greater expansion, ever more optimization, ever more accumulation are not making people happier or the world safer or cleaner or more fertile. I wish I knew what is going to be that sort

of pivot point that is going to finally convince enough people to say that the whole model by which you've been operating is a nightmare for future people. I think what we're going to need to be doing as communities is to figure out demonstration projects in which we see how it's possible to organize our economic life in ways that promote good quality of life, that promote mutual care and flourishing, that make our homes more beautiful and more safe, our neighborhoods cleaner, our educational institutions more focused on the well-being of students.

Your book is reminiscent of Robin Kimmerer's book, Braiding Sweetgrass. She talks about how people need to feel that the earth loves them back. What kind of practical things can people do to get that sense?

So many of us live in a world where the things we face are mostly screens and they are constantly trying to gain our money or our vote or our likes. It's an endless solicitation. You can't eliminate it entirely, obviously, but get involved in growing and making things. It doesn't need to be a big production. I'm not gonna recommend that everyone start a garden. Grow one plant. Cultivate a flower or a fern and then come into the presence of it. See its growth, sense the aliveness of the world. Another thing people can do is get involved in making things, knitting sweaters, building furniture. Those little acts of creativity put you in deeper touch with the physical world and you begin to sense how the physical world is a place that is suited for our flourishing. It's a confirmation of the goodness of this world — the sense that the natural world is packed with beauty, delicious flavors and beautiful colors and fragrant aromas.

What's gonna precipitate all of this happening is leaders in our communities making this a subject of conversation, a subject of analysis because it's not too hard to get people to realize the capitalist drive of accumulation and consumption is not making us happier, it's not making us healthier. So we now need to figure out what are alternatives we can try on a smaller scale, but those smaller scales can build and we can start to see models that can be then exported and expanded.