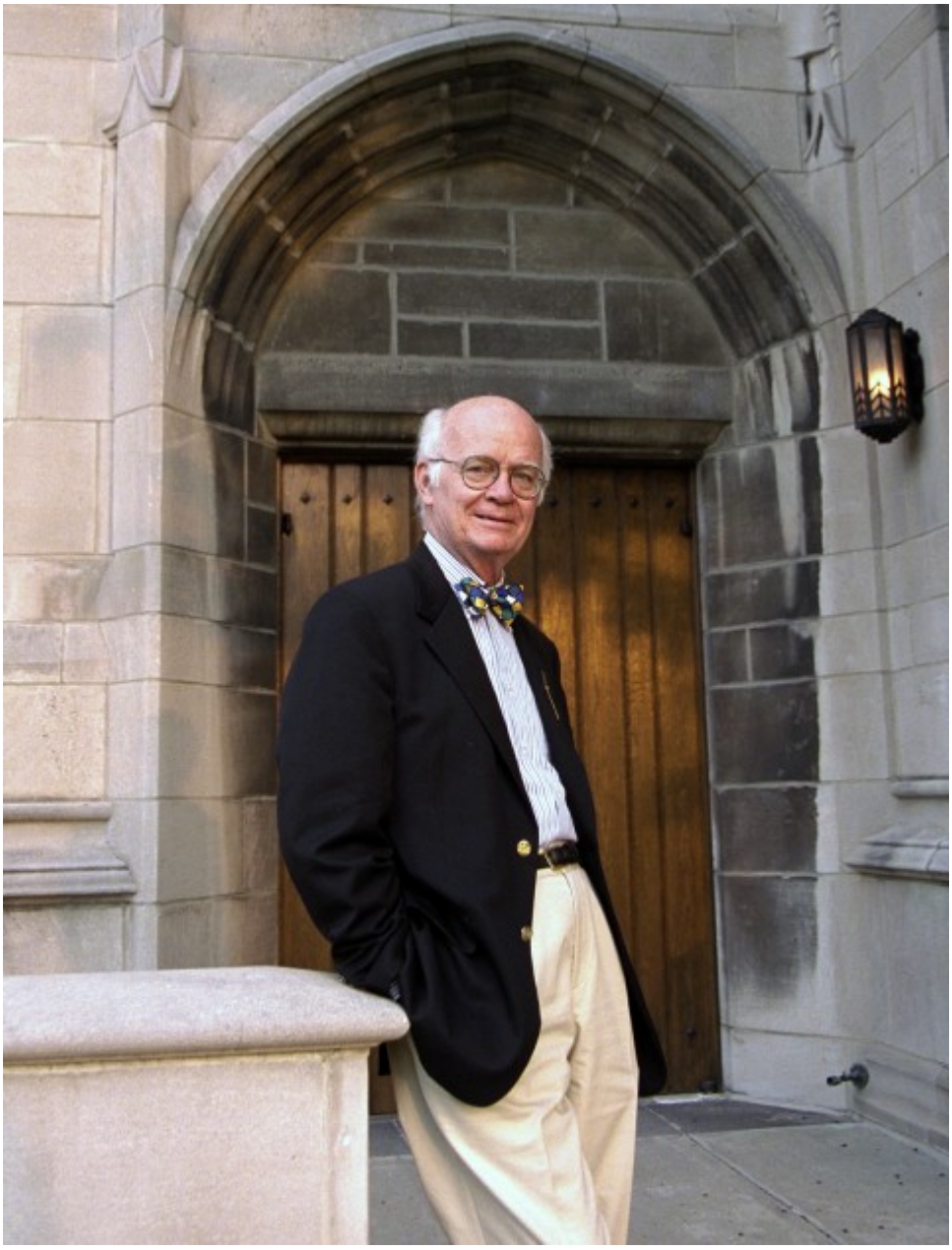
In Martin Marty’s classroom

One evening, Marty had the whole class out to his house. There were shelves of books that he wrote or edited and even more books by his students. I thought, *I do not belong here*.

by Thomas Willadsen in the May 2025 issue
Published on March 4, 2025



Martin E. Marty (Photo by Micah Marty)

The first time I remember hearing his name was in 1987. A colleague of mine asked whether I had chosen a seminary, and I told him I was going to the University of Chicago.

“Isn’t that where Martin Marty is?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so.” Had I heard the name before? I wasn’t sure.

A few months later I found myself in Marty’s Introduction to the Study for Ministry, a first-year course required of all master of divinity students at Chicago. Each Tuesday

we discussed a book by a member of the faculty, and each Thursday the book's author discussed it with the class. A final paper was required at the end of the course. I titled my paper "Hell No," because the concept of a literal hell had been thoroughly discredited by modern scholarship. A classmate who had her first encounter with feminist theology in the course called her paper "Keeping a Breast." She had moved to Chicago from Alabama in a brand-new red pickup truck. Marty insisted on being taken for a ride in it. Later, we got her a bumper sticker that said, "Martin Marty rode in this here truck."

One evening, Marty had the whole class out to his house in the suburbs. We marveled at the honorary degrees that lined one hallway. My most vivid memory is of the shelves of books that he had written or edited. Then there were the shelves and shelves and shelves of books that had been written by his students. I did *not* belong at the University of Chicago.

Still, my grandmother was proud of me, and here's why: Someone once wrote to Ann Landers because her granddaughter was upset when the granddaughter's minister told her that dogs and cats do not go to heaven. Ann contacted Marty about this, and he said no one knows what heaven is like. So the minister could not give such a definitive answer, and if the girl imagined her beloved pet in heaven, that made perfect sense. My grandmother impressed her bridge club when she said that I had the expert Ann Landers turned to for a professor.

I was among the students at Chicago who were certain we had been admitted because of some obscure affirmative action niche. Could it be they did not have enough White, male mainline Protestants in their ministry program? They must have needed someone from downstate, or a left-hander.

Another distinct group were the students who apparently could not leave. I met one of them in line for lunch one day. His name was Bill, and he was close to 50. He had not quite finished his degree yet, and he had incomplete courses with professors who had been dead for years. "So you can leave the city of refuge," I observed. Divinity school is the rare place where there is even a remote chance that this joke will be appreciated.

After graduating I subscribed to the CENTURY. I began reading each issue by turning to the inside back cover to read Marty's pithy M.E.M.O. column. I also accepted my first ministry position in Minnesota, where there are more Lutherans than people. My

status there rose when people learned that I had studied under Marty.

After moving to my second call I began writing a column for *The Cresset*, a journal of commentary on literature, the arts, and public affairs, grounded in the Lutheran tradition. When it changed its format and publication schedule, Marty wrote that it "looks good these seasons." The editor passed this along to the columnists as an "atta boy!"—though essentially all Marty had said was, *The magazine continues to be legible*.

A few years later Marty was speaking in my town, and I went to hear him. Just before he was introduced, I spotted him in the hallway and said, "Mr. Marty, I'm Tom Willadsen, pastor of the Presbyterian church in town, and I graduated from the divinity school in 1990."

"Willadsen . . . Willadsen . . . you write for *The Cresset*." He recognized my name. Oh my.

Three years after that a friend emailed me: "I sat next to Martin Marty at a conference last week; he reads your articles in *The Cresset* and says you should keep writing."

In a moment of wild, delusional hubris, I sent an email to Marty:

> Twenty years ago I was a student of yours at U of C. Now I am the Presbyterian minister in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I've been writing a humor column for *The Cresset* for more than ten years. I am hoping to have those and some other columns I've written published as a book.
>
> As I start this process, would you be willing to write something for the back cover? Something like, "Willadsen's columns are reliably legible. That boy knows how to use a semicolon!"
>
> Given my deep midwestern roots, this is the best I can hope for.

He wrote back:

> I read you in *The Cresset* and remember you well.

> I don’t do blurbs (my website in “regrets” says that, and why); readers are suspect that these are just friends doing things for friends (well, you’re my friend); but if one does a couple of pages of Foreword they can trust and tell that the foreworder has read the book. If you already have a foreword, fine; if not, I’d be glad to. What do you think?

Now all I had to do was write a book. I had not done a single thing to submit accumulated columns to a publisher; I was hoping to have something in writing from Marty just in case I ever did. I was bluffing.

I wrote the book. And now Marty was on the hook to write the foreword. He turned in something brilliant and witty and concise, as the publisher demanded. Part of it reads:

> A funny thing happened on the way to the keyboard. I assumed that I would be paid by the word, a foolish delusion. No one ever gets paid for a blurb. Blurbers take it out in trade. They get a copy of the book and a free McDonald’s cheeseburger the next time you are in the author’s town, which in this case is Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

I had the publisher send him a copy, which I imagined would sit on one of his many shelves of books written by his students over the years. Now, when was I ever going to get a cheeseburger to him?

Maybe it was the therapy, or the Lexapro, or just the passage of two decades. But I started to appreciate my divinity school home, even to feel a kind of fondness for it. One morning I sat down and wrote a Bibfeldt essay. Franz Bibfeldt is a fictional theologian, the product of a practical joke from Marty’s seminary days that stood the test of time. My first year at Chicago, the Bibfeldt Lecture was the only lecture I understood. It gave me a glimmer of hope that perhaps, if I turned in my papers on time and did not call attention to myself in any way, I might sneak through and graduate.

While the tradition of “honoring” Bibfeldt around April Fools’ Day had waned in recent years, they were willing to revive the tradition. On Wednesday, April 10, 2013, I attained the only title I have ever coveted—Bibfeldt lecturer—when I delivered “It Could Be Wurst: Franz Bibfeldt: The Lost Years of Gastronomic Theology.”

As Marty and I walked to my car afterward, I shared with him that I really had felt like an imposter during my years at the divinity school—and that it was only years later that my colleagues confessed to feeling the same way. He said he felt the same way as a student, though he spent more time with historians than theologians.

The earth stopped turning. Martin Marty felt that he had not belonged at the University of Chicago when he was a student? The man to whom Ann Landers turned for theological guidance?

We drove up Lake Shore Drive, and I dropped him off and then watched from the curb as he got into his building safely. I hoped he remembered the cheeseburger in his pocket.