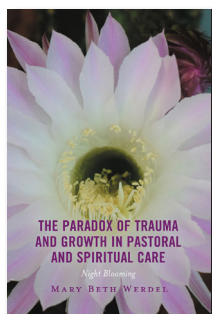


## BOOK REVIEW

### ***The Paradox of Trauma and Growth in Pastoral and Spiritual Care: Night Blooming***

By Mary Beth Werdel. Lexington Books, 2024. Emerging Perspectives in Pastoral Theology and Care. xv + 113 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4985-1993-9. \$90.00 (hardcover); \$81.00 (e-book).



Dr. Mary Beth Werdel, director of the Mental Health Counseling and Spiritual Integration and Pastoral Care programs at Fordham University, continues her long-standing research on posttraumatic growth (PTG) using her analogy of night blooming. Her scholarship explores the intersection of spirituality and wellbeing during times of loss, stress, and trauma. In this 2024 publication, Werdel asks a deeply human question: *how do we confront suffering when we don't know what to say?*

Originally introduced in the 1990s by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, the concept of PTG refers to the possibility of positive psychological change following trauma. Werdel frames PTG as a paradox, the tension between trauma and growth, and offers a compassionate, research-informed perspective aimed at pastors, psychologists, clinicians, caregivers, and all who practice deep listening. She writes, “[W]hile pain and suffering are not the thesis statement of life, the space where suffering, spirituality, and growth meet can be a liminal space ...” (x).

Her central aim is to explore this paradox, drawing attention to both the barriers and pathways to PTG, and the ways in which spiritual and religious frameworks can either enrich or hinder that process. Early in the book, she challenges spiritual caregivers who have, in her view, outsourced knowledge of trauma to counselors and psychologists. In turn, she urges mental health professionals not to dismiss the spiritual dimension of care. “[There] must be at least a knowledge of both areas,” she writes, “so that caregivers do no harm” (xii).

In chapter one, Werdel begins with trauma itself, insisting that the study of trauma is not just important, it's an ethical imperative. She unpacks the definitions and impacts of trauma, emphasizing its effects on the body and relationships. Chapter two explores the concept of paradox. Drawing on second-wave positive psychology, she highlights the complexity of emotions, and warns against three key risks in misunderstanding PTG: oversimplifying the search for meaning, narrowing definitions of wellbeing, and undermining resilience. Chapter three introduces the book's central metaphor, night blooming. Like rare flowers that bloom only in darkness, PTG is portrayed as a process that often unfolds slowly and quietly, under difficult conditions. This imagery carries into chapter four, where Werdel explores how lived experiences of religion and spirituality shape the PTG process. The final chapter, "Witnessing the Night Bloom," offers guidance for those who accompany others through trauma. Here, Werdel insists that engaging the paradox of PTG is "less of a skill to be learned and more a way of thinking to nurture within the professional listener" (74).

Drawing from over 30 years of PTG research, as well as her own clinical and academic experience, Werdel delivers a compelling and necessary read for caregivers across disciplines. She substantially succeeds in her goal: to show that paradox is not something to be resolved, but embraced, that psychology and spirituality are intertwined in the human search for meaning.

With clarity and depth, she demonstrates how interpersonal, intrapersonal, and systemic factors shape the possibility of growth after trauma. The result is a book that leaves readers with a renewed perspective and a practical, trauma-informed approach to care. One that is as deeply human as it is hopeful.

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