

Interfaith Grit: How Uncertainty Will Save Us. By Stephanie Varnon-Hughes. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018. 117pp. ISBN: 978-1-5326-0645-8. \$13.60, paper; \$9.99, eBook.

Stephanie Varnon-Hughes tackles a substantial challenge in her new text, *Interfaith Grit: How Uncertainty Will Save Us*, a slender monograph that combines the practice of interfaith dialogue with the theory of “grit” and resilience in learning. As the Director of Cross-Cultural and Interfaith Programs at Claremont Lincoln University and one of the original founders of the *Journal for Interreligious Studies*, Varnon-Hughes comes at the topic of how to create better mindsets and spaces for interfaith learning with years of academic and practical experience. The resources for her text range from theory-heavy authors who might only be familiar to professionals in the field to qualitative interview data and anecdotal experiences shared on social media. The overall effect is largely accessible, with a few denser sections, and the central message of the book—which can neatly be summarized as “Make yourself uncomfortable!”—comes through consistently throughout.

The text is organized into six chapters after a brief introduction, beginning with a chapter that lays out a few practical examples and the overall challenge of trying to facilitate moments for dialogue and learning in a context where many of us are tempted to close our social circles in around us and only converse with those who share our viewpoints, sometimes mocking and “blocking” those who disagree. The second chapter addresses the concepts of grit and resilience, offering relevant research from the fields of child psychology and education, and concludes by providing some history of the interfaith movement worldwide. The third draws on interfaith and comparative religion resources to discuss how one can cultivate the kind of reflective mindset that allows a person to encounter difference or confusion without shutting down, with a fourth, very brief chapter outlining more practical techniques for developing these skills. The fifth and last full chapter discusses storytelling and narrative pedagogy as profound tools for finding and embracing the vulnerability that leads to empathy and curiosity about the other.

The literature cited by the author derives from such wide-ranging disciplines that I imagine it unlikely that any reader will recognize and resonate with all of them; readers might naturally hone in on concepts that are most familiar to their experience or field and glide a bit over the parts less relevant to their interests. Yet, ultimately, the book’s overall message of practicing discomfort is oft-repeated in the various chapters, between and amongst the academic citations and personal examples that round out the text. This creates a more cyclical piece that lends itself to being an “excerpt-able” book, one where sections or chapters can easily be pulled out without losing the overall thrust of the argument.

Where Varnon-Hughes’ work shines brightest is in the practical examples. As a practical theologian and religious educator, I frequently found myself excited when I saw that the next page contained a bulleted list, as these contained the grounding piece that I craved after reading detailed literature analyses. One example that comes to mind is a short section suggesting ways that adults might expose themselves to difference and mild discomfort in a healthy way. The author suggests trying to eat vegan, buying a gift in a tattoo parlor or a luxury spa (whichever is less familiar to the reader), or joining a Facebook parenting group that you already know you disagree with (31). Varnon-Hughes walks a thin line that pushes both people from more conservative backdrops, who are prone to judgment about those unlike themselves, and the growing movement in progressivism

that suggests that cutting oneself off from the “negative influence” of people one disagrees with is a practice one should perform regularly and with gusto. Readers might find themselves wondering what these exposure practices look like for either people who have very little “interfaith grit” or those who are especially vulnerable to being hurt or harmed by the deeply held views of others about their identity; I would have appreciated if Varnon-Hughes had tried to meet this question head-on, even if her response could only have been a complex version of, “it depends.”

Varnon-Hughes describes her intended audience as somewhat wide-ranging, citing activists, practitioners, and leaders from a variety of backgrounds, but there are moments where the text is clearly more angled towards those who are not novices to inter-religious topics—for example, when underneath the header “What does ‘interfaith’ mean?” (8) the author discusses a method of religious education rather than offering a definition. Another, quite minor, quibble with the text comes from its layout. The chapters are uneven in length and the longer ones do not have section headers, which makes flipping back through the pages to find a particular reference or argument less simple than it might be. Engaged readers may want to know upfront that this is a text they should dog-ear, highlight, and insert sticky notes into so they can quickly relocate the most useful parts of the text. Minor issues aside, the book is thought-provoking and should be stimulating for anyone with an educator’s heart, as well as those who enjoy seeing distinct analytical fields brought together in a generative way. I anticipate that this text will be best read and appreciated by professionals and educators who are looking for better and more evocative ways to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding without resorting to pat answers or tokenized forms of representation.

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