

Book Review

***The Paradox of Trauma and Growth in Pastoral Care: Night Blooming.* By Mary Beth Werdel. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024. pp. 113. ISBN 978-1-4985-1993-9. Hardcover, \$90.00. e-book, \$45.00.**



Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2024, Issue 41, 167-169
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

One of the major gifts of this book is the ways in which it provides resources to spiritual care providers, whether professional or a loving companion, on how to reflect upon the spiritual dimensions that may be present in the aftermath of trauma. It is a wonderful offering which blends a nuanced understanding of trauma alongside diverse spiritual traditions. Building on her previous work within posttraumatic growth (PTG), in this book Werdel strongly (and rightly) argues that scholars and practitioners from across religions or spiritualities should be more informed of best practices around trauma care. She does not indicate that spirituality has nothing to offer the conversation. On the contrary, she writes that spiritual leaders and practitioners must not “outsource all trauma knowledge to counselors and psychologists” (xii). And vice versa, Werdel calls for mental health professionals to learn from spirituality and “not to outsource all spiritual content to clergy, care workers, chaplains, and spiritual directors.” Furthermore, “professional helpers must be aware of the current research that integrates psychological understandings of growth with spiritual writings and philosophies so that spiritually related interventions...are not trite at best and dangerous at worst” (xii).

Werdel’s ultimate and lofty goal is to build bridges between the psychological sciences and a wide array of theological/spiritual traditions of the world in order to better care for those who have endured trauma. In chapter one, she focuses on defining her understanding of trauma and the myriad ways it can show up in a person or community. This initial chapter also raises the important distinctions of how trauma can even be passed down culturally or intergenerationally. In chapter two, her emphasis is on the reality and importance of paradox when considering trauma care and how embracing paradox allows us to hold two seemingly contradictory realities at the same time, viz., positive and negative experiences. The crux of the argument here is that trauma is one of the main experiences in which a confrontation with paradox is unavoidable.

The third chapter is perhaps her most significant. In it she introduces and builds her metaphor for PTG as the rare night blooming flower which blossoms only once or twice per year in the darkness. For the author, this connects to the understanding that caregivers should stay open to the process as they companion others through the darkness which accompanies

traumatic experiences. Yet, darkness should not only be problematized, it should also be understood as a unique place wherein growth can still transpire.

In chapter four, Werdel proposes the ways in which religion and spirituality can also be a source of either positive or negative reinforcement of PTG. Here is where she cautions about the risk of spiritual bypassing which often happens when well-meaning people who do not know how to respond to trauma fail to care in restorative ways for others. The final chapter is devoted to the notion of witnessing and how that can be a praxis and approach to working with the paradox inherent to trauma.

Werdel draws primarily from Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity as she compares how different traditions testify to principles of paradox and witnessing. Since she is a mental health professional by training, most of the book is clinical and diagnostic in scope with aspects of religion intertwined therein. The primary goal is to advocate for spirituality (and its resources) to be further considered and integrated in efforts aimed and tending to the wounds which are prevalent on the road to recovery. In this case, it is a wonderful book which can be used to train spiritual care providers of many kinds, whether spiritual directors, chaplains, pastors, or spiritual leaders on the front lines of social justice.

It would have significantly strengthened the book to have included a consideration of how Indigenous Peoples might relate to the wisdom stemming from plant life or the more than human world. Since the night bloomer was her primary metaphor, it would have been interesting to connect how many different spiritual traditions look to plants—not just for metaphors, but for actual sustenance, healing, and growth amid suffering. In addition, it would have been a helpful integration to consider how religious and spiritual traditions build upon relationality at their core, overcoming individualistic healing paradigms. All of this to say there is still many possibilities for furthering this work which is all so important in a traumatizing world.

In summary, the book makes a wonderful effort to bridge conversations across many lines of thought that share the aim of working more comprehensively and collaboratively to tend to trauma in the world. I appreciated Werdel's closing, where she wrote, "from a systemic perspective, the greater goal in the work of the paradox of trauma, spirituality, and growth, is to move humanity to a place where one can honor traumatic growth and be interested in creating systems that all people can live in and love in that does not harm anyone at all" (85). The final call Werdel makes here is highly resonant to a spirituality of nonviolence and ethic of no-harm, which is a principle evident in many spiritual traditions as well. This could be a next step in developing the PTG project at large, weaving together insights at intersections of spirituality and psychology. While a nonviolent world may seem impossible or a long way off, let us work and remain open to the process of healing and repair that will often surprise us as magnificently as a flower that blooms in the dark of night.

Aizaiah G. Yong
Claremont School of Theology

RY

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.