Book Reviews

Reflective Caring: Imaginative listening to pastoral experience

Bob Whorton SPCK London 2011


‘As a pastoral carer the only thing I bring is myself’

This is a fascinating book. Bob Whorton invites all those involved in the art of caring to become more aware of who they are and what they bring into the therapeutic relationship. The foundation of the text is his conviction that ‘as a pastoral carer the only thing I bring is myself’. So Bob dares us to get to know ourselves just a little bit better – the voices, the tricks, the energies.

If this is something that you would like to do, and if you can see how reflection can strengthen your capacity to care, then this is a book for you. I like the book precisely because it aims to be transformational and character building. This is what clinicians working at the coalface need: inspiration to be yourself, to find the balance, or ‘the place just right’ to care ever and over again.

Drawing from deep wells of personal experience; as a Methodist minister, chaplain to a high security psychiatric hospital and in his current post as chaplain to Sir Michael Sobell House Hospice, Oxford, the author uses his own reactions and imaginative journeys to be the bones of the text. By sharing his own vulnerability and woundedness – never an easy thing to do in the public domain – he models reflective caring. The author draws strongly on his Christian heritage, which he hopes will not be a barrier to his reflections on the soul. It would be fascinating to have alternative sacred and secular passages and inspirational verses to inform parallel journeys. A task for someone else to do?

The book enjoys an easy structure – The opening chapters outline a way of caring. Accept the many selves which shape our identity, including our wounded self which may actually be the cusp of healing. Embrace imagination as the language of the soul – and use techniques such as walking the labyrinth to come close to our hidden selves. Play, he argues, is needed just when a crisis is brewing, and when we are set in a serious business. Go deep to make connections between our outer and inner worlds – and do not be frightened of the cost of wrestling like Jacob at Jabbok.

There then follows a series of soul reflections, which in essence were the basis of group sessions that Bob had with volunteers in the Pastoral Team at his hospice. So we are treated to insights into how to cultivate gratitude, welcome intimacy, avoid the risk of perfectionism and believe ‘it is as it is’; when one is driven to fix and to sort, trust in what will be, what is the need in us all to belong and not to live on the outside, how to face our sadnesses and anger. These soul reflections offer many insights into our many selves which shape and inform our caring relationships and are worth taking time to read and get to know.

The appendix: ‘Over to You’ contains many ‘soul exercises’ and ‘questions for reflection’ which you can play with either on your own, or as a basis for group work, or preparation for supervision. For me the worth of this delightful book will correlate to how much time you spend exploring your experiences and discovering your many selves.

The author says that he has always been fascinated with what is going on in an encounter between two people. In recommending the book to you, I would be fascinated to gauge its impact on those people who want to travel to depths, become more self-aware of our inner worlds, to be able to sit with distress, our own and the distress of others, believing perhaps that in all that we are and in all that we do we are held in a love that is greater than our own.

Ian Stirling