

March Book Summary

Dan Brent

Wrestling with Our Inner Angels

Nancy Kehoe, Jossey-Bass, 2009, 149pp., \$19.95

A rule of thumb in psychiatry seems to be: If you talk to God, it's prayer; if God talks to you, you're crazy. Nancy Kehoe became an "interpreter" in the world of mental illness, "a person who could translate the foreign language of religion for therapists as they worked with clients who 'did God talk'" (p.xvi)

Sister Nancy and a colleague put together a "group" on spiritual beliefs and values. The participants were residents at a mental health facility. Eight people chose to participate at first. They represented a variety of faiths and included some with no faith as such. Sister Nancy's colleague summed up the first meeting for the participants. "Today we have talked about believing in ourselves, the question of forgiveness, where some of us find God, and how people use their beliefs—all rich topics that we can come back to." (p.13) They did. And eventually the number of participants grew and the groups proliferated.

Kehoe's non-judgmental style encouraged the participants to get past their fears about discussing their efforts to understand and reach for God. She tells of the amazing impact it had on her own spirituality to hear her clients tell about their struggles. They were trying to come to terms with a supposedly loving God who allowed them to suffer such pain and despair.

"This book is my attempt to bear witness to the stories of some of the remarkable men and women I have encountered in these programs." (p.18)

There are the personal stories. Beverly had been in and out of mental hospitals since age eleven. She believed she was "inherently evil". But after one close call with a suicide attempt, she said, "God in his mercy showered me with forgiveness, new hope, and love." And later, "No longer imprisoned by the crippling effects of isolation and self hatred, I no longer walk alone." (p.29) "Here was a woman," the book reflects, "engaged in two battles: one to receive care and be accepted and loved and the other for her soul. With amazing tenacity she persevered on both fronts. Her caregivers responded only to her aberrant and extremely off-putting behavior." (p.31) Beverly wrote, "Despite the incredible amount of suffering I experience and see others experiencing, I have real hope—and that hope has given me comfort in my darkest hours." (p.33) It makes you want to rethink your definition of a saint!

Another client, Jennifer, "learned to connect God with beauty and life, not with demands and expectations." (p.38) She wrote, "Our true natures are bled out of us by some religious teachings, terrifying family experiences, and the pain of mental illness. We are not just pieces of damaged psyches. When you get rid of the toxic material many of us have carried from our early experiences, the majestic spirit can emerge." (p.39)

The author discloses some of her own struggle for identity. She tells about an experience in her religious community where she'd been written off as uncreative. She had an opportunity to work with clay and she sculpted what turned out to be a beautiful wounded hand of Jesus. Instead of winning approbation from the group, it generated a dismissive "*You did that!*" reaction. "At the end of the gathering, I took my sculpture, crushed it, and went back to struggling with what I thought it meant to be a 'good religious', one who was obedient and self-effacing." (p.41)

One year at a Seder meal that the group sponsored, "One client passed on the horseradish, saying, 'No thanks. My life has enough bitterness in it already.'" (p.77) Another client, Bud, "was generous in the face of deprivation, he was compassionate in the midst of pain and despair, he never imposed his burden on others." (p.65)

In another story, Beth and Taylor, clients with mental illnesses, were able to "distinguish between the symptoms of their illness and their spiritual experiences." (p.99) Research shows that faith makes a positive difference for individuals who suffer physical ills. But caregivers of people with mental illnesses tend not to work from that same benign assumption. So, "since the stance of disbelief is the position most clients expect from their caregivers, the clients are unlikely to reveal the experience of another voice. Then the question is whether or not the therapist can willingly suspend disbelief sufficiently to explore the client's experience." (p.100)

In the book's last chapter, Kehoe reflects on her own life. "I was like the elder son of the parable, the one who stayed at home doing what he thought his father wanted, but not wholeheartedly." (p.108) She was battling her own demons which she identified as envy, regret, and guilt. So when her clients tell her, "You mean a great deal to us," she says, "I went to my car and wept." (p.111)

"I still look at myself through the lens of not-yet, not-enough." But the clients "have held up a mirror and allowed me to see a different image of myself, and I, in turn, have done the same for them . . . I have begun to see not a barren desert but a flowering landscape." (p.128)

Seeing through the author's eyes, the reader will likely have a similar experience.