

Book Review: Larry Culliford

'Journeying Home – Unlocking the Door to Spiritual Recovery'

by Fiona Gardner

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'Journeying home starts with a glimpse of recognition that something needs to change'

I liked this ambitious book and found it valuable. Fiona Gardner and her publishers are to be congratulated on bringing it to fruition.

The challenge of bringing the two themes of spirituality and psychotherapy together in a creative marriage must be met in real life before it can be described so successfully. In her introduction, the author bravely and disarmingly outlines something of her own passage from painful childhood through therapy to becoming a therapist, while simultaneously developing an increasingly meaningful and personal Christianity. Her compassion and understanding will benefit her readers, as they have clearly benefited her patients 'Alan' and 'Kirsty', whose stories we read about progressively from chapter to chapter.

These two narratives serve to illustrate a number of interwoven themes, which are set out in the introduction and revisited in the final chapter, 'Held in love-scarred hands'. The eight chapters thus take us deliberately on a circular journey, getting figuratively back to where we started, somehow healed and whole.

Gardner shows that therapy, through a relationship with the therapist, and religion, through a relationship with God, both offer parallel but distinct benefits. She encourages and assists the therapeutically aware to become better orientated spiritually, and the spiritually aware to become more knowledgeable psycho-therapeutically. There is very appealing and straightforward advice for both here. Knowledge of the Bible and about Christianity is helpful, but perhaps not essential. Where psychoanalytic and object-relations terminology and theory are used, the context and the author's clear (but occasionally abbreviated) explanations are of great assistance. No one should feel daunted by this book, although I did find a second reading of the earlier chapters helpful.

Both Kirsty and Alan experienced difficulties in childhood, leaving them with lasting doubts about themselves and legacies of shame and guilt. Drawing on St. Bernard, the twelfth century founder of the Cistercian Order, Gardner enumerates four stages of love, making it clear that few patients on entering treatment have reached even the first, in which, 'We love ourselves'. In the chapter, 'Feeling Ashamed and Guilty' she speaks of guilt and forgiveness as an often necessary part of the journey home. As we proceed through the book, biblical themes are used to telling effect. There are references to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, St. Peter's betrayal of Christ, and to the parable of the prodigal son. Gardner comments, 'the Bible narratives teach us to embrace uncertainty and what is not yet known, and to live with what may be possible. They help us to use our imaginations. They can also give us inspiration and consolation.' (p.26)

Reflecting on the Israelites' release from slavery in Egypt, Gardner explains how the therapeutic process can help a person find their 'inner Moses' to lead them out of danger and difficulty. She speaks of those entering treatment being *unconsciously* preoccupied with their suffering, and how this needs to become a *conscious* preoccupation. The third stage then involves *consciously* letting go and the fourth *unconsciously* letting go of this preoccupation, leading to healing. This process takes

time but, as Gardner has written elsewhereⁱ, ‘the purpose of God within scripture is not delineated by *Chronos* – historical time – it becomes a different sort of time, *Kairos* – God’s own time. This is the time of decision and transformation, transcending the quantitative approach of time measured by the clock.’ So it is in therapy.

As the stories of Alan and Kirsty unfold, we learn of separate serendipitous events, external to the treatment process, involving strangers who appeared at the right time and place, enabling them to grow in both psychological and spiritual terms. Kirsty met a Franciscan monk on a train, for example, and their conversation began when a failure enforced a wait for them both on the platform. The monk lent Kirsty a meaningful bookⁱⁱ which answered for her religious questions about the role of women that her therapist could not. Kirsty and the monk became correspondents, and she was helped in her development beyond the endpoint of therapy.

Spirituality is about the relationship between the one and the whole, thus linking the deeply personal with the universal. It is the dimension in which all people are somehow connected to each other, and to the divine and seamless totality of creation. For some, this totality is ‘God’. Spirituality then is often about having a sense of belonging, of meaning and purpose in life, of having something to contribute. It is also about personal integrity, feeling whole, and thereby being healed. We are all, in Gardner’s terms, prodigal children. ‘Journeying home,’ she says (p.139), ‘starts with a glimpse of recognition that something needs to change’.

A journey beginning with the vicissitudes and traumas of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, unfolding in therapy through psychological and inter-personal development, can only, according to Gardner, be completed and bring us successfully home in the spiritual dimension, in the realm of unconditional love. She says (p.149), ‘a therapeutic relationship can help kick-start our spiritual life. If we are listened to and understood, if we are thought about and reliably held in mind by someone new, our inner foundations of trust, belief and faith are built up. We need this experience so that we can turn in maturity to an authentic relationship with God.’

Echoing both the therapist Donald Winnicott and the 20th century Cistercian monk and writer Thomas Merton, to whom she refers, Gardner explains that returning home involves letting go of a protective ‘false’ self, naturally enabling one’s ‘true’ self to emerge. Alan, for example, is eventually able to give up the timid, fussy and over-protective, constantly anxious false self, imposed defensively against near-overwhelming childhood guilt that he had caused his mother’s illness. Through therapy, a warm relationship with his fiancée, also through prayer and return to newly meaningful church attendance, he is able – first consciously and then increasingly unconsciously – to mature and discover his underlying true self. What he finds is a serene equanimity, and a new capacity for enjoyment without the burden of guilt.

The true self is both psychologically and spiritually healthy. It is wise, generous, honest, caring and readily given in sympathy to both laughter and tears. This timely book serves to remind us that the true therapist, similarly calm, kind and compassionate, is spiritually as well as psychotherapeutically aware. Few of us, then, can yet be said to have completed the pathway of return. Many will appreciate the guidance in ‘Journeying Home’, as we find our way ‘back to unity’. This book deserves to be widely read among College members, whether Christian or otherwise.

ⁱ Gardner, F. (2003) Thomas Merton and Scripture. *The Merton Journal*. Advent 2003. **10**, 2, 19-22

ⁱⁱ Bondi, R. (1995) *Memories of God*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd