

Book Review by Liz Bryson, Hospital Chaplain

'Sanctuary: the discovery of wonder'

by Julie Leibrich

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I sit pensively beside Le Lac de Sainte Croix, Provence, having finished reading Julie Leibrich's *'Sanctuary: the discovery of wonder'*. I am in awe of the beauty of this place, a sanctuary in the midst of my busy life. I am in awe of and intrigued by Leibrich's wide-ranging exploration of sanctuary.

Leibrich has taken me on a journey of thoughtful and engaging wonder. By interweaving her own story and journey of discovery with that of many others: family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, professionals, mystics, historians and clerics, she turns a kaleidoscope slowly and beautifully to examine sanctuary in a thought-provoking way.

Leibrich's qualifications to write this book lie in her experience as both a commissioner of services and a service user. She worked in New Zealand as a research psychologist before becoming a pioneering Mental Health Commissioner. She also required several episodes of treatment as an inpatient in psychiatric hospitals.

The shape of the book is reflected in the circular jigsaw with a missing piece on the front cover. It pieces together sections entitled: 'wondering about sanctuary', 'illuminating sanctuary', 'protecting sanctuary' and 'wonderment of sanctuary'. Leibrich visits the concepts of space, story, belonging, love of people, freedom of mind, presence of body, essence of spirit and time for time. She includes the challenging human need for solitude, silence, simplicity, slowness and stillness in the frenetic current culture of the twenty-first century. The final section addresses mystery, meaning, miracle and full circle.

Without being prescriptive or offering answers Leibrich invites the reader to consider the nature and significance of sanctuary. This book, as Leibrich says, 'Harvests the experience of my life' (p88) as she reflects back over her life in her 'autumn' years. She turns the kaleidoscope a mere fraction at a time creating space for the reader to consider the concept of sanctuary. Each gentle turn moves the patterns of colours such that a new mosaic is experienced by the reader.

Interspersed with stunning photography at the beginning of each section, the reader's senses are touched in every way. Leibrich says 'there is no advice in this book as I am no expert about sanctuary, just someone who happens to be thinking about it for a long time.' (p12) She goes on to say, 'I hope you will find things here that lead you into wondering, wandering and wonderment.'

For professional or amateur, scientist or artist, this book contains an array of understanding, encompassing body, mind and spirit. It is grounded in everyday human experiences but also uncompromisingly explores the profound and abstract issues of spirituality, connectedness and meaning.

Leibrich cursorily challenges societal attitudes and norms that potentially imprison and prevent us from discovering sanctuary in life. She raises the double-edged ideas of finding space, solitude, silence, simplicity, slowness and stillness to protect our experience of sanctuary. She very briefly addresses fears, joys, and learning from others. This area of critical thinking feels somewhat incomplete.

There are no guidelines to adhere to after reading this book but there is a stirring within and a challenge to find the unique meaning of sanctuary for you as an individual

Leibrich finally says, 'I have a vision of sanctuary as a circle, perfect and complete. Sometimes I still forget to protect my sanctuary. I make mistakes, have false starts, and fall down many times but I do enter sanctuary again... every time I experience sanctuary it makes me more likely to experience it again. So with each turn of life sanctuary deepens. It grows, like a spiral of ever-increasing circles... There can be no conclusion to this book, only a point on a curved line.' (p182)

I recommend this book to both medical and non-medical readers for a reflective and engaging read that may inspire, and empower flourishing.