

A Review by Richard B. Gilbert, A.B.,M.Div,FAAGC, CPBC Founding Director, Connections – Spiritual Links

Fasten your seat belts. Grab on to a good friend and all of your inner resources, for this book is not an easy read. Almost like a soap opera with every page a cliffhanger, this book is one of the most overwhelming, yet persuasively caring books I have ever read. Most of all, even in its occasional brutal honesty, it is one of the most helpful pastoral looks at spirituality, especially for the bereaved, that I have ever read.

Andrea Maresco (Joanetta Hendel) is a bereaved parent. Her young son died of respiratory complications. The death of any child is a horror packed in surprises. The child (Benjamin) died of respiratory problems that were not expected...just like the death of a child is *never* expected, and certainly never welcome. The book is the diary of feelings, experiences and insights of a woman who lost a child, lost a husband, lost a marriage, nearly lost her own emotional wellbeing, and on many occasions, felt she had lost the God she had come to know and to trust.

The book is a page by page expose of what *some* couples go through after the death of a child. We see the pain and struggle of the father (seldom written about), and see demonstrated most vividly the truth that death does not fix broken relationship, but scatters the pieces further and further from any recognizable expression of relationship. The father was abusive, controlling, subject to a variety of addictive behaviors, and he had those tendencies before Benjamin's death. As happens in grief, we fall back on whatever is "normal" for us, and that becomes our set of journey markers. Edward, the husband/father, had a very poor set of markers to rely on for his journey, and the worst rose to the top in its destructive fury that left everyone scattered and scarred.

We are really also experiencing a powerful witness of what the breakup of a family feels like. While witnessed and recorded by the mother, all of the players are included. No matter how many couples and families I have worked with through separation and divorce, no one expressed in writing the horror and pain as well as has been done in this book. If you are working with couples or individuals in this predicament, this book is helpful.

There were other side benefits. For example, we realized that many attorneys and counselors specializing in divorce are not fully competent, and do not check in on such issues as counter transference or transference. It is also apparent that too many professionals do not understand domestic violence. In the case of Andrea and Edward, if the professionals understood domestic violence, and the mentality of the victim, they would have known that you do not try to counsel the perpetrator and the victim together. This section also reminds us of the responsibilities, even in our disrupted state, of being good consumers when "shopping" for a therapist. A wise therapist would

recognize when the sessions/relationship is not working. A client has the right to back out, re-contract, or negotiate with a new therapist.

Most of all, this is a book about spirituality. While she speaks from the Christian perspective, her honesty and her definitions enable all of us to learn from her experience, fitting her pathways into our own, and reclaiming our own spiritual vitality. This is the book at its best. It is the reminder that spirituality is never easily worked. To suggest that someone is “saved,” and now has it all together, is faulty in both definition and theology. Spirituality is always about relationship, however personalized, and journey or growth. A spirituality without the latter is dead, just another empty box.

The book also gives us a good reminder, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that God is realized and experienced best within the wilderness experiences. At the times when God seems the most silent and most absent, he is the God of love and presence. When we are most blinded, God sees.

She “believed” in “an overwhelming sense of Love” as her God. She could speak of the funeral Mass for Benjamin as a truly remarkable experience of faith, comfort and spiritual community with a congregation. It was rooted in the reminder that, as the story’s purpose expresses it, “This story is about an impossible journey—and about a God who provided a safe passage.” The journey continued. The same priest who was loving and caring was later, to no fault of his own, insensitive, foolish, siding with the enemy. The church community of support and love became a center of hostility, hurt, and abandonment. The God she prayed to, demanding answers and direction, became the God of silence and question. Religion destroyed; spirituality crushed.

Rooted in the pain of her sorrow and her dreadful ride through life’s horrors, she focused her anger at God and her church. She redefined her spirituality, almost as a warning (like safety labels on a package) to her readers and herself. At the time she was beginning to risk believing, “God seems to be on my side, though he does not shield me from all life’s bumps and bruises,” she warns us, “I have long since renounced the God of the Bible, a God who reigns over religious institutions that are laced with deceit and malevolence, where congregations use piety and Biblical jargon in the name of Holy Order. Churches are the enemy, organized religion a joke.”

She was able to stay in her feelings, even her wallowing, because the God of her honest and real spirituality was the God who was willing to meet her there. Her respect for her own feelings enabled her to address her own anger, rage and abandonment. She also, in her frequently sabotaged efforts at reaching healing, was able to get back to her definitions of spirituality and religion (*and that they are different!*), and to a faith that is both trust and risk. She brought her rage to the God and the church she chose to attach, and found new love, new community, especially a community of equally broken and fragile folks in need of a refreshing spirituality and reframed religion. She saw herself

with “a restless need to connect with a church family,” and the insight (with trust) that “God works through churches and I am asked to be part of one.”

One strong caution with this book. While it is about bereaved parents and broken relationships, it is, as stated earlier, brutally honest. It is not a book I would give to a newly bereaved or particularly fragile griever. It may be more than some can handle. It is mandatory reading for counselors, lawyers, clergy, group facilitators and others who work with bereaved parents and troubled families. The book is also a wonderful invitation for those who seek meaningful spirituality (even if not particularly comfortable in a Christian framework).

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