

Crossing the Desert: Learning to Let Go, See Clearly and Live Simply

Robert J. Wicks

Notre Dame, IN • Ave Maria/Sorin Books •
2007 • 186 pages • hardcover

“There are four questions and three steps that must be encountered by anyone seriously interested in taking a spiritual journey toward true inner freedom.” (p. 11) Thus begins the invitation to enter into the desert for a journey into self-discovery. For us chaplains, it is a wonderful reminder of what we began when we entered our first clinical pastoral education (CPE) unit. It is also a helpful instructional manual for those of us involved in spiritual direction or counseling.

Using the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Wicks weaves a journey that becomes one’s own life journey through one’s own particular deserts. Wicks regards the wisdom of these Christian Parents as a treasure trove of insights for those who are experiencing stress, depression, grief or loss. Becoming disciples of these third and fourth century Fathers and Mothers, we are called to sit quietly and listen.

Wicks first encountered desert wisdom through Thomas Merton’s book, *The Wisdom of the Desert*. He quotes Merton, “These monks insisted on remaining human and ‘ordinary.’ ... they had come into the desert to be themselves, their ordinary selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves.” (p. 12) From his background in psychology, Wicks realized that this was the present milieu; our attachment to “things” is pulling us away from ourselves.

Henri Nouwen also touched Wicks’s life deeply through personal encounters and through his writing in *Desert Wisdom*. Through reflection on these writings, Wicks developed his thesis for this work. He writes, “Why had I forgotten my deep love for (in Nouwen’s words) ‘the spirit of discipleship’ of the Desert Fathers and Mothers? How could I now use them more completely to help guide me in my own life as well as to assist others who sought my help? And finally, could I now glean the essential elements of a ‘desert spiritual apprenticeship’ from a number of religious traditions” (p. 15)

Wicks states that his goal “is to provide a sense of how obscure women and men of the fourth century, along with some of the other most beloved spiritual writers of our time, offer us the wisdom of the desert to free us from the chains of our modern insecurities and attachments.” (p. 28) He has organized this book into a journey within the desert, guided by three gates, four voices, four questions and three steps.

To begin, we must flee to the desert, which Wicks describes as unfriendly and harsh, a place of extremes where one has to consider that survival depends on one’s choices. More importantly, in the desert “an opportunity to gain a new perspective and a unique appreciation for what is truly important is joined by a radically different sense of what relationship, hospitality, and compassion should mean in our lives.” (p. 22) To survive in this desert, one must experience a true conversion, a letting go of everything nonessential. Only by being free can one experience a true and radical relationship with God.

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Everyone who commits to this journey must enter through three narrow gates to attain a complete and full life. The first gate is passion, which Wicks defines as “a sense of commitment, faithfulness, and appreciation of the gift of life.” (p. 43) Gate two is knowledge, which “helps one differentiate between unnecessary suffering on the one hand, and the kind of pain that must be faced rather than defended against or avoided on the other.” The final gate is humility, which is “the ability to fully appreciate our innate gifts and our current ‘growing edges’ in ways that enable us to learn, act, and flow with our lives as never before.” (p. 45)

The desert permits us the space to enter each gate and to consider our unexamined memories and perceptions. Although the desert may be harsh and unforgiving, our encounter with our self is one of love, understanding and acceptance. The desert is a place of growing up where we take those perceptions we formed as children and reexamine them in the light of maturity. We once again open our ears and listen to those stories for the truth of our lives.

Next Wicks presents four voices to which we must listen. These are the voices of our friends. The first voice is the prophet, who challenges us to continually examine ourselves. Next we hear the cheerleader, who supports us through those difficult moments of our lives. Third is the harasser, who forces us to keep a perspective about ourselves. Finally, we hear the wise companion or soul friend, who encourages us to be all that we can and supports us without ridicule or shame.

Four questions confront us. What am I filled with now? (examination of where are we attached, caught,

addicted or blind). What prevents me from letting go? (acknowledgment of the fears and habits that imprison us). How do I empty myself? (effective use of our spiritual tools—prayer, meditation and silence—from which comes the grace to open up). What will satisfy me yet leave me open to more? (refurnishment of the self).

Finally, there are three steps: find your true name, find a second word, take a leap of faith. Ultimately, these steps are a call to let go, to gain purity of heart. They evolve into a grace-filled transcendence that allows us to embrace and act on our own divine gifts.

This small book is packed with wisdom, so much so that the reader may feel that the text tackles too much. Perhaps, Wicks is calling us to slow down and chew on each morsel rather than grabbing a “quick-fix” fast food. This is a different book every time I pick it up. Behind the simplicity, it is dense with Desert Wisdom that flashes like lightning as one reads, rereads and matures.

This book would appeal most to those who are comfortable with change and have been engaged by the theologies and philosophies of other faith traditions. For those who are ready for the pilgrimage of life, this is a highly recommended guidebook.

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Let in the Light: Facing the Hard Stuff with Hope

Patricia H. Livingston
Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press •
2006 • 156 pages • softcover

Patricia Livingston is so at home in her own skin that she invites her readers to join her in her spiritual journey and to share their own experiences. She is perfectly at ease in revealing how she received illuminating insight and hope from experiences with friends and family. Her transparency can encourage readers to an openness that permits the light to shine through.

Her grandson, George, running into the bedroom wall, at age four, symbolizes her reason for sharing this collection of stories. George was trying to get to the bathroom early one morning and ran into the bedroom wall. “I’m okay, Grandma,” he replied slowly, in response to her concern. “It’s just—I guess—I have too much dark in my eyes.” (p.9) Livingston says she wrote this book “because there is too much dark in our eyes. We are badly bruised from running into the walls of our existence, trying to find a doorway.” (p.10)

Her variety of supporting evidence and illustrations combined with the range of her resources makes this an interesting book. For example, in Chapter 1, “Light and Life,” she explores these questions: Why do we have such a fear of the dark? Why is light such a significant source of imagery for our sense of life? (p. 11) Insights from the Bible, science, the Nicene Creed, watching a movie with a priest and another with her two sons are employed to reveal the significance of learning the skill of “letting in the light.” (p.14).

Recalling her grandson, Daniel's birth, Livingston writes: "There were no labor rooms, no delivery rooms, no separate maternity ward rooms, just one corridor for it all. Unless a woman had a C-section, it was all in the same place. There were women in labor up and down the corridor." (p. 19) Her experience affected her physically. "I could feel adrenaline pouring through my body. I just could not believe this place! I had heard about the crisis in medical care in hospitals. I had heard about the severe strain on overworked nurses. But how could a medical system do this to these women? How could they advertise this maternity design as if it were some kind of a beneficial upgrade?" (p. 21) However, her perspective changed when she heard her daughter's voice: "Look at him, Mom! Just look at him. Isn't he a miracle?" Livingston writes: "I will never forget the impact of that moment. It was a stopped-in-my tracks challenge to where I chose to put my focus." (p. 21)

She enhances the chapter on the power of reframing by using what meteorologist Edward Lorenz described it as the "butterfly effect." "Even the smallest of actions can make a big change" (p. 24).

The transitions that link each of the sixteen chapters show the connectedness with the central theme. Livingston's personal style of storytelling is to let the insight into light emerge naturally from retelling the story. She lets her readers see how she responded to her experiences with honest emotions. Accordingly, she shows us how to translate our experiences of darkness—even our darkest nights of suffering, anxiety and hopelessness—into positive light.

Livingston acknowledges that her book "may be familiar territory." (p.29) Pastoral caregivers will recognize many of the methods and concepts she uses, and some may deem this as a limitation. On the contrary, the fact that old methods are infused with new insights for application is a primary strength of this work. This book will prove useful as a resource for self-care, improving chaplains' supportive skills and in assisting them in finding sources of light in new and unexpected places.

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***Pastoral Care of Depression:
Helping Clients Heal Their
Relationship with God***

Glendon Moriarty
Binghamton, NY: The Haworth
Pastoral Press • 2006 • 239 pages •
softcover

Helping depressed people heal their relationship with God sounds great, but of course there is no "quick fix" to make that happen, and this book makes no claim to be such. The author states a two-fold purpose: to provide the reader with a strong understanding of depression and the God image and to furnish the reader with the therapeutic ability to change the God image. (p. xvi)

Throughout this book, Moriarty discusses the development and characteristics of a person's God image, which he defines as "the personal, emotional, and subjective experience of God" as derived from the person's early experiences with his or her parents. (p. 42) If the person experienced his or her

parents as loving and trustworthy, the person's image of God will be the same. On the other hand, if parents were experienced as harsh, impatient or unpredictable, the person's God image will have those characteristics. The author's premise is that depressed persons are stuck in a negative feedback loop: feeling guilty before God, feeling they have to be perfect to please God and fearing abandonment by God and others.

Included in the book are exercises designed to help discover one's God image by evaluating relationships with father, mother and God. The reader is encouraged to complete each in order to thoroughly understand the concept of the God image. (I completed them and found them thought-provoking and helpful.)

Moriarty uses case examples of Bob and Lilith, pastor and deacon respectively, to illustrate the God image. Throughout the book he returns to them, discussing how the concepts he identifies apply to each. After he identifies how to assess a client's God image, he discusses how to affect/change the God image, first from the standpoint of psychodynamic therapy, then by way of cognitive techniques. An interesting array of interventions are offered for the latter.

Therapists, especially pastoral counselors or others who work with clients whose beliefs about God are important to them, will find this book most useful. I think chaplains will find it of limited value unless they are in a setting where they have opportunities for multiple, deep contacts with clients.

Finally, the book's perspective is Christian. While I think the concepts could apply to any monotheistic belief system, readers should

be aware of the Christian assumptions made by the author.

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***The Unwanted Gift of Grief:
A Ministry Approach***

Tim P. VanDuiwendyk
New York: The Haworth Pastoral
Press • 2006 • 183 pages • softcover

The author's practical approach to grief, along with his straightforward dialogue, his recounting of personal grieving events, as well as his decades of hands-on experiences as a hospital chaplain validates the emotional and spiritual challenges of grief work, and opens the reader's eyes on almost every page, where deep down within one can hear a voice shouting, "Yes!"

The author maintains that grief work, hard as it may be, is truly a God-given gift. The result is a renewed person who can grow on many emotional and spiritual levels and move forward living life to its fullest while still honoring the loss of a loved one.

Each of the four distinct sections contains a major building block of understanding grief as gift. The easy-to-read text provides a clearly laid out map of structured learning, a healing guideline, both for the individual and the group, e.g., family, friends. It also is a teaching tool and resource for healthcare professionals, chaplains and other pastoral caregivers, grief counselors, social workers, CPE and seminary students.

Throughout the book where clinical or technical words are used, the next sentence defines the word in a

way that does not insult the professionally educated or the layperson. The index is especially helpful for reference to key words and the location within the text for further study or review.

The Unwanted Gift of Grief is a practical guide through the wilderness of the grieving process. It outlines the differences in male and female grieving, and the marriage and intimacy issues that may arise. The author also describes the different ways introverts and extroverts grieve and touches on numerous aspects of grief, e.g., praying for a miracle, anger toward God, recognizing when sadness/depression become pathology, the need for sojourners on the journey through grief's wilderness. He notes turning points as healing begins to manifest itself: early euphoria and its potential pitfalls, peek-a-boo experiences of grief's return and what the healing transformation looks like.

VanDuiwendyk presents a healing pathway for all who grieve to navigate as well as a teaching and learning resource for professionals that I believe will stand the test of time. This book deserves space on the shelf next to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*.

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***Under Orders: A Spiritual
Handbook for Military Personnel***

William McCoy
Ozark, AL: ACW Press • 2005 •
softcover

Chaplain McCoy offers a handbook to the current generation of

military personnel, most of whom are young adults living outside of their growing up environment for the first time. It is, he says, "a handbook to think through one's faith about, to reflect about one's choices with, and to guide those people as they create the new world ahead." (p. 15) His intention is to translate the essential gospel message of unconditional love and forgiveness into the language of the current generation, and for this to be a place for them to begin, "their intellectual and spiritual quest." (p. 17)

The book is comprised of ten "orders" for such growth, each of which concludes with several questions for individual or group reflection. It is intended to be used either individually or as part of a formal or informal group discussion.

From the perspective of a healthcare chaplain, the book's greatest value may be that it is a new resource to offer to our staff—or to their young adult children—impacted by deployments and increased military service. To the extent that they are searching, this book may be an aid to "sorting things out" during the long periods of waiting that is a part of military service.

The orders McCoy gives include understanding yourself, accepting this generation as inherently "good," believing in God, understanding faith through asking the right questions, finding good friends, understanding death and its influence on your life now, fighting sin, understanding one's vocation, looking at how one "knows" what is real and experiencing love as the fundamental law of the universe.

McCoy sets out to explain abstract concepts such as postmodernism, hermeneutics and other theological

constructs in simple, everyday language. He assumes very little formal religious background on the reader's part, an assumption that is both a strength and weakness. Though the text is likely to be helpful to those who are searching, it may be too much "milk" and not enough "solid food" for those who have a strong church background. Even they, however, will benefit from the questions at the end of each chapter. It is unabashedly a cognitive approach that seeks to encourage the reader to identify and then to correct theological distortions absorbed from family or society.

Under Orders is written in a breezy, conversational tone that makes it accessible and an easy read. One can almost hear McCoy's voice; however, what works in direct conversation does not necessarily work well as prose. The book's primary difficulty is the apparent lack of editorial attention. The punctuation, grammatical and word choice mistakes are distracting.

Though healthcare chaplains may have to stretch to find creative ways to use this book, its limitations should not prevent its use. People throughout the institutions we serve, and the congregations in which we worship, are at various stages in their quest for answers. This book offers a way to reach out to those who, by the virtue of their deployments, often are invisible to the church and offers them some signposts on their spiritual journeys.

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The Year of Magical Thinking

Joan Didion

New York: Knopf • 2005 • 231 pages
• hardcover

In the final analysis, the book is less than the sum of its parts. Didion writes this work as a mixture of memoir and mourning. It is her way of attempting to come to terms intellectually and perhaps emotionally with the terrible and sudden loss she sustained when her husband of many years, suddenly died from a massive coronary in their front room. To complicate matters, their only child, a grown daughter, lay seriously ill in the hospital.

Chaplains who deal daily with crisis and catharsis will recognize and applaud the honest reporting of many of Didion's comments as she makes her way through this year of magical thinking (... this is not really happening/I did not abruptly become a widow/my child is not deathly ill/this terrible nightmare is happening to someone else/I cannot give away his shoes; he will need them ...) There are some wonderful insights tucked away in the book. "Grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life." (p. 26-27) "People who recently have lost someone have a certain look, recognizable maybe only to those who have seen that look on their own faces The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness These people who have lost someone look naked because they think themselves invis-

ible ... incorporeal." (p. 74-75)

Joan Didion—novelist, screenwriter, descriptive reporter—depicts well the sense of surprise that anguish brings in its wake. She ably conveys the emptiness and the unreality that the mourner feels within. "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be oblitative, dislocating to body and mind. We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe that their husband is about to return and need his shoes." (p. 188)

So with all these gems, what is missing? Perhaps it is that in describing their life together as successful writers with upscale homes at various times on both coasts of the United States, or their travels to Hawaii, or other marks of their accomplishments and achievements, it feels as though Didion is showing off, bragging about her triumphs. Though never stated, it feels as if she is thinking, "this should not happen to people like me."

Overall this is a good book, and there are many well described insights into this initial year of mourning. She engages, returns to and moves through many of the stages of grieving, including anger, disappointment, bargaining and denial. *The Year of Magical Thinking* affirms the human face and common experience of these stages of grief.

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***Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder:
A Guide for Family,
Friends, and Pastors***

Robert Collie

New York: The Haworth Pastoral
Press • 2005 • 118 pages • soft cover

A young woman moved slowly and methodically down the hallway, rubbing raised hands on the wall. Even in a psychiatric facility, this behavior seemed odd. While pondering whether to intervene directly, a dim light came on. Could she be a part of our new treatment program for anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders? She was. She was carrying out a behavioral therapy assignment known as exposure or response blocking.

Robert Collie has written an excellent little book, packed with information for both chaplain and parish pastor. A diplomate in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) and licensed social worker, his primary expertise grows out of being a consultant to an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) support group. He weaves their stories into the tapestry of a clinical presentation of the etiology, symptoms and a primarily Christian pastoral response to OCD and related disorders.

Five chapters address neurological and biological origins, including a predisposition to be overly anxious, responsible, hypervigilant and conscientious with frequent religious manifestations. The sufferer experiences unwelcome automatic intrusive thoughts that quickly become obsessions and compulsions leading to rituals. Superstitions and magical thinking often follow. Collie carefully explains the brain dysfunction process underlying these disorders.

Three chapters differentiate be-

tween pastoral and unpastoral caregiving. We afflict the afflicted with even more anxiety when we over-emphasize themes of guilt and punishment for sin and leave persons of faith no room for doubt. Offering faith certainties forcefully or sound theological logic does not appease a mind that constantly fires a doubting challenge. The more magical and vague the religion, the more the imagination is engaged and superstitions fed. Collie urges caution in offering forgiveness of sin for these thoughts and behaviors. "The pastoral task is to establish that the thoughts and behaviors are morally and ethically neutral" so that the sufferer can emerge from secrecy and shame to receive treatment.

Pastoral caring helps sufferers to manage religious doubt, to work with unwanted intrusive thoughts as temptations; to move away from an image of God as the Grand Inquisitor; to rebalance law and grace, legalism and kindness; to address the fear that magical superstitious thinking has given in to evil witchcraft; to move from endless perfection seeking to good enough and normal; to accept the normalcy of the fear of death and thereby reduce its power; to regain new perspectives on what is to be valued in life; and to utilize Catholicism's historic understanding of OCD as scrupulosity.

Collie concludes with more practical advice for the pastoral caregiver and three appendices, including one on resources.

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Addiction: Pastoral Responses

Bucky Dann

Daniel G. Bagby, editor
Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press •
2002 • softcover

This book emerged from the author's service both as a United Methodist pastor and clinical director/certified alcohol and substance abuse counselor. He rightly notes that substance abuse and addiction are both complex and difficult to treat.

This book fills a deep void in pastoral care literature. Many pastoral care specialists have relied too much on secular resources for thoughtful reflection about treating persons with addiction. Although Dann writes primarily for the pastor who has ongoing and significant contact with congregants who fit the addictive pattern, this book has a place in any pastoral care library, especially as few volumes have been written from the pastoral care perspective.

He notes that the local church is a natural place to locate assistance for the addicted person. Many congregations already offer their physical facilities for such organizations as AA and NA. He encourages them to move beyond this and to develop a more comprehensive approach for treating persons with addictions. Clergy are in a unique place to empower individuals to seek the help they need, and they often assist in the individual's transition back into the faith community following treatment.

Dann notes several misconceptions concerning the nature of addiction: there is a clear definition of the problem; people can be identified as addicts merely by looking at them; there is a clear reason for the addiction; using an illegal

substance does not automatically mean addiction. He provides a list of symptoms any three of which indicate substance dependency: tolerance—the ability to consume more of the substance over time; withdrawal—aftereffects such as hangover, chills, sweats, cramps, diarrhea, insomnia or seizures; exceeding intentions—lacking control over the use; failed attempts to quit; poor use of time—the amount of time needed to maintain the habit increases; interference with important roles and activities—drops out of social events, recreational activities, and the occupation is jeopardized; makes problems worse—medical or psychiatric problems become worse.

He differentiates between abuse

and addiction, defining the latter as the point where negative consequences interfere with several aspects of life. The word “interference” becomes key in making a pastoral diagnosis.

Dann outlines four essential pastoral care stances or therapeutic positions for helping persons with addiction: patience, honesty, withholding judgment and maintaining personal boundaries. He notes that associated problems, such as medical issues, illegal behaviors, sexual issues and family problems, also may need to be addressed.

The final portion of the book is devoted to developing a positive and comprehensive morality/theology concerning addiction. The author sets the western cultural con-

text of the drug environment and the immense ambiguity that surrounds the use of drugs in general. He points to four suggestions that enlarge a morality for the addicted person. While I understand the layout of the author’s material, as a theologian, I would have benefited from reading this chapter first. This book would be a useful resource for a beginning CPE student assigned to the substance abuse unit.

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“Seeing Clearly”. Reading Comprehension “ Short Stories Directions: Read the story. Then answer the questions below. Near the beginning of the story, we learn that Donna “was fit, trim, and ate only the healthiest of foods, eschewing soda and candy.” Since Donna only ate the healthiest foods, and soda and candy are unhealthy foods, we can infer that Donna does not eat soda and candy. In the sentence Peter is a bright student, he simply does not apply himself, the speaker does not talk about Peter in a condescending way because the speaker describes Peter as bright. The qualification that Peter does not apply himself does not make this statement condescending because it does not suggest that the speaker is superior in any way. ‘Anyone who cannot speak clearly and simply should say nothing and continue to work until he can do so.’ Sir Karl Popper. Spotlight Posts. I have to admit, the live presentation and performance was a bit sloppy on my side (my apologies), so I recommend to download and dissect the workbooks to get the most out of the meetup. I think both workbooks are worth a look. Many thanks go to Tea Kuseva and Alan Murray for organizing the event and having me, to Carlos Barboza for suggesting me as a speaker and of course to everyone who took the time to attend the session. If you have any feedback or questions, please leave me a comment here or contact me by email. Stay tuned. Crossing the Desert tells us why we need the desert in our lives and what kind of angels only the desert can bring. This is Robert Wicks at his best: wonderfully sane, balanced, accessible, witty, and challenging. Mysticism for those who are frightened of that term. This book presents desert wisdom in a very succinct and simple way which is accessible to most everyone. I enjoyed Wicks writing style and find myself coming back to some of the thoughts written in this book, more often than I would have thought. He speaks plainly and yet it is in the simplicity that the wisdom is found. Charles Blackmore crossed it, and lived to tell the tale. There are very few big adventures left and very few heroes. Children’s stories used to specialise in them - courageous explorers with sunburnt, leathery skin and eyes narrowed by straining to see into far horizons on their journeys into the unknown. These days you no longer find such people in fiction, let alone in real life. Or so I thought until I met Charles Blackmore. route; we went into it blind. In the event, it took 59 days to cross from west to east, and the desert was very kind to us. Anyone reading his extraordinary account of that crossing will wonder at the use of the word “kind”. I had been offered promotion but suddenly I felt I wanted to see who Charles Blackmore really was, outside all that. It was a tremendous gamble. Crossing the Desert by Robert J. Wicks, 2007, Sorin Books edition, in English. Let the desert teach you. Seek what is essential. Enter through the narrow gates. Listen to friends. Be grateful. Letting go. Ask the four desert questions. Feed your soul. Become a desert apprentice. Take three steps to inner freedom. Edition Notes. Includes bibliographical references (p. 157-166).