How to avoid burnout

Peter Selby faces the challenge from one of the clergy he appointed

Faith, not over-simplification

Sarah Hillman reads a book that says the right things on depression

When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend: Reflections on life and ministry with depression

Mark Meynell

IN SPITE of its title, When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend, and subject-matter, depression, parts of this book (extract, Faith, 11 May) made my heart sing for joy. Why? Because at last there is a intelligent book about depression, mental illness where the author is wise enough to admit that he doesn’t have all the answers, a book written with honesty, courage, and out of continuing pain.

Too much writing on this subject in the past has attempted to provide the solution, and, though somewhat a parody of the real situation, can be described as, “Turn to God and it will all be OK.” Ultimately, it will, but how does one survive and carry on, as they do? That is partly what this book is wrestling with.

Mark Meynell, its author, is an ordained Anglican from the Evangelical tradition. He also has an on-going journey of living with depression, but what is important is that, though his eloquence speaks volumes about that experience, although even as we read it we have the sense that faith, though tested, never totally lost its ability to provide perspective and meaning in his suffering. That perspective is the foundation for the wisdom in the next hundred pages: the practical necessity as well as the spiritual importance of self-care, particularly for the most energetic, creative, and committed, who find self-care hard.

In many sermons, the Pauline image of the disciple — to which Swans refers a great deal — can remain a general comment about ministerial humil­ity rather than the particular need and support that what specific remedies and responses. It is because this author gets specific that this book is lifted above well-meaning exhortation to be both challenging and of practical use to those who find it hard in prac­tice to accept the subtitle’s message that “You are more important than you imagine.”

Many examples of vulnerability and practical self-care are supported by a wide selec­tion of biblical citation and the wider rea­der that was, no doubt, part of the author’s self-care.

Alongside all that is worth while in the book, there remain some questions. Surely, a more artistic and nourishing front-cover design would have portrayed the book more accurately. And isn’t the subtitle rather than the title the real message of this book? It is for everyone, not just, or even mainly, “leaders”? The book is at least partly a critique of what the designation “leader” engenders.

Yet, if this is a book for everyone, it especially challenges those who have witnessed of others’ ministry. I happen to have been the bishop in­volved in the author’s call to under­take the special challenge of growing and enlivening a church in the centre of Worcester. It is hardly a decision that I can regret, given all the good that has flowed from it. But, since the take-up of the book, I must say that I was not ready to accept the subtitle that is written down at the front of this book. It is more than I can say that God does not become a gift.

Sarah Hillman reads a book that says the right things on depression

Floating hospital: on one of the Mercy Ships, founded 40 years ago, a young patient recuperates after surgery. The photo is from the new edition of Ships of Mercy. The remarkable fleet brings hope to the world’s poorest people by Don Stephens, this Christian missioner’s 17 years with Lynne Stephenson and Nancy Predaina (Hodder, £9.99 (£9) 978-1-473-68252-4)

Sex addict’s story

An important novel that lays bare a priest’s pain, says Paul Edmondson

The Final Retreat

If Joseph Flynn confesses to his bishop about his years of sexual promiscuity. He is met with com­passion and sent on an eight-day retreat to Craigbourne Monastery. A broken-down pianist, Stephen Hough, takes the form of a breezily honest, con­fessional book, Frank Frost’s (above), and is often addressed to the clergy he appointed. He also has an on-going journey of living with depression, but what is important is that, though his eloquence speaks volumes about that experience, although even as we read it we have the sense that faith, though tested, never totally lost its ability to provide perspective and meaning in his suffering. That perspective is the foundation for the wisdom in the next hundred pages: the practical necessity as well as the spiritual importance of self-care, particularly for the most energetic, creative, and committed, who find self-care hard.

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