

The way of the wound: A spirituality of trauma and transformation.

Robert Grant (1996). Self published.

Available from Guest House Institute [<http://guesthouse.org/institute.php>] or directly from Author.

Healing the soul of the Church: Ministers facing their own childhood abuse and trauma

Robert Grant (1994-1995). Self-published.

Available from Guest House Institute [<http://guesthouse.org/institute.php>] or directly from Author.

“The only way out... is through.”

These words of wisdom, given to me by a Jewish psychiatrist and mentor many years ago, kept echoing in my mind as I read these two books by Robert Grant, Ph.D.. The words remind me, like a silent totem, of the challenges and hard work required to confront and transform the trauma and pain in our lives. While freedom and a new sense of purpose lie on the other side of this confrontation, it remains a daunting task to move forward, even if only “one step at a time.” And, there is no way around the confrontation that leads to healing. The only way out... is through.

Robert Grant is a consultant and trainer for religious, business, military and international relief organizations; he is also a clinical provider and supervisor for clergy, counselors, psychologists, and other mental health workers in areas of trauma and victimization. He provides lectures, workshops, and training around the world on issues related to psychological trauma, sexuality, and spirituality. And, he knows what he’s talking about. He goes into trauma zones to treat victims, care for relief staff, and train local personnel. He helps church leaders in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific to deal with the consequences of abuse created when church ministers abuse those under their care. He has also consulted with a variety of diocesan and religious officials, as well as formation personnel, around trauma-related issues.

The way of the wound: A spirituality of trauma and transformation is the main book of the two. It is a deeply compassionate exploration of the path through trauma to a life of meaning and purpose, understanding and hope. Grant describes this path as a version – perhaps THE original version – of the hero’s or mystic’s journey. In writing this description he weaves together the

warp of research and writing about mythic heroes and mystics (for example, Joseph Campbell, Evelyn Underhill), depth psychology (Viktor Frankl, Rollo May) and traditional spiritualities (Thomas Merton, Adrian Van Kaam) with the *woof* of modern philosophy (Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Martin Buber) and trauma studies (Judith Herman, Alice Miller). The result is an amazingly engaging and readable synthesis that helps the reader to understand the existential and spiritual challenges faced by victims/survivors of abuse and trauma.

This book is also a thoughtfully presented theological anthropology with a distinctly Augustinian and contemporary cast. It presents a kind of synthesis between Western and Eastern spiritual perspectives. All of us, the author believes, share an essential *restlessness* that is rooted in the Spirit's call, in an "essential incompleteness." Many people risk having this spiritual restlessness hijacked by attachments, addictions, power/control, material things, success, and anxieties or the "cares of this world." This view reaffirms traditional and contemporary spiritualities (from Buddhism and Ignatian spiritualities to the asceticism of "The Force" in *Star Wars*) regarding "inordinate attachments" that distract us from life's primary purpose and hinder us from spiritual growth.

Our task is to awaken to the call of Spirit, throw off the attachments and distractions that get in our way, and follow the call. There are many paths one can follow in order to do this, many paths toward spiritual growth and development, many spiritualities from which to choose. Giving oneself to a life of service and compassion is one way. Religious life and ministry is another. Recovery from addiction is also a potential path for spiritual healing and wholeness. For some, the path laid before them is "the way of the wound," a journey through trauma to transformation. Trauma, while a hellish thing, can also be a potential catalyst for embarking on the path of spiritual growth. It has traditionally been the path of the shaman, the mystic, and the mythic hero.

Grant defines trauma simply as related to "overwhelming life events that render a person powerless or in fear for his or her life." When such an event occurs in someone's life – *unintentional* traumas such as the death of a loved one or a natural disaster; *intentional* traumas such as terrorist acts, rape or the abuse of a child; *secondary* traumas such as witnessing the stories of victimized people, or working in situations of disaster relief or inner-city crime and poverty – the safety and security of ordinary existence can be ripped away and the existential chasm of fear and dread can open under one's feet. Persons pay a price for exposure to this "underworld" of trauma, often losing their psychological and spiritual moorings and left to cope

with isolation, toxic shame/guilt, a deep sense of inadequacy, and a debilitating loss of trust that leaves them vulnerable and alone. All their previously constructed meanings and beliefs are pared back and they often find themselves bereft of both life-meaning and social support. In their disillusionment and grief, they find themselves cut off, without a map or directions for where to go next.

It is often at this moment that they encounter counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists and spiritual directors. Some few may find that these caregivers can help along the way. Many, however, encounter caregivers who are themselves frightened of the trauma and unable to accompany them on the road. [The book is also a critique of professional counseling, spiritual direction, and formation delivered without informed sensitivity to trauma and its effects.] Becoming dispirited, the trauma victim again seeks distraction and diversion from the path. In Grant's view many settle for lives of "quiet desperation," organized around addiction or other illusions of control. For the lucky ones – and for their caregivers – Grant devotes the majority of the book to the journey of transformation. This is where victims and survivors will find validation and guidance for their struggles. Clinical and pastoral caregivers, spiritual directors, formation personnel, religious authorities will find sound instruction for understanding the journey and learning how to assist others.

Utilizing a paradigm from traditional Christian spirituality, Grant speaks of an initial catalyst (conversion, trauma) that sets one's feet on the journey. There is then a process of spiritual development through purgation, illumination, and union. In successive sections of the book he elaborates the dynamics and pitfalls of each step, providing a map through the shoals of trauma recovery. I particularly liked the section on "Avoiding the Call" in which Grant examines many of the distraction strategies used to divert one from the catalyst and authentic spiritual growth. Looking at intellectualism, addictions, a frenzied flight into spiritual practices or inflated religious *alter egos*, or psychological symptoms – all forms of diversion – is an enlightening section. Grant's deft examinations of a "dark night of the ego" (the night of sense in John of the Cross) and a "dark night of Self" (of soul) are also well worth reading. Grant examines these critical "nights" as a progressive "decentering" in which the ego and its illusions are stripped bare and the Self feels abandoned by Spirit, so that true compassion and connection with all there is can be accomplished. This has been the goal of spiritual development all along. It is the journey from victim, to survivor, to "wounded healer" or advocate on behalf of others.

In elaborating the path of the heroic or mystic survivor, Robert Grant has written the essential

elements of a “spirituality of trauma.” Such a spirituality is much needed in our world today, and in our practice of ministry. Many of those in ministry and religious leadership need the tools and perspectives of such a spiritual view in order to understand their pastoral purpose. This book takes its readers a long way down the road toward such understanding.

Healing the soul of the Church begins where *Way of the wound* leaves off, turning its attention squarely to the needs of the Church and its ministers. This book is a sober(-ing) analysis and critique of the current situation from a loyal son of the Church. It is unflinching, yet compassionate. Grant speaks to us some fierce truths, yet reminds us of the pain suffered by ALL victims and presents us with a variety of preventive and healing recommendations. He believes deeply in honest and compassionate confrontation with our “shadows” – personal and communal – and a change of Church “culture” as the only paths to re-discovery of healing and forgiveness (reconciliation) as the core mission of the Church. *The only way out... is through.* Part I reads like a review of *Trauma 101*, a comprehensive overview and examination of basic trauma theory and the far-reaching effects of trauma experiences in peoples’ lives. It builds upon and complements *Way of the wound* by presenting a model of trauma and statistics regarding prevalence of the phenomenon, particularly in the United States.

Grant reminds us that a number of epidemiological and clinical researchers have reached a consensus that approximately 22.9% of the general population in North America – one in three women; one in five-six men – have experienced some form of sexual abuse prior to 18 years of age. Compare this consensus estimate with national sources; go, for example, to <http://www.childwelfare.gov/>; <http://www.jimhopper.com/>; <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/>, or http://www.darkness2light.org/KnowAbout/statistics_2.asp.

These numbers, astounding as they are, do not even begin to account for physical or emotional abuse, neglect, and a number of other harmful experiences that lead to traumatization (e.g. witnessing violence in the home; growing up with an alcoholic, substance abusing, or criminal family member; living with chronic marital discord or infidelity, and the like). The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE), for example, confirms earlier estimates that 30% (one in three) of U.S. and Canadian men have experienced physical abuse as children (<http://www.acestudy.org/>). We know from many sources that 28 million to 35 million children (approximately one in every four children) grow up in homes with potential parental alcoholism.

The effects are devastating, as a recent report from APA Online demonstrates (see, for example, <http://www.apa.org/releases/alcohol0106.html>).

Grant also portrays in vivid detail the psychological effects of such trauma. He describes persons whom many ministers, formation personnel, spiritual directors, and a variety of helpers will remember meeting. Victims of untreated trauma carry baggage of guilt, shame, a sense of inadequacy and inferiority that is quite toxic and debilitating, even if it is covered over by social compliance, intelligence, a suave exterior, and a “good boy” morality. In fact, he explains, one should expect to meet these qualities in unrecovered victims; they have learned that their very survival depends on the public presentation they make, while their own souls are imperiled from within. They live out of idealized versions of the self – a false self – in order to secure acceptance and approval. What could be more appealing to these victims than a priestly or religious vocation that conveys a sense of meaning and value in service and self-sacrifice? This is the ultimate “moral defense” for the individual and carries the added benefit of covering the deficiencies and shame of a family that might not bear up under close scrutiny. In addition the numbers of trauma victims, Grant believes, is likely to be higher within ministry circles than in the general population. All of us who care about the future of priesthood and religious life need to come to terms with the likely numbers of unrecovered victims who seek spiritual meaning and purpose in ministry and religious leadership.

Part II begins here with an incisive exploration of “Reasons for Entering Clerical or Religious Life” (Chapter 9). Readers looking for a theological or spiritualized treatment of vocation and call will likely be scandalized by this section, indeed by the rest of the book. This is a hard-nosed, clinical examination of the many conflicted, unacknowledged, hidden, and shadowy experiences that lie underneath vocational choice. It is not for the faint-hearted.

One way to read these sections is to reflect on the trauma statistics enumerated above (and throughout this special issue of *GH Review*) and ask how well prepared the Church is to integrate some percentage of unrecovered persons into its formation processes and ministries. What would it take for the Church to honor the vocations of such persons, while assisting them to seek healing and recovery? How many persons suffering from the toxic effects of trauma are currently working in the Church’s ministries, and how can they be helped into recovery? How has the Church itself been shaped, for good or ill, by the traumatic experiences of those in ministry and in positions of power?

The sections on “Religious Formation” (Chapter 10) and “Community Life” (Chapter 11)

are quite well written and present powerful challenges to the *status quo*, even though they were first written in the 1990s. The sections on “Sexuality” (Chapter 12) and “Religious Culture” (Chapter 13) present a nuanced picture of both phenomena and could help to frame conversation about where to go from here. A well-rounded and contemporary theology and spirituality of sexuality, chastity and formation could be built on this foundation. Chapter 14, “Trauma in Ministry” gives a much-needed and welcome complement to the earlier focus on childhood and adolescent abuse. Although not much discussed within Church circles, the deeply traumatic experiences suffered by adult ministers (for example, in war zones, on the missions, in inner-city environments) are addressed here with compassion and great care. In today’s world of poverty & starvation, terrorism, racial and ethnic violence, and genocide the witnessing of brutal acts and the experiencing of violent evil are all too common for missionaries and others who try to bring Christ’s presence into lives around the world. We all have a duty to see that global ministers, missionaries, and other pastors working in traumatic circumstances are helped to acknowledge their pain and seek recovery. This is an important section for all readers, but particularly for Church leadership who can implement effective programs and strategies.

The book ends with a section of “Recommendations” that is far-reaching in scope. It can help the Church in a crucial variety of ways. Concrete examples abound:

- Diocesan directors of vocations, *formatores*, Novice Masters/Mistresses, seminary professors need to acknowledge the presence of trauma in their midst and become aware of the signs and symptoms. The Church itself must acknowledge the presence of unrecovered persons within ministry and leadership, and demonstrate a serious understanding of this phenomenon as a likely “hidden engine” for many elements of the current crisis of mistrust and misconduct.
- Those seeking admission to ministry training, and those who assess their “readiness” for training, must learn about the toxic effects of trauma and begin the process of (self-) identification and early detection. Training and use of simple screening instruments would help here, as well as an understanding of the need to complement current psychological testing with extensive (and focused) family history taking and interviewing.
- Formation programs must be reshaped to allow for personal and interpersonal exploration of developmental issues, as well as for the development of intimate friendships to break down barriers of loneliness and isolation. Examining ways to augment “internal forum” knowledge of trainees with ongoing background information and encouraging personal disclosure is important as well.
- Training formation personnel and superiors, as well as spiritual directors, to accompany and help candidates to face and work through their issues and personal injuries is critical for pastoral formation that is worthy of the name. Some kind of certification and

continuing education for those charged with the task of formation is also critical.

- Referrals for psychological and other help should be made without shame and with confidence in the help that is offered. This includes referrals for counseling, testing, psychiatric medications, residential programs, and other forms of assistance.
- Debriefing and renewal programs for those returning from the missions, from traumatic situations, and the like should be mandatory and executed competently.

These and other recommendations round out the book and make a case for pastoral reformation of Church practice in a variety of situations.

This book is well-written and challenging. The two-book set needs to be read and discussed by Church leaders and formation personnel.

One last point: Both of the books reviewed here are self-published by the author. He was unable to find a “home” for either book in any of the better-known publishing houses, religious or secular. This is something of a mystery. His credentials are impeccable and his experience extensive. While the books touch on areas that are similar to other current publications, such as David France’s *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal* (Broadway, 2005), Richard Sipe’s *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (Routledge, 2003) Jason Berry’s *Lead Us Not into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children* (University of Illinois, 2000), Grant’s work has had difficulty being widely disseminated.

This is unfortunate, and hard to explain. One wonders, however, if his commitment to remain a “loyal critic” isn’t part of the problem. His language is direct to be sure, yet always laced with compassion for ALL the victims, including those unrecovered victims who are part of the Church structure. And clearly, he has an interest and a stake in the Church’s finding ways to reformation and redemption.

These two books are not exposés and catalogues of the Church’s sins, primarily the work of journalists. They are a clinician’s description, diagnosis, and treatment plan. They are a forthright attempt to assist all members of the Church to acknowledge the faults of the past, to confront the difficulties of the present, and to make the necessary changes for the future. Compassionate confrontation is key here. ***The only way out... is through!***

Guest House Institute is glad to be able to make his views and writings more available. His books can be purchased directly from him, or through Guest House Institute.

Oliver J. Morgan, Ph.D.
University of Scranton