
Bidwell, in a brief, concentrated volume, both offers a theoretical construct and demonstration of that construct for spiritual care givers to help couples grow in their relationship through short term spiritually integrated support, perhaps three to five sessions.

He opens by naming three dimensions of his approach: (a) Empowering, as contrasted to guiding alone, “allows people to claim their agency; it brings them to voice so that they can act rather than be acted upon” (4) (b) The narrative approach makes use of the stories couples tell about themselves and guides them toward telling more hopeful and positive stories. (c) “Spirit pervades everything…” (5) This includes the caregiver, the couple, their culture, community, and life together (couples might be seen as “communal souls”).

Further, Bidwell names four resources for care. (From this reviewer’s stance, this is pastoral theology at its best – engaging the finest relevant work of social science researchers as well as enduring and emerging theological and ethical perspectives). One resource is the Semitic and early Christian desert traditions of “passions-spirits-demons” particularly as they create strife in committed relationships.

Another is narrative psychotherapy as “a consistent and coherent model of change that is appropriate for use with couples.” (7) Narrative therapy is a form of using the client’s own stories developed by Australian Michael White and New Zealander David Epston.

Still another resource is the empirical research of psychologist John Gottman and associates. Gottman offers a helpful understanding of a healthful relationship and also identifies “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” These are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling, which are much akin to the passions of which the desert Abbas and Ammas spoke.

Bidwell’s fourth resource is a theology of mutuality that contains a vision for a covenanted partnership. This in turn will have components of relational justice, equal regard, mutual empowerment, respect for embodiment (thus violence cannot be an option), and resistance to colonization (which includes resistance to harmful cultural beliefs).

From this framework, the author illustrates how this approach can be used in short term counseling relationships. It is a non-pathological approach that invites the couple to tell their own story and identifies and externalizes the forces threatening their relationship with guidance on how to rebuild the partnership. This discussion is developed with vignettes and brief counseling conversations (revisited for symptoms and issues) in situations all too common among couples. These include lack of attention-conversation, over heavy schedules, the changes with the arrival of a new baby, and internet distractions.

Bidwell offers a method capsulized in the acronym SMART (first developed by David Nylund) adapted as a way to offer appropriate spiritual care with couples: Separating people from problems and passions; Mapping influences; Attending to teamwork; Reclaiming partnership; Telling a new story. (43-45)

This is an important work. It offers a door to competent, hopeful, short term counseling in an extremely important aspect of a minister’s work. This approach integrates the discoveries of desert
spirituality with the findings of modern family researches and introduces a method to address these “passions” with compassion and partnership.

The book’s great strength is also possibly its weakness. Bidwell writes concisely and reports-integrates the insights of much of the pastoral theological academic community with which he is conversant. Those unacquainted with the theories-methods he engages might need a more thorough introduction. He may have attempted too much in too brief a statement.

At the same time, he provides bibliography as to where to go to learn more and also offers exercises to learn more about the methods. I commend the book to you.

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