

[MJTM 22 (2020–2021)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Robert J. Wicks. *Night Call: Embracing Compassion and Hope in a Troubled World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxix + 248 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-1906-6963-8. \$26.95.

Resilience is an essential and popular subject for those participating in healing and helping vocations. The reader will find that Robert Wicks's *Night Call* is not unique among the numerous books on this subject in this regard. However, what does make *Night Call* distinct is its emphasis on the role of psychological virtues, such as patience, persistence, humility, and compassion. These virtues build up the ability to acquire the expansion of inner freedom, especially for those in middle and late adulthood, so that people can grow in resilience and compassion amid suffering, failure, and darkness.

*Night Call* contains a prologue, nine chapters, an epilogue, an appendix, information about the author, and an index. It not only provides a reference bibliography but also further reading on resiliency, self-care, and compassion for three potential audiences of readership: (1) general readers, (2) physicians and nurses, and (3) psychotherapists, counsellors, social workers, and ministers. The arrangement of the section on further reading indicates that Wicks is sensitive to the unique needs of different vocations.

Based on his clinical stories and experiences, Wicks provides the following themes for each chapter. He begins by encouraging frustrated helpers by presenting the significance of their compassionate presence. Then, in Chapter 2, he notes that helpers can harvest the fruits of failure if they are empowered to see the benefits that the disappointments may bring. In Chapter 3, Wicks discusses the necessity for helpers to create space to lean back and see the benefits of the failure, or see in the darkness, through practising solitude and silence. Furthermore, in order to live out

what they see during the alone time, Chapter 4 introduces the practice of attentiveness and unlearning, which enable helpers to be open to the new perspectives without being blinded by stale judgment. Knowing the challenge of making a breakthrough in expanding the horizon of views through unlearning, Wicks advises searching for wise mentors for guidance and support in Chapter 5. However, in Chapter 6, Wicks, as an experienced mentor, is swift to clarify and reemphasize that what helpers need to learn from mentors is not helping skills but a realistic self-care strategy. Then in Chapters 7 and 8, Wicks directs helpers to realize their painful but rewarding growth through three inner journeys: finding their central identity, pruning their identity by considering the effect of weaknesses on strengths, and releasing their primary gifts and developing the growing edges. Wicks encourages that even though helpers may encounter painful struggles when they embrace and enhance their weak areas, the reward is their enlarged inner freedom to face challenges to being a compassionate presence in the darkness. Finally, in Chapter 9, Wicks concludes that the elusive virtue of humility is essential throughout the life of helpers to ensure growth and inner freedom for resilience while they faithfully respond to their call to be light in the darkness.

Wicks suggests in the prologue that the reader can begin their reading by choosing a topic that they feel will be most helpful, then afterwards they can explore the other areas more effectively based on what has attracted them. Wicks's system is that helpers start from where and who they are and take strategic and practical steps to explore and move to a new horizon of their life. Beginners who are overwhelmed by a busy agenda can begin by incorporating the practice into their arranged schedule. For example, they can develop their simple self-care program by taking their walk to the washroom as an opportunity for practicing mindfulness. Meanwhile, the advanced helpers may consider expanding their inner freedom by leaping into the darkness to develop the growth edges. Wicks's advice, strengthened by his personal experiences of encountering challenges and growth, gives this work credibility, and motivates its readers to follow through rather than just producing romantic feelings about being a helper.

Even though Wicks suggests that the reader can start reading any chapter they want, it does not mean that he arranges the themes randomly. Instead, *Night Call* manifests a sequence or flow of chapters. The reader can find at the end of each chapter the reasons why they need to pursue reading the next chapter, which may enhance what they learn from the current chapter. For example, the reader may find it abrupt that “mentor” becomes the theme of Chapter 5 since the emphasis of this book focuses on “the quiet lessons.” However, Wicks explains at the end of Chapter 4 that helpers need mentorship for support, given the difficulty of removing psychological cataracts by oneself. Furthermore, Wicks sticks to his system of “the quiet lessons” by focusing on guiding helpers to ponder the profile of mentors in their quiet time.

Regarding the intent of this book, Wicks has accomplished his two goals: “to enable people to enjoy their lives a little more” and “to help them better appreciate the amazing breakthroughs possible when they can stand in the darkness with a new sense of openness” (xxi). The reader will recognize that Wicks wraps his themes and advice around achieving these two goals. However, as some scholars realize, Wicks’s book does not present any breakthroughs. Instead, it directs the reader to refresh their memory of the core approaches to self-compassion that may be buried by some dysfunctional norms of this society and unhealthy family influence. Wicks also reminds readers that they must put his advice into practice to benefit from it.

Therefore, one may raise the question of why it is challenging to put into practice what is not new to this society. Wicks tries to advise the reader to start with small steps. However, what he has missed in his book is practical advice for readers in different vocations. Even though Wicks recognizes the different needs of various professions, he does not create sections to present the unique strengths and weaknesses of caregivers from diverse backgrounds in providing self-care. On the one hand, it is understandable because Wicks addresses a general audience. However, since Wicks can deftly summarize broad topics like self-care or resilience, he could have included application for various vocations. Since Wicks spends fifty-three pages in an appendix on

a retreat, he could have spared some space to address the particular needs of different professions.

Furthermore, as a Christian scholar who acknowledges the importance of spirituality, Wicks does not point out the strength of Christian spirituality in achieving his goals. It is possibly a common practice of this society to avoid highlighting Christian practices while advocating non-Christian approaches such as Zen practices. Upholding Christian value may be a new horizon that psychological self-care needs to embrace. As Wicks says, the key to self-care is to put the advice into practice. However, for Christian ministers, whom Wicks kept in mind when he wrote this book, it is necessary to modify the book's advice before they put it into practice.

Henri Nouwen, Wicks's mentor, asks, "Is there the still point where my life is anchored and from which I can reach out with hope and courage and confidence?" (175). The answer given by Nouwen lies in the relationship with the Divine Being, especially as a beloved one, rather than practicing self-debriefing during the time of solitude and silence. The space created during alone time is significant but not fundamental. When we encounter the Supreme Being in the solitude of our created space, we are able to bear the fruits of life for others and ourselves instead of merely changing customs and styles. Otherwise, the more we reflect on ourselves, the greater the possibility that we become obsessed with self-knowledge, which Wicks warned the reader to avoid several times. Only attachment to the One who sets human beings free can produce the assurance of inner freedom when we care for others and ourselves.

Another point that Christians need to adapt is the belief and approach to building up the weak areas of our character or virtues. Wicks realizes that the growing edges are also part of our identity, even though they may not be the primary or centred ones in the beginning. However, the goal of Christian growth is Christ-likeness, no matter what strengths and weaknesses we have. Therefore, in Chapter 8, Christians may appropriate a leap into the darkness to faith in the transformation of character, following the image of Christ, the one who has the Seed of virtue for all. Pursuing completion in Christ-likeness is essential to

Christians. Numerous caregivers emphasize building up human strengths as if these strengths are the embodiment of their particularity. Only a few, for example, M. Robert Mulholland Jr., strive to present a growth to a full-fledged personality that shows a balance of polarities of character. From Christian perspectives, it is possible because of the transformative force of the divine Spirit working in the process of human renewal.

Those who understand the differences between various vocations can benefit further from this book. Otherwise, people may be misguided to throw out their treasure or cover up the perils in their journey of self-compassion to be a compassionate presence with others.

I recommend this book to those who desire to be helpers and healers and those who pursue a whole life of personal growth. For Christian readers, I would recommend that they adapt the content of the book through the lens of biblical spirituality. At the same time, this is a great book to guide Christians to help non-Christians without forcefully imposing Christian values and approaches on them but with the hope of introducing them to a new horizon when they see the divine light.

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