

How to avoid burnout

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

Sustaining Leadership: You are more important than your ministry
Paul Swann

BRF £8.99
(978-0-85746-651-8)
Church Times Bookshop £8.10



SEE beyond the small size of this book to an offering of generosity and wide-ranging wisdom.

Its generosity lies in Paul Swann's writing about his experience of illness without holding much back: he invites us into his experience of chronic fatigue. We are given a graphic, though not over-dramatised, account of the terrible toll that ME took on the author.

Even more significant is the particular distress that burnout brings to a person of great talent and deep commitment, when he reaches the point when he has to say, "I can't do this any more." Fragility — to put it mildly — was what he encountered as he "hit the buffers"; then fragility was what had gradually to be emerged from, and then, as its meaning became clear, to be embraced.

So, the first third of the book is

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 hardest.

In many sermons, the Pauline image of the clay pot — to which Swann refers a great deal — can remain a general comment about ministerial humility rather than pointing to specific vulnerabilities that need 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 your ministry." The many examples of vulnerability and practical self-care are supported by a wide selection of biblical citation and the wider reading 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 oversight 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 disintegration and the reintegration that this book describes are also what (in part) flowed from that decision, I found the book a particular challenge.

Looking at my former ministry, I ask myself, in gladly appointing some of our strongest people to the hardest tasks, are we as aware as we need to be of the particular support and resourcing needs that such colleagues have? Or do we just hope that the talented and the committed will find their own way of avoiding burnout? That goes along with a more searching question: how well are we ourselves modelling self-care?

But this gentle author also knows how to use examples that challenge lightly; so if you ever catch yourself not completing the two minutes that your electric toothbrush allows, remember it's not just your teeth that you're not caring for.

The Rt Revd Dr Peter Selby is a former Bishop of Worcester.

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

IVP £9.99
(978-1-78359-650-8)
Church Times Bookshop £9



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 an intelligent book involving good theology about mental illness where the author is wise enough to admit that he doesn't have all the answers. It is a book written with integrity, 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, in my words, "Turn to God and it will all be OK." Ultimately, it will, but how does one survive and remain faithful till then? 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 ongoing journey of living with depression. But what is important is that, though his eloquence speaks vol-

umes, he does not allow his illness to become what defines him; nor is it what gives him his identity, though he recognises that "depression is my chronic reality."

In the introduction to the book, Meynell makes an important point that, when it comes to mental health and depression, generalisations are rarely helpful; that is perhaps where much writing on this subject has fallen down, as sufferers try to make their own experiences the general rule. He rightly explains how language is limited, and how one of the symptoms of depression is the way in which it can make articulate people unable to express themselves. In this he finds a friend in the American novelist William Styron, a wordsmith whose attempts to describe the indescribable Meynell labels a "life-saver".

Meynell takes Styron's phrase "brainstorm" and turns it into "brain blizzard" as a way of describing his own experiences. He uses the symbolism of being alone in a cave, a dark and intimidating place, where the only voice that we hear is our own, as negativity reverberates around the walls.

Interestingly, neither of those images resonated with my own experiences of depression, and yet, as I read, that didn't really matter, because Meynell is reflecting on his life and the pictures that make sense to him. It is different language to describe similar experiences.

Looking at the darkness that depression brings, he writes in detail about guilt and shame. I was encouraged, too, to find a chapter on suicide, so often a taboo subject for Christians, but one that needs to be

brought into the open. For those who have never experienced suicidal thoughts, it is hard to understand how anyone, let alone a person of faith, might contemplate ending his or her God-given life — a good reason that they, too, should read this book.

That may all sound as if this book is only about darkness and negativity. It isn't, because throughout there is the underlying touchstone of the love and compassion of God, the God who can live with our darkness. The Psalms are quoted extensively, and the later chapters offer real hope in the character of God — compassionate, loving, and responsive to those who admit that they haven't got it all sorted.

Here is a Christian leader honest enough to say that God does not always seem present, even though we cling on through faith. A chapter on relationships with other people is helpful, both those who are also "cave-dwellers" and those who have never experienced the isolation and darkness of depression, including a wonderful list of things not to say, all of which have been said to me over the years.

A final chapter addresses the thorny issue how someone living with depression can also be a pastoral minister. Meynell did give up one paid position because of his health, but not his ministry. Though he would not wish his experiences on anyone, he can also see God's hand at work in using them to help others, and in this way they have become a gift.

The Revd Sarah Hillman is Vicar of Puddletown, Tolpuddle, and Milborne with Dewlish, in Dorset.



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 bringing hopes to the world's poorest people* by Don Stephens, this Christian mission's founder, with Lynda Rutledge Stephenson and Nancy Predaina (Hodder, £9.99 (£9); 978-1-473-68254-2)

Sex addict's story

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

FR JOSEPH FLYNN confesses to his bishop about his years of sexual promiscuity. He is met with compassion and sent on an eight-day

The Final Retreat
Stephen Hough

Sylph Editions £14
(978-1-909631-28-1)
Church Times Bookshop
£12.60



retreat to Craighourne Monastery.

This novel, by the world-famous pianist Stephen Hough, takes the form of a bruisingly honest, confessional notebook during Fr Joseph's time away. His reflections include his earliest sexual awakenings, being bullied by his damaged mother, his neurotic need to be accepted, his addiction to male prostitutes, and the effects of black-

mail. Hough's intermittently poetic prose is as precise as his music. He carefully paints a world of voracious desire and chronic loneliness, as the 60 short, tautly written chapters take us ever further into the protagonist's mire. The novel's truthfulness might shock some readers. This is a non-erotic narrative about sexual addiction arising from a deeply rooted fear and repression of sexuality in the Roman Catholic Church.

Fr Joseph's faith has dried up; his vocation has fallen silent; his priesthood has turned to sand. Liturgy and sacrament have ceased to be meaningful, and human relationships have become banal. What confronts us is a self laid bare both literally in squalid sex and metaphorically on retreat, a priest's dark night of the soul, and his inability to escape.

Hough makes all this seem as raw and true as the pain of extreme grief. I found myself longing for the protagonist to realise the *via negativa* of his experience. The woman taken in adultery, the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, and Judas's suicide are invoked, but Hough admirably avoids self-indulgence and moralising.

The book is a beautifully printed hardback with attractive endpapers, and includes a colour reproduction of Anton Kolig's nude *Seated Youth* (1919). Hough's novel is important, brave, and controversial. It deserves to become a classic of its kind.

The Revd Dr Paul Edmondson is Head of Research and Knowledge and Director of the Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

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