

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Healing the Western Soul: A Spiritual Homecoming for Today's Seeker** by Judith S. Miller, Haverford, PA: Paragon House, 2015, 252pp + 25 front matter pp., \$14.95 pb, ISBN 978-1-55778-917-4; Kindle ed. \$9.95 e-book.

We are the authors of over 20 books on psychiatry, trauma psychology, and psycho-spiritual growth. We taught at Rutgers University's Institute for Alcohol and Drug Studies for 30 years between us and I (Charles) was professor of Internal Medicine and Psychiatry. I am now a visiting researcher at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I (Barbara) am a near-death experiencer (NDEr) who spent six years as research assistant studying the aftereffects of near-death experiences at the University of Connecticut Medical School with psychiatrist Bruce Greyson.

Judith S. Miller, our colleague and friend, is professor of Developmental Psychology at Columbia University. One of the courses she teaches, "Spiritual Development Across the Lifespan," has been very appreciated over the years by her students. She is also on the faculty of the International Institute for Consciousness Studies and Psychotherapy in Wittgau, Germany, and leads psycho-spiritual retreats regularly in the US, Europe, China, and Korea. She has served on the Board of Directors of the International Association for Near-Death

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Studies (IANDS), and she is past president of the local support and interest IANDS group in Delaware Valley. A highly regarded teacher, clinical supervisor, and spiritual guide, Miller is a popular speaker and presenter for lay and professional audiences alike.

We found *Healing the Western Soul* to be a spiritually rich book that brought us to a psycho-spiritual celebration of our homecoming by giving us an easily understandable framework for intellectual integration, emotional liberation, and spiritual illumination. Miller asserted that the contemporary Western mental health system is failing people who have had spiritual experiences, especially those involving Western spiritual figures such as angels or Jesus. In her opinion, too many therapists are stuck in the worldview that only what science can prove is real. She has observed that all too often, health practitioners believe that anything outside the realm of provable science, including the Western mystery path, should be medicated away. As a result of this influence and of early exposure to the negativity-, shame-, and fear-base of much of organized religion, patients themselves often discount their own emergent Judeo-Christian imaginings and experiences. All these preconceptions get in the way of addressing a Western spiritual emergency. This situation has become more than an individual crisis: It has become the crisis of Western civilization.

Miller acknowledges a Judeo-Christian path as one route to the Divine. Her encouragement to allow for the authenticity of mystical experiences in the therapeutic process opens up a powerful route toward healing to those whose souls yearn for something beyond the material world.

*Healing the Western Soul* is divided into three parts. In Part One, "Our Western Spiritual Angst," Miller described three support systems for psycho-spiritual seekers—religion, psychology, and the New Age movement—and how those systems, despite good intentions to assist seekers on their psycho-spiritual journeys, are failing. In Part Two, "Our Western Spiritual Roots," she examined the deep and powerful influences of the Western mystical ground on the individual's psychological and spiritual growth and development. She noted that because many contemporary seekers do not understand the sacred foundation from which the Judeo-Christian tradition has arisen, they turn away from their Western spiritual experiences that actually have their source in seekers' souls. To provide seekers with a better understanding, she discussed the nature of the mystical ground, the nature of the Western God experience, and the importance of working with the dualities of dark and Light. In Part Three, "Our Western Spiritual

Path,” she focused on the three stages of the Western Spiritual Path: Awakening, Illumination, and Union. She guided readers through an explanation of their features, their relevance to people today, the challenges of each, and how to resolve those challenges for healing and development.

Throughout her book, Miller made four key points. The first is that *at the foundation of Judeo-Christian tradition is a sacred, mystical ground*. Many seekers today don’t know this fact, so when they receive important spiritual messages that contain Western spiritual imagery or meaning, they turn away from them. These people call themselves “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR; p. 89). Having been disappointed with their childhood religion, they look to Eastern, Shamanic, or other non-Western alternatives—rather than look within to their own mystical ground. Miller asserted that organized religion actually has little to do with mystical truths. Although organized religion by and large has not supported people on their personal journeys, when Western mystical energies express themselves, they need to be taken seriously if spiritual growth is to occur.

Miller’s second key point is that *all traditions ultimately lead to the same home—irrespective of what the name of that place is, whether God, Goddess, All-That-Is, Holy Spirit, Higher Power, Elohim (the Hebrew Divine), or whatever*. But people’s paths to that home may vary because of who they are, what spiritual roots comprise their identities, and the like. While affirming the value of various paths, Miller also contends that people with Judeo-Christian roots have a “spiritual DNA” that shows itself, and they need to keep ego out of the way and surrender—follow—and be open to whatever comes through their consciousness and soul (p. 209).

A third key point is that *in the West, most people who have acute psychotic episodes will express at least part of their initial crisis (and often in later illness as well) in religious terms*. Almost always present are conflicts between good and evil, often taking the form of Christ and the devil, as well as other major existential, religious concerns about life and death, paranoia of invisible energies, and so on. This is why psychiatry uses such diagnostic criteria as “religious ideation,” “grandiosity,” and “ideas of reference.” These “psychotic” experiences, however, are similar to experiences of high functioning spiritual seekers doing breathwork, taking psychedelics, and involving themselves in other psycho-spiritual initiatory journeys. Even people who have had light-filled near-death experiences, if they are to continue to grow psycho-spiritually, will have to confront inner and outer darkness and

unconscious shadow material. Each of these people—mystics, saints, everyday folks, NDErs, individuals with psychotic diagnoses—is tapping into a shared spiritual reality (p. 35). Particularly in the West, seekers must work with the dualities of light and dark if they are to *authentically* reach beyond these dualities toward the Oneness, or Enlightenment, that so many aspire to—and so few reach.

Miller's fourth key point is that *if Western culture is to progress, Christ Consciousness needs to be acknowledged, expressed, and appreciated*. Today, many people are being opened to this expanded spiritual consciousness, this sacred ground of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but few guides exist to help them accept it and then learn how to integrate it into their consciousness. Miller asks, "When is the public at large, psychiatry and psychology, and spiritual practitioners going to acknowledge seriously the authenticity of Western mystical energies, experiences, and messages with which so many people are challenged?" (p. 202).

From our experiences traveling as speakers and authors on this subject, we are witnessing an increase of interest by both professionals and the lay public for direct spiritual knowledge and experiences that are part of human development and not to be considered pathological. It is time to take this knowledge that Miller so beautifully explains and offer it to readers.

We highly recommend *Healing the Western Soul*. We consider it an exceptional book that is on the leading edge of human psycho-spiritual development. This book is appropriate for students and professionals in psychology and psychiatry. Interested spiritual seekers would also enjoy this book, for its content reaches areas that we have not seen addressed in previous work. Others whom we recommend read this book include people who identify as Christians or Jews and suffer spiritual angst; those identifying as SBNR but who feel adrift in a spiritual smorgasbord; individuals who have had powerful spiritual experiences and don't know what to do with them; non-Christians who wonder why they are having experiences of Jesus; those unable to heal their deepest wounds, despite help from well-intentioned psychotherapists, spiritual counselors, clergy, and/or psychotropic medication; more than 50 million people who report they see and hear God and are given a diagnosis of serious mental illness; clergy who feel a loss of spiritual connection in the institutions in which they serve; and near-death experiencers who have trouble integrating their experiences into their personalities and everyday lives.