

Kirk A. Bingaman, *The Power of Neuroplasticity for Pastoral and Spiritual Care* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 129 pp.

Kirk Bingaman is a revolutionary. He is a cautious revolutionary, but a revolutionary nonetheless. In clear and descriptive prose, he calmly outlines recent neurobiological research findings about neuroplasticity. These findings have profound implications not only for pastoral care but also for theology in general. He has written a very important book, not only for what it says but also for what it implies.

Bingaman starts by providing an overview of brain functioning, focusing in particular on the amygdala, the section of the brain that is responsible for scanning the environment for threats. Bingaman points out that our 'fight, flight or freeze' reaction is now activated too frequently, often in the absence of real threat. We also have a tendency to perceive everyday stressful situations, such as a short work deadline or public speaking, as representing danger, even when they aren't real threats to our safety or physical being, and we respond to these stressors with our fight, flight or freeze reaction. Given that our modern lives are full of such stressors, we are often in a state of fight, flight or freeze, with damaging consequences for our peace of mind as well as our physical health.

On the positive side, Bingaman cites research that shows that throughout an individual's lifespan the brain is able to rewire itself, creating new neural pathways. This is called neuroplasticity. Consistent use of spiritual practices is one of the ways we can rewire our brains. With new neural pathways, we no longer reflexively react to situations as negative. Instead, we are capable of having a greater degree of acceptance of our circumstances and hence an experience of more serenity. One of the central themes of Bingaman's book is that contemplative practice enables individuals to live congruently with "the core teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: Do not be anxious about tomorrow."

Bingaman cites research that has found physiological evidence that the brain changes in response to a daily spiritual practice of mindfulness-based prayer and meditation. These studies reveal a reduction in the level of activity in the amygdala, so it can be said that an effect of meditation is "calming the stress region of the brain."

One of the very interesting findings of these studies is that the changes in brain functioning were similar for Buddhist monks who practiced daily meditation and Catholic nuns who engaged in centering prayer. It is to Bin-

gaman's credit that he discusses the possibility that spiritual *practice* may be more important than spiritual *content*. He mentions Thomas Merton's understanding that meditative and prayerful practices have less to do with the dogmas and creeds of faith and more to do with being in the "simple presence of God . . . in direct and simple attention to reality." He recognizes that similar neurobiological findings arising from different faith traditions mean that spiritual and pastoral caregivers will need to focus more on the *how* of spiritual practice and perhaps not as much on the *what* (the theology, liturgy, and dogma of the faith tradition).

Bingaman concludes with a discussion of the potential benefits of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). The therapeutic approach he favors is intended to help patients "be with" their problems, enabling them to let go of their need to instantly find solutions. He makes the case that therapeutic approaches based on 'solving patients' problems' or 'fixing' them often reinforce the negative patterns that brought the patients into therapy or counseling in the first place.

As a CPE supervisor, I was gratified to see how closely Bingaman's work affirms the way I train chaplains. I teach them to simply *be* with patients as a non-anxious presence and to refrain from focusing on 'fixing' the patient's problems. The chaplain's air of calm acceptance, even under very painful circumstances, enhances the patient's ability to access the same spiritual and psychological space that the chaplain is embodying.

Bingaman's use of the term "Judeo-Christian heritage" is a term used by Christians that is not valid for Jews. The term implies that Christianity superseded Judaism, and it ignores any developments in Judaism since Christianity began. Though most likely not meant to be so, it is dismissive of current Jewish spiritual practice. This, however, is a minor flaw in an otherwise brilliant work. The book's ability to synthesize various strands of research and apply the conclusions to both individual spiritual practice and spiritual and pastoral care makes it a landmark book in its field. I recommend Bingaman's book to everyone interested in the relationship between spiritual practices and healing. It will not only help you in your professional practice but will encourage you to be more active in your own spiritual practice as well.

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