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[Review of] The Beauty of a Darker Soul: Overcoming Trauma Through the Power of Human Connection

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Review by Leonard L. Lira

The Beauty of a Darker Soul: Overcoming Trauma Through the Power of Human Connection

Joshua Mantz | Lioncrest Publishing, 2018 | 276 pp. eBook ISBN: 978-1619616752, paperback ISBN 978-1619616745

This book is not just another war story. However, what better story to tell than that of a man who died on the battlefield and came back to life to tell his tale? In fact, that catastrophic moment for Joshua Mantz, as he died from a sniper's bullet in the streets of Baghdad during a combat mission, flatlined, and then was revived by CPR at a forward aid station, legitimizes his tale and compels readers to believe his remarkable story of survival and resilience. More importantly, given the current national emphasis on veteran mental health issues, Mantz provides insider advice for how to deal with trauma. After all, Mantz died and then lived through trauma, both psychological and physical, and describes the steps he took to cope with it. But he does this not just for veterans; he offers his framework and method for anyone suffering from trauma. It is especially pertinent to clinicians who are trying to help people suffering from the repercussions of trauma. To quote the author:

Trauma doesn't discriminate. It comes in many shapes and forms and it impacts all of us, from every walk of life. Though the nature of our experiences may be very different, the emotions that manifest from them are often very similar, especially when we look at them through the lens of shame, powerlessness, betrayal, and guilt. (2017, p. 259)

Thus, the beauty in the *Beauty of a Darker Soul*, is that moment when you are most vulnerable, completely unraveled emotionally, and in the deepest despair of suicidal thoughts because that is when you are most open to the human connections that could help you find yourself, your purpose, and your way back from the brink.

Drawing from Viktor Frankl's memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1985), Mantz describes the darker soul as a person who accepts their circumstances, and the way they decide to suffer through the trauma. Mantz offers his experience in dealing with his physical and psychological wounds associated with his trauma to describe this process. He states that at one point he had, "no resolve left...no desire to continue...no resilience...[he was] completely defeated and broken," but that it was the "gift of [human] connection" from those around him, and his acceptance of that outreach that got him through (2017, p. 257). This acceptance of complete defeat and human outreach offers the deeper meaning of a person's life and brings them back from the precipice of complete failure. It is finding the strength to be vulnerable. And through that recognition of vulnerability, to understand that vulnerability is what binds all people together at the core of human experience. It solidifies the human connection. Reading Mantz's description of his experience of this epiphany, reminded me how similar his advice is to a line in the song "Let Go" by Frou Frou: "It's alright 'cause there's beauty in the breakdown" (Heap & Sigsworth, 2002). It is by letting go and acknowledging that you cannot control your recovery, that you find the strength to accept the lifesaving connection of the human touch.

In addition to being a military veteran, Joshua Mantz is a nationally recognized professional speaker on trauma and the founding CEO of Asymmetric Mind. Asymmetric Mind is a behavioral health training company delivering advanced training in psychological trauma, psycho-cultural competency, and moral psychology. His videos on YouTube are both powerful and enlightening. And his experience and knowledge about trauma and how to deal with it comes out clearly in his book.

Told in twelve chapters, Mantz's book gives us a little background of him as a student, soldier, and family member in the first three chapters. This biography helps the reader identify with him, to

realize he is not superhuman, but comes from humble origins, like all of us. Mantz sets the context for his trauma by describing his tour of duty to Iraq. During this period of his life, he interacted with the average Iraqi population while he led his unit in helping the Iraqis bring order back to their community. He provides a vivid description of the trauma the average Iraqi citizens suffered during the second Iraq-US war. It is during these four chapters that Mantz describes, in depth, his subsequent death and resurrection. Then, in the last four chapters Mantz describes his breakdown and recognition of his own darker soul that allowed him to find the human connection he needed to recover and eventually build a resiliency to the effects of the trauma that he still suffers with today. His concluding chapter provides a description of the “Darker Soul.” This chapter provides a pivotal insight to the reader about how to find meaning in suffering. In fact, Mantz reveals that people go to therapy for trauma not to get better or to recover, but rather to learn how to suffer productively as opposed to suffering in vain.

In the last four chapters of his book, Mantz claims that the normal treatments for trauma, such as cognitive behavior therapy and prolonged exposure therapy [two main therapies employed by the Veterans Administration (VA) for veterans] fall short in facilitating a true transformation in trauma sufferers. Though not a trained clinical psychologist, his reason for making this claim is that cognitive behavior and prolonged exposure therapies, when done in isolation by only focusing on the mind, fail to recognize the connection between mind, body, and soul. Thus, they only treat a third of what ails those who suffer from trauma. He asserts that rather than just focus on the mind, someone suffering from trauma needs therapies that help with the body and spirit as well.

In making his claims about the commonality of shame and guilt in people who suffer from trauma, the need for human connection, finding meaning in suffering and the failure of therapies that solely focus on the mind, *The Beauty of a Darker Soul* is reminiscent of three similar works: *Achilles in Vietnam* (Shay, 2005); *Soul Repair* (Brock & Lettini, 2012); and *Afterwar* (Sherman, 2015). In *Achilles*, Shay calls for the “communalization” of war trauma where war veterans speak with average Americans to share their experiences (2005, p. 194). In *Soul Repair*, Brock and Lettini recount one veteran’s remarks on the fact that no one can truly recover from war trauma, but instead “The best that can be hoped...is to achieve a sort of benign acceptance” (2012, p. 45). In *Afterwar*, Sherman points out how veterans respond to therapy, but that their symptoms seem to remain (2015, p. 48) and how some VA clinicians are beginning to supplement standard cognitive exposure treatments with alternative therapies (2015, p. 70). The contribution that Mantz makes to this literature on recovery from trauma and moral injury is that he died and lived this experience and tells the story from the patient’s perspective but like a clinician and in a manner that can easily connect with a broad audience of trauma sufferers and their caretakers.

Further, Mantz’s assertion about the lack of sole focused cognitive therapies has some standing based on the latest empirical research. Some research has recognized the lack of common forms of cognitive behavioral therapies to address negative affect (i.e. adverse emotional symptoms caused by trauma) (Brown et al., 2018). Other research confirms Matz’s mind, body, and soul prescription. For example, efforts at spiritual therapy have proven positive in the therapy of police officers suffering from trauma, PTSD, and moral injury (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2013) and veterans from war (Scurfield, 1994).

In the final assessment, Joshua Mantz achieves the aims of his book. He both eloquently describes the brutality of war, what it is like to die in war, and the recovery from the wounds that war leaves. He further achieves his larger aim, which is to generalize the phenomena of trauma common to all humans who suffer from it. He convincingly points out how through the acceptance and learning of how to suffer productively with the aid of human connection, all who suffer from trauma can learn to live with the pain of their past and hope for a better future.

While this book is written by a veteran, with one hell of a war story, it is not your average veteran memoir. Its value is for all who suffer trauma, to help them find the beauty of their darker souls so they can learn to connect to those around them who love them and are just as human in their sufferings. As such, while the *Beauty of a Darker Soul*, is a helpful guide to veterans suffering from PTSD and moral injury, its application and reach is to a greater audience of individuals who suffer trauma, either from sexual abuse or other traumatic events in their lives. It should be compulsory reading for healthcare professionals who specialize in all forms of trauma care.

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