



Finding Ourselves Lost: Ministry in the Age of Overwhelm

By Robert C. Dykstra. Publisher: Cascade Books, Price \$23.00, ISBN 9781532634819

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Never has a book been more apropos as “Finding Ourselves Lost; Ministry in the Age of Overwhelm” by Robert Dykstra. His surgeon’s knife cuts keenly, going to the heart of the matter. In seven freestanding yet related chapters, Dykstra speaks of the ‘lostness’ of individuals today, and how they might be ‘found’—by Jesus and his stand-ins, from the local pastor to Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood.

Dykstra’s premise is that pastoral care is preaching the Word by other means. What begins in the pulpit cannot stay there. It must continue into the heart and life of the individual through the daily work of the minister, in heart or home or therapist’s office. Anything less is pastoral dereliction of duty.

The book begins with the Parable of the Lost Sheep. We are of course that sheep, lost in the age of overwhelm. The shepherd—Jesus or one of his human stand-ins—goes after that sheep, leaving the flock in the wilderness, so great is his desire to find us. Desire drives the shepherd—knowing that sheep get lost through no fault of their own. Overwhelming times simply separate sheep from flock. No blame is cast. A task awaits. Go find them.

The zombies of today’s movies are another way in which Dykstra speaks of our lostness. Like the sheep, they also seek home, but with a meal on their minds. Their search for human flesh, however, is simply a search for a real human relationship, not the deathly variety we are used to. If you are the designated living human that a zombie has sought out, then sit still long enough and he or she will be restored by your humanity. Ordinary acts of goodness can restore anyone to health and love. Not only does this bode well for those who are lost, but also for those who would like to be of more use in this world, and restore zombies to health, rather than simply hiding from them in the safety zones of faraway churches.

The core of the book—where the surgeon’s knife is most keenly applied—is the section on humiliation and then the Kingdom. Humiliation is that time in any child’s life where their free and spontaneous creativity is turned off, turned down, or turned

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away, by a parent or other authority figure who simply cannot indulge that particular feeling at that particular time. Other obligations might take precedence. While true in any area of creative exploration, in the realm of sexuality the parent's squeamishness might subvert innocent exploration. Either way, the child learns quickly and deeply that certain behaviors are not welcome. In order to stay safe in an unsafe world, or to find the necessary approval from this center of their little universe, the child never again makes the mistake of indulging the seekings of their heart—to the point of not knowing in the future that such seekings were even there.

Yet, in this case, by the sheer grace of God, Jesus comes among us saying 'the Kingdom of God is among/within you.' Dykstra explores both meanings of this word. The Kingdom of God is among us as a group, and to feel its presence we need to be in a group. The Kingdom of God is also within us as individuals. That is to say, the Kingdom of God is deep within each one of us, inside that repressed space that we have tried to forget. God is accessible—not a faraway authority figure. In a charming story of brave boys at night telling tales by the light of bullet lamps, we see the Kingdom within each boy shining a light at the Kingdom among the entire group. Yes, as Dykstra says, there may be sexual overtones, but most importantly there is unrepressing the repressed; and finding salvation together in this world, without waiting for the next one. A truer description of the role of the church was never written.

Stories of Mister Rogers—that are presented throughout the book—serve two deep, salutary purposes. Empathy is Dykstra's word for the kind of human love that Jesus teaches and embodies—the love that is shown in a kind word or a gentle touch. This is the love that Fred Rogers shows. Rogers, in his TV shows and public appearances, embodies this gentle, non-overwhelming love. Rogers' most powerful gift is his vulnerable humanity, his non-heroic way about life. The simple kindness that radiates through his TV show is remembered by college graduates and gifted honorees years later. His love lights a path to the center of long darkened hearts and enables people to follow that lighted trail out into this world again.

To some degree, Rogers is the father in the story of the Prodigal Son—not nearly so fearsome as either the younger or the elder son assumes. Rather, he is ready to do whatever it takes to make the isolated child a joyful member of the household again—empathically, emphatically, made welcome once more.

It is, however, in this area of the household welcome, that I find Dykstra wanting. It may indeed be Jesus or the pastor or the gifted individual who finds the one who is lost. They may heal the wound of so long ago. But what happens next? What if the person is healed of the wound, but still alone in this world of overwhelm; and authority figures still look on disapprovingly? I myself found Dykstra's narrative of early childhood embarrassment so compelling that I became lost in those old painful feelings. This moment of pain—of Dykstra's surgeon's knife cutting deeply and keenly, but with no medication applied—became an important turning point for me, and led me to think of what happens next in our journey to healing.

The healing oil, the Kingdom of God among us, the empathic love that heals, might begin with the living Word of a gifted pastor or friend. The restoration to complete life however, comes from the local church, or neighborhood hangout, or community gathering. It is the wooly friends—the flock in the wilderness—who

surround the lost sheep and just generally warm it up with friendship and acceptance, that finally bring it home. It is the friends within the generous father's household who—having watched and learned from the overwhelming generosity of the father—now live it out among themselves.

Having been a parish priest for many years, I see this happen. I see how those who get only private pastoral care are never fully restored to complete health, but depend on the next appointment. I also see how parishioners, who have been through tragedy, can find themselves again through the warmth of worship and fellowship with friends. The pastor might go in search of the sheep, pull them from darkness, and light the way home. The Words of Jesus might echo in the darkness near the lost soul; but it is the local church—among the flock left in the wilderness, among the boys with their lamps and stories in the darkness—that is the destination of the journey. It is not far away, and friends are waiting.

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