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*Hospitable Witnessing: Using Autoethnography to Reflect Theologically
on a Journey of Friendship and Mental Health Problem*

by Priscilla Sun Kyung Oh

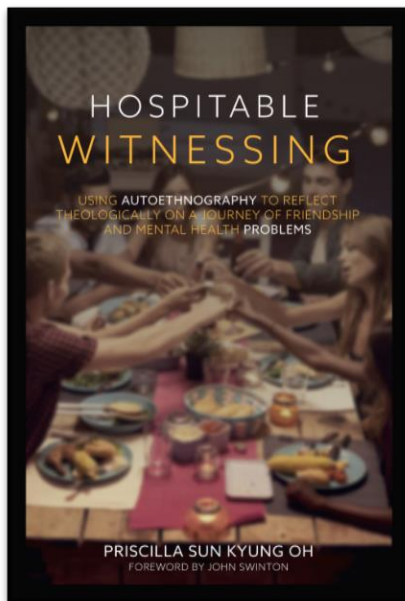
Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

978-1-5326-0397-6 / paperback / \$26

www.wipfandstock.com

New Title from Priscilla Sun Kyung Oh

Hospitable Witnessing: Using Autoethnography to Reflect Theologically on a Journey of Friendship and Mental Health Problems



Drawing on her own experience of befriending a person suffering from a long-term mental health challenge, Dr. Priscilla Oh reflects on the meaning of care and friendship theologically. Using autoethnography, she goes beyond the personal experience and examines various issues surrounding mental health. *Hospitable Witnessing* candidly takes readers into the everyday life of being with a mentally ill person. There are emotional challenges and contingencies in sustaining friendship and caring for a person with a long-term mental health problem. Oh points out that those who care for a loved one during a long-term illness inevitably experience “burnout” resulting from the constant care requirements. Under such an enormous disruption, we need to be compassionate toward another’s suffering and be willing to be present and available for them. This book suggests our need of one another and identifies three important Christian practices: caring as we are being made in the image of God, compassion as being present with the sufferer, and lament as to revitalize our faith and hope.

Priscilla Sun Kyung Oh is a practical theologian and author. After her formulative studies in Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Massachusetts, USA and her PhD at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK, her research became focused on stories of people with mental health problems and how practical theology might help them. Recently, she began to explore the idea of identity formation practice for people with dementia and their families.



1. What is the purpose of the book?

Hospitable Witnessing tells a story of my friendship with a person suffering from a long-term mental health problem. The central narrative gives a detailed account about chronic mental health problems, challenges and contingences in my twenty- years of caring relationship with Natalie. My goal in this work is to make theology an intimate conversation about feeling and relationship. The quality of text would reveal the personal details about my life and friendship that show my disappointments, pain and failure as well as my achievement and good judgements. Although I appreciate the significance of these risks, I have not been swayed from the conviction that theological imagination can touch on the complexities and ambiguities of living only by showing the good and the difficult times and what is personal as well as what is open and accessible. This work takes an unorthodox form of theological reflection in the narrative structure. I try to show my experience of seeing my friend's mental health problems as I remember it as a life being lived in a particular moment.

2. What category or genre do you think it fits into?

The genre of the book is interestingly unique. To retell my story of friendship, I chose autoethnography, one of the qualitative research methods, which allows authors to use their own stories as the subject matter. I also locate my work in the field of practical theology, which seeks to think critically about issues around our ordinary lives relating to the church community and scripture as they relate to the world.

3. Something you liked about it.

What I like about this volume is the author's candid openness. I was bold enough to share my feelings and thoughts regarding the issues around mental health problems without neutralizing them in an academic voice.

4. Something you disliked about it.

After the completion of the manuscript, I wished that I could engage my thoughts in conversations with healthcare professionals and theologians particularly regarding later parts of the book. But I am happy about how my feelings and thoughts were maintained throughout the stories that I told.

5. Describe the setting of the book

I introduce autoethnography as a tool to use my own story of friendship, and then I take readers to the actual scenes that happened in my witnessing of the friend's mental breakdowns and various episodes. Then, I began to explore the idea of illness stories as a friend and critically reflect the nature of understanding mental health problems as a social construction and not as traditionally accounted for by mental health professionals. Looking through the themes of the story, I also began to share the idea of how we might deal with emotional challenges while encountering the beloved's long-term illness. I suggest ways in which we might respond to those challenges truthfully: with compassion, practicing lament and friendship.

6. Describe the significant part of the book

One of the significant portions of the book is, unlike my doctoral thesis, that I began to see my caring experience in light of ‘witnessing,’ which I describe in chapter seven.

7. What techniques does the author use to tell the story?

One of the techniques that I used in the book is through ‘telling and showing.’ I not only tell my own stories to readers but also show them by using conversations and dialogues in the story. I also consider the relational ethics of care in writing about intimate others in my book.

8. Summarize it in one written sentence or a one-minute speech.

Hospitable Witnessing takes readers into everyday life being with a person who has mental health problems and candidly opens up emotional challenges and contingencies that immediate family members and friends might encounter daily. It does not refuse to acknowledge the trials and errors of the caring experience nor does it neglect to recognize the need of interdependence, within which we need one another whether we are able or disabled.

9. What do you think of the ending?

At the end of the book, I mentioned about the practice of ‘re-membering,’ that is a particular type of recollection and calling attention to the significant figure who influences in your life. I recognize the need of interdependence as we find ourselves as being part of the story to which we belong.

As our lives move forward, my stories also move on. It means that there are still on-going stories. I embrace them wholeheartedly as they bring the gift of life in this relationship. I hope to be able to share more stories later as our lives go on.

An Excerpt from *Hospitable Witnessing: Using Autoethnography to Reflect Theologically on a Journey of Friendship and Mental Health Problems*

Through welcoming my friend into our home, I have learned to express myself more honestly. That is not something big or strong, but it is about the emergence of “I” in our mutual relationship. When I become true to myself and do not disguise myself to others, something happens inside of me that is to do with growth and love, trust, faithfulness rather than bitterness, rejection, and insecurity. I have been through the time of emotional recovery from my friend’s illness experience even after she has gone into a care home. I must admit that dealing with Natalie’s chronic condition of mental health challenges was hard, but I was compelled to face fundamental questions about life in ways not possible for people do not experience such a tragedy. I feel as if I have undergone a conversion experience again. It certainly has increased my commitment to my friendship and strongly impacted on my trust and faithfulness of God. (p.127)

By welcoming each other into our home, we have learned to trust and rely on God while being charged to care for the weak. Through difficult times of being with Natalie, I have learned to come to God and learned to acknowledge the limit beyond my ability to care for her in times of need. A theological framework within which I have explored regarding what it means to befriend in the context of mental health issues has a decisive turn here in that the source of human existence comes from God. Our real humanness, as God brings us into being, is not that of separateness and isolation, but that of belonging to God and being the partaker of God’s unfailing love. Here I reckon with the vision of Shalom. The term, Shalom, affirms the life that is in harmony with God. For the Hebrew word, Shalom is the near term to health to express a person’s well-being of life and fullness. As Walter Brueggemann describes, “Shalom is the vision of life rooted in God’s promise and in the memories of faith and hope in God, which demands of us to be aware that in this present life that we are not our own.”

Regardless of struggles and challenges, even if Natalie still finds it difficult to socialize with her poor concentration and apprehension, I have learned to recognize that Natalie is nevertheless precious. Here I envision the Shalom of God amid uncertainty and unpredictability, where we may respond to our friends without hiding our fear of rejection, but with the realization that our lifespan is not our own. We need to learn to be in the present moment together, recognizing that we belong to the One who created us. We must acknowledge our weaknesses and need for dependence.

Then we may discover the truth of common humanity through the act of compassion, not from preceding conventions. As Vanier claims, “As the human heart opens up and become compassionate, we discover our fundamental unity, our common humanity.”

Therein present moments with others, when we become available for one another, which we open up the possibility of renewed compassion.

(p.148)

Praise for *Hospitable Witnessing: Using Autoethnography to Reflect Theologically on a Journey of Friendship and Mental Health Problems*

“*Hospitable Witnessing* is an unusual and necessary book which investigates the author’s experience of caring for her mentally ill friend. Readers will find themselves deeply engaged in the psychological pain and confusion of both the author and her friend. This honest and compassionate book will be of great value to families, church members, and professionals engaged in the care and treatment of mentally ill people.”

—**Mary Fawcett, Former Lecturer, School of Policy Studies, University of Bristol**

“This tender and compelling work offers a challenging theological reflection upon mental illness. It fully acknowledges the pain and ambiguity that accompanies mental anguish but through the use of deeply reflexive and profoundly spiritual tools it helps to bring this suffering within the reach of prayerful contemplation and ethical response.”

—**Heather Walton, Professor of Theology and Creative Practice, University of Glasgow**

“*Hospitable Witnessing* is a delicate filigree of longing and loss held together with twisted threads of lived experiences. As a reader and relational psychotherapist, I am impacted by the gentle invitation of entering the enchanted world of another’s faith and the realm of possibilities which open up in the spaces between presence and absence of illness when exploring the nature of the divine.”

—**Salma Siddique, Director of Counselling, Psychotherapy and Experiential Therapies
School of Education, University of Aberdeen, Scotland**

“Our real humanness, as God brings us into being, is not that of separateness and isolation, but that of belonging to God and being the partaker of God’s unfailing love. . . For the Hebrew word, Shalom is the near term to health to express a person’s well-being of life and fullness.’ I see the work of Priscilla as one driven by and for shalom, especially in the story of her ministry with these two close friends. And I believe her work can direct others toward similar lives of service.”

—**Gary A. Parrett, Former Professor of Educational Ministry and Worship
Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary**

