Reviews

Books


Kathleen Greider's book adds light to one of the most disappointing experiences in my life. About three years ago, conflict developed among members of a Christian peer group of six to which I belonged. When I suggested we call in an objective outsider to teach us how to resolve and express conflict, the suggestion was summarily rejected: "Some of us wish to resolve problems in a spiritual, Christian manner and you want to resolve conflict therapeutically." Greider's study addresses just this sort of situation. Not "reckoning with aggression" can result in passivity, contained feelings, surface politeness, or stifling passive-aggressive behavior. My group dissolved without resolution leaving damage in all its members in areas touching on "trust and self-esteem."

The split occurs in theology when "spiritual" is not inclusive but excludes "reckoning with" human emotions and the body of knowledge developed out of the disciplines of "psychology" and "social science." Greider selects a "critical collaboration" method, involving the interweaving of distinct disciplines: psychology (Winnicott's work); social science; theology and sociocultural meanings in different contexts and perspectives (especially gender and race). Utilizing a feminist pastoral theological approach, she stresses the need for "change in the ways we care for aggression in ourselves and in others." Issues raised by aggression in spiritual life and in the practice of pastoral care and counseling are examined.

The author's interest in studying aggression, the problem of violence, and the inability to express healthy aggression is rooted in Greider's rural Pennsylvania Amish background, where she experienced and observed extreme suppression of aggression, the fear of which resulted in either mute paralysis or violent behavior. Nothing in her religious and theological education caused her to question her callow understanding that "aggression was equated with sin, or nearly so." She hungered for "more zest, more spontaneity" and it seemed to her that "people (of faith) were too often stiflingly contained, excessively cautious, dispassionately agreeable and lukewarm."

Greider presents a two-part thesis: human aggression has been distorted...
into extremes of either violence or passivity and lack of vitality, “largely by neglect of aggression’s ambiguity and relationality . . . and needs repair.” Further, “such reckoning can both decrease violence and increase vitality.” Greider theorizes that “caring for aggression is demanding, tough work: it does not come naturally; it can and must be taught.” She believes that lack of attention to the ambiguity and “relationality” of normal aggressive feelings make it impossible for relationships to survive. If the skill for compassionate confrontation has been cultivated, one may experience the reward of what Greider terms “a precious seasoning of relationship.” What she seems to be advancing is a kind of political correctness for aggression: Forget about the old saws—healthy aggression is good for the soul. If you can recognize the pit bull in yourself and put a harness on the beast, you can walk through the shadow of the valley of life and deliver no evil.

According to Greider, aggression has to be “reckoned with” along with other human emotions of depression and anger, in order to be healthy. She pounds yet another nail into her already steady structure: “to the degree that we have not cared for aggressiveness before finding ourselves in a conflict, we will be more likely to function violently in the conflict.” In the five chapters that follow, Greider dives into the sea of terminology surrounding the meanings of aggression as it is expressed in various disciplines. What I would call “assertiveness” (the impetus to express or assert one’s experience and reality) is what Greider calls “normal aggression.” It is what one does or does not do with those feelings that results in what can be called “assertive” or “healthy aggression.” She uses Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sojourner Truth as examples of healthy aggression. For Greider, the nonviolent author of “I have a dream” was possessed of healthy aggression and Gandhi’s fasts were used to agress the English. She quotes Sojourner Truth at length: “. . . I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain’t I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it) and bear the lash as well—and ain’t I a woman? I have borned five children and I have seen ’em mos all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a woman’s grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain’t I a woman?”

From this discussion Greider proposes that “conflict mediation could be required of all committee chairpersons in a congregation or other organizations.” Every community could care for aggression and likely decrease violence by providing affordable, convenient, and regular access to training in conflict mediation or resolution and in non-violence training. Religious resource organizations have trained staff members ready to provide such instruction.

According to Greider, this book is intended for anyone who has ever misused aggression and all who have felt they needed to be more aggressive. It is for individuals and groups, scholars and general readers who struggle with the complex issues of power and aggression in either ecclesiastical or temporal settings. It is clear she is attempting to reach for counselors, parents, and