

Ewan Kelly, *Personhood and Presence: Self as a Resource for Spiritual and Pastoral Care* (London: T & T Clark Intl. [A Continuum Imprint], 2012), 208 pp.

The purpose of *Personhood and Presence* according to the author Ewan Kelly is to assist “those who seek to understand their individual personhood better” (pp. 4–5) in order to enhance the quality of relationships where care is the focus. Self-understanding is not an option for caregivers: it is a moral imperative because the person of the caregiver is a primary resource for healing care. Beginning with the “beloved self”, Kelly explores many dimensions of the self—waiting and relating; being vulnerable, sexual, limited and powerful—in search of meaning, purpose and greater self-understanding.

Other books have addressed these themes. What is distinctive about Kelly’s approach is his intentional use of poetry and story to illuminate the human struggle. It is experience-near with few clinical cases. The aim is to evoke fresh insight in the reader without diminishing mystery. Poetry does that. It also promotes an empathic mood that permeates the book and Kelly’s methods for inviting self-discovery. A line from a novel describes the framework he creates: “love is the condition in which people help each other to see the truth about themselves” (p. 84). The impact of this approach is wisdom more than knowledge of the self.

While the purpose of the book is to foster curiosity about the self for the sake of more self-understanding, there are insights for pastoral care and supervision along the way. ‘Waiting attentively’ with those who suffer counters our inclination to cure all ills. Examining ‘our abilities, vulnerabilities, and limitations’ is what caregiving persons must themselves do, precisely because it is “at the heart of what we seek to help others do” (p. 180). When our questions are prematurely specific or when we look for more and more information, it may be to avoid being vulnerable to the unknown with the other. If we are comfortable in our own skin as embodied children of God, we might be willing “to risk utilizing our bodies in a discerning way within caring relationships, to express God’s love and compassion significantly through the use of touch” (p. 56). Not everyone will agree with Kelly’s willingness to risk appropriate touch in therapeutic relationships, but it is a perspective worthy of serious consideration.

This is not a carefully argued treatise on the self, nor does it resolve tension around definitions of personhood, identity, or self. In my judgment, Kelly’s discussion of self-care does not match the generosity of spirit that pervades the book. Supervision in the ministry of care is mentioned often and is clearly important, but I might have wished for more discussion about how it can assist in generating the kind of gracious and gentle curiosity about the self that pervades the book. Those are small points. What is most clear from reading *Personhood and Presence* is that I would love to have a pub lunch with Kelly in his home country to absorb his wisdom and be cared for along the way.

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