

Presence Book Review
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Over the past fifty years, Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation has trained generations of spiritual companions. In September 2023, Shalem will commemorate this milestone anniversary with the release of *Soul Food: Nourishing Essays on Contemplative Living and Leadership*, a collection of writings by Shalem graduates and leaders.

This collection opens with a beautiful foreword by Valerie Brown, a Buddhist-Quaker Dharma teacher, spiritual companion and executive coach, followed by a blessing note from Rev. Dr. Tilden Edwards, founder of Shalem Institute, to whom this book is dedicated.

The book is divided into two thematic sections, Welcoming and Belonging and Holy Awe. These themes create the sacred container for the voices of spiritual directors who have been often rendered invisible or devalued in the predominantly white Western spiritual direction community of practice. *Soul Food* centers the stories of spiritual directors who are non-binary, disabled, hearing impaired, African American, queer/LGBT, international, Asian, BIPOC, trauma survivors, activists, recovering from addiction, and elders. Many of the chapters describe ongoing experiences of oppression (micro and macroaggressions) in their spiritual direction formation and training programs.

In the opening chapter “God’s Pronouns,” author Carl McColman writes about gendered language for God, prayer, and their own spiritual and gender identity formation. McColman opens with a discussion about a new contemporary translation of Julian of Norwich’s *The Cloud of Unknowing* by Carmen Acevedo Butcher: “...gendered pronouns unavoidably say something about our image and view of God, and that such pronouns often can carry subtly different connotations in different languages. ... The singular they pronouns are associated in our day with transgender and nonbinary persons. But to apply these pronouns to God? It made sense to me” (5). I was especially drawn to Sarah Forti’s chapter “Listening for the Holy,” and her invitation to practice body compassion. As a person with a disability, Forti shares tenderly about her experience of hearing loss within the context of her spiritual life: “This body compassion moves beyond body consciousness toward the belief that God is fully present and fully loving ‘at the lowest part of our need,’ as Julian of Norwich said, for ‘God does not despise what he has made’” (21).

In another compelling chapter by Althea Banda-Hansmann, “Toward a Decolonising Spiritual Direction Practice,” she critiques the emphasis on training people to offer one-on-one spiritual companionship. The white Western privileging of individualization ignores the impact of trauma and oppression and devalues collective spiritual experience. Banda-Hansmann grew up under apartheid in South Africa and is the Founding Director of Transforming Moments Consulting where she specializes in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), race-work, coaching, and spiritual direction. Banda-Hansmann writes, “The centrality of the individual is valued and delinked from

a collective experience and the impact of oppression. Prioritising the individual's experience to the exclusion of developing a social and systemic lens is another hallmark of white Western understanding of spirituality and interpretation of God that is traumatising for historically oppressed groups" (53).

In the chapter titled "What Your Tender Heart Knows," Marcelle Martin offers a whole-person definition of spiritual practice that brings a renewed sense of wholeness and repair to a pervasive, disembodied theology and practice that has been all too prevalent: "Most people raised in Western cultures have been conditioned since childhood to suppress certain kinds of bodily and spiritual awareness and to focus our attention on what we can know with our minds. An important part of the spiritual journey thus requires practices that help us pay attention to our subtle spiritual senses and to the wisdom of our bodies" (157-158).

In the Introduction to *Soul Food*, the authors state that they "intentionally sought a diverse group of contributors, including the LGBTQ+ community and people of all ethnicities and nationalities" (xv). However, I am troubled by the omission of stories by Jewish, Muslim, and other diverse faiths and cultures, particularly given that several highly respected spiritual direction teachers and leaders from non-Christian religions were trained at Shalem. Moreover, although Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is quoted in the opening to the second section about Holy Awe, and there are numerous references to the Jewish sacred texts (aka the Hebrew Bible), these sources were framed within a Christian context and there was no acknowledgment of the Jewish roots of these texts.

Fortunately, in a chapter entitled "A Thousand Paths to Contemplation," Westina Matthews affirms many ways to define contemplative practice: "In our increasingly diverse world, there are hundreds—if not thousands—of ways to be a contemplative. Let us open our hearts to make a place for this rich diversity of experiencing stillness ... which may or may not include silence ... as we seek to become a welcoming Beloved Community where all can feel a sense of belonging" (107-108).

The anthology closes with a description of Shalem's strategic planning process and group discernment practice, from which a vision statement, guiding principles, and focus areas were created for 2025 and beyond: "In 2025, Shalem will be a dynamic and inclusive community, empowered by the Spirit, where seekers engage in transformation of themselves, their communities, and the world through spiritual growth, deep connection, and courageous action" (199).

Soul Food is a courageous, liberatory anthology with essential reading for spiritual direction formation and training programs, and for the ongoing personal and professional growth of spiritual companions.