

Review

Gordon Hilsman, *How to Get the Most Out of Clinical Pastoral Education: A CPE Primer*. London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018, 174 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-1-78952-793-5, £18.99.

Reviewed by: Margaret Whipp, Lead Chaplain, Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust, Oxford, UK
Email: margaret.whipp@ouh.nhs.uk

At the end of a long career in chaplaincy and supervision, Gordon Hilsman is now bequeathing the fruits of his reflection to a wider audience. Following last year's publication of *Spiritual Care in Common Terms*, in which he articulated a topography of spiritual assessment and documentation, we now have from Jessica Kingsley Publishers his primer on Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE).

It is a fascinating book to read from a UK perspective, where the CPE model of professional development has never achieved the same dominance as in the US. Hilsman offers a wonderfully mature survey of his own educational practice, richly portraying the dynamic details of a process which excels in promoting those very qualities of attentive process, intuitive awareness, descriptive empathy, and maturity of integration.

I was unsure about the intended audience for his educational apologia. The book is marketed as a primer for prospective students but reads much more as a guide for practising supervisors. Indeed, the broad helicopter view provided by this primer seems to operate on a very different level from the insistent attention to experience which is required of programme participants. Perhaps the kind of students who would read the book are precisely those described in his third chapter as emerging "Process Leaders".

The first two chapters form the core of the book, delineating and commending the educational methods and culture that have come to characterize CPE over the last 80 years. What Hilsman distils here is something of almost canonical quality, outlining with clarity and perception the operation of those classic learning techniques of verbatim presentation and group processing. He writes beautifully, exposing his decades of gathered insights through pungent phrases and vivid character sketches. An example of this

style is the marvellous sentence picked out in the Foreword, where Hilsman describes the challenge to students of presenting a verbatim to a group of peers. “One way to conceptualize the optimal verbatim session attitude is to find a place on a continuum between the watertight stubborn and the sickeningly acquiescent”. We know that Hilsman is deeply acquainted with both extremes.

What concerns Hilsman at every turn is authenticity and integration. It is axiomatic for him that growth in the spiritual development of programme members, the “soul-shaping” of chaplains, is fundamental to the practice of excellence in spiritual care. This conviction is explored in his fourth chapter in terms of a phenomenological theory of CPE, and it is at this point that the enormous strengths as well as some of the hidden weaknesses of the educational methodology start to come into focus. It is particularly revealing that the summary diagram which concludes this chapter centres on the goal of integration – not for the patient, but for the personality of the chaplain/caregiver (p. 135).

What Hilsman beautifully expounds is the spiritual and psychological formation of a mature (or maturing) potential carer. Far less evident, throughout his book, is any clear or critical exploration of the clinical context and professional framework for the care itself, still less any explicit attention to the goals and outcomes of effective care. He inhabits a strikingly different paradigm from the world of outcome-oriented research and practice which is newly ascendant in the US, and to some extent across the globe.

Will I be recommending this ‘primer’ to our UK chaplaincy students? The educational culture gap will be far too wide for any who are unfamiliar with the group-therapeutic ethos which is so fundamental to CPE. I hope that our supervisors and educationalists will study Hilsman’s work, and reflect on the enormous contribution of the movement he represents. His profound truthfulness and attention to process is something for which I am profoundly indebted in reflecting on some of my own professional challenges. For those beginning pastoral work, however, I would encourage a wider curriculum which can fully explore the context of care in a complex professional environment, fraught with subtle religious, ethical, and cultural demands, and rich with theological depth and mystery.