

*Flourishing Life: Now and in the Time to Come.* By Sandra M. Levy-Achteemeier. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012. 123 pp. \$16.98 (paper); \$9.99 (Kindle).

This well-written book confirms the aptness of Rowan Williams's description of Anglican theology as reflection on the shape of Christian life. Sandra M. Levy-Achteemeier brings her expertise as a psychologist and priest and her life experience and wisdom as a person to developing a coherent vision of what it means to live fully, and in doing so she offers the readers of this book a holistic and evocative journey through current discussions in theological anthropology.

Levy-Achteemeier focuses on human flourishing primarily in its personal existential dimensions and associates it with coherence, integrity, and creativity. Fleshing out what this kind of flourishing looks like, what makes it possible, and what contributes to it constitutes much of the book. Although the author suggests various practices of faith and ways of living that can "sculpt" spiritual and personal flourishing, it is definitely—and thankfully—not a how-to book or primer in self-improvement. There is too much realism about the vagaries of human life and the mystery of existence to fall into glib optimism or to suggest illusory self-reliance.

Instead, the author convincingly argues that living a flourishing life in the here and now is a valid theological and spiritual endeavor, implicitly a matter of vocation and discipleship. To this end, she brings to bear a broad range of theological resources, including literature from the emergent church, N. T. Wright, and contemporary biblical scholarship. Her last chapter's discussion of the relationship of the resurrection to physicality and the matter at hand is well done and serves as a capstone for the book. However, it is the evolutionary and mystical dimensions of the theology of Teilhard de Chardin that powers this work. His image of God as the transcendent Other drawing all creation to itself toward final fulfillment and at the same time being the God who "penetrates, enlivens and sustains all creation" in the here and now provides the theological framework for understanding what it means and why it is important for human beings to flourish.

This book does a number of things well. It affirms the importance and role of human agency in one's relationship with God, self, and life while affirming God's grace and initiative. It operates out of a hopeful disposition toward the future as unfinished and amenable to human intervention that cooperates with God's grace without discounting the reality of sin and suffering. Levy-Achteemeier's commitment to science and faith as "complementary and mutually enhancing" domains means the incorporation of pertinent research and insights from neuroscience and psychology without defaulting to uncritical appropriation. Her deep appreciation for a "God-drenched" world calls for a strong sense of God's presence in the ordinary events of life, including those experiences of difficulty and challenge which invite us into growth and transformation.



Stories of particular individuals and communities are an important part of this book. Levy-Achte-meier treats these stories tenderly and respectfully, so that they serve as more than illustrations or case studies but as evocations for inspiration and reflection. The stories, and the way Levy-Achte-meier relates to them, highlight the importance of narrative as a root metaphor for the process by which our lives cohere and by which we interpret them. This does run the danger of assuming that the process of sharing and telling stories—that process of “rewriting” our lives—works automatically, leaving out the decisions, emotional states, and relationships that constitute the world behind the text. She does emphasize, however, that it is not primarily the stories that we tell ourselves but the stories that we share with others that disclose and make meaning. This points to the relational and social nature of human beings. Being in community is more than an enhancement: “Re-writing your life story within a religious community’s tradition—given the power of a tradition’s stories and rituals to lay the groundwork for the deepest layer of meaning in your life—can provide the best chance for creating a sense of coherent flourishing in the end” (p. 92).

This book’s theological and practical wisdom recommends itself to people of any age who are asking questions similar to Levy-Achte-meier’s. As someone of Levy-Achte-meier’s generation, this reviewer found it evocative and reassuring, a springboard for the work of aging. For people in the helping professions, this book provides a coherent, integrated, and hopeful foundation for understanding what others are going through as well as possibilities for meaning-making with them. Many of the book’s excursions into psychological research or experiences such as grief and trauma are helpful in their own right, offering simple but wise guidelines for behavior change or ways of thinking about navigating the givens in life, such as genetic dispositions, emotional drives, or cultural contexts.

This book covers a lot of territory, but succeeds both because of the way the author fits it all together and because the author’s commitments, questions, and personal experience are all close to the surface in a transparent and helpful way. This thoughtful book casts a hopeful vision of human life, one that is psychologically sound, scientifically congruent, and, most importantly, theologically informed and inspired.

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