
Larson, Dale G. (1993). *The Helper's Journey: Working with People Facing Grief, Loss, and Life Threatening Illness*. Champaign, IL: Research Press. 292 pp., \$19.95 US.

Reviewed by: James A. Foster, PhD, Professor, Acadia University.

I opened this book with considerable interest. It held, or so I imagined, an "expert's" view of a topic I have known from both sides; first, as a patient dealing with some less than encouraging news; then, occasionally, as a caregiver for others who have similarly dealt with a life threatening illness. What I was looking for was a book to give me a deeper understanding of people dealing with the most basic of all our anxieties—death—and how I might be of more help to them when called upon.

I wasn't searching for a recipe book, mind you, because I have a personal loathing for that genre of helping literature—dial a solution—which has become so prevalent in our society and tends always to trivialize life's great questions with remedies that make objects out of those seeking understanding.

Dale Larson's *The Helper's Journey* seemed to be just what I was looking for. It is intended for "volunteers, nurses, physicians, social workers, clergy, counsellors and others who work at the front lines of caregiving." It is based on Larson's "firsthand" experiences with what he sees as the "challenges of caring." And, Larson, himself, has an impressive list of qualifications—clinical psychologist, frequent speaker in the USA and abroad, researcher, Fulbright scholar. He directs the Graduate Health Psychology Program at Santa Clara University and has developed a video series on caregiving skills that is used nationwide. It doesn't come much better than this.

So, were my expectations fulfilled? Well, not exactly. The first 200 pages of the book really focus on research and concepts that most formally trained counsellors and counselling psychologists would be familiar with. In chapters 1 and 2, for instance, he looks at the nature of altruism, the meaning of empathy (feeling with vs. feeling for), the heartbreak of caring, and, burnout—the pitfall of caring too much. Nothing new or surprising here!

In chapter 3, Larson offers some suggestions for stress management. Once again there are no surprises. Anyone who has read about stress (as I suspect most counsellors today have) will be covering familiar territory—the role of self-esteem, and self-blame; demanding too much of ourselves; the recognition that Hell can indeed be other people; and the importance of self-efficacy, control, reframing, relaxation, and mediation in dealing with stress.

Larson explores his interest in secrecy and concealment in chapter 4. At the tender age of six he recognized that "keeping threatening personal information concealed from others can be damaging to your health" while confiding in someone can have a "healing effect." Although Larson falls back on such familiar models as the Johari Window to explain the importance of self-disclosure in every day life, I found this chapter to be the most valuable of all.

His research on secrecy, for instance, revealed that 20% of the people he surveyed carried with them a secret that they were unprepared to tell anyone. Larson comments on the potential harm of secrecy among the terminally ill and their families about such things as the diagnosis, prognosis, guilt, anger, and shame. Not surprisingly, for AIDS patients the risk of concealment is high, given as a result of the stigma attached to the disease.

Just as important Larson makes it clear that the caregiver him/herself is not immune from troubling thoughts, most often concealed self-doubts, that can greatly reduce one's effectiveness. Among other suggestions, he recommended the need for a confidant at such times.

The remaining chapters cover the therapeutic relationship, communication skills, team building, and comments on a caring society. Frankly, I saw nothing in them that was appreciably different from available introductory texts in counselling. Perhaps I should not have been surprised because despite the veritable explosion of counselling specialties and techniques over the last 30 years, the "healing" properties of counselling remain essentially the same.

This is a well written book by an author who apparently knows his stuff. And yet to me, the book's value is questionable: Most of the content is old hat. Caregivers with little or no formal training in counselling might find it a good starting point.

This is scarcely an enthusiastic endorsement. I realize this. Maybe I was expecting too much. On the other hand, I have too often purchased books on the strength of their dust cover claims only to be disappointed by the content.