

BOOK REVIEW

Necessary Risks: Challenges Privileged People Need to Face **By Teri McDowell Ott**

Reviewed by Teresa Kaldor, CENetwork of the ELCA

How can we challenge ourselves to take steps in bringing about social justice in the face of our fears? How can we break down barriers and eliminate the boundaries that have been erected? In her new book, ***Necessary Risks***, the Reverend Dr. Teri McDowell Ott provides personal insights into this struggle as she relates her own transformational journey as a Christian White privileged woman learning to take risks in uncomfortable settings.

Ott defines the issue of privilege early in the book. She is upfront about her concept of privilege; it is an “unearned advantage that might or might not include inherited wealth, networks, and connections.” (p. 12) It does not mean that Whites don’t have to struggle, but it does mean that there are certain factors like race with which they don’t have to deal, and this changes the dynamics of the life they lead.

Fear, while a necessary emotion for survival, can keep us boxed in. Instead, we need to learn to embrace fear and take risks. Reverend Ott explores ten risk categories: going, staying, learning, teaching, following, leading, listening, speaking, failing, and succeeding. Each chapter centers around an episode or episodes in her own life, whether as a Presbyterian pastor in a congregation, a chaplain at Monmouth College facilitating a spiritual ministry for marginalized students, or as a volunteer teacher at a local men’s prison. Her honest account of her fears (for example, in school and seminary, she dealt with panic attacks when faced with public speaking) and her mistakes is disarming and allows readers to own up to their own misgivings. Expanding on her personal experiences, she exposes readers to thought-provoking insights offered by writers and theologians of color including Gloria Anzaldua, James Baldwin, Eddie Glaude, Jr., Bell Hooks, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others.

Reverend Ott states that she wrote the book in hopes of challenging more White privileged people “to take risks, to be courageous, to face our fears and move forward in learning, growth, and transformation.” (p. 12) Why is this important? She writes, “The dehumanizing systems we benefit from separate us as people, harden the borders between us, and keep us from opportunities for transformation and growth. We privileged people can begin to understand this when we risk venturing into spaces where we cannot dominate, where we can meet and come to know people whose lives are culturally, economically, and politically different from our own.” (p. 190) By taking risks, we heal ourselves and our communities. To encourage risk-taking, at the end of each chapter, she provides multiple suggestions for taking the first step in a particular risk category. Some are suitable for individuals and some work well with groups. In addition, Ott offers a curated list of resources so that readers can broaden their understanding of the issues as well as go deeper.

In summary, ***Necessary Risks*** is a highly readable and practical guide for those looking for ways to pursue a more equitable society. Be prepared to be moved to action! The book is available at [Necessary Risks: Challenges Privileged People Need to Face | Fortress Press](#) and other online bookstores.