

JUNE 2023 BOOK REVIEW

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing

Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. and Oprah Winfrey

The title of the book is intentional. What happened to you is a better question than what's wrong with you when dealing with trauma. The authors focus on the paths to healing and recovery from trauma, with an emphasis on childhood trauma. Oprah Winfrey shares stories from her childhood that shaped her adult life. Her stories are raw and painful, but through her years as a reporter and talk show host, she came to understand why she was acting the way she was, and how she was able to form lasting trusting relationships.

Dr. Perry's specialty is neuroscience, the science of the brain. His research focuses on the impact of stress and trauma on the development of the brain. The research summaries are heavy at times, and the book contains numerous diagrams of the brain and how it functions. The purpose is to know what each part of the brain responds to trauma. The combination of science and the stories from Dr. Perry's patients are powerful because we are learning about how people with painful trauma find a path forward and new ways of living.

The book is in a conversational format with both authors asking and answering questions about trauma. The balance of body, mind, and spirit as described by Oprah is further defined by Dr. Perry as regulation. Regulation combined with relationships and reward help a person make sense of the world. Trauma produces dramatic changes in these three systems. Trauma is further defined as event, experience, and effect. The stories describe what happens to a person, how their brain processes the event, and the effect it has on their development.

The chapter Relational Hunger in a Modern World has great relevance for our faith communities. The authors claim we have forgotten how to listen to one another and be fully present. There is a relationship poverty, and the lack of relationships leads to less resiliency. Empathy and forgiveness lead to greater resiliency and the book has many examples of people who healed when these were present. Our churches can be places of empathy, and we are called to forgive. Churches can be the communities of caring that provide support over a long period of time.

This book is best used by a team of people with faith formation and health care experience. There are programs that exist like Stephen Ministry and Peer Ministry that walk alongside children, youth and families dealing with trauma. There is a workbook which goes further into the definitions of trauma and issues to think about, and worksheets that address actions and goals. The workbook and the book need careful organization by a health care professional, but there are many useful applications to a ministry setting.

Reviewed by Diane McGeoch, President, Christian Education Network of the ELCA