

## Greetings to Our Readers

**W**E TRY TO WARMLY greet everyone who enters into our academic classroom or counseling office. This is not a PR ploy. It is our attempt to provide a small grace-filled moment for others, the opportunity for them to feel recognized, to feel important, to feel connected so that they may be reassured, strengthened, and perhaps even healed.

Some people need that more than others. Our experience and training suggest, however, that every person struggles to some degree to hold their self together and therefore needs all the grace-responses they can get. And so permit us to extend our warm greetings to you as you enter into this reflective place.

This book is about the psychological injuries we all inevitably experience throughout life. Some of those injuries are mild, some are debilitating, most are in-between. This book is also about a new way to understand these injuries to our self, along with a new healing approach for dealing with them. We think you will resonate intellectually and emotionally with this fresh perspective on old problems. It is our intention to serve as coherent guides into this new way of understanding and responding. Moreover, we endeavor to illustrate how this approach, called “self psychology,” can benefit that widest of ministries called “pastoral care.”

These chapters, therefore, are not only for pastors, parishioners, pastoral counselors, church consultants, seminary teachers, and denominational leaders who try to be channels of healing grace; they are also for those injured ministers of grace themselves. All of us are included. Every individual, and every congregation, has suffered injuries to their self. Some have turned those injuries into blessings. Some have survived the injuries but are left with a limp. Some have been injured to near death; others to total collapse.

The perspective of self psychology was developed by the late Heinz Kohut. Kohut is considered by many to be the most important psychoanalyst since Sigmund Freud. His work has resulted in major changes in

psychological thinking and clinical practice. Although one of the authors of this book has written extensively about Kohut and self psychology as it applies to church life, it is our joint assessment that Kohut's work is still basically unknown, and unused, by those in ministry.

We believe that Kohut's self psychology perspective uniquely illuminates how everyday people and groups construct their reality based upon the most essential motives and desires of their self. In addition to this interpretative framework, we believe that Kohut also provides a viable working attitude to take in helping individuals and groups restore their injured self. Kohut had no illusion of managing history, either of individuals or groups, but he did think that an informed, empathic understanding toward others and toward one's self, could make a crucial difference in the life of each. We are not attempting in these pages to train our readers to be self psychologists; instead we attempt to inform our reader about how self psychology can be, at the very least, a decisively influential background perspective for whatever they do in the broad work of pastoral care.

We also believe that Kohut's work can greatly aid our understanding of the dynamics of healing grace. Too often when it comes to the issues of brokenness, sin, acceptance, and salvation, some theological orientations can be what Kohut referred to as "experience-distant" rather than "experience-near." Grace, however, often occurs "horizontally," not just "vertically." On the horizontal, human side, grace is the act of embracing others with empathic understanding and empathic responses. "Empathy" is the shorthand term for empathic immersion into the self experiences of others by which we come to understand them, and for empathic responsiveness to their self needs shaped by our empathic understanding. As an act of grace, empathy is the most powerful means by which the self of an individual is reassured, strengthened, and even healed. Indeed, a case could be made that empathy is the foundation for all human acts of grace toward others. Being a channel of grace, therefore, entails freeing, exercising, and broadening our capacities for empathic immersion into the self experiences of others and for empathic responsiveness to their self needs.

While theology can certainly inform psychology, as Kohut distinctly affirms, human experience psychologically understood can also be a valuable resource for a vital theology. Our work, therefore, will attempt to show how self psychology's insights into injuries of the self can have important implications for the traditional understanding of sin, as well

as for the relationship between empathy and grace. In the process, we will challenge some traditional conceptions of the human condition and invite our readers into an exploration of how the issue of self injury is pivotal for deepening our understanding of the human condition.

Finally, we believe that this book is important because it will introduce readers to very significant interviews with Heinz Kohut that had never been published before. Shortly before Kohut died in 1981, he accepted Robert Randall's request to interview him. Kohut graciously invited Randall into his home for two lengthy interviews dealing with Kohut's self psychology understanding of the role of religion for individuals and for culture. These interviews were granted in part because of Kohut's familiarity with Randall's extensive attempts to bring pastoral counseling into dialogue with self psychology. The interviews elaborated on some of Kohut's perspectives that had only been touched on in his earlier writings. They are compellingly positive for the role of religion in maintaining self cohesion throughout life and in restoring cohesion to selves that have been injured.

Randall has gained full permission from Thomas Kohut, the son of Heinz Kohut, to publish these interviews in whatever form he deems best. Thomas Kohut, in fact, remembers his father speaking favorably about Randall's interest and work. This book contains complete transcripts of those interviews.

Here is how we will proceed. Chapter 1 offers a friendly introduction to Kohut's perspective and the basic tenets of self psychology. Chapter 2 then examines Kohut's conviction that injuries to the self represent the central problem of the human condition. This chapter places Kohut's position within a broader framework of Western perspectives about human nature. We employ a self psychology perspective to look afresh at theological ideas that may restrict our empathy for our self and for others.

Chapter 3 shows how self psychology understandings are relevant to the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of sin, and especially the seven deadly sins. It explores how sin related to injuries to the self.

In chapters 4 and 5, we shift our focus to how self psychology can benefit our understanding of grace in pastoral care activities. Chapter 4 follows an actual minister through one of his actual days and reflects in depth on his many pastoral encounters from the self psychology perspective. In chapter 5 we use the self psychology perspective as a tool

for providing pastoral counseling guidance for three churches that are “fragmenting” in three different ways.

In chapters 6 and 7, we provide two interviews with Kohut that have never before been published. These interviews, conducted by Robert Randall, reflect Kohut’s views on religion and its value in addressing psychological needs. Chapter 6 contains the interview conducted on March 22, 1981, while chapter 7 contains interview from April 12, 1981.

Then finally, in chapter 8, we each reflect on the significance of Kohut’s comments on religion in his interviews. We look at the contributions Kohut makes to the understanding of religion, to the working alliance between religion and self psychology, and to the lives of religious believers and religious seekers.

The 32nd Annual International Conference on the Psychology of the Self met in Chicago during the third week of October 2009. We authors were there. The title for that conference was “The Forward Edge of Self Psychology.” Part of that “forward edge” was to emphasize again a forward edge Kohut had established years before: the crucial and indispensable role of empathy for others as the primary means by which persons are reassured, strengthened, and even healed. We agree. We know this not only intellectually but personally. It is our hope that we can make this perspective abundantly clear in the pages that follow, and might, thereby, contribute grace-moments for parishioners, congregations, and for those who serve them.

Terry D. Cooper  
Robert L. Randall