

# Book views suffering as mystery to be lived

*Sharing the Darkness: The Spirituality of Caring*, by Sheila Cassidy; Orbis (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1991); 177 pages.

By Dr. Christine M. Bochen  
Guest contributor

Dr. Sheila Cassidy, medical director of St. Luke's Hospice in Plymouth England, tells us that she began writing this book to explore the spirituality of the care of the dying — only to find the scope of her book broadening to include those in professions and ministries of caring, and "perhaps even all Christians."

She began to see "the prophetic nature of caring for those who are, in economic terms, useless" and found that it is "a lavishing of precious resources, our precious ointment, on the handicapped, the insane, the rejected and the dying that most clearly reveals the love of Christ in our times."

Cassidy writes with wisdom and compassion born of her own experiences of caring and being cared for, and invites her readers to reflect on the brokenness and hope we share for "we are all wounded" and "we all contain within our hearts that love which is for the healing."

The first chapters of *Sharing the Darkness* deal most explicitly with care of the dying in the setting of hospice. I should point out that although Cassidy speaks of her experiences in a hospice — a place where persons are cared for in their last days — the term "hospice" also refers to a philosophy of care.

Both as a place for the dying and as an approach to care, hospice concerns itself with the whole person. Accepting that death is unavoidable, hospice strives to relieve dying people from pain — physical, emotional and spiritual. Hospice recognizes the dignity and uniqueness of each individual, and provides care, compassion and company during the person's last days of life.

In a society that — despite its technological advances — is timid in its efforts to relieve pain, quick to isolate and distance the dying, and so aggressive in prolonging life at all costs that it prolongs the process of dying, hospice plays a prophetic role, speaking boldly about how we fail to care with compassion and love.

Cassidy allows us to enter into the hospice experience by sharing stories of people she has come to know in their last moments of life. Her deeply moving stories draw us into the darkness of suffering and into the light that can break into people's lives when they are most vulnerable.

Caring for the dying, the handicapped, the dispossessed requires love — the radical love of which Jesus speaks when he calls his friends to love "just as

I have loved you." Cassidy searches the Scriptures and the witness of the Christian community for insights about what such love means: how we might become Samaritans when it is all too easy to be Levites, how we might have the strength to simply be by another's side accepting "the stance of the impotent bystander," how we might be prodded by communities like Jean Vanier's L'Arche to see God revealed and present in precisely those whom our society renders invisible.

Cassidy helps us see that to love as Jesus did, we must shed our illusions and overcome our fears. In so doing, we risk seeing ourselves as we are, realizing that we "isolate the handicapped on the pretext that they will disturb the peace — when the reality is that their presence disturbs our desire for the beautiful" and that we "isolate our dying on the pretext that they want peace — when the reality is that their presence disturbs our sense of omnipotence and immortality."

Such lessons are not easily learned. In the last few chapters, especially, Cassidy reflects on the frailty and vulnerability of the carer. She speaks of her own struggles: the exhaustion, depression and burn-out she has experienced firsthand in hospice work. She speaks frankly of her own shortcomings, of her efforts and failures in service, of her attempts to make sense of life and death.

Those who care for others must take care of themselves too. Prayer is essential. Prayer, contemplation, and community are the life-giving springs that refresh and enliven the carer. Cassidy's spirituality, admittedly Ignatian, is one that recognizes the relationship of contemplation and activity, the rhythmic move between desert and marketplace.

It is a spirituality that ultimately views suffering not as a problem to be solved but as a mystery to be lived — in the world, in the acts of caring for others. To live the mystery, you must "empty out your teacup God," Cassidy says, using Anthony de Mello's well-known phrase to show us that our concepts of God are too small. Her attempts to reconcile the all-powerfulness of the Creator with the God who suffers with us and in us reveal to her "the God of Paradox."

Cassidy's last chapter considers another paradox: that suffering can be redemptive. Her reflection on this theme is colored by her own experiences of suffering: in the 1970s, she was imprisoned and tortured, when as a young doctor in Chile she treated a wounded revolutionary during the military coup. That experience is recounted in *Audacity to Believe*, a book which, like *Sharing the Darkness*, is well worth reading.

EDITORS' NOTE: Dr. Bochen is a professor at Nazareth College of Rochester.



Hollywood Pictures

Emily (Melanie Griffith, center) begins a murder investigation with the help of (left to right) Ariel (Eric Thal), the Rebbe (Lee Richardson) and Mr. Klausman (David Rosebaum) in *A Stranger Among Us*.

## Murder story plays better as study of Hasidic culture

By Gerri Pare  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — A cynical police-woman has a spiritual rebirth while pursuing a murder investigation in *A Stranger Among Us* (Hollywood).

Jaded by her job and out of touch with her emotions, detective Emily Eden (Melanie Griffith) is surprised to be graciously accepted inside a cloistered Hasidic community in Brooklyn to investigate a diamond cutter's murder.

Living with their spiritual leader, the Rebbe (Lee Richardson), his son and heir apparent, Ariel (Eric Thal), and daughter, Leah (Mia Sara), Eden is deeply impressed by their warmth and vibrant spirituality. The close-knit and supportive families of the Hasidim are in sharp contrast to her own absent mother and retired cop father who keeps her at arm's length.

As gentle Hasidic scholar Ariel daily explains the intricacies of their beliefs, Eden begins some heartfelt soul-searching. She finds herself drawn to him and knows he is fighting similar feelings.

Director Sidney Lumet wisely down-

plays the murder mystery — which is routine — in favor of exploring a little-known religious culture and its effect on an outsider.

The Hasidic community is lovingly portrayed as one united family enriched by the daily practice of their faith.

The blooming romance of Emily and Ariel never overwhelms the main point — Eden's emergence as a person who learns to appreciate her neglected emotional and spiritual life.

Thus, little stress is placed on the story's violent aspects, which are handled quickly and efficiently. The murder's solution is less satisfactory, coming like a bolt out of the blue.

Not noteworthy as romance or mystery, *A Stranger Among Us* does score as a touching story of redemption found in a most unexpected setting.

Due to brief scenes of violence and mild sexual references, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.



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