

Interview with Cindy Bunch author of “Be Kind to Yourself: Releasing Frustrations and Embracing Joy”

Interviewer: Deacon Holly Shipley, Chapel Hill, NC

Cindy, you and I have known each other since childhood. What would you like our readers to know about you?

Your readers might be interested in knowing that I grew up American Baptist and studied at Northern Seminary. I recall that my first experience of praying the Apostle’s Creed was when visiting your Lutheran church as a teenager, and that we talked about the meaning of that creed afterward. These days I love the liturgy and attend an Episcopal church.

What led you to write the book “Be Kind to Yourself”?

After my beloved spiritual director, Marilyn Stewart, died I began reflecting on all that I had learned from her over the years. I felt a stirring to write. I planned some time away where I could concentrate on the writing and just started writing and waited to see what would come. And for readers who have a busy ministry and professional life but think they want to write, I would advise doing the same: get away and start writing. See what comes.

After a few days, I was able to start creating outlines and structures for a larger book. I arranged and rearranged it a few times and eventually came up with a structure for the book as well as the theme of self-kindness.

Why do you think the spiritual practices presented in your book would be important to Faith Formation leaders?

My approach to spiritual practices is to find the ways to connect to God that are life-giving. Taking the time we need to restore our souls by spending time with God is a form of self-care. And we know that leaders often need to be reminded to be kind to themselves.

Our themes this month are boundaries and discernment. How might your book fit into the “boundaries” discussion?

When we think of sermons we have heard on the text “love your neighbor as yourself,” we may have heard it noted in a sermon that we should not neglect ourselves as we care for others. But often that is simply said in passing as we focus on being of service to the world. Giving our attention to what it means to love ourselves may feel selfish to us. And yet even Jesus took time away from the crowds he was teaching to pray (Luke 5:16). When we are more tender with ourselves, we are better able to experience and express empathy to others.

How do you define discernment? How might some of the spiritual practices presented in your book help with discernment?

I see discernment as watching for God in my life, in the terms of Ignatian spirituality, discovering when God is near and when God feels far for me.

While, as I mentioned, I started the writing with a sense that I should write about what I learned from Marilyn Stewart, following that prompting led me to a practice that I had formed through another experience of discernment. At the heart of the book is a particular practice of the examen that I had been following for about a year when I started writing. The story behind that I that I was reading a manuscript by Gem and Alan Fadling for their book *What Does Your Soul Love?* In a section where they were describing how we place ourselves in a state of openness before God, they wrote, “Notice when you are bugged.” That statement stopped me short as I was reading.

When I am reading in manuscript form, I am often in professional mode (I’m an editor at Intervarsity Press), thinking of the structure of the book, how the audience will receive it, and so on. But sometimes a line or section jumps out to me. Then I know *those words are for me*. It is God offering me a nudge in the midst of the workday.

I took that statement “Notice when you are bugged,” and made it into a question. Then I decided to make it a part of a daily practice. I would think about the past day and write down the answer to just two questions:

1. What’s bugging you?
2. What’s bringing you joy?

Creating that simple practice has been a great help to me. In Ignatian terms the things that bug me are the moments of desolation that draw me away from God and the things that bring me joy are the consolations that draw me near to God.

The phrasing of “what’s bugging you?” shows me where I am hooked into negative thought patterns about myself or others, and what I need to let go. The things that bug me can form a low hum in my brain throughout a day. They can threaten or spoil other lovely moments of the day. But more significantly they keep me disconnected from God.

But each day also brings a new opportunity to lean into what brings me joy as well. The more I understand about what’s bugging me and free myself of that, the more I am able to embrace opportunities for joy. It’s part of what I am learning about being kind to myself.

Do you have a suggestion of books that would be helpful for boundaries or discernment that you would like to recommend?

“From Burned Out to Beloved: Soul Care for the Wounded Healer” by Bethany Dearborn Hiser. It’s a great resource for both boundaries and discernment.

Thank you, Cindy, for sharing your book and insights with us!