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Book Review

Sacred Psychiatry: Bridging the Personal and Transpersonal to Transform Health and Consciousness

By Judith Tsafir MD

Reviewed by Eric Leskowitz MD

The title of Dr. Judith Tsafir's new book, *Sacred Psychiatry*, would seem to be a contradiction in terms. It's been at least a generation since psychiatry abandoned its soul (*psyche* in Greek) in its quest for the latest medication. But this book does not misfire – it lives up to its provocative paradigm-busting title and its dauntingly wide range of topics. It informs, excites and inspires, because the obvious expertise and experience Dr. Tsafir has developed while exploring an exceptionally wide range of healing practices serves to fortify the vision of true healing that she describes here.

Dr. Tsafir, a trained psychoanalyst, has accomplished the impressive task of maintaining an academic appointment with the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School despite her website's open discussion of such unconventional topics as energy healing and crystals, or the role astrology plays in her diagnostic assessments. Franz Mesmer, the discoverer of Animal Magnetism, wrote his graduation thesis on medical astrology, only to get "excommunicated" by the French Royal Commission, so Dr. Tsafir's work is a sign that the pendulum is finally swinging back in the other direction. This book is an excellent guide to many of the key elements of this transformation, a paradigm shift that is bringing the sacred back into psychiatry.

Dr. Tsafir shares many details of her own background and personal experiences, in the service of explaining concepts and processes for the reader; this adds a degree of richness and resonance which academic and clinical texts so often miss. The heart-wrenching story of Holocaust trauma-induced depression in her family of origin has been transformed into her own lifelong practice of compassion and understanding, and the development of techniques to address

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this sort of ancestral trauma. As she describes the unique series of adventures and explorations in her life journey, the temptation is to say that her conclusions can't apply to anyone else because her experiences were so unusual and atypical. But in this way, she's perfectly illustrating one of her underlying clinical points "that everyone's healing journey is unique and valid." She does not offer one specific template that we should all follow; instead, she offers the suggestion that we each follow the call of our own spirit, our own unique "heavenly mandate", as she calls it.

Many elements are discussed in this book, almost too many. She moves effortlessly from invoking white lion totem animals as guides in her spiritual practice to outlining the biochemical changes that underlie mast cell activation syndrome. Dr. Tsafir is able to cover, and synthesize, all the dimensions – body, mind, emotions, energy, spirit, cosmos - in her multi-dimensional model of psychiatry, health, and humanity itself. And she links personal healing to the healing of the planet in such an effortless way that it does not come across as didactic or prescriptive, as so many holistic health books tend to do. Indeed, her list of favored spiritual practices – altars, drumming, setting intentions, oracle cards, nature, sunlight – flows naturally in the course of her discussion of the importance of cultivating one's unique path of spiritual growth.

In the didactic realm, she offers clear explanations of astrological concepts that even made sense to this non-astrologer, especially the useful metaphor of our world's current "astrological weather". I'm not sure how her children will feel about seeing their charts and personalities discussed in such depth here, but the reader owes them a debt of gratitude because their stories help us to understand astrological archetypes and their influence on psychological development in a way that is surprisingly down-to-earth and not off-putting to a skeptic.

Minor quibbles include a too-short list of citations for the many clinical and research studies that she describes, and the lack of an occasional diagram or table to help organize and clarify the many practices and concepts described here. For example, a sample astrological chart would help to make visible some of the technical terms she introduces. But as I've said, these are only minor points; the main point is that this is an important book. I would guess that there is a long waiting list of people wanting to become a patient of Dr. Tsafir's. Those who are lucky enough to cross the threshold into her office should thank their lucky stars (Dr. T's astrological leanings seem to have rubbed off on me!). She is a gifted healer and writer, and for that we can all be grateful.

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