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## Review of Marchand's "Restoring Rebecca: A Story of Traumatic Stress, Caregiving and the Unmasking of a Superhero"

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## **Restoring Rebecca: A Story of Traumatic Stress, Caregiving and the Unmasking of a Superhero**

By Christopher Marchand

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone

In recent decades the dynamics and concerns related to *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) have become increasingly recognized, diagnosed and treated. Less recognized is the concern over *Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (SPTSD). Few outside the worlds of social work, medicine, and emergency response services are aware of these issues. Researching this topic, one discovers that it is spoken about at many levels within the training and practices of these particular vocational fields. Yet, at the same time, it is not often recognized beyond these areas.

In *Restoring Rebecca*, Christopher Marchand, Associate Professor of Youth Leadership at Providence College (Manitoba), introduces this disorder to a wide audience in a very accessible book. SPTSD is commonly known as *vicarious trauma* or *compassion fatigue*. It refers to the overwhelming nature of exhaustion which can result from being personally aware of and responding to the trauma that someone else is experiencing. Examples could include a fire-fighter trying to rescue a dying child from a burning car wreck or a social worker who discovers his foster child has a recent history of abuse. The caregiver or first responder does not experience the immediate or primary trauma of the victim; however, he or she experiences secondary trauma as one who is empathically involved in the crisis or traumatic experience of the victim.

Using a composite character, Marchand outlines the week in the life of a high school student named Rebecca. Using her experiences with friends and family, he illustrates the not uncommon experiences of many individuals who long to extend kindness and compassion to their peers. Rebecca navigates through the stories, experiences, and observa-

tions of substance abuse, bullying, physical injury, family dynamics, and suicidal ideation. These experiences begin to increase her stress and eventually begin to wreak havoc in Rebecca's life. As she attempts to help her friends, she begins to experience her own trauma.

To grasp the significance of this book and its subject requires that I go back to the summer of 2007. I came across a short article by Marchand in which he applied the theories and notions of SPTSD to the role of the youth worker. In his experience, he had observed that most youth workers had intimate knowledge of the pain and angst of the children and young adults who trusted them. Marchand assessed that while many other care-giving professions were trained to identify the symptoms of SPTSD, youth workers were not. They were unable to recognize that their anxiety, fatigue, and sleepless nights were the result of exposure to the hard things experienced by their young people. These symptoms could be the evidence of something quickly recognized by mental health professionals. However, youth workers were in fields not familiar with the signs and background of this disorder. Marchand began synthesizing tools and theories with the intent of using them as an important part of caring for youth workers; particularly, he wanted to provide tools for recognizing compassion fatigue.

In conversation, he discerned that this material might also have relevance for those in the world of student affairs. While he was not aware of it ever having been theoretically applied to college student affairs, he speculated that it might be of use to the field. I was intrigued by his reflections and suggestion. Upon his recommendation, I administered the *Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Test*

(also known as the Professional Quality of Life Scale) to the George Fox University professional staff members who live on campus among our residential student population. I administered the scale two more times through the academic year and then as the year concluded. I am in my second year of administering the scale.

We have used the scale to assist our staff in discussing how to care for one another and how to assess the veracity of our perception of reality. The tools Marchand has highlighted are simple and quick. Training is unnecessary for administering the scale and the results are as valuable as you want to make them. The scale is not a tool for therapy, but the results could be used to direct one to a counselor. They are particularly useful for assessing and evaluating how we maneuver through boundaries, stress, workload, and weariness.

Marchand provides a study guide and tools as appendices to the book. The book and its resources can be easily used by both professional student affairs staff and their student leaders. While it may not be classic literature, its intent is to bring the unexpected and the perplexing world of compassion fatigue into focus and create understanding in an easily accessible manner.

This small book, which can be read in a few hours, is a parable and illustration of how caring can be overwhelming. In story form, Marchand sets out to describe the fatigue, the paralysis and the emptiness that sometimes accompanies the desire to love and care without restraint. He uses the poignant phrase "unexpected cost of caring" to express his concern. While Rebecca's week is concentrated with trauma, one does not have to go very far to observe how Marchand's story is not embellished. Thinking of the crises, illnesses, and tragedies our college students experience, and then the care directed towards them; our colleagues in student affairs are prime candidates for SPTSD or compassion fatigue. This book illustrates the unexpected consequences of caring, yet provides a strategy to minimize that cost and how to restore our ability to care. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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### References

Marchand, C. (2009). *Restoring Rebecca: A story of traumatic stress, caregiving and the unmasking of a superhero*. Denver, Co: Outskirts Press, Inc.