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## The Cry of the Teacher's Soul

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### Abstract

Matthias, L.R. (2015). *The cry of the teacher's soul*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

In the current educational landscape, particularly in the West, myriad factors contribute to the challenges and difficulties teachers encounter on a daily basis. In the face of bewildering student concerns, high-stakes testing, and rigid accountability structures that often de-personalize the teaching profession, educators – perhaps more than ever before – are facing the very real effects of burnout. In *The Cry of the Teacher's Soul*, Laurie Matthias weaves scholarly insights from theology, psychology, and education together with powerful, personal stories to provide a spiritually and pedagogically-sound resource.

## Book Review

### **The Cry of the Teacher's Soul**

Cathy E. Freytag, Houghton College

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In the current educational landscape, particularly in the West, myriad factors contribute to the challenges and difficulties teachers encounter on a daily basis. In the face of bewildering student concerns, high-stakes testing, and rigid accountability structures that often de-personalize the teaching profession, educators – perhaps more than ever before – are facing the very real effects of burnout. In *The Cry of the Teacher's Soul*, Laurie Matthias weaves scholarly insights from theology, psychology, and education together with powerful, personal stories to provide a spiritually and pedagogically-sound resource.

Utilizing paradoxes (Palmer, 2008), Matthias skillfully address the “both-and” of the various challenges teachers face as they seek to serve students effectively while also embracing the grace they need to thrive personally, professionally, and spiritually as whole persons. Recognizing that many teachers have good intentions and seemingly right motives, the author calls attention to the respectable-but-not-healthy motivations that often drive teachers to do noble things while unwittingly drawing from “broken cisterns” (Jeremiah 2:13). She candidly addresses the tensions of idealism-realism; the call to “die” in order to “live”; the juxtaposition of self-sacrifice and self-care; the challenge of being versus doing; and the struggle to reconcile our identity as sinners who are beloved by God. These are significant issues in the life of the teacher. Most educators are drawn to teaching for humane or philanthropic reasons; we naturally want to give of ourselves for the benefit of our students, but we need to know who we are, Whose we are, and where our source of strength and identity comes from, or we run the risk of trying to be super-teachers seeking to fix, control or remedy situations in our own power, which will ultimately lead to burnout and disillusionment. In addressing these paradoxes, Matthias rightly acknowl-

edges that grappling with these seeming incongruities is difficult emotional and spiritual work, but she equips the reader with resources and strategies to engage in this often strenuous work with encouragement, joy, and hope.

While numerous practitioners in the helping professions have offered a plethora of guidelines and approaches for ameliorating the depleting effects of stress in altruistic vocations, many focus on the personal-self and the professional-self in dichotomous ways. Conversely, Matthias encourages the reader to view herself as a whole person; the teacher does not cease to be a teacher when she leaves the classroom each day, nor does she shed the features that make her uniquely individual when entering the school each morning. By exploring the rich landscape of the inner life (cf. Palmer, 1998; 2000; 2004), the willing educator learns that living fully and with integrity at all times and in all places enables her to thrive, rather than merely survive, both in and out of the classroom. This requires reflection and vulnerability:

...our focus is on teacher reflection for the purpose of exploring one's inner life in order to prevent burnout and perpetuate the kind of teaching that makes a difference in students' lives... we are deliberately attending to the inner life of the teacher, responding to those cries of the soul, because unlike many other professions, teaching is incredibly personal. We cannot separate our inner lives from our professional lives. (p. 10)

Recognizing that teaching is a very self-giving profession (cf. Astley, 2004), Matthias acknowledges that Christ, the ultimate example of a caring teacher, gave out of fullness and abundance and not from a place of scarcity. Teaching is most certainly self-giving, but it shouldn't be self-depleting: “We are never required to empty ourselves without being first filled” (p. 51). Ironically, one of the ways Matthias suggests that the

teacher can “die to self” is by taking time to care for herself. God desires to restore and renew us through regular Sabbath rest (Buchanan, 2006). He charges us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39), yet so often we overlook the critical need to care well for ourselves in order to care well for others (Addleman, 2012). Matthias offers compelling arguments for why self-care is central to the flourishing of not just the teacher, but her students as well. When teachers fail to appropriately care for themselves, they deplete the very resources they need to serve their students wholly and responsively. The notion of healthy, God-honoring self-care is but one of the many of life-giving, restorative insights offered by Matthias.

El-Roi (God Who Sees) sees us and knows our every need. He knows that we are broken and need to be remade, refilled, and renewed, and this is what He desires to do for us. “He is a loving father who longs to give us everything we long for and everything we need in order to live our lives as exemplary Christians and as exemplary teachers” (p. 67). Far too often, we, as educators, try to fill our need for acceptance by excessive doing or by seeking to validate our worth through the approval of others. Christ calls us to come and rest beside still waters and to enjoy green pastures (Psalm 23). He wants to nourish us and to remind us of our inherent worth as His beloved ones. As we take time for deliberate, intentional reflection, we can remember (or perhaps recognize for the first time) the source from which our caring, effective teaching should emanate. Our value and identity come from Him.

With great care and the responsiveness of a loving shepherd-guide, Matthias gently leads teachers to examine the deepest yearnings of the heart and provides reflective guideposts that can direct educators at any stage in their journey toward hope and healing. Helpful for veterans, novices, teacher educators, mentors, and anyone desiring to support the flourishing of teachers and their students, *The Cry of the Teacher’s Soul* is a must-read.

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