Assignment Title: Reading Report

This Here Flesh / Report by Cole Arthur Riley

Name: Sharna Forbes
Campus Location: ATS/NY City

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This Here Flesh is a book of contemplative storytelling. The author Cole Arthur Riley notes that the book is not a book of new things or ideas. Her thoughts have been thought before. The book is more remembrance than revelation, more maybes than certainty. And there is a sparse novelty. Much of what you'll find here is old and even, I hope, familiar.[1] Riley was not raised in an overtly religious home.[2] She was an anxious and insecure child.[3] Riley writes about the stories that have formed her.

She writes when I think of my ancestors who lived in chains; I often wonder what sacred defiance lived in their minds while another dominated their bodies. For the field and plow, and whip can undoubtedly affect the mind. Still, they cannot possess it.[4] She reflects on stories of her family, personal struggles, and the Bible and uses them to explain our history, why things are the way they are, and how they can be different. But, she adds, "from the womb, we must repeat with regularity that to love ourselves is to survive. I believe that is what my father wanted for me and knew I would so desperately need: a tool for survival, the truth of my dignity named like a mercy new each morning."[5] What is her aim? She writes that "as you cradle these pages, it is my sincere hope that they might serve as conduits for mystery, liberation, and the very face of God."[6] Riley addresses topics such as dignity, body, belonging, fear, lament, rage, justice, repair, rest, and liberation.

Analysis

Who is the author targeting? Riley targets both blacks and whites. She states I used to think Christian contemplation was reserved for white men who leave copies of C.S. Lewis's

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[1] Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh. Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2022), xi.
[2] Ibid., viii.
[3] Ibid., 3.
[4] Ibid., x.
[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] Ibid., xi.

letters strewn about and know much about coffee and beard oils. If this is you, there is room for you here. But I am interested in reclaiming a contemplation not exclusive to whiteness, intellectualism, ableism, or mere hobby."[7] She also says, "I write these pages in solitude but tethered to those to whom I belong and who in some manner belong to me."[8] Her writing is unexpectedly very liberal. She uses a mixture of formal and casual language and references. Her use of poetry can make it difficult for some of her targeted audience to understand, which might significantly impact its usefulness to the average reader. She frequently uses storytelling, anthropomorphism, descriptive language, and historical information to make her points.

The book has its strengths and weaknesses. One of the strengths is a statement Riley made about wonder. Riley defines wonder as the practice of beholding the beautiful. She made this remarkable statement: more than the grand beauties of our lives, wonder is about paying attention to the commonplace. It could be said that finding beauty in the ordinary is a more profound exercise than climbing to the mountaintop.[9] I believe life can be more fun and exciting when we learn to appreciate or enjoy the little things.

Another strength is Riley's ability to use her personal struggles to explain the system, how it affects one's perception, or how it defines how one should look or act to be deemed a person. For example, when she said, "you know about the holes? The ones in my eyes that made me believe I could see air?" When the surgeon examined her eyes and exhaled a gust that could pierce her heart, and said to her, "This is what it should look like, pointing to an eye that doesn't belong to her. Now this is you.[10]

Another strong point is where the author states that tyrants thrive in communities of fear. They deceive the fearful into believing they will resolve their agony. They'll promise safety,

[7] Ibid., ix.
[8] Ibid., xi.
[9] Ibid., 32.
[10] Ibid., 87.

power, and belonging to those who require their hope to be attached to a person. Once the tyrant gains confidence, they have less need to hide their evil. They have become salvation to some sects of the community. And in their terror who would dare rebuke the rescuer?[11]

In contrast, one of the weaknesses of this book is what seems to be Riley's attempt on several occasions to ascribe a feminine gender to God when she states, "when God talks about getting her house ready, is she expecting us all at once?"[12] I got a little confused here. I wondered to whom she was referring or its simply my misunderstanding. I am unaware of any place in the Bible where God uses or is referred to using a feminine gender.

Take-a-ways

I take some specific thoughts about leadership and the church from reading this book. One is the need for every leader or developing leader to rest. She writes, "God, in Christ, learned something of this incessant demand. In one of the gospels, Jesus wakes up at daybreak just to go out to find a place to exhale alone for a bit."[13] Rest is not only healthy, but it increases your ability to function effectively. The other takeaway is to be alert to those in need, even unexpectedly. Riley wrote about her grandmother, who had no money and nowhere to go. She and her children slept in her car. Her last resort was to pull into a church parking lot for a night. Shortly afterward, the pastor greeted her and gave her twenty dollars, some food, and somewhere to sleep. It wasn't the best place, but his benevolent gesture was noted.[14] Another takeaway is that as a leader, it is good to learn people’s stories and have some level of humor to put people at ease during challenging times. I agree with Riley that "you have to acquaint yourself with insecurity,

[11] Ibid., 91.
[12] Ibid., 23.
[13] Ibid., 153.
[14] Ibid., 151-152.

people's stories, and the needs in the room to bring levity into their heaviness without diminishing their pain."[15]

Finally, I can implement these in my current and future ministry by setting aside at least one day per month to isolate, reflect, and get some needed rest. I can also be intentional and discerning about entertaining strangers. Not only that, I could work on learning people's stories and endeavor to bring cheerfulness to a challenging situation without diminishing the pain of the persons involved.

Bibliography

[15] Ibid., 162-163.

Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us.* New York: Convergent Books, 2022.