



Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Filling Empty Cups: A Review of The Soul of the Helper

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Abstract

"All of us are called to love and care for our neighbors and yet, this can become tiresome and exhausting if we do not remember that we, too, are made in God's image."

Posting about the book *The Soul of the Helper* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/filling-empty-cups-a-review-of-the-soul-of-the-helper/>

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Comments

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Filling Empty Cups: A Review of *The Soul of the Helper*

Erin Olson

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Title: *The Soul of the Helper: Seven Stages to Seeing the Sacred Within Yourself So You Can See It in Others*

Author: Holly Oxhandler, PhD.

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We have likely all heard the phrase, “you can’t pour from an empty cup.” When it comes to stress, trauma, grief, loss, and many other difficult life circumstances, people find themselves parched. In my personal experiences working with social workers and other care-giving professions, those who walk alongside people who are hurting often experience emotional, physical, or spiritual emptiness. It is within these points of awareness that I began reading *The Soul of the Helper*.

Dr. Holly Oxhandler was one of my professors during my time in the PhD program in the Diana Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. Under Dr. Oxhandler’s tutelage, I learned much about social work research methods and scale development, but, with surprise, I opened her book *The Soul of the Helper* and realized a nearly mirrored set of childhood experiences with our parents’ divorce, remarriages, and then subsequent challenging relationships with our fathers. Reading her book was like stepping into part of my own story as she recounted not only her childhood trauma, but also how she’s tried, in some ways, to overcompensate for it. Her story is one of hope and resiliency, but it’s also one of struggle. Dr. Oxhandler has taken her personal experience of disconnection and used it to fuel her research and writing.

It is common for people to choose a helping profession when they themselves have been the recipient of some form of professional help. I became a social worker in part because of my own personal experience with my parents’ divorce when I was a child. I didn’t spend a lot of time in therapy working through the divorce or my subsequent turbulent relationship with my father. It wasn’t that my mom didn’t offer or try to get me help—it was that I resisted it. At a fairly young age, I seemed to have already absorbed the idea that I needed to be strong both for my sense of pride in being able to “weather the storms of life” and also for the sake of my family. I could fill my own cup, thank you very much! Fortunately, I had a solid informal support network in the form of my extended family, church family, and friends.

While a variety of books are written about mental and emotional health, the role of faith and the faith community can often be overlooked in both the counselor and the counseled. In my own life, the role of my informal religious community helped fill my cup. Dr. Oxhandler, however, recalls the number of mental health professionals she saw as a child and an adolescent, many of whom neglected to address her own religious or spiritual beliefs. As Oxhandler works through her undergraduate and graduate degrees, she becomes increasingly interested in the application of spirituality and faith in the helping professions. Recognizing and reflecting our clients' faith beliefs is important, but it's more about connecting the "sacred" in them to the sacred we carry in all of us. It's this recognition that ensures we, as helpers, do not forget to take time to notice and nurture our own "sacred" souls.

The Soul of the Helper goes beyond self-care to connect helping to faith and spirituality. In my role as a Social Work professor, I frequently interact with parents of prospective social work students (and often the students themselves) who express concern about their child's ability to cope with the stressors of being a professional helper. These concerns are not unwarranted. We know that many helpers express increasing levels of stress and burnout. Every day, helpers leave their workplaces feeling overwhelmed by the unending needs of those they serve, tired of trying to "fix", and anxious about the futures of those they serve. Oxhandler says, "If we—the helpers—aren't paying attention to our own spiritual and mental health journeys, we run the risk of unintentionally hurting those we're trying to care for"¹. As the general mental health of our country continues to be a concern, we can't forget to attend to the mental health needs of the "first responders" to this epidemic.

The Soul of the Helper focuses on teaching those hard workers to "find the sacred within ourselves to see it in others". Oxhandler identifies several key practices to navigate greater spiritual health alongside this beautiful and challenging profession. First, we can't nurture our sacred selves until we identify the breakneck *speed* at which many of us operate. We have been taught to work hard and to work long, and often these two things seem to be tied to our feelings of worthiness. Oxhandler says we must notice our speed and then be intentional about *slowing* down, as she cites examples from her own academic career when she had to learn these lessons the hard way. This change does not come easily, but with *steady* attention to specific practices and reflection, we can learn to recognize our worth outside of our productivity or external standards of success.

Being *still* is one intentional practice that can help us take time and space to reconnect with ourselves and our Creator. Oxhandler suggests being still can include using a centering prayer while also stilling our inner critic. While many Christian practices of spiritual meditation, reflection, and care exist, Oxhandler suggests a memorable passage from Psalms, such as Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God" alongside intentional breathing to slow and focus our bodies.

It is only when we finally slow down and be still that we can really see God in and around us. We can start to notice the beauty in the world while also having the ability to recognize the

sacred within us. Can you still hear God and notice him when you're busy and overwhelmed? Definitely. But just as when I'm running through the prairie, I notice much less of the beauty than when I am taking a leisurely stroll. A constant frenetic pace does not give us time to see, receive, and appreciate the love we receive from God and others, but seeing this and remembering it requires a *shift* in recognizing the sacred image of God in both ourselves and in others.

Oxhandler suggests that a shift can take place through the practices of seeking the sacred, practicing humility, and engaging in interfaith dialogue and intercultural experiences. Once we have recognized our speed, slowed down, remained steady, been still, started to see and shift, then we are prepared to *seek and serve the sacred* from a place of abundance. Oxhandler ends with three things to remember:

- – You bear the image of God, the divine spark within.
- – Seeing the sacred within helps you to recognize and honor it in others.
- – We must explore and tend to our inner landscape so we can tend to the world around us.

While reading Oxhandler's suggestions for a shift in perspective, I saw similarities within a reformed perspective that can be helpful for those navigating trauma or working with those who are. When operating from the perspective that all human beings are formed in God's image, then care and love for the person in front of them, regardless of the circumstances, is as crucial as caring for one's own body. Similarly, the depth of Christ's sacrifice and love serves as a gentle reminder that God is at work, not on our own timelines. No room for a savior-complex here, which can so often fuel burnout or fatigue. All of us are called to love and care for our neighbors and yet, this can become tiresome and exhausting if we do not remember that we, too, are made in God's image.

While *The Soul of the Helper* may seem to be written specifically for those in the helping professions, it is certainly applicable to a wider audience. We are all caregivers, whether professionally, personally, or both. The tendency to give of ourselves without "filling our own cups" can lead to a routine of depletion and exhaustion. Being reminded that we are both beloved and unique, we can find freedom to think creatively about how we can serve others.