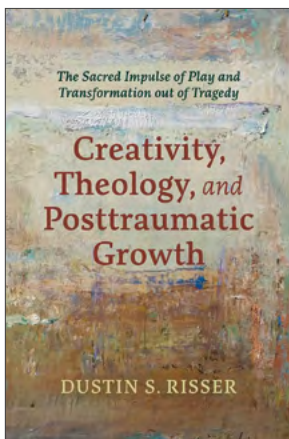

Creativity, Theology, and Posttraumatic Growth: The Sacred Impulse of Play and Transformation out of Tragedy

by **Dustin S. Risser**

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Reviewed by Chaplain (Major) Soojin Chang



In *Creativity, Theology, and Posttraumatic Growth*, Dustin Risser works to fill the gap in academic research around the role of creativity in posttraumatic growth (PTG). Risser contends that an individual's innate creativity is key to unlocking potential growth after trauma. He argues that the "experiences of creativity and play can offer a holistic approach to growth and transformation, after tragic and disorganizing experiences of trauma."¹ Risser privileges "being" before "doing," arguing that an individual's relational experience in a safe environment produces creativity. Risser defines creativity as the authentic individual expression. The purpose of laboring creatively for traumatized individuals is to regain the grasp of their true selves and make meaning out of trauma rather than highlighting the innovation of the experience or product. What is most important for Risser is that the creative expression found in dancing, music, poetry, and visual arts speaks to the individual. Talent for public performance or exhibition is not required for a person to experience posttraumatic growth.

Risser's primary conversation partner is Donald Winnicott. He uses Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory to explain creativity and play in human development. He draws significantly on Winnicott's psychoanalytical theory of potential space and creative emergence to show how play enables trauma survivors to find their true selves. The upshot of utilizing

Winnicott's theory is a tightly focused book with a logical flow. Risser's other sources also complement Winnicott's work. Risser also draws on Judith Herman's three-stage trauma recovery framework: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. He looks to both psychology and theology in an integrated way to understand the use of creativity in PTG.

The creation account in Genesis also plays a crucial role in Risser's book. The Triune God creates out of chaos and darkness. Because humans are created in God's image, Risser suggests that people, too, have the potential ability to create something meaningful out of chaos and darkness. The creation is also communal. God creates the first human community with Adam and Eve. Community is both an original gift and deep need. Risser lifts up the faith community as a place that can provide a safe physical and spiritual space, expert companionship, and a sense of belongingness where individuals can freely explore individualized creativity to find their true selves. Trauma brings fear, confusion, pain, and chaos to those who live with it. The experience of trauma shatters the worldview and faith that an individual creates throughout life within a community. However, the individual can come a renewed sense of faith and a new worldview with the support and help from a community that provides a holding environment with genuine care.

Risser's argument ultimately builds to an analysis of the desert rose. Risser sees three layers of symbolic representation with the desert rose. First, the root system represents a sacred holding space that prepares individuals to safely internalize the traumatic experience and develop healing and growth. The faith community, psychotherapy, friends and families, or other various holding places can help the root system to grow deeper and stronger to nurture individuals' understanding, hope, and power. Second, the caudex, the root stem from which new growth arises, represents perseverance over time, where an individual stores every bit of hope, meaning, honesty, and connection throughout traumatic experiences. Exploring the place of caudex requires integration from solidarity, expert companionship, and the faith community to bolster reconnection and transformation. Third, the flowering itself exemplifies the manifestations of PTG and creative life. The flowering of the desert rose is not merely a sign of hope but "a reminder of the promise of resurrection that exists through the work of Jesus, for the loving sake of the world."²

The desert rose illustration perfectly summed up Risser's thesis that PTG can happen with proper support from

the community and innate creativity. He highlights a few times that human effort, both from a clinician and an individual, is not the source of PTG, but the life-giving source of PTG is the Triune God. For a Christian clinician or a local church minister, the work of the Holy Spirit ensures that their efforts are sealed with the power of God. I wholeheartedly agree with Risser's call to be humble before God while supporting traumatized individuals. Risser also calls individual therapists and the wider community to a posture of humility because God uses all things, including clinicians, ministers, and the community for God's glory. Risser not only proposes a conceptual account of PTG, but he shares many examples of how the integration of theological and psychological understanding of trauma can help traumatized individuals to experience authentic PTG.

Risser primarily writes for the civilian Christian context. As a result, there are some limitations around how his work might be taken up and applied in an Army context. First, the Army, in general, values productivity over creativity. It will be challenging for Army personnel to find a holding environment where they can practice and experience authentic, individualized creativity. The Army works hard to innovate its technology and fighting power but does

not usually encourage individualized creativity. Risser may suggest finding a community where individuals can safely enter creative practices. A second limitation to applying Risser's work in an Army context is finding a suitable community for minority groups. While the Army comprises diverse national, religious, cultural, racial, and social groups, not all have equal or equitable access to viable community resources. Individuals from sizable groups such as Christians can conveniently identify an appropriate community that nurtures authentic creativity. However, members of smaller religious or ethnic groups may face difficulties finding a community that can provide the requisite support during the aftermath of trauma. Non-Christian Army chaplains may still find value in his work, but it will be limited. Finally, the scope of Risser's project is simply much narrower than breath of concern for Army chaplains supporting service members of all or even no faith background.

Even so, Risser's research offers a beacon of hope for members of the Army community who may be grappling with trauma-related issues. PTG is possible. Chaplains play a pivotal role in helping Soldiers remain true to their beliefs, even in the face of adversity and trauma. For this reason, I recommend chaplains examine Risser's work.

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NOTES

1 Risser, *Posttraumatic Growth*, 3.

2 Risser, *Posttraumatic Growth*, 110.