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Evangelical Anxiety

A Memoir

Charles Marsh

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1. Charles Marsh writes, “I’d long since formed the notion that Christians didn’t need secular psychology, because we had been given the Holy Spirit, who was the ultimate Healer” (p. 15). How do you personally understand the relationship between faith and mental health?
2. Writing about a moment during his divinity school years, Marsh notes, “My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose tender voice filled my every longing, now seemed as silent as the distant stars” (pp. 15–16). Have you ever felt this way? If so, what led you into that season? Did you emerge from it? If so, how?
3. “I kept a copy of Oswald Chambers’s *My Utmost for His Highest* up high in the closet . . . Next to the Holy Bible, evangelical Christians revered no book more than Chambers’s devotional classic” (p. 16). Why was Chambers’s book so important for the evangelical community in which Marsh was raised?
4. In “Harvard Divinity School: Fall 1981” and “Dry Leaves Tumble Down University Circle,” Marsh details his family’s perspectives on mental health: “My mother talked a lot about nervous breakdowns” (p. 37). His grandmother had views on the subject, too: “On a summer afternoon in Jackson, Mississippi, in the cool of my grandmother’s dining room, the window unit humming like a kazoo, my cousin Bess had disclosed that she had started seeing a counselor. It didn’t matter

that my grandmother, the fragile daughter of a town drunk, had little love for my cousin's father and that she could always be counted on to provide safe harbor from his spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-child fanaticism. Now she offered Bess a stern rebuke: 'You best put an end to that right now, missy! All that's just going to mess you up more.' My cousin did not say another word on the subject" (p. 25). How was mental health talked about in your family of origin? How has that shaped your understanding of mental health in general and your own mental health in particular?

5. "I was fairly certain that Jesus would return to rapture the Christians before I could marry and go the distance. The lines of desire and purity collided in a heap of shame" (p. 56). Who and what formed your childhood understanding of the relationship between faith and sexuality?
6. Writing about his relationship with the Bible, Marsh reflects, "My real education came through the Bible—the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, King James Version, to be exact. I was given that Bible—imitation black leather, gold-edged, with two red ribbons to mark the pages—and it's still in my library at home" (p. 61). What role has the Bible played in your intellectual growth and development?

7. Marsh describes the experience of growing up white in the Deep South in the mid-1960s. Did anything in Marsh's description surprise you? How did Jim Crow and the Black freedom struggle shape his childhood?
8. During his years in Baltimore, Marsh experienced what he called a "crosswise altar call" (p. 118). What happened in that moment for him and how did it change the course of his Christian life?
9. "Analysis and faith traverse similar terrain—they understand how language and narrative heal. They may see each other as strangers or competitors, but they need not. . . . Neither needs the other to effectuate its truths, but they follow parallel tracks into the mysteries of being human, where all truth is God's truth" (p. 131). What healing did Marsh need, and how did both "analysis and faith" play a role in that? How do you envision either psychotherapy or faith playing a role in your healing process?
10. "I received the gift of mortal life: the freedom to be imperfect, to have fears and face them, to accept brokenness, to let go of the will to control all outcomes" (p. 133). This "freedom" was hard-fought for Marsh. In your own life, have you experienced something similar? If so, what was that journey like for you?

11. “K and I and the children were—like all other low-church refugees—enthralled by the sensual aspects of Sunday worship at the cathedral—the light, the colors of the stained-glass windows, the spiced smell of incense, the polyphonic chants of the choir, the golden chalice, the vestments” (p. 137). When have you experienced worship as “sensual”? How is Marsh’s experience of worship in the Baltimore Cathedral similar to and different from his experience of worship in some of the other churches he describes: his father’s church in Laurel, Old Seventh Baptist in Baltimore (pp. 115–18), the downtown church in Charlottesville (p. 3)?
12. “It took many years tunneling into the civil rights movement before I could see, alongside the white-on-Black violence, the white-on-white beatings doled out regularly by coaches, principals, choir directors, youth pastors, and anyone else claiming *in loco parentis* rights to other families’ children” (p. 148). A few pages later, he describes his own childhood participation in violence meted out to Jacob Krawley, the son of a Klansman. How do you respond to Marsh’s account of white-on-white violence?
13. At the end of “Summer in Laurel,” Marsh describes his coming to terms with the fact that his grandmother’s enduring racism—her belief, stated to him baldly, that “white people are the superior race” (p. 176). Do you

have family members who hold views sharply divergent from your own? How have you handled that?

14. Marsh spends a great deal of time reflecting on his “analysis”—that is, his three years of almost daily therapy sessions with David Lieber (p. 178). Does Marsh’s account of psychoanalysis make analysis attractive to you? Why or why not? What has been your own experience with psychotherapy?
15. Writing about his children, Marsh states, “I wanted them to know that their aspirations are noble, and they can trust their bodies, their minds, their desires. I could not immunize them from life’s uncertainties, but I could relieve them of the weight of evangelical anxiety” (p. 181). Where are other passages in which Marsh describes his life as a father? What picture do you form of him as a father?
16. “The fear of God may be the beginning of wisdom, but fear of the body calcified into a certain spiritual paralysis quashes the confidence of the gospel” (p. 199). How were you taught to view your body? And how did that view intersect with faith?
17. How has Marsh’s relationship with Christianity changed and developed over the years? If you grew up in a faith tradition, how has your relationship with that tradition changed as you’ve grown older?

18. Throughout the book, Marsh discusses his prayer life. Why is prayer important to him? How would you describe the different kinds of praying Marsh undertakes at various points? Does the book seem to commend certain modes of prayer, or other devotional practices?
19. Considering all the characters in the book other than Marsh himself, which character most intrigued you? Why?
20. What did you most appreciate about this book? What made you uncomfortable? What inspired you? Why?