

Book Review:

Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education, by Janet Fuller. New York: Church Publishing, 2024, Pp. xxvi, 183, \$24.95 (Paperback).

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Abstract: Higher Education Chaplains who find themselves scrambling for the right words for a religiously diverse or secular audiences may find a great resource in Janet Fuller's book: Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education. Fuller worked in Higher Education Chaplaincy for more than 40 years and is the co-director of the Master of Arts in Chaplaincy at Hartford International University.

Keywords: Janet Fuller, liturgy, blessings, higher education chaplaincy

Higher Education Chaplains working in religiously diverse or secular audiences may find a great resource in Janet Fuller's book: *Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education*. Fuller is an Episcopal priest who has worked in Higher Education Chaplaincy for more than 40 years. She is currently the co-director of the Master of Arts in Chaplaincy at Hartford International University.

"*Blessings for Your Students*" joins other books of liturgy, poetry, well-crafted and elegant thoughts often used to bless new sacred moments, such as *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* by John O'Donohue (2008). In this book's introduction, O'Donohue speaks of how "progress" has cut away at the "human tissue and webbing" that had once connected people. This lack of belonging has left us without rituals to "protect, encourage and guide" us as we cross into unknown and unfamiliar territory. "For such crossings we need to find new words." (O'Donohue, xiii-xiv).

Fuller's book finds new words for higher education blessing moments, drawing from Episcopal prayer traditions. In writing these blessings, Fuller is mindful to not alienate people from the task of finding meaning in complex experiences. To that end, she rewrites her Christian blessings in such a way that the new words of blessing hold meaning making space for multiple faiths and secular audiences. Fuller's blessing resonates across differences and remind us about what makes us human and what we all still share as our world changes and some traditions fade and may lose its signifying power.

The book of blessings is organized by chapters organized by the following categories: Transition and Change (1), Challenge, Crisis and Grief (2), Justice (3), Wonder and Hope (4), Gratitude (5), Campus Occasions (6). Each chapter begins with a reflection on Fuller's experience in higher education and how college and university chaplains hold space for students during various important moments in the academic year. The reflections are as valuable as the blessings.

These blessings are usable for various occasions, but especially ones that occur only in higher education such as choosing a major. In two stanzas of a blessing, Fuller writes:

Send your wisdom to help us know
that what we do will be a blessing,
that the major we choose will be a good one,
that we cannot go wrong,
and that it will all become plain.

And give patience for those restless hearts
as we wait, walk, work and wrestle
for enlightening recognition
and a vision of who we are to be.
(Discerning a Major, 49)

While these words may have been inspired by higher education, they contain the heart of the new words that may be needed for modern day blessings in a world where our experiences and our future plans are often difficult to communicate across differences. Fuller's work reminds us that our various religious traditions may have tools to find the new language needed for new and complex experiences. Shared blessings may help turn these complex experiences into points of unity and shared humanity rather than divisions. For example, from her blessing for choosing a major:

Are you there?
Can you hear the struggle of mind and heart
that pushes and pulls,
hangs them over the abyss
of unknowing,
when everyone we know
is sure?
Can you see ahead
When we cannot?
(Discerning a Major, 48)

The essence of what this blessing celebrates for a student's choice of major could also be used to celebrate moments beyond higher education: a new job, relocation to a new city or any major life decision. In a similar way, this blessing, while written for a specific student on the occasion of her graduation, could also be used for many reasons. Fuller writes:

For the future daily nearing –
Make her ready for it all
Be visible among friends she chooses.
Be known in her success.
Tangle up your love in the family she creates
And may every meaning she makes include your abiding belief in her.
Extend your blessing as she commits to her part to make a more just world.
Protect her from every evil and make her grateful in the face of hurt.
(For This One Student, 106-107)

Fuller also sees how these blessings could be used widely and beyond higher education. Unlike clerics and religious leaders from specific religious traditions, Higher Education chaplains regularly experience how not all communities are not God-oriented and sometimes secular. While clerics and religious leaders may be aware of waning religious interests, Higher Education Chaplains are constantly working with people who are searching for spiritual realities beyond a specific religious tradition. In her work as a chaplain, Fuller has been supportive of these searches and offers blessings in her book that affirm various spiritual journeys as valid, true and worthy searches.

This book may make a good addition to the many other books that chaplains' reference when preparing for opening and closing words at events, especially as audiences are becoming increasingly diverse. Fuller's book reminds us that while we are complex, we are moved by similar feelings and experiences and is a useful tool from religious traditions that can be used to hold space for all of humanity. But clerics and religious leaders of other traditions may also find this book helpful, if not as a template for finding the words to speak widely after holding space for reflection and meaning making.

Valerie Bailey has been the Chaplain to the College at Williams College since 2018. She has been a college chaplain for a total of eighteen years at several other campuses. She is also an Episcopal Priest who has worked in parishes in Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York.