

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*

David Rohrer, MDiv^a

<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.133260>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2024

The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World. By Jamil Zaki. New York: Crown, 2019. 288 pp.

An unmistakable irony, and perhaps some audacity is embedded in reviewing of a book called *The War for Kindness* in the *Military Chaplaincy Review*. How will a title that pairs the words “war” and “kindness” go over with an audience of people who minister to those who fight real wars? What might prompt them to push through the eye-rolling absurdity of this oxymoron on the cover, reach for the book and then actually read a few pages of the introduction? My answer is that Jamil Zaki’s *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* is a book that encourages chaplains and other clergy to persevere in the very personal battle we fight to maintain and grow in empathy for those to whom we are called to minister.

The great hazard in that work has not changed much since the time of the Old Testament prophets. We clergy keep proclaiming and the recipients of the message keep demonstrating their limited ability to hear. This fraught dynamic sows seeds of indifference and cynicism in us. Zaki’s book is an invitation away from this well-trod path toward pastoral burnout. It is a scientific affirmation of a spiritual truth. Zaki provides encouragement to persevere in the work of inviting people to grow into a new mind. His book is a call to take note that the brain God made for us as humans has the capacity to grow new pathways that enable us as clergy to live transformed lives.

Zaki studies empathy in his work as a professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory. He defines empathy as “an umbrella term that describes multiple ways people respond to one another including sharing, thinking about and caring about others’ feelings.”¹ The primary invitation of the book is to “choose empathy.”²

^a **David Rohrer** recently retired from 42 years of service as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He served four congregations in California and Washington. He is the author of *The Sacred Wilderness of Pastoral Ministry: Preparing a People for the Presence of the Lord* (InterVarsity, 2012).

¹ Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 178.

² Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 33.

Zaki identifies curiosity, imagination, and contact as three practices that help people grow into this choice. These practices are gateways to seeing a bigger picture. They extend a hand up and out of the constricting pit of isolation, fear, and enmity and help to deliver us into an expansive space characterized by empathy and kindness. Zaki hopes to help people “put on a pair of goggles that work like thermal sensors but pick up emotion instead of body heat.”³

The oxymoron in the title of this book depends on acquiring and using the weapon of empathy. As Zaki says in his introduction, “Empathy’s most important role is to inspire kindness: our tendency to help each other, even at a cost to ourselves.”⁴ Vulnerability is part of the cost of empathy. We as people gain territory in this war by initially relinquishing it. Through the vulnerability of setting aside our certainty about who the other person is and choosing instead to be curious about how they perceive themselves and the world, we gain ground. What initially feels like letting down our guard and exposing ourselves to attack turns out to be a first step toward victory. Apart from curiosity, we remain lost in the echo chamber of our own thoughts, perceptions, and conclusions. Curiosity opens up the possibility of making unlikely friendships. It moves us closer to one another without demanding a resolution of the problem that separates us or overlooking the differences that divide us.

Zaki highlights imagination as another resource for building empathy. In “The Stories We Tell,” he speaks of how art and literature can help us to untether our minds from the present moment and see possibilities that we might not otherwise see. Stories, according to Zaki, can have the effect of “flattening our empathic landscape, making distant others feel less distant and caring for them less difficult.”⁵ Later in the same chapter, he writes: “Fiction is empathy’s gateway drug. It helps us feel for others when real world caring is too difficult, complicated or painful. Because of this it can restore bonds between people even when that seems impossible.”⁶ When we immerse ourselves in a story we make a choice to unstick our mind from the present and give ourselves permission to see a bigger picture; to “see visions and dream dreams.”⁷ Zaki encourages his readers to tear down the walls that protect a stunted imagination, and so let in a new source of light that illuminates space that that we did not know we had.

³ Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 3.

⁴ Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 4.

⁵ Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 76.

⁶ Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 82.

⁷ Acts 2:17, Joel 2:28.

Zaki himself is a great storyteller. This book is not merely a recitation of data derived from scientific research. It is filled with inspiring stories of human transformation. In the chapter entitled “Hatred Verses Contact,” he tells the story of former white supremacist Tony McAleer’s journey out of hatred and into empathy. The chapter is a description of how the walls of hatred can be broken down as one becomes open to—or is even inadvertently exposed to—contact with those who live outside those walls. In Tony’s case it was the birth of his children and his choice to be connected to them that began the process of breaking down those walls. He began to see himself differently and to invest in activities that would support his personal growth. This path brought him into contact with a Jewish leadership trainer, Dov Baron. Tony’s perceived “enemy” showed him compassion. As a result, as Zaki reports, “This cracked Tony open. He’d created a surface of hatred to cover his shame and loneliness. Once someone accepted him, warts and all, he no longer needed it.”⁸

Zaki doesn’t just write about kindness he also demonstrates kindness toward his readers. If one does not have time to wade through all the research, the 16 pages of the introduction provide a very satisfying and informative read. But if you have the time to go deeply, love data and want specifics about the research, you can immerse yourself in the well-organized footnotes and appendices at the back of the book. In addition, his compassion and sense of humor are present throughout the book. His transparency in telling the reader about his personal struggle as a child navigating the tension of his divorced and feuding parents contributes both credibility and accessibility to this work.

The metaphors of war and winning or losing battles don’t pair well with the process of personal growth Zaki describes, which is my only criticism of the book. In this process there is not really a foe to be vanquished, there is rather a darkness that stands in need of light or a bondage from which one needs to be freed. Acknowledging and addressing our inability or refusal to do the work of striving to see and know the other is what is at issue in this book. I see it as an invitation to ponder and respond to Jesus’ words about addressing the log in our own eye before we attempt to diagnose and remove the speck we see in our neighbor’s eye. If there is a battle to be fought it is one that is extremely personal. The battle is to work at seeing and knowing the people I serve rather than wallowing in my frustrations over all that I perceive they are not and thus fall prey to the suspicion that they will never change.

The War for Kindness is not a blueprint for how to lead people into battle or how to fight a war that will somehow mend our fractured world. In that sense it is a refreshing break from the titles on the pastor’s bookshelf

⁸ Zaki, *War for Kindness*, 60.

that tell us how to lead or motivate or deploy the people in our care. The book is rather the description of a personal struggle we all face to know and grow in our understanding of the people whom we serve. Zaki offers an invitation to accept, and an assurance that we can meet, this challenge. I highly recommend this book both for the chaplain who is living under the burden of frustrated cynicism inspired by the perception of all that the people she/he serves are not, or for the chaplain with compassion fatigue brought on by the burden of caring too much. Zaki invites his readers to step back and see a bigger picture so that we can take that step forward to engage the people to whom we minister. His book has proven to be a thirst-quenching cup of cool water that inspires me to hope.

Published: April 07, 2025 EDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC0). View this license's legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode> for more information.