Spirituality
Culture
Book Reviews



La Sallette Sr. Aniliza Juan, volunteer coordinator at Christ House in Alexandria, Virginia, and Lucy Allen, a student at the Basilica School of St. Mary in Alexandria, put food donated from students of the Catholic school into bags Oct. 24, 2017. (CNS/Catholic Herald/Ashleigh Kassock)



by Robert Shine

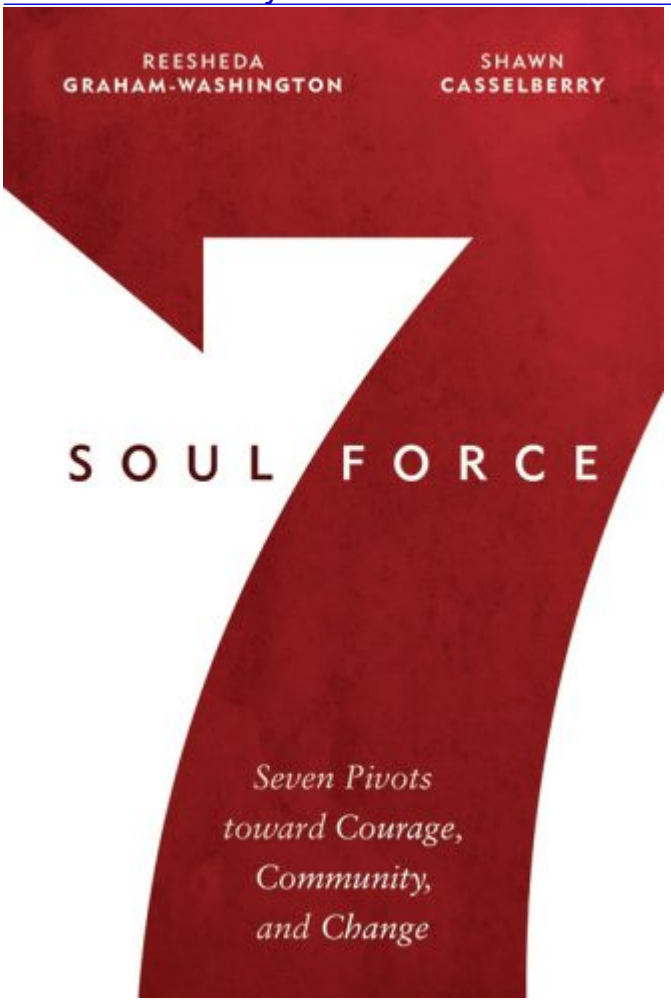
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SOUL FORCE: SEVEN PIVOTS TOWARD COURAGE, COMMUNITY, AND CHANGE
Reesheda Graham-Washington and Shawn Casselberry
192 pages; Published by Herald Press
$16.99

Being Catholic in the age of Trump can be draining. The range of social injustices to be decried and vulnerable communities to be defended seems unending. In the church, freshly impaneled grand juries nationwide foretell more reports of grotesque sexual abuse by clergy that church leaders systematically covered up. I confess that, at times, I relinquish working for justice. I turn on my "out of office" reply and tune out media reports in favor of the shelter Netflix comedies provide.

I suspect I am not alone in needing such escapes. But Christ invites us to never run too far from reality. How then do we keep seeking justice, when the church, which should be our refuge, has become a source of wounding betrayal and the world storms around us?

Reesheda Graham-Washington and Shawn Casselberry propose "soul force" as a source for sustainable and effective change-making, a concept they explore in their book *Soul Force: Seven Pivots Toward Courage, Community, and Change*. Soul force is the place "where the Spirit of God and our human resilience meet," and it is "an awakening to the realization that we have a creative force within us, because we all bear the divine imprint of the Creator." A concept from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., soul force is aligned intimately with Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha and Jesus' acknowledgement that the kin-dom of God is within us (Luke 17:21). Soul force helps us to become our truest selves so as to live in radical solidarity with the world around us.

The book proceeds through seven pivots aimed at helping readers unleash the power of their own soul force into collective movements for justice. The pivots are: from fear to freedom; from barriers to bridge building; from self-centeredness to solidarity; from hurt to hope; from consuming to creating; from charity to change; from maintenance to movement. Graham-Washington and Casselberry's commentary about each pivot draws from their own lives, Scripture, wisdom from outside voices, and cultural works like "Hamilton." Each pivot's chapter includes a brief third-party story, questions for personal reflection and a mantra.

Pivot four, from hurt to hope, is the book's core. This chapter engages some of humanity's deepest questions: Why does God allow suffering? How should I maintain hope? Themes of hurt and hope interweave our lives, thus interrogating such questions is a necessary and urgent task for justice seekers. Beyond affirming a vision of the beloved community we pursue, unleashing soul force requires us to understand, at least partially, the broken world we inhabit.

Toward this latter end of the book, the authors offer a partial theodicy, or explanation for why a good God would allow suffering. The authors write, "We believe that God allows hurt because God knows that suffering is the very thing that most ignites us to love, live, collaborate, transform and commune with one another." They ask elsewhere, "If pain didn't exist, would we be in community with each other?" Graham-Washington and Casselberry admit that theirs is only a partial

response, that such an approach is "a tough pill to swallow," and that suffering is not the sole cause of human action. But they seem committed to the idea that God allows suffering so that human beings will act to love one another.

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Soul Force is not a theological treatise. A fuller exposition of the doctrinal ideas undergirding their theodicy is understandably not included. Still, I question what the authors offer because I find it difficult to hope from their position. Suffering intensifies human beings' empathic action toward one another, but it is not "the very thing that most ignites us to love." Rather, one could argue it is a desire for relationship that most compels humans to love and be loved. Even if suffering were entirely absent, humans would still be loving, living, collaborating, transforming and communing. It is the fruits of relational love, not the pangs of suffering, in which I root my hope.

While I quibble with their theodicy, Graham-Washington and Casselberry are correct to include this question in the heart of their book. Witnessing the abuse of children in immigration jails and rectories alike and countless other injustices, the question of how God could let such suffering exist is newly posed to many people. How we each answer this question is quite determinative in how we unleash soul force and continue seeking justice.

Soul Force reads easily and is well-organized; Graham-Washington and Casselberry helpfully employ numbered lists, section headings and charts to guide the reader. Seasoned activists may find the book's ideas to be elementary, but its accessible, non-threatening engagement with dynamics of privilege, theories of social change, and critiques of individualism and consumerism will surely benefit newer minds. Educators, counselors and community organizers can readily use the book with clients and in their communities.

Soul force is not a goal, but a way of living that requires lasting attention and conversion. *Soul Force* is a tool for accountability and inspiration to which readers can return at different points along their journey. Indeed, such re-rooting and renewing work is necessary if we hope to keep striving for justice while surrounded by so many evils.

[Robert Shine advocates for a just and inclusive Catholic Church. For more on his writing and work, visit www.robertgshine.com.]

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