

Memoir of gay life needs more confession

Francis DeBernardo | Aug. 1, 2012

HIDDEN: REFLECTIONS ON GAY LIFE, AIDS, AND SPIRITUAL DESIRE

By Richard Giannone

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Richard Giannone's memoir is really two books in one. The first book, the one suggested by the title, *Hidden: Reflections on Gay Life, AIDS, and Spiritual Desire*, does not live up to its promise. The second book, the unanticipated story of Giannone's care of his infirmed mother and sister, is a fine surprise.

Giannone is a retired Fordham University English professor who is gay, who came of age before the legendary 1969 Stonewall riots, and who weathered the AIDS epidemic's ravaging of the gay community in the 1980s. Yet his autobiography is much less provocative than its somewhat heroic title suggests.

Based on the word "reflections," I'd hoped his story would provide personal insight into the struggles of living a closeted existence during decades when "coming out" was sometimes a dangerous decision. I expected that there would be tales of courage and sacrifice about caring for friends with HIV/AIDS in a time when all of society's institutions -- including the church -- ostracized these victims. I looked forward to reading reflections about connections between sexuality and spirituality from the perspective of one on the margins.

Unfortunately, there is too little of that story in this text. The AIDS epidemic is covered in the first chapter of the book, and is rarely mentioned in the later narrative. In the other initial chapters, Giannone does reflect on his struggles with sexuality and spirituality, but he never gets personal enough in his descriptions for his experiences to be relevant to others. While he is careful in documenting the events that occurred, he does not delve into the more personal ramifications of these events. Or, he does so in an abstract way, never getting to the telling details that would make the story come to life.

For example, Giannone offers the powerful and curious claim: "Being gay and seeking God are inextricably bound at the generative vortex of one's nature." Such a claim deserves serious unpacking of details, events, insights, but sadly he offers no further explanations. Those details would be where the true story lies.

Unfortunately, there were too many such unfulfilled promises, too often summary when expansiveness is needed. For instance, in one short paragraph he sums up what could be a wealth of information about the struggle of 1960s gay life and the spiritual and identity traumas such entailed:

Until I came to New York at the age of 32, in August 1967, I shared my gay identity with only a few close friends. That's the way it was then, before Stonewall: Get a job, keep it, survive the dangers of gay life -- blackmail, loss of job, street beatings, religious censure, arrest, countless forms of legal harassment, and murder. Safety trumped freedom. I lived, worked, and prayed in fear. I certainly could neither respect nor trust authorities.

It reminded me of the preface, titled "Confession," of Dorothy Day's classic autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. In that section she compares writing her memoir to going to confession. Part of the reason I did not

connect with her book is that it never became truly ?confessional.?

I realized as I read *Hidden* that reading autobiography is, in some respects, like being a voyeur. The reader is interested in peering into the soul of another person to see how it works, to see if there are similarities between the writer?s life and the reader?s. Especially in regard to his struggles with sexuality and spirituality, Giannone doesn?t get personal enough in his writing for the reader to be satisfied.

It is the second, far better book that is the heart of this volume. Caring for his mother?s physical needs provided the author with a wealth of opportunity for reflection on personal identity, family relationship, gender roles, ethnic and cultural barriers, and connections with the divine. The story of caring for her comes before the story of care for his sister and is the more compelling one. Understandably enough, a parent-child relationship is in many ways much more primary.

The second book has wider appeal, of course, for it relates a common situation that many people face -- caring for a sick family member, and some of the existential crises and vistas that such a task produces. Giannone?s preference for abstraction rather than detailed writing serves this section well. We are treated to some profound insights, such as his description of his sister?s return to her home after a long hospital sojourn: ?At home on Harper Terrace, she would be solely dependent on the source of her life; she would be alone with the Alone.?

While *Hidden* does not deliver the title?s promise of insights into sexuality and spirituality within the gay and HIV/AIDS community, it can offer solace and companionship for those who take the difficult but rewarding journey of caring for a frail loved one.

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