

My Five Stones: A Memoir

Susan Darin Pohl

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With *My Five Stones*, Susan Darin Pohl has written a cogent and effective memoir that plainly but compellingly relates her development from being a young girl raised in the Detroit area (in the Southern Baptist tradition) to her career as a chaplain in a federal women's prison, eventually becoming a management consultant in California. Pohl's easy, matter-of-fact style is perfectly matched to this complex and fascinating story. The author did not grow emotionally and spiritually in a straight line, and though the narrative reflects this, its organization still seems logical.

Pohl's work as a chaplain for women in a federal prison is gripping. She relates the story of an inmate whose ten-month-old baby was placed in foster care when the mother went to prison for a drug offense; subsequently, the foster father beat the baby to death. The inmate mother told this story in a group meeting centered around dealing with grief. Addressing her own issues, Pohl writes, "It now seemed vitally important for me to develop clarity about my belief if I were to continue this work, and not lose my mind, my heart, or my faith."

Pohl's life has not been easy, but, on the other hand, it has not been a great deal more tragic than the lives of many others: her mother was an exceedingly difficult person to relate to, her older sister died at an early age from cancer, and the writer was several times married and divorced. What makes this memoir worth reading is the manner in which Pohl has been able to confront these various difficulties and grow from them, spiritually and emotionally.

My Five Stones touches on mundane matters in a fresh and challenging way. In a session with a counselor, Pohl addresses her failed marriages. As related by Pohl, the counselor suggests that perhaps the question is not why she has gotten divorced twice but why she keeps marrying.

Pohl has a gift for intertwining her storytelling with small bits of profound observation. She tells about writing her dissertation for her doctor of ministry degree, basing her work on her experiences at the women's prison. She ends this segment with a riff beginning, "I believe now that we all create prisons for ourselves of one type or another." A few sentences later, she concludes, "A big difference between a physical prison and a mental one is we can break out of our own prison once we acknowledge it is of our own making." Simply and directly, without preaching or exhortation, Pohl leaves readers to ponder these thoughts and come to their own conclusions.

My Five Stones is a tender and optimistic book that offers hope and encouragement to all who read and reflect on it.

JOHN SENGER (October 14, 2013)

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