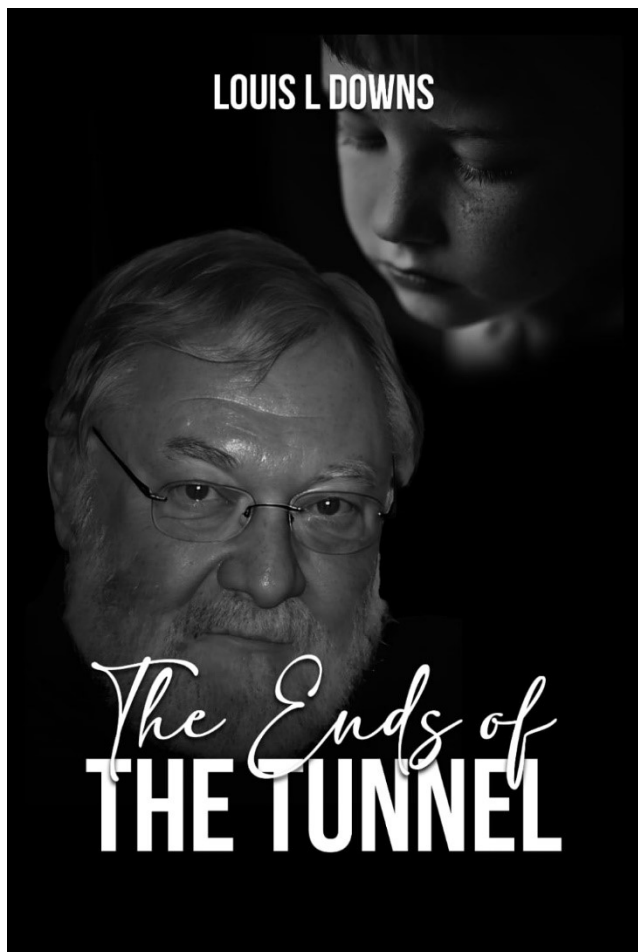


‘Ends of the Tunnel’ an intriguing read

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“The Ends of the Tunnel” by Louis L. Downs. Independently published, 2024, 415 pages, \$18.99 (paperback).



“Posttraumatic stress is no joke, nor is it anywhere close to as workable in therapy as anxieties,” Louis L. Downs explains near the beginning of “The Ends of the Tunnel,” his recently released treatise on a subject that increasingly hits close to home for many of us. “I’ve told my students that while anxiety is based on anticipatory fantasies that something very personal will occur, simply because it might, PTSD is like being stuck on a railroad track with an approaching freight train coming at such speed that it will hit you and tear you to shreds. It is not that it might happen. It is that it will.”

“All it takes is a trigger that reminds the emotional center in the brain, the amygdala, of that traumatic event in some way, and the train has just struck – no time to get out of its way,” he continues. “It is our job to help our clients recognize when a train is coming, how to reduce the impact, then to slow down the stress hormone infusion, and finally to step, completely off the tracks.”

So begins a fascinating foray into the human psyche led by someone who is obviously an expert in dealing with a dimension of human

experience that touches us all from time to time – some more than others. I’m also pretty sure many could relate to the opening paragraphs of this review and some probably had a primeval reaction due to their ability to instantly identify with the descriptive prose over which Downs is a master. “The Ends of the Tunnel” is a book that the general reader will no doubt find intriguing, and which those who work in the provision of mental health services will find exceptionally enlightening.

Structurally, the volume consists of a preface, 16 relatively self-contained although intrinsically linked chapters, and an epilogue. The manuscript contains several historical photographs that help bring the narrative life in a visceral manner by adding an element of authenticity that would not have been possible otherwise. The writing style is fluid and conversational; the reader has the distinct feeling that Downs is speaking directly to them in an intimate yet oddly objective dialog. I felt I could connect to much of what the author was recounting even though I had not personally experienced events analogous to what he was conveying.

What Downs has constructed is equal parts autobiography, history lesson, and instruction manual. The way the author weaves these three components together to form a coherent chronicle is truly amazing. Given the particulars endemic to the story he is telling, it is apparent that we are

approximately the same age; many of the cultural references are firmly embedded in my own upbringing – right down to the description of the first television set his family owned and the characteristic deference to his father that I experienced in my family growing up.

With respect to the historical context mentioned above, consider the following from “Beginning to Wake Up,” the sixth chapter and one of my favorites:

“I started my job and quickly found out that the hospital was what they called a Reagan Special. Before Ronald Reagan became the Governor of California, psychiatric hospitals were owned and run by the State. He simply disbanded them and relegated mental illness to small, privately physician-owned facilities for severe psychiatric states. The age of private companies, funded by state, federal and insurance psych hospitals was on. The psychiatrist groups that owned Crestview had started 17 small hospitals under the company name Semperviron. They thrived on providing limited care, giving only enough psychiatric medications to keep patients insane but relatively benign – relatively. It was a dangerous place to work.”

You’re probably thinking the same thing I am: Have we really made all that much progress over the last 60 years? There are politicians today who would no doubt consider this to be a good business model.

A psychotherapeutic specialist in trauma, anxiety and personal-based disorders, Downs has a doctorate in counseling, with a minor in psychology, from Oregon State University. His areas of expertise include curriculum development and equipping disaster mental health relief teams. An acknowledged expert in the field, he has been providing workshops and training internationally since 1986.

As is usually the case with most books in this genre, what I found most illuminating was the lessons Downs learned as he navigated the various significant relationships in his life (and there were several). His capacity for deep introspection is evident on virtually every page; he dissects and reflects upon each episode in a way to derive the most benefit from it - constantly striving to make sense of the world in a never-ending quest for self-improvement. Witness this passage from the eight chapter, “Post Psychotherapy”:

“I had learned to trust myself. I had learned not to automatically trust others in a relationship with me. I still had more lessons to learn. I had thus far learned to make my own unilateral decisions, to sort between people I could trust as opposed to those I couldn’t, and I’d learned to trust my own judgment, skills, and intelligence. I had not learned that I couldn’t stare untrustworthy people in the face and continue to treat them as if I trusted them or at least respected them. Leaving the possibility of continued relationship based on the other person’s force of will is a fool’s game, because people seldom change without consequences and crisis. Forced change in a relationship is unhealthy and unrealistic. Change based on consequences does not resolve core characteristics. It is easier to learn to build new relationships based on truthfulness and flexibility.”

I’ll bet I’m not the only one to give a hi-five to that sage advice.

As Ray Roper, a high school friend of Downs, asserts in his review on Amazon, “For the likely majority of more fortunate readers who escaped such childhood mistreatment, the book is an enlightening look into a different family dynamic, an awareness of which, and the possible means of recovery from which, would benefit all readers.”

I could not agree more and I plan to recommend this one to all my colleagues. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.