

Upcoming Grief Events

The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully

By Frank Ostaseski, Flatiron Books, 2017.

Few stresses compare to stresses we feel when confronted with our own death or the death of those important to us. Our death anxieties encourage us to spend as little time as possible contemplating death so we can focus more on living. Co-founder of the Zen Hospice Project, Frank Ostaseski has a different and more life (and death) affirming approach. In his many years of work supporting the dying, Frank has learned that lessons gained by those facing their own deaths can be helpful for the living even when the threat of death is or seems far away.

Ostaseski is a devout and learned Buddhist practitioner and he brings a strong Buddhist perspective and approach to his hospice work and to his writing. As someone from a different faith tradition, this was not troublesome as Ostaseski is clearly open to wisdom from other traditions while he shares wisdom from his own (as illustrated by the story excerpt in the Living All the Way section in this newsletter edition). The strength of the book is the stories he shares and how he connects them with the five themes or "invitations":

- Don't Wait
- Welcome Everything, Push Away Nothing
- Bring Your Whole Self to the Experience
- Find a Place of Rest in the Middle of Things
- Cultivate Don't Know Mind

These invitations are illustrated with vignettes of many different hospice patients and their families as well as professional caregivers. The perspective is that when confronted with our own mortality, we often have insights that are helpful for living our last days. These lessons, however, are also valuable for our living of other days, as well. He makes his case persistently, gently, and passionately. I found myself underlining phrases and short passages on many pages with the intent to return to ponder more deeply. A compelling read and especially useful for those supporting others facing death and those willing to consider and learn from their own eventual deaths.

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The Moon Prince and the Sea

by Daniela Rose Anderson, Et Alia Press, Little Rock, 2018.

The world of childhood cancer has changed dramatically. For children with cancer in countries with access to the latest treatments, overall five-year survival rates are almost 90%--a dramatic increase from 10% just forty years ago. Yet, too many children, of course, do not survive, and this would especially be true for those who lack access to treatment.

Within this context, *The Moon Prince and the Sea* tells the story of two real children with cancer who are treated for but ultimately die from their illness. They live in two very different worlds but are bound together by their common illnesses and fate. There is sadness, of course, in the story, but there is much more. The strongest feelings and impressions are connection, compassion, and transcendence.

Sumit is a boy in rural India who travels for days to get to the hospital for treatments. As he physically recovers, he connects with other children in the hospital. He also learns of a girl named Marina in a distant country (the US) who also has cancer. He is touched by her story and dreams of her. He paints her a picture and sends a brief letter of encouragement. Far away she receives his gifts and feels both connection and comfort.

After he returns to his country home from the city hospital, Sumit is not able to return for more treatments. A caring nurse travels to Sumit's home to learn from the neighbor children that Sumit is now "in God's home." But his story is not ended.

Marina waits until family and friends are ready, and then she closes her eyes and takes her last breath. In the next place, she and Sumit unite, healed, unafraid, and bound together. Where they are and where they go is a place of both mystery and love, and they go there hand in hand.

From my days working in the childhood cancer world, it was not uncommon to see children from different backgrounds deeply bound together by their common experiences. Their connections and courage reminded us all of deeper truths. This book is based on a true story and it goes beyond literal truths to evoke bigger truths. The painted illustrations evoke feelings of comfort and compassion, and Sumit's yellow silk cape is used to good effect connecting him to the moon and marking him as its prince. Marina's name means "the sea" which is also metaphor for so much more. An uplifting, sad, compassionate, and transcendent story.

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In Shock: My Journey from Death to Recovery and The Redemptive Power of Hope

by Dr. Rana Awdish, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2017.

When she was pregnant and working as young critical care doctor, Dr. Rana Awdish died—or came about as close to it as possible and still be here to tell about it. This book is her story of that day and the following few years where she repeatedly came close to death again. Her story is a compelling patient story involving dramatic rescues, near misses, good and bad communication from healthcare professionals, and denial of pain and risk on her part and by her treatment teams. But it is more than that. It is also a narrative reflection on the systemic flaws in how we educate and encourage physicians and other healthcare professionals to distance themselves from patients and suffering and how we can do much better for patients and for healthcare providers.

Along with being an insightful and compassionate physician, Awdish is also a talented writer, able to describe both human reactions and complicated medical conditions for both medical and non-medical readers. She strongly critiques our healthcare system which too often leaves little room for compassion for patients, families, coworkers and the professionals themselves. Such a system fall short for all involved and has both humane and medical consequences. Others have made similar arguments, but few have the power of Awdish's story which brings together both patient and provider perspectives.

Among the many insights offered, two particularly linger. One is that too often our current system of medicine encourages a deeper connection to the diagnosis than to the patient. The other is competing images of the role of healthcare providers. A too-common image is healthcare providers with their backs to a cliff trying to catch and save patients tumbling to the edge and into the abyss below. In this image, the providers are unaware of the depth and breadth of what patients see and experience. A more respectful, compassionate, and helpful image is that of healthcare providers standing side-by-side with patients as they face the cliff and the abyss beyond. In this image, providers are partners with patients in their efforts at health and living and willing to be companions when life is short or frightening.

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Thankfully, Awdish did not die on that terrible day or on many of the terrible days that followed. Her survival and recovery was mostly a benefit to herself, her family and friends, and her future children. But her hard-won insights are also a benefit to us—healthcare providers, patients, and providers who will be patients (as was Awdish) as we learn from her experiences to both save more lives and better ease the suffering of the living and the dying.

On Living Again

by Kerry Egan, Riverhead Books, 2016.

Kindness and humility are the pervasive themes of beautiful collection of stories and reflections shared by hospice chaplain Kerry Egan. Kindness towards others, kindness towards suffering, towards human pain, shame and frailty, and towards ourselves. And humility in the face of mysteries found in life and living, death and dying. Each chapter is a story of Egan's interactions with a hospice patient and sometimes the patient's family. She expounds about the quiet, yet powerful, role of the chaplain to provide presence and a healing space which allows others to enter into the questions and meanings of her life. To provide such companionship takes remarkable strength, gentleness and patience. She respects the dying not primarily because they are dying but because they are people like the rest of us—they just have a heightened sense that time is short—and all people have messy stories which shape their lives and pains which too easily burden. All people need a witness to their stories and in the sharing there is healing both for the sharer and the witness. Egan has beliefs and convictions to support and guide her and they serve to provide safe places for others to explore their own beliefs and convictions. The stories she shares are remarkable but not unusual. They are representative of all of us in our complexities, strengths and weaknesses. Highly recommended, and not just for end-of-life professionals.

About Grief: Insights, Setbacks, Grace Notes, Taboos

by Ron Marasco and Briant Shuff, Ivan R. Dee, 2010.

In this line of work, there are many books, articles and presentations about grief. Some are clinical and research-oriented, some are more self-help, and some are testimonies or

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memoirs. All can be helpful. This books doesn't fit well in any of those categories, and that is one of its strengths.

my grandmother asked me to tell you she's sorry
by Frederik Backman, Washington Square Press, 2015.

The title and cover were eye-catching and the *Library Journal* endorsement on the back read, "Full of heart, hope, forgiveness, and the embracing of differences, Elsa's story is one that sticks with you long after you've turned the last page."

When Breath Becomes Air
by Paul Kalanithi, Random House, 2016.

Paul Kalanithi confronted death as both neurosurgeon and terminal cancer patient. His story and observations are bravely and beautifully told in *When Breath Become Air*.

H is for Hawk
by Helen Madonald, Grove/Atlantic, 2015

H is for Hawk is a beautifully written memoir about grief, loss, wildness and finding one's place in the world.

Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief
edited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, Talor & Francis, 1996.

Twenty years ago, an important book was published which helped us better understand that we don't fully leave behind those we love and lose. The book and the concept was Continuing Bonds.

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My Father's Arms Are A Boat

by Stein Erik Lunde, illustrated by Oyvind Torester, Enchanted Lion Books, New York,
www.enchantedlionbooks.com

A special children's book for a winter's night with a father and son lonely together for wife and mother. From Norway, where much is known about winter nights.

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End

by Atul Gawande. Metropolitan Books, 2014.

In this timely book, surgeon Atul Gawande considers the challenges and limitations of modern medicine in the context of aging and illness which leads to death. In this exploration, he looks at the "big picture" of medicine and healthcare, especially in the United States, and also at personal stories including the story of his own father's cancer and eventual death.

Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant? – A Memoir

by Roz Chast. Bloomsbury, 2014.

There is no book like this one in form but its themes and subject matter are ones that will resonate with many. Roz Chast is a cartoonist whose work is often found in The New Yorker magazine. This memoir covers the last years of life for her elderly parents from the perspective of an adult child who both loves and is often exasperated by them. This is a family story well-told of life, dying, death and the messiness along the way.

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Missing Mommy: A Book About Bereavement

by Rebecca Cobb, Henry Hold and Company, New York, 2013. (first published in the United Kingdom, MacMillan Children's Books, 2011).

www.mackids.com

So begins an excellent book for young children concerning the death of a parent. The young boy is confused by his mother's absence and eventually his father helps him understand that his mother has died. His father helps him understand the basics: his mother can't come back because she has died and her body doesn't work anymore, it was nothing he did, his father wishes she were here, too, but they are still a family and will remember her. The words are simple in their reality and wisdom, yet it might be the pictures that really set the book apart. The illustrations are a colorful mixture of crayon, marker and watercolor, and are very expressive. The combination of insightful, straightforward words with engaging and evocative illustrations helps this addition from the UK stand out in the grief/loss genre of children's literature.

Duck, Death and Tulip

by Wolf Erlbruch, Gecko Press, 2011 (first published in Germany, Verlag Antje Kunstmann, GmbH, 2007).

This illustrated book from Germany, discussed the topic of understanding and coping with death in terms of a duck, death and a tulip. The illustrations are really masterful and the book is a uniquely creative addition to the genre.

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Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?

by Elke & Alex Barber, illustrated Anna Jarvis, Crowdfunded in 2012.

www.isdaddycomingback.com

Alex was three years old when he and his father went away for a "boys only" weekend and his father died unexpectedly. A sudden death is hard to understand at any age, but it is especially challenging for preschool-age children. In this book based on the true story of the Barber family, Alex tells the story and asks lots of three-year-old questions, and his mother does a beautiful job of answering honestly and clearly in ways that give Alex the opportunity to understand the basic facts of what happened.

Something Happened

by Cathy Blanford, illustrated by Phyllis Childers, Signature Book Printing, 2008.

www.somethinghappenedbook.com

A young boy is excited (mostly) by the coming of a new baby in the family, but then something happens and the baby dies. The boy narrates his family's story, and he explains, "Instead of going to the hospital to say hello...we had to go to the hospital to say goodbye."

Author Cathy Blanford has over twenty years working with grieving children and also serves as a bereavement counselor for Still Missed, a support program for families who have experienced a pregnancy loss. Her long years and practice experience show in the simple, direct language of the story and the issues addressed. A special and appreciated feature of this book are notes directed to parents.
