

## Life, Death, and Compassion

published with slightly different title in *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 84, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 1059-1065  
© 2002, Catherine M. Wallace

### Books Discussed

*Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper*, by Barry K. Baines (Perseus, 2002)

*When the World Breaks Your Heart: Spiritual Ways of Living With Tragedy*, by Gregory S. Clapper (Upper Rooms Books, 1999).

*Inventions of Farewell: A Book of Elegies*, ed Sandra M. Gilbert (Norton, 2001).

*Act of God/Active God: Recovering from Natural Disasters*, by Gary Harbaugh (Fortress, 2001).

*Sorrow's Company: Writers on Loss and Grief*, ed. DeWitt Henry (Beacon, 2001).

*The Healing Companion: Simple and Effective Ways Your Presence Can Help People Heal*, by Jeff Kane (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001)

*When Suffering Persists: A Theology of Candor*, by Frederick W. Schmidt, Jr. (Morehouse, 2001).

*Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith*, by Studs Terkel (New Press, 2001).

Mammograms, colonoscopies, calcium tablets big enough to choke a horse. Low-fat vegetarian meals, regular check-ups, cardio-vascular exercise of various kinds. Alas, my days of cheerful bookish sloth and rare roast beef are gone forever. I've gone from looking like my mother to looking like my grandmother, the indomitable matriarch for whom I am named. At some point, will "don't trust anyone over thirty" turn into "don't trust anyone under sixty"??? I have visions of baby-boomers marching on Washington as in days of yore, but this time waving our canes and demanding changes to Medicare.

But as I massage sunscreen into the deepening lines around my eyes, a small voice repeatedly wonders: *who are you kidding?* At some high intellectual level, I understand that the denial of death impoverishes life, distorting its hopes and its pleasures in a pretense that This Will Last Forever. My small furtive denials continue nonetheless, no matter how often I rediscover that nothing lasts, not even suffering. I think that recognition first dawned on me at the death of my father, who died relatively young after a long and brutal illness.

His funeral Mass, planned and celebrated by a Franciscan, was a glorious proclamation of the Resurrection. The white and gold of it broke through both the gloom of late November and the unspeakable darkness of my exhaustion. I understood, gut-level and somehow for the very first time, that Jesus came to proclaim a simple, permanent, timeless reality: life is good, life is eternal, and life is ultimately beyond human comprehension. The Kingdom of God vanquishes death but neither pain nor fear nor the fact of dying. I sat back bewildered, focusing somehow on the bare toes and the edges of sandal straps visible beneath the celebrant's cassock. One does not wear sandals in Chicago in late November: how could he face both this cold and our pain with such warmth?

Haunted and blessed by that memory, and mindful for decades now of AIDS moving in our midst, I have watched the growing market for books about coping with suffering, death, and grief. The best of these are anthologies that variously name the unnamable truth: we are frail, mortal, and doomed to suffer. In *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*, Studs Terkel interviews sixty-two people about their experience of death, their sense of God, and the foundations of their hope that life is worth living despite death.

He begins with police officers, emergency-room nurses and physicians, soldiers, clergy. He includes artists, parents, people dealing with AIDS, city folks and country folks, old folks and young folks, a few famous folks (Kurt Vonnegut, Doc Watson) and very many more who live in commonplace obscurity. He includes both a survivor of Nagasaki and an American doctor, active in African healthcare, who rages that Illinois will spend \$14 billion a year on roads when a mere \$15 to \$30 million per year per country could rescue Africa from AIDS--money that the international community refuses to provide.

A few speak eloquently about encounters with God's abiding and sustaining presence; many more discover and yearn for the very same God but do not believe that churches understand what they are talking about. The range and depth of these interviews testify to Terkel's extraordinary ability to listen in ways that free people to talk. Anyone involved in hospital ministry or in ministry to strangers should spend a few days reading this book, simply to appreciate the range of deep feelings, careful thinking, and scathing memories that ordinary people bring to bear on the question of death.

More polished, more powerful--at times overwhelmingly so--are a couple of literary anthologies. Sandra Gilbert, *Inventions of Farewell*, offers 206 poems, 40 by authors who died before 1900. Although a few of my favorites from this earlier period were missing, what felt "missing" was more than matched by discoveries I would never have made on my own. Better yet, I can attest that Gilbert's sense of poetry is to be trusted, especially by those who are *not* finely trained in the esoterica of literary forms. She expects poems to have something to say that is worth thinking about, and to render at least a rough sense of that idea at first reading. I admire her literary judgment, and I'm in awe of the work such intelligent selection must have demanded.

The first hundred-fifty pages offer poems on a variety of key experiences: watching the dying, viewing the dead, funeral ceremonies, and imagining the afterlife. The remaining 325-plus pages are elegies: poems lamenting a death. The elegies are grouped thematically: death of the beloved, of a child, of a friend, of the great or the beautiful, death by violence, deaths of other poets, self-elegies, and meditations upon mortality generally. All of these poems are both short and elegant; most of them are also remarkably accessible. Selections from *Inventions of Farewell* might therefore serve as conversation-starters for a mourners' support group or a CPE group. In their ability briefly but powerfully to convey an experience, these poems would also be superbly useful for courses in pastoral care or for general undergraduate courses in death, dying, and the meaning of life.

In *Sorrow's Company*, DeWitt Henry, founding editor of *Sojourners*, offers fifteen essays by established writers, including Jamaica Kincaid, Andre Dubus, William Gibson, Anatole Broyard, and James Alan McPherson. The essays are divided into three

categories: “Leave-takings,” “Bereft,” and “Legacies.” Such polished writers, struggling with their own grief, will leave anyone in tears. And yet I found it a blessing to listen, if only to realize--now, thirty years later--that I was not as alone as I felt in my years of sitting quietly, attending my father’s slow death. Despite an abundance of family and my extraverted parents’ many many friends, I felt anchored in a separate reality. However belatedly, it’s good to know there was nothing at all unique either in my experience or in my sense of devastating isolation. These essays will convince any caring friend (or any fledgling priest) how much the grieving need someone with the courage that listening demands. Nothing more.

And nothing less. Jeff Kane’s *The Healing Companion* draws on his decades of experience as a physician (probably an oncologist) leading support groups for mortally-ill patients and for their families. His how-to-listen advice is succinct: shut up, call an absolute halt to the chattering reactions in your own mind, and pay attention not only to the words but more centrally to the feelings of the speaker. Invite expansion upon whatever statements felt most emotionally laden--and then shut up again, shut up entirely and sit very still, attending with all your might. The Chinese figure for “listen,” he explains, is compounded of images for “attention,” “ear,” “eye,” and “heart.”

I was intrigued by his description of such listening as a visceral and intuitive process demanding both real intelligence and sustained concentration: the listener is by no means a blank or passive partner. The healing role of the listener is made clear in the many snippets of conversation Kane offers. These snippets, obviously drawn from tape recordings made during those decades of support groups, illustrate how healing takes place when one person attends so richly to another. Dialogue this powerful cannot be faked. His restraint, his willingness to offer so much of this wealth in one very small book, testifies to the humility of his healing spirit. The man has a gift, a gift that *The Healing Companion* effectively shares.

I think it’s fairly easy to recognize that the dying or the grieving need someone to listen, but I have often felt that my attentive silence is little more than a thin and shabby facade for my own frightened helplessness. *The Healing Companion* convinced me that such silence can be a rich gift indeed, provide I can recognize and silence the static of my

own anxious, self-centered, memory-rooted reactions. Furthermore, he showed me how delicate, attentive, minimalist responses to the suffering can heal without pretending to fix, to explain, or to explain away the realities of the situation. This book should be read by anyone who hopes to offer genuinely pastoral care, and anyone who thinks that maybe someday someone they love will fall seriously (even if not mortally) ill or injured.

Kane's last two chapters address religious issues with delicacy and sophisticated respect. In facing death, he explains, we face life's deepest mysteries; when the dying make peace with the reality of their dying, we stand witness to the deepest mystery of all. He offers no theological or explicitly religious formulation of this mystery, but he names it skillfully and draws from the naming excellent advice that Christians can indeed take to heart. The healing companion is a conduit, he explains, not a container--healing comes through us, not from us (p. 168).

Furthermore, he counsels, we will repeatedly fail to listen with full attention because we will be distracted by our own fear and by our own pain. That's inevitable; it's no reason to give up on ourselves or to avoid the suffering. "In addition to your personal limits," he explains, "there's the ultimate limit inherent in healing itself: *you can't know what you've accomplished*. Human influence is trivial compared with that of the inscrutable cosmos, so for all our efforts, healing still comes from grace. . . . The boundary between what we can accomplish and what grace provides is where we can touch the Divine" (p. 183). He does not discuss either prayer or theological questioning as part of the interaction between caregivers and the suffering, but he certainly offers a rich framework within which to think about how to do so with healing presence.

In that regard, I particularly admired his insistence that when one person suffers disease, all who love them suffer some level of illness--all of which seeks healing. Healing, as Kane defines it, is "calm acceptance of [one's] immediate situation" or "*the attainment of inner peace*" (p. 12, p. 10), to which end he quotes Václav Havel: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out" (p. 71). Ultimately, I'm convinced, only faith in the present and compassionate God offers hope adequate to the depth of human suffering.

Frederick Schmidt, an Episcopal priest and Director of Spiritual Life and Formation at Perkins School of Theology, deconstructs theological efforts to explain pain away-- essentially putting a solid religious foundation under the situations and conversations Kane describes. *When Suffering Persists* is a masterpiece of practical theology: learned, elegant, nuanced, passionate, and yet absolutely accessible to those without theological education. He delineates a theology of suffering by exploring the inadequacy of our identifying God as both absolutely omnipotent and absolutely "good."

Schmidt is remarkably sympathetic to and generous with claims that he sees as ultimately wrong-headed, but he is equally clear that when suffering *persists* then these claims unravel in devastating ways. *When Suffering Persists* offers a gentle but clear account that will prove invaluable for ministry to people whose suffering is deepened by shabby or inadequate theology they have assimilated from who-knows-where. Schmidt argues that a theology of suffering must see God as unfailingly present, compassionate, and sustaining--not as an omnipotent figure who might have stopped or prevented suffering but who chooses not to.

Under any circumstances, our efforts to be present to one another's pain force us into painful encounter with the deepest, most dangerous realities of what Incarnation actually means. When Kane says we are conduits, not containers, he does not fully acknowledge the very real danger we face not only from the suffering before us but also from grace as it passes through us. According to hymns, grace may flow like a river; but in my experience it can sometimes feel much more like a chain saw.

The Rev. Dr. Gregory Clapper encountered such dangerous grace when a plane crashed not far from his house. As a chaplain in the Air National Guard, he was deeply involved in ministry to the dying, the survivors, the ground personnel, and their families. In *When the World Breaks Your Heart*, he beautifully explains the many dimensions of mystery into which suffering draws us.

First, of course, is the ontological mystery of tragedy itself. Beyond the question "why do such things happen?" are the mysterious depths of our own reactions to suffering, to loss, and to death: tears, humility, gentleness, hope. The greatest mystery of all, he argues, is the visceral encounter with the sustaining presence of God.

Clapper's raw encounter with the presence of God runs all through the book: I came away as impressed with his courage as with his theological insight. *When the World Breaks Your Heart* is worth more than a shelf-full of tomes on the preaching of funeral sermons, and more than a case of Advil for neck muscles that cramp as one pulls into hospital parking lots. It has also provided real comfort for my own horrible memories of ambulances, emergency rooms, and grim-faced surgeons struggling for words.

Finally, two very small books that may be immensely useful. Gary Harbaugh's *Acts of God/ Active God* offers--among other things--abundant Biblical resources for ministry amidst natural disaster. There's a depth here, a resonance, that no doubt reflects his experience at the head of the Lutheran Disaster Response. Now that the grim specter of terrorism matches the violent weather of global warming, this little book may prove a pearl of great price for those ministering to devastated communities.

From an utterly secular perspective comes Barry Baines, *Ethical Wills*. Baines proposes that the ill or the aging might take time to name the wisdom they have acquired and the values according to which they have struggled to live, offering such things to their heirs as a moral inheritance. Most of the book is a set of ordinary "composition exercises" designed to help people get going on this task by providing a minimalist structure and set of questions to answer. There's also a website, [www.ethicalwills.com](http://www.ethicalwills.com).

Despite the secular individualism of Baines's presentation, the idea itself is marvelous. Writing an "ethical will" certainly can be situated within a life of faith. For many of us, for instance, certain passages in Scripture have become deeply laden with meaning and with grace over the years. But I'm sure my children and husband have not the faintest idea what these passages are, or why or how they have come to mean so much to me. I also have favorite hymns and, like everyone else, memories and stories of times when I felt the presence of God in some utterly unequivocal way.

It might take the grace of a Studs Terkel (and maybe his tape-recorder as well) to initiate and sustain such conversation with the seriously ill, but we don't need to wait until we are actually dying. Furthermore, any parish has a contingent of silence-prone introverts who might read Kane, then Schmidt, then Baine, and then set out to listen to the shut-in, the frail elderly, or the chronically ailing, essentially calling upon them to

share their experience of the life of faith as a sustaining witness sorely needed by those who come after them. Writing an “ethical will” might also be a useful exercise for a priest leaving one parish for another--useful both for the parish and for the priest!

One way or another, our presence to the suffering is inseparable from the slow death of One who thereby testified that God knows just how awful life can be. As Clapper explores so beautifully, the real mystery is not death--death is just biology--but the human capacity for tears, humility, gentleness, and hope. The God-shaped hole so evident in so many parts of these books is a hole ringed with fire across which Christians are called to step--with bare feet no less, and in attentive silence, and as bearers of the Presence of God.

Catherine M. Wallace  
Book Review Editor