

BOOK REVIEW

Rebecca S. Valla, MD
Winston-Salem, NC

Beyond Surviving: Cancer and Your Spiritual Journey by David Maginley, Halifax, NS: Tristan Press, 2016, 226 + 10 pp., \$16.00 US/\$21.00 CAN (ISBN 9780995881112)

As a medical doctor and practicing psychiatrist of some 30-odd years, I spent the majority of my training in hospital settings where very sick people resided. The experience of life for them was in many ways altered. It was suspended because, for a time, there was only the uncertainty that became their reality: Will I survive this (illness, surgery, treatment)? How will I cope; behave; contain myself? If I survive and leave this place, how will it change me? Will I be back? What then?

I have chosen to follow a path of mostly helping people to live more fully and more happily. I do have patients who become seriously ill, and some transition to the hereafter in a manner that involves my connection to them. I sit with people who are in grief over the loss of loved ones—and I share in their pain and suffering. But mostly I am not in the liminal space between life and death, day in and day out. My path and my gifts are not suited to the excruciating consciousness of death's shadow at the door.

David Maginley is a Canadian minister and chaplain whose own path and work has placed him in the center of that very interface of life and death. His own story of surviving cancer four times brought him to this threshold. In his book, *Beyond Surviving*, he wrote of his own life experience with much vulnerability, and his openness to the reader can't help but inspire. Here is a human being—a fellow traveler—who has learned to embrace what IS. Whether life shines through the darkness of sickness and the threat of death, or whether death takes on an unexpected and miraculous companionship, either way is alright with him. In the words of a much-loved Christian hymn,

Rebecca S. Valla, MD, is a psychiatrist practicing in an outpatient, holistic treatment center. Correspondence regarding this review should be sent to Dr. Valla at 127 Holistic Health, 127 S. Poplar St., Winston-Salem, NC 27101; e-mail: rvalla@bellsouth.net.

it has become “well with his soul.” His profession as a chaplain at a major cancer treatment center has placed him at the very axis of life and death.

I met David through the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) organization. He has presented at its conferences on such topics as “The Promise of a New Day: Grief, Hope, and NDE on a Cancer Ward” (2013); “Spiritual Care of NDEERS in a Hospital Setting” (2017); “On the Edge of Immortality: The Power of NDEs in Preparing Patients for the Final Journey” (2018); and “NDEs and the Unfinished Love Story” (2019). As in this book, his approach has been to be consciously present, honest, and profound, in his understated, self-disclosing way. I have—and I believe others have—always come away from any encounter with him feeling exalted as a human being. We are each and all so much more than we can express in words. Our connections run deep and take us into mystery and magnificence.

I have also gotten to know David in a more personal way through his joining our first IANDS Ethics Committee. I have found him to be a man of great integrity, acceptance, and perspective. He easily translates errors of judgment or action into opportunities for self-awareness and personal growth. For him, all seems to be in divine order.

David wrote this book, which has won the Nautilus Book Award, to help others forge meaning and spiritual growth through the suffering and uncertainty that cancer brings in its wake. The empathy he brings to his patients, which exemplifies his spiritual wisdom and commitments, as well as his own expansion through experience, is enhanced and illuminated by his studies. His knowledge of philosophy, world religions, modern physics, and consciousness research, as well as therapeutic touch and ancient healing traditions, are brought to bear on the individual situation he is called to encounter. He shows us readers how, and to some extent, helps us understand why, we need one another in the depths of our being. He said in the Preface that “what is most important . . . is to love deeply, to be real, and to know that life has purpose, and to make a difference by living it.” This book is a blueprint for individuals with cancer, their loved ones who suffer with them, and the professionals who seek to meet them in a place of deep connection and, yes, of love.

Beyond Surviving is divided into four parts. Each part begins with the story—his story—of a tumor presenting itself in his body with new urgency, and the uncertainty and chaos that accompanied the discovery. He has suffered four tumors, all of the same origin: neuroendocrine cancer. Each recurrence brought a new crisis leading to ques-

tions of meaning and hope. Just as each trauma throughout a lifetime brings one back to those experienced before, each of these recurrences brought him back to where he had been and what he had learned from his previous cancer experiences. These four punctuations, or interruptions, of his lifetime, have created a journey. Along the way, his return to lessons of self-love and love of the beautiful mystery of life, and to his certain knowledge that fear is not stronger than love, and can be a doorway to discovery and transformation, has carried him further along his pathway. This journey has become his “homework” for this lifetime. One of these episodes with cancer led David to have a near-death experience (NDE). He came to understand the double meaning of that ineffable experience of finally being “Home” in the place of light infused with love. The work of us humans, to come to terms with our temporary identity and physical existence and to realize the necessity for unconditional love and forgiveness—for both ourselves and others, resonates with how we will understand our essential selves when we transition from this lifetime and find ourselves at “Home” once again.

Part 1 includes David’s first experience of cancer at age 17. David’s description of the shock and distress of this discovery seem to be in keeping with how it must be for most first occurrences of cancer. He took the opportunity to highlight some of the science of cancer diagnosis and treatments, as well as some of the common ways that people pressure themselves, sometimes capitulating to the imposed pressures of loved ones, to “remain hopeful” and to “think positively.” He called out this “tyranny of hope” as a problem, because it stands in the way of a true encounter with the face and the real prospect of death.

It is here that we learn to love our suffering self with a tenderness from which deep meaning will be born. It is here that faith in a loving God, and confidence that you are, indeed, wired for immortality, make it possible to do more than endure suffering – it makes it possible to shine even brighter through it. (p.30)

He also illustrated how he has subsequently taken this lesson into the work he has done at the bedside of cancer patients.

There is no greater privilege than accompanying the dying, to witness a soul’s transition from this world to the next. There is no greater heartbreak either. The capacity to hold these two extremes in the cradle of compassion is what determines the quality of our presence . . . This is not a quality that emerges from training, ego, or intellect. We experience it through our own suffering and redemption, which means you have to know brokenness to be a conduit of grace. (p. 31)

With consistent emphasis, David led readers to the central question of becoming a cancer patient. It is not the “Why me?” question. Rather, it is “What am I going to do with it?”. The focus is then turned to the personal opportunity to know oneself deeply, and maybe to begin this process in earnest for the first time. His second point of emphasis was the connection with loved ones and the opportunity for a genuine and powerful sharing of this profound lived experience. Death is part of life. We all “know” that. “The problem is, when we are unable to be authentically present with ourselves, we cannot be authentically connected to others. We feel too vulnerable, too overwhelmed, too terrified” (p. 46). David instructed those of us who are witnesses to the terrified patient

to assist the individual toward their authenticity, where they can stand in their pain, adapt to their crisis, and connect more deeply . . . they’ll find that letting go is easier than hanging on to something that wasn’t real. By engaging our mortality in this way, we are really engaging our living. (p. 46)

In this way, the chaplain introduced us to the spiritual dimension of cancer. He ended with a case presentation of a loving family attending the death of their mother. Her vivid presence—until her last breath—was a gift to her loved ones.

In Part 2, David opened the door to Pheochromocytoma, the type of cancer that he had, which recurred 10 years later. We now understand more about this rare—two in a million each year—and dangerous cancer. He emphasized the opportunity for reconciliation, reminding us that “relationships are the fabric of our souls, the only clothes we wear to heaven, and they are always torn and tattered” (p. 68). Again, we have the reminder of “homework” that is brought to our attention by the prospect of dying. “Dying brings the homework of forgiveness out of the shadows” (p. 69). David addressed “regrets,” which he termed “the unfinished love story” (p. 69). He marveled at the human spirit, which “is profoundly wise in the ways of reconciliation. Often a person will die on a birthday or anniversary, a mystical expression of solidarity and connection” (p. 70). True to form, he went after the toughest nuts to crack in life, which are the realities of trauma and abuse that make forgiveness so elusive. Here, the training of the chaplain and pastoral counselor brings us insights about the trauma of cancer returning the patient to past traumas. They may attempt to “cope” with their cancer diagnosis in ways they tried in the past, such as substance abuse or other self-destructive behaviors. “The capacity

to endure may entail cutting off the emotional connection to one's vulnerability, one's fear, and one's humanity" (p. 71). Again, he used true and very moving examples of cases in which dying people forgave their abusers or worked through their own need for absolution.

In this section, readers are fully initiated into the inevitable subject of grief. David prefaced his discussion with the promise that grief will lead to gratitude and to the opportunity to love more deeply. He invited the loved ones in this drama to trust their grief process, which is "wise and honors the relationship" (p. 83). In the anticipation of our loved ones' death, we are each challenged to imagine life beyond their being here with us. This is work, on an emotional and psychological level. It is honest work, and we have much to gain as we stumble through it. Guilt commonly confronts us somewhere along this path. We feel guilt for giving up hope as well as for going on into our futures where our loved ones cannot follow. Ultimately, we are rewarded when we submit to the pain of our looming loss. Vulnerability is the price we pay for the advancement of our wholeness and self-knowledge.

Preparatory grief is the work of the dying. The realities of this process include concern for loved ones, fear of suffering, unfinished business, and the question "What lies beyond death?". For many people, much of the work is the unfinished business. (As a psychiatrist, I plead the case for examining one's life in an ongoing way and attempting healing and course-correction well before time is running out.) I suspect that Chaplain Maginley would say that it doesn't matter when this work is complete and that doing it upon one's deathbed may be the best time for that individual to do their self-healing. Preparatory grief actually begins at the moment of diagnosis and continues on throughout the course of illness as "negotiation with mortality" (p. 87). David referred to this process as "core homework for the soul" (p. 87) and observed that the pace is accelerated when compared with the anticipatory grief of the family. We are also treated to the experience of his own preparatory grief process, which changed over time.

Not surprisingly, David took a chapter to educate readers about how to lean into allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and courageous and to open ourselves to the wondrous power of compassion. He used an illustration with a patient, Mike, who, in the process of his struggle with cancer, had lost an authentic attachment to himself as well as to those he loved. When, with David's help, he found his way to admit to himself his effort to fight and control and saw that it came out of fear, he was able to make the decision to let in self-compassion, which ended the chokehold that fear had exerted on him. David offered a

few simple tools from Buddhist teachings for achieving a deeper level of relationship with oneself. The first, is not to identify with what we think or feel. He advised that we instead invite curiosity and ask ourselves the question "What is this about?" (p. 99). Curiosity enables us the freedom to step back from the experience of such emotions as shame, self-doubt, or defensiveness. The second tool is to witness to the suffering. If in meditation, the mantra would be "I have this body, but I am not this body. I have this thought, but I am not this thought. I have this feeling, but I am not this feeling. I am the witness" (p. 99).

Finally, David introduced readers to three cases of "remarkable survivors." Each exemplified how to harness their inner resources and to remain present and self-loving in spite of the circumstances of suffering and the fear of death. David used this backdrop to summarize research in this area of survival through the acceleration of conscious development, of the placebo effect, and of the science behind how and why cancer gets started in the body, and he offered one promising multistep program for patients with advanced cancer aimed at helping them change their consciousness as well as their lifestyles (p. 108). We are left with several examples of miraculous healings, where something beyond human comprehension appears to have occurred. Here is where the divine appears to be playing a central role and where our chaplain guides us to see that "faith is a state of connected consciousness" (p. 111).

Part 3 brings into focus the transformational power of the whole-self encounter with cancer. David's tumor was too small to be seen on the most specialized of scans, but his symptoms told the story that it is there, somewhere. Of necessity, he turned to the survival tool he knew would help: meditation. He defined this strategy as a way to be authentic and present in spite of his terror and anxiety. He then introduced mindfulness as a way of being, a conscious living that is akin to the Christian tradition of "centering prayer." We learn of his personal favorite mantra, *maranatha*, which means "Come Lord!" and "Our Lord has Come!" He described this phrase as bringing him "compassionately to his pain." "Come to me, Lord. I am reaching through my mortality to your eternity, where the light is infused with love, I am aching for you. I am held. I am home" (p. 119). Following David's eventual surgery, he was re-hospitalized with an infection. During the night, he "felt a presence in the room" and "saw a figure in the dark silhouetted against the curtain drawn around his bed" (p. 119). That figure was not of a living person in the room with him.

Next, David brought readers closer to the frontiers of "healing"

work in today's world: Therapeutic Touch, which is a spiritual healing practice, and a good example of the interplay between consciousness and biology. David had taken the time to learn this methodology while a Parish minister, and he slowly introduced it into his chaplain work at the cancer treatment center. He cited some of the research that supports this practice; and also recommended the wonderful, though massive, book, *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (cited in his endnotes, #63). The main point he wished to make here is that "mind is independent of the brain, and it continues after death" (p. 123). David took readers through history to the origins of Therapeutic Touch as well as the healing traditions of Native Americans, Chinese, and East Indian cultures. Next, he provided a 5-page discussion about the history of Biophysics, what is known about the electromagnetic fields of the body, and how the strongest field comes from the heart. "Compassionate presence turns out to be so much more than kindness; it is the active engagement of your own bioenergetic field, one that is infused with wisdom and power to assist another person in restoring health and vitality" (p. 132). Illustrating further the paradigm shift that is underway in our understanding of medical science as it has been studied and practiced, David described the study of consciousness as "the most transformative topic that will revolutionize our species once science embraces it" (p. 137).

David began Part 4 with a message for him that his Therapeutic Touch teacher received during a healing session with David: "It's going to be very difficult this time, but we'll give you strength" (p. 156). As David prepared for yet another surgery, he went into cardiac arrest, requiring "code blue" intervention at the bedside in the ICU, and he essentially sang to the medical team as they stabilized his vital signs. He now understood the meaning of this message. Next, he reviewed a history of NDEs and some of the research on this phenomenon to date. Interspersed throughout this section is a discussion of the after-life and notions of heaven and hell. Readers learn that David himself, as a chaplain intern, had an NDE when he lost consciousness during a chapel service for patients and staff. As for the experience and his telling of it, there is that obvious elation and "more real than here" quality that is so characteristic of NDE descriptions. Also characteristically, he was so disappointed to be back in his body and this reality when he awoke. He learned that his heart had stopped this time. He went home, where he slept and "secretly mourned" (p. 176). Following a discussion of various non-metaphysical hypotheses for the "cause" of NDEs, David, in his role as minister shared excerpts from the Bible

that resonate with the profound mystery of spiritually transformative experience. He brought readers back to the power of love with an illustration of an elderly couple he knew as a young pastor. The man had an NDE and was subsequently able to associate it with the purpose of human life: to learn to love. David then reminded readers of the famous biblical text from I Corinthians about love. He punctuated this message with the case of a man who had attempted suicide. While on the other side, he saw two doors. The one that showed light behind it was waiting for him, but not yet. His return to life showed him first that he was forgiven and loved unconditionally, and second that he had this “homework” to do for himself and in his personal relationships in his current life on Earth.

Before leaving the discussion of NDEs, David made a compelling and succinct argument for the ethical implications of how experiencers are treated by medical and other healthcare professionals. He spoke of

the hope NDEs write upon a person’s heart: the cause is not the experience. Any attempt to explain their story will reduce their story. This individual has just experienced an unparalleled dimension of being. It will become a defining facet of their identity in this world. The best response is an open and compassionate one, whatever you may think of their tale. The significance of this cannot be overstated. (p. 188)

He also emphasized that experiencers don’t automatically return enlightened. They tend to stumble and struggle as much as any other mortal. The most critical part of an NDE is the debriefing experience. If it is supported with the nonjudgment and interest that experiencers need, it can result in an amazing outcome of breaking a person open to their own capacity for creating meaning and healing in their own lives and to this love-power emanating into the world’s own healing.

Finally, David, in his role as a minister, offered a message for the Christian church. He spoke as someone who, himself, has integrated his many identities and has reconciled them to become a lightning rod for love. He clarified that in Jesus, God shows us how we are to live and be. In I John, “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God” (p. 210).

Cancer can accelerate this growth, slapping us with a reality check and a literal deadline to get serious about love. This is a goal that goes far beyond surviving. It is the purpose of life: to attain the highest level of consciousness through love, a process that cannot be completed here, but continues toward perfection in the life to come. (p. 210)

This is indeed an ambitious book. I expect that it is most fully appreciated by David's chaplain colleagues, and certainly would recommend it to schools of divinity where chaplains are trained. I expect that it is "too much" for many of the professionals who work in hospitals. For them, I would recommend reading the cases and what is of interest and moving on when passages evoke anxiety or negative self-comparison. There is much to be integrated into one's own life and self-identity. This is the story of David's "hero's journey" that has taken many years and much suffering and hard spiritual and emotional work. It is a book to come back to.

I suspect that as a reader evolves in love and deepens in self-knowledge, the pages will take on fresh meaning. For those who have been diagnosed with cancer, and for their loved ones, the thirst for hope and reassurance will guide you to the passages that are most needed. Search for them, as they are like mining for gold.

I could see parts of this book being condensed and reproduced as "primers." One could be for those with cancer, another could be for loved ones, and yet another could be for looking toward new paradigms of illness and healing. There is so much material here both for sermons and for spiritual seekers.

This book is an encounter—with life and death, to be sure, but mostly with life. And with love. It is brimming with enthusiasm, wonder, and gratitude. Those readers who would expect a book about cancer to be "depressing" are in for a shock. This one is uplifting and hopeful.

I am thankful both to know David and to have read his book. If you decide to mine the treasures of this book, I expect that your experience will be of a piece with mine.