

After the Diagnosis...

a Manual for Living

The Transformative Power of Love
During Sickness, Dying, and Death

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Rocco, a successful businessman, had lived life in the fast lane, affording himself all the bennies and perks associated with success. At fifty-eight, Rocco was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He was stunned – the man who’d been able to do it all, a self-proclaimed master of his own destiny, who lived and never looked back, had been stopped in his tracks. He left the doctor’s office, shell-shocked and overwhelmed. Now what?

Rocco somehow made it to his car, and without making a conscious decision to do so, found himself driving to his mother’s grave. He got out, sat on the ground, put his head in his hands and cried. “Mom,” he sobbed, “What am I gonna do?”

He felt his mother’s presence in an overwhelming way. This was followed by a strong impulse to somehow “get back to God.” Rocco got up, thanked his mother, and came to see me.

Not one to beat around the bush, I told him, “Rocco, you have a challenging path ahead of you. But, your greatest work – the most important and fulfilling work of your life is ahead of you.” This began our journey together for the next two years.

Rocco put his hand to the plow and began to approach his faith as he had his work

and his play – jumping in with both feet.

He returned to church with some regularity, and actively reached out to make amends for whatever hurt he had caused his loved ones. He also strived to build deeper relationships with family and friends, spending time in conversation as well as companionable silence - for the first time becoming a man of *presence* rather than *presents*. We'd go to breakfast and engage in deep conversations about life, love, and death. Rocco actively shared his spiritual reading and insights with others, and spoke openly about the transformation he was experiencing. He still had a fun-loving personality, went to the casinos, and enjoyed life as best as he could, living as fully as he could right up to the day he died.

Toward the end of Rocco's life I stopped by his house. He invited me to join him in his garage, where he'd go for a smoke. "What the hell?" he said, exhaling through a smile, savoring the tobacco that could no longer hurt him. He took another drag, looked me in the eye and said, "Fr. Tom, ***these past two years have been the happiest years of my life. How I wish I knew back then what I know now...***"

Several weeks later, on his death-bed, I came to see him again. He asked me to lie down beside him so he could whisper in my ear. "I love you," he murmured, his face lit with a smile of deep joy. He died shortly thereafter, leaving a legacy of transformation and of love. He never lost his zest for living, or his passion in dying.

And this is what I want for you, as well.

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Introduction

No doubt, you've picked up this book for one of several reasons. Either you or someone you love is facing a curable or serious sickness, a chronic condition, or a terminal illness. You might be standing in the wake of a death or find yourself dealing with loved ones mired in it. Perhaps you're a professional who has dedicated your life to helping others in this situation. Or, maybe you're one of the few people curious enough about the emotional, spiritual, and physical challenges of sickness, dying, and death to begin the quest long before your own final chapter. In fact, the work that Tony did in his dying is such good work that all of us would greatly benefit by beginning long *before* a diagnosis. Interestingly, through the years I've found that the challenges of adjusting to the "new normal" an illness or any significant loss brings - dealing with family dynamics, navigating outside support systems, grappling with your emotions and anxieties – so much of this mirrors what the dying face, although perhaps with less intensity. So, in many ways, the "work" is the same. And the sooner the work begins, the easier the final chapter.

I learned so much from counseling the sick and the dying. You'll hear many stories in this book about them (although names have been changed to protect their privacy.) And if the dying can do this work – anyone struggling with illness can do it. Regardless of your particular circumstances, one thing is true. As the Reverend Billy Graham has said, "The biggest surprise of life is the brevity of it." The escalator of life

moves pretty fast. In that sense, it's never too early to look death squarely in the eye, or at least to consider its impact and what it means in the context of life.

We all will have our turn to die.

Reflecting on the familiar pattern of great loss stirs deep emotions, whether we're holding death's calling card in our hands or not. We can sympathize with those in the throes of it – and, at the same time, would do almost anything to avoid walking in their shoes. It's easy to understand how difficult it will be when our turn comes.

But here's an incredible statistic – in recorded history (as of 2015) an estimated 100.8 *billion* people have died, according to the Population Reference Bureau. Every day another 150,000 people cross from life to death. In light of this, wouldn't it seem as though we would have developed some wisdom and insight that could be helpful to us as we face this inevitable phase? It begs the question – *If dying is a natural part of life – something every human being must face, why is it that we have such a limited ability to enter into it?* Do we struggle and suffer because we're weak fearful people, devoid of faith?

Perhaps, especially in western culture, the problem is that we have a difficult time recognizing that death is just one more milestone on the path of life. That we view life and death as diametrically opposed, always in opposition. That life is to be grasped, and death avoided at all cost.

For most of us, facing our own serious sickness and/or death or that of a loved one is the greatest challenge we'll ever be confronted with. We try to control the mystery

of it by dealing with it on our own terms - fighting against it, or running from the brokenness of human existence rather than allowing it to reveal any greater meaning.

But, what if it was possible to enter into this process in a free and loving way? To have the ability to see sickness and death as sacred, to reverence the great mystery of it? What if we could avoid the paralyzing fear, denial, anger, and regret that so often colors what could be a life-giving, redemptive, and liberating experience? And, ultimately, during this often elongated process, *what if we could live fully even as we're dying, in a gracious and loving way? That is what this book is all about.*

As we begin to reflect on the path of suffering inherent in sickness, dying, and death, we need to look back and ponder the fundamental mystery of our birth and living. We also need to gaze ahead and consider the hope of rising and rebirth. Without contemplating the *entire* journey, we can become preoccupied with just one phase. Embracing a holistic sense of this (birth, living, dying, death, resurrection, purification, oneness, rebirth, life eternal), can ensure that we don't become stuck in whatever stage we're in (or anticipating), thus distorting our perspective. Instead of viewing the movement as a "winding down" of life, we can begin to recognize it as a natural thrust toward wholeness, rooted in our oneness with all that is, was, and will be. Therefore, the entire continuum can be seen as our evolution toward a higher level of consciousness, empowering us to experience the eternal quality that we share with the universe and everything in it. This book is intended to gently guide you toward a deep knowing - that death is not the end, that it doesn't have to destroy the bonds we've forged in our lives, and that love doesn't stop at the grave.

Of course, completing what we think of as the final leg of our earthly journey poses a number of challenging transitions. Most of us will move through a period of denial, then resignation, and for some, on to a state of acceptance. When a patient arrives at a place of accepting that death is inevitable, he or she can die peacefully. Much has been written about the movement from denial to resignation, and finally acceptance – many books and programs are designed to take you there.

But this book is different.

Instead, we want to share a rare slice of heaven that can be grasped on *this* side of the grave. A place beyond acceptance, and before death. A place of transformation in which we can realize, in the fullest, purest way, what our life’s purpose has been, and what an amazing gift we can entrust to those we leave behind. How our legacy can be one of love – pure, powerful, and eternal. Our goal is to help you ask the important questions at each new plateau as the life you’ve known is waning: “Who am I becoming?” “Who am I at my very core?” “What exactly is it that lasts?”

Therefore, this book is not just about sickness, dying, and death – it’s about rebirth *in this life and beyond*. It’s really about living and loving along the *entire* journey. We’ll examine the ways, both positive and negative, that we deal with our own vulnerability, losses, and mortality, and explore how the counter-intuitive act of letting go can empower us to intensify our loving during the most difficult times of our lives. It can also move us beyond sympathy toward a greater sense of empathy and compassion for others. **Most importantly, the realization that we can *choose* the way we live and the**

way we *love* through every stage of living, sickness, dying, and death can change *everything*.

Each and every human being will, someday, have to walk this walk. Trying to do it alone can lock us in a state of radical self-absorption. We feebly reach out to family and friends who are well-intentioned, but often spiritually and/or emotionally ill-equipped to guide us through the process. We become tongue-tied, unable to share what really matters. The pain becomes oppressive. The joy of living is swept away in a hell of our own making.

We don't need to allow negative emotions to dominate our lives and our relationships. Feelings, in and of themselves, are not bad – and they need to be experienced. In fact, they can lead us into the deeper recesses of our souls so that we can profoundly experience a power greater than ourselves – and we call that power God.

The depth of your faith experience in the past doesn't matter. Nor does your religious affiliation. Regardless of spiritual practice or lack of it, we are all, at the center of our being, one with God. The common path through sickness, dying, and death is an opportunity to explore this indwelling of God, and in the process, discover how to transform our own experience and that of those we care for in and through God's love. While this book is written through the lens of the Catholic Christian faith, the ideas, insights, and practices point to universal core truths that make them applicable to all religious traditions.

One of the best ways to navigate the wilderness of this new and seemingly

hazardous territory is to have a spiritual guide, a calm and reassuring voice to validate your experience, offer hope, provide direction.

This book can be that guide. It can be your walking stick, your candle in the darkness, your roadmap for this major rite of passage you're moving through. We'll ask the seemingly unanswerable questions that can lead you to higher levels of consciousness, and in the process, help you discern what you really believe, and how to stand in the face of the universal mysteries of life in a stance of love and freedom.

As a Catholic priest, I've seen the ways that people deal with every imaginable type of loss – the loss of a job, a home, a relationship, a loved one – all of these smaller deaths provide a glimpse of what our own physical dying and death will involve. In pastoring a large parish I've officiated at over fifteen hundred funerals. I've watched families struggle, fight, and throw away what could be a precious shared time together. Often, entering into the dying process without a guide, family issues begin to surface and intensify, becoming stumbling blocks to loving. Our inability or refusal to love and forgive life and others, our avoidance of open, honest, and loving conversations can taint the remaining time we have together. These stumbling blocks not only hinder relationships with those we love during sickness, dying, and death, but often linger in the aftermath, causing pain and confusion in the months and years that follow.

But, I've also seen the opposite – loved ones who walk together down this mysterious pathway in a shared sense of intimacy, awe, appreciation, and love, leading to a profound awareness of the gift of the other and the presence and power of God.

They've been able to *transform* the starkness and suffering inherent along the pathway toward death.

The *transformative power of love* is what makes all the difference. When we begin the process of moving away from our “ego selves” toward our true “spirit selves,” when we learn to embrace mystery rather than our compulsion to control, we gradually grow into the spiritual beings we were always meant to be – and always *have* been, if only we'd been able to recognize it. In doing so we can escape the oppressive anxiety and self-absorption that can dominate our final time on this earth, and instead deepen our awareness of what is at the core of all life - love. Unconditional love. Connectedness. Communion. A wholly fulfilling sense of being one with those we love, with the world, and with all of creation. We begin to experience the indwelling of God, to make meaning of our suffering, to see the purpose of life. To leave behind a legacy of faith, hope, and love.

The question is, since death is a certainty for all of us, how will we choose to traverse this path of suffering? Will we walk the path in a stance of resistance, control, fear, and anxiety? Or with a disposition of loving surrender, peace, and even joy?

That's what this book is all about. While reflective, it is also extremely practical. We offer concrete suggestions and strategies for patients and for caregivers. We share stories of the scores of families and individuals who have honored me by allowing me to walk with them on what is always a deeply intimate and personal journey. We invite you to learn from them. Their stories will make you realize that you're not alone. That, in fact, you're *sharing* in their stories, and they in yours.

How to Use this Book

You can move through the book in a number of ways. Regardless of where you and/or your loved ones are in the process of sickness, dying, and death – before, during, or after - you can gently immerse yourself in these pages and allow the mystery to unfold. Of course, the best time to approach this material is in the green times - the earlier in the process the better. The longer you wait, the more difficult it is to do the work of dying.

You might sit down and swallow this book whole, then go back and access the sections that best speak to you at each step of your journey. Or, you might pick it up and move through it slowly, savoring it, getting your heart around it a little at a time, like an acquired taste. Basically, we're saying that absorbing everything in this book is more like a marathon than a sprint. It's important to pace yourself and reflect as you go. Perhaps you've lost someone in the past and have never completely come to terms with it. This could be your opportunity to birth something loving out of that death. Whichever approach you take, your interaction with this book can become a kind of powerful dialogue in which you and those you love can partake in – and the sooner the better. So often, families wait far too long to enter into these sacred encounters – and because of this, they often never take place.

After each chapter we encourage you to discuss what you've read with others. On our website (www.journeyofthesoul.life) you'll find discussion questions – food for thought that will help you relate the chapter material to your situation. Take some time to think about these questions, and date and write out your responses. Jot down notes and make comments in the margins of the book – really make it your own. Since this isn't a

“one and done” kind of book, I recommend going back to these questions and notes at a later date to contemplate how your perspective may have changed.

Best of all, you can read it in the green times, when sickness, dying and death seem like far-away eventualities.

So, let the sacred surrender begin – and in the process allow yourself and those you care for to become empowered and healed by love itself.