

Second Edition

*Light*  
*in the*

*Shadows*

**Meditations**

**While Living**

**with a**

**Life-Threatening**

**Illness**

**by Hank Dunn**

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Hank Dunn, Spring, 2005

## *About the Author*

For more than twenty years Hank Dunn has been ministering to patients at the end of their lives and their families. He has served as a nursing home chaplain at Fairfax Nursing Center and as a chaplain for the Hospice of Northern Virginia (now Capital Caring).

Hank is a graduate of the University of Florida and of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. After serving five years as a youth minister at a very traditional church in Macon, Georgia, he moved to the DC area to be a part of the very nontraditional Church of the Saviour. After work as a carpenter and directing an inner city ministry, he moved into the chaplaincy in 1983.

He is a past president of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. He volunteers as an on-call chaplain at the Loudoun Hospital and at Joseph's House, a home in DC for formerly homeless men with AIDS. He is a Volunteer Pastoral Associate at his faith community, Vienna Baptist Church.

To help him explain end-of-life decisions to patients and families, he wrote a booklet to hand to them so they could reflect on the issues discussed. First published in 1990, *Hard Choices for Loving People* is in its Fifth Edition (2009) and has sold over 3,000,000 copies. It is being used in more than 6,000 hospitals, nursing homes, faith communities, and hospice programs nationwide.

Hank Dunn is a frequent speaker on topics related to the end of life. For fun he enjoys backpacking, kayaking, fishing, and life in general.

# Introduction

**I**n my more than two decades of work with those living with a life-threatening illness I have learned some valuable lessons about living in the midst of difficult situations. I have served as a chaplain in a nursing home, with a hospice program and in as hospital as well as volunteer in a home for formerly homeless men with AIDS. As difficult as it is, what seems most important is to *live each day as fully as possible*. I have seen people live a life of meaning and purpose even while severely disabled and seriously ill.

In these few pages I have gathered the most helpful insights these patients have taught me. This book is about finding hope in hopeless situations; being grateful in the midst of great losses; experiencing a connection to things eternal; living a meaningful life while considering the possibility of death; and getting to the root issues in medical treatment decisions.

In my first book, *Hard Choices for Loving People*,<sup>1</sup> I outlined some of the medical treatment decisions we might face. But living with a life-threatening illness is more than just medi-

cal treatment decisions, so I felt this book was necessary to expand on the emotional and spiritual struggles brought on by disease. In neither book do I try to give medical advice. I recommend discussing medical treatments with your physician and other healthcare professionals familiar with your particular case. I can only write of my experiences with specific medical cases and they may or may not be similar to the circumstances you are facing.

All the stories I share are true, but, at times, I have changed names to protect privacy.

Each of these selections is written as a meditation—some thoughts to be pondered. They are meant to be companions for those with a life-threatening illness and their families. At the end of each piece is a thought, indicated by a check mark (✓), to carry with you through the day. My hope is that these words will help you live each day fully and that you can go into the future with courage and peace.

# *Part One*

## *Living Each Day Fully*

### *Hope from a Life of Gratitude*

To accept our circumstances is another miraculous cure. For anything to change or anyone to change, we must first accept ourselves, others, and the circumstance exactly as they are. Then, we need to take it one step further. We need to become grateful for ourselves or our circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

*Melody Beattie*

As I entered the nursing home room, the noise just outside the window was deafening. Construction workers were breaking up concrete with jack hammers. Seated next to the window, not ten feet from the closest jack hammer, was my friend, Mary. She was totally blind, had beautiful white hair, and often let a smile cross her lips. As soon as I heard the noise—and saw Mary right next to it—I said, “Mary! You don’t have to stay here with all this noise. We can find another room for you during the day and you can come back here after the noise has stopped.” She

smiled, "That's okay. I kind of like it." "You like it?" I asked. And this time with a big grin she said, "It's so good when it stops."

I asked her once what it was like to be blind. She said, "It's wonderful." "Wonderful?" I repeated. "Yes," she explained. "You can learn so much being blind. I listen to talking books and talk radio. I can tell where people are in the room and what they are doing, just from their sounds. You listen so much better when you are blind." She had a way of giving thanks for what she still possessed rather than despairing over what she had lost.

If there is one attitude that can sustain us through the most difficult of circumstances, it is "the attitude of gratitude." This is the ability to give thanks for the gifts in one's life, not necessarily because of the hardships, but in spite of them. In other words, we are not grateful that we have a life-threatening illness, but we are able to give thanks *while* we have a life-threatening illness.

If I had not seen this ability demonstrated consistently over the years, I would not have believed it possible. In the midst of the most serious illnesses, people have told me they have had a wonderful life with children, grandchildren, and beautiful memories of good times. They remember the travel and fulfilling careers. Another blind patient who was wheelchair-bound—and more than 100 years old—would often say, "Isn't God wonderful?"

- ✓ *May my thoughts this day turn toward gratitude for all the gifts I have received, and for those I still possess today.*



## *Do Some Things “Just Happen”?*

Some vital impulse spared my needing to reiterate the world’s most frequent and pointless question in the face of disaster—Why? Why me? I never asked it; the only answer is of course Why not?... You may want to try at first to focus your will on the absolute first ground-level question. Again that’s not “Why me?” but “What next?”<sup>3</sup>

*Reynolds Price*

Several years ago a hurricane was making its way across the Gulf of Mexico. Landfall was expected somewhere around the Texas-Mexico border. It finally came ashore south of the border. Many lives were lost, including children on a school bus. In one of the broadcast stories of this tragedy, I recall a Texan saying something like, “God really spared us on this one.” We often hear survivors of disasters credit God for sparing them and sending the calamity in another direction. The horrible implication, of course, is that God chose to kill a school bus full of children instead of me... Isn’t God wonderful? Don’t get me wrong—we should always have a sense of gratitude for the gift of our lives. But when something as random as a hurricane misses us, I think it would be wrong to assume God steered it through someone else’s hometown instead of ours.

Rabbi Harold Kushner pondered this issue of randomness after his son died of a deforming and painful disease. He gathered his reflections in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Here are a few of his words:

A change of wind direction or the shifting of a tectonic plate can cause a hurricane or earthquake to move toward a populated area instead of out into an uninhabited stretch of land. Why? . . . There is no reason for those particular people to be afflicted rather than others. These events do not reflect God’s choices. They happen at random and randomness is another name for chaos, in

those corners of the universe where God's creative light has not yet penetrated.<sup>4</sup>

While I was a nursing home chaplain I had the opportunity to minister to a patient whose life was maintained by a mechanical ventilator and an artificial feeding tube. He was unconscious and had been for months. Although he could possibly exist in this condition for years, he was not expected to recover. His wife was very faithful in visiting him daily. They were Jewish—he by birth, and she converted from the Catholic faith of her youth. I occasionally found her with both a Jewish prayer book and a rosary. Sitting by his bed, with the noise of the breathing machine in the background, she often said to me, “I know God has a purpose for making my husband like this.”

Since they were Jewish, and she was asking the question of why this horrible thing had happened, I gave her a copy of Rabbi Kushner's book to read. A few days later she gave it back to me and said she didn't like it. I was a little surprised and asked why. “He said God is not in control of everything... that some things just happen at random,” she replied. I thought, isn't that obvious, just look at your husband. What on earth would a loving God hope to gain by destroying this man's brain and his ability to swallow and breathe and then suspend him between life and death on machines? She wanted no part of this thinking. She would rather have a God who intentionally did this than let go of a God who controls everything.

One of the greatest gifts granted by the Creator is our freedom to choose our own way, even if it is contrary to what is right. Likewise, the natural world of disease and disasters is also free—not that it has a mind and chooses to afflict certain people and not others. But the apparent randomness of the universe can be the dark side of this gift of freedom. And in the midst of the randomness of disease or disaster, God is present

... not necessarily causing it, but going through it with us.

It is natural to ask “Why?” and to be angry at God. In fact, it is a necessary step in moving toward acceptance and hope in the midst of a life-threatening illness. People who are forever disappointed in God and never cease to ask why God has sent this cancer... or the illness of a child ... or this auto accident miss the point. These things are just the natural tragedies of life. The real question is not “Why?” The more important questions are, “What am I going to do in this circumstance? How am I going to respond?” We can hold on to the anger and hatred, or we can respond in grace and peace. We do have a choice.

- ✓ *Each time I am tempted to ask, “Why?”, I will change the question to “What next?” or “How am I going to respond now?”*

## *God's Presence in Spite of the Medical Outcome*

As we come to terms with loss and change, we may blame ourselves, our Higher Power, or others. We may hear ourselves say: "Why didn't God do it differently?..." To not allow others, or ourselves, to go through anger and blame may slow down the grief process. But we may need to get mad for a while as we search over what could have been, to finally accept what is.<sup>5</sup>

*Melody Beattie*

The scriptures are full of stories of God "failing" and not delivering the faithful ones from tragedy. A patient struggling with cancer said to me once, "Don't you think that if you just believe hard enough you will be healed?" I often refer those asking such questions to the following two scripture passages.

There is a Hebrew story of the three men the king would destroy in the flames if they did not bow down and worship his idols. They refused to bow down knowing that God could deliver them from the fire. Then they added to their trust in God to deliver them, "But if not... we will not serve your gods." (Daniel 3:17-18) Even if they weren't delivered they would continue to trust God. We could rewrite this for those facing a life-threatening illness, "I know God can heal me and save my life, but if not, I will continue to trust in the Lord." Not being healed does not necessarily mean we lack enough faith.

Paul, the Christian apostle, was plagued with some sort of physical disability or nagging medical problem. We do not know what it was, but it bothered him enough to pray for healing. He was not healed. Here is a person Christians regard as a great man of faith and his prayers were "not answered." That is, he was not healed. But he did get an answer. God said to him in effect, "I will not heal you, but I

will not abandon you either. My grace is sufficient for you.”  
(II Corinthians 12:8-9)

We make a mistake to assume that God is only present if we get a “good” outcome from the medical condition we prayed to be relieved from. People in the Bible occasionally didn’t get their prayers answered, yet they knew that God was with them. Another mistake is to assume that our healing or the healing of someone we love is totally dependent on the size and genuineness of our faith.

There are other miracles besides physical healing, such as the miracle of having peace in our hearts. Or the miracle of being reconciled to our families. Or the miracle of approaching this illness with serenity and a sense of the presence of God. The three men stood before the furnace with full knowledge that they could perish in the flames. But that fate, that outcome, did not deter them from their sense of God’s presence.

- ✓ *I will try to sense God’s presence in spite of what I hear from the medical reports, knowing that I am connected to an eternal Source no matter what the situation.*

## *Hope for Forgiveness and Reconciliation*

When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us.<sup>6</sup>

*Lewis B. Smedes*

Serious illness often brings about a serious review of our lives. In that review, we often find we have some regrets about a relationship with someone important to us. Perhaps we have been cut off from a family member because of some incident years ago. I have seen family members reunited and reconciled after years of estrangement. Sometimes they can't even remember why they were cut off from one another.

Hospice physician Ira Byock often asks his patients, "If you were to die today, God forbid, but if you were to die today, is there anything that would be left undone?" A life-threatening illness forces us to assess what is really important in our lives. It is now almost a cliché, but no one ever looks back over life and says "I wish I had spent more time working." We look back and sometimes we see hurts we have received from others or have given to others. Often that which is left undone is reconciling with someone else.

Forgiveness is the way to move beyond life's hurts. Not forget them, but take them so seriously that we must practice what some consider a divine act—forgiving. Sometimes people are uncomfortable with the idea of "forgiving" someone for a horrible act. Some would rather talk about this as "freedomness." We gain inner freedom by releasing hatred, anger, and thoughts of revenge when we forgive someone.

The other side of forgiveness is to ask to be forgiven for a wrong we have done to another. We are all capable of inflicting harm. Most likely, in the course of a lifetime, each of us has hurt someone else. The way to release this burden is to ask for forgiveness.

Many books have been written on forgiveness. Lewis B. Smedes summarizes the topic:

The most creative power given to the human spirit is the power to heal the wounds of a past it cannot change. We do our forgiving alone inside our hearts and minds; what happens to the people we forgive depends on them. The first person to benefit from forgiving is the one who does it.... Forgiving happens in three stages: We rediscover the humanity of the person who wronged us, we surrender our right to get even, and we wish that person well.... Forgiving does not require us to reunite with the person who broke our trust.... Waiting for someone to repent before we forgive is to surrender our future to the person who wronged us.... Forgiving is not a way to avoid pain but to heal pain.... We do not excuse the person we forgive; we blame the person we forgive. Forgiving is essential; talking about it is optional.... When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us. When we forgive we walk in stride with the forgiving God.<sup>6</sup>

✓ *Is there anyone from whom I need to ask forgiveness?  
Or, is there anyone I need to forgive? Today is a good  
day to begin this process.*

## *Choosing My Response*

You may not have control over your initial reaction to something, but you can decide what your response will be. You don't have to be at the mercy of your emotions. . . . You may not be able to change your medical prognosis, but you can control the destructive emotions that can subvert your mental and physical health. For me, acceptance has been the cornerstone to my having an emotionally healthy response to my illness.<sup>7</sup>

*Morrie Schwartz*

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

*Luke 6:45*

**Y**ou could almost feel the collective pain in the room. I had joined a local support group of the Compassionate Friends. All of these twenty or so parents had lost a child. Some to disease, some to auto accidents, one to suicide, and one stillbirth.

I had been asked to speak on the topic of “Death and Spirituality.” I knew this was not a group to whom I could just give pat answers. They were there because they had suffered what all of us usually consider must be the greatest wound—the death of a child. I brought a draft of some of the selections from this book. They took me to task over the term “letting go.” They said they will never let go of the memory of their child, and there is not a day that goes by that they don't think of them. I felt I needed to defend myself. I explained that I meant “let go” of the anger, bitterness, and hatred over the unfairness of a death. The memory and sadness would always be there.



These people were the experts in dealing with suffering and loss. I was planning to read a piece about a woman who was grieving, sad, and angry at God and everybody. As her 95-year-old mother lay dying in a hospital, this woman thought about all the losses she had suffered, including the death of a brother and a sister when they were teenagers, the recent death of her husband, and her escape from two countries in her pursuit of freedom.

She finished her recounting of loss after loss, and we sat in silence for a few moments as I searched for words. She broke the stillness, asking, "Do you believe in God?" I said, "Yes." She then asked, "Then how come God makes some people happy and others sad?"

Now I had to decide if I could be honest with this woman. So deep were her unhealed wounds I knew there was nothing I could do or say to take away her pain. The truth is, all of us have a choice in whether we are happy or sad. I decided to be honest. I told her happiness comes from deep inside us.

She concluded, "I will never be happy then, because there is nothing happy inside of me."

Now who was I to tell this group of grieving parents that "happiness is a choice"? I decided to go ahead with my original plan and read the selection. I finished and waited for them to tell me, "You have no idea of the depth of pain and you have no choice." That did not happen.

After just a moment of silence, from around the room, they all said that one day they made the choice to engage in life again. They made the choice to find some happiness amidst the sorrow. They will always miss their child but could go on with life in their woundedness.

This idea that we have a choice in our happiness is not original with me. Viktor Frankl is the one who told us this is the "last of the human freedoms"—the freedom to choose

how we will respond in any given set of circumstances. He was a Jew and a psychiatrist who learned about this freedom as a prisoner in several concentration camps during the Second World War. Hear his words:

The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action.... Man *can* preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.... We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

[I]n the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone.... I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost.... It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.<sup>8</sup>

The sort of person we become is the result of an inner decision and not the result of the influences of... cancer... the illness of a child... divorce... disability.

- ✓ *When the circumstances seem to be overwhelming, I will know I have a choice in how I am going to respond. I will not blame my illness, or other people, for how I feel inside.*

## *Fear of Impermanence*

Learning to live is learning to let go.<sup>9</sup>

*Sogyal Rinpoche*

C. S. Lewis began his classic *A Grief Observed*, with the insight “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”<sup>10</sup> He had walked the road of cancer with his wife, and in this book he reflected on his journey.

In my twenty-two years of walking with those living with life-threatening illnesses, I have noticed often the presence of fear—fear of pain; fear of what will happen to me if I die; fear of what will happen to my family; fear of abandonment—all legitimate fears. Yet a basic fear for us all, not just those who are ill, is the fear of the fact that we will not live on this earth forever... our impermanence. So deep is this fear that we go to great lengths to cover up the reality of our impermanence.

We are little different than the Egyptian pharaohs who were buried with vast amounts of worldly possessions to carry them on to the next life. Though we don't carry possessions to the grave we do try to surround ourselves with things that tell us we shall live forever. Perhaps even our constant motion from activity to activity is an attempt to cover up our impermanence. For if we really sit still, in the silence, we might be reminded that our life is limited. So we work long hours, keep the TV on, go to shopping malls, let music and chatter fill our morning commute... perhaps to avoid the silence and being alone.

And we resist change because change reminds us of our impermanence. A life-threatening illness and possible death is the ultimate change... the ultimate threat to our permanence. Sogyal Rinpoche speaks so well to this issue:

It is only when we believe things to be permanent that we shut off the possibility of learning from change. If we shut off this possibility, we become closed, and we become grasping. Grasping is the source of all our problems. Since impermanence to us spells anguish, we grasp on to things desperately, even though all things change. We are terrified of letting go, terrified, in fact, of living at all, since learning to live is learning to let go. And this is the tragedy and the irony of our struggle to hold on: not only is it impossible, but it brings us the very pain we are seeking to avoid.<sup>9</sup>

✓ *I will try to see the impermanence of things as a sign of freedom. If I know all things change, I can let go and not have to grasp on to them so tightly.*