

Reviews

—Reviewed by Pamela Cooper-White, Professor of Pastoral Theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and author of *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Fortress, 2004).

“Let me see your scratch spin.”

My coach begins my weekly figure-skating lesson with the forward one-footed spin, an element I’ve been struggling to master for months. Some people are natural-born spinners, but I can’t find my center. I spiral out of control instead of whirling in place like a top.

“Bring your free leg around with energy.

“Don’t leave your right arm behind.

“Stand up, stand up, stand up!” My coach calls out encouragement as I fight for balance.

His suggestions strike me as good advice for more than skating. (p. 7)

Occasionally—perhaps all too rarely—a little book comes along that illuminates a powerful aspect of human experience with humility, insight, and a touch of poetry. Dr. Sara Corse’s memoir, *Cradled All the While: The Unexpected Gifts of a Mother’s Death* is such a rare book. Corse, a psychologist, chronicles the last eight months of her mother Jane’s life. From the shock of receiving the news of her mother’s cancer diagnosis to her mother’s last breaths in the company of her family, Corse faithfully records the experiences, both inner and outer, of welcoming her dying mother into her own home and companionship Jane on her final journey from life to death. In the process, she deepens her understandings of herself, her own roles as daughter, wife, mother, and sibling, and finally, her sense of being held by a never-failing mother God. Such a book could easily take a maudlin or even new-age turn.

But like the skating metaphor Corse uses as the guiding image of her memoir, her reflections “find balance and fight centrifugal force,” so that just as she found unexpected gifts in caring and being fully present to her mother’s dying, the reader, too, is given gifts of insight that are clear, penetrating, and graceful—grace full. In her honest, detailed recollections of her thoughts, feelings, and responses, Corse holds up a mirror for readers to understand their own and others’ experiences of caretaking, loss, and grief. She writes with accuracy and poignancy about the

gradual unfolding of events, and the thoughts and feelings that accompanied them, from the early stages of coping with the first terminal diagnosis, to the many daily and hourly decisions and logistical demands (Chemotherapy or not? Where should Mom stay? What level of care is needed? How much should she be pushed to fight for that elusive “quality of life”? How much of this is the cancer vs. “post-polio syndrome,” and how might “post-polio” be functioning as a mechanism for denial? What can Mom still eat? When should hospice be involved?), to the final more existential questions of remembering, loving, and forgiving self and others.

Equally compelling, Corse interweaves these recollections with childhood memories, as each new challenge that confronts her as her mother’s primary caretaker re-stimulates old feelings, patterns, and family dynamics. Two historical events haunt the family as they navigate this new trauma: her mother’s disability due to polio (often covered up and stoically managed, but a pervasive force in the family dynamic), and her father’s death at age 47 of a heart attack, when Corse was just a freshman in college. Corse is unflinching in her scrutiny of her own conflicted feelings as the daughter who was assigned the role of favorite, but at the price of being expected to be “a ray of sunshine; like Mommy’s perfect little girl,” (p. 13) and at times also, the price of betraying her more expressive, moody sister in order to maintain her mother’s approval. Her mother’s death also re-opens the unhealed wound of her father’s death many years before, and the truth of the family’s subsequent fragmentation and stoic denial.

Over the eight months, Corse narrates her own movement from fear of failure, judgment, and expectations that her mother could do her dying “richer, fuller, better” if she could adopt an “open, active attitude” (117)—echoing her mother’s own demands of perfection on herself and the child Sara—to a place of deepening acceptance, pleasure in the present moment, fulfillment in simply caring without an agenda, and at last, letting go. In the course of the eight months, mother and daughter move beyond their habit-crusted dance of mutual wanting, withholding, reaching, and defense, until words of love and gratitude come to be freely spoken—even for the first time. Gradually, with all the steps forward and back that characterize real life, Sara comes to a crucial realization:

For so long I have wanted my mother to be different—to love me more, to understand me, to take away my anger and sadness and want, and to love herself. I have been angry with her for her inability to change on my terms, and with myself for being selfish and heartless. Yet in this moment of seeing my mother as she was and is, and knowing what suffering has laid her low, my heart fills with love and an acceptance that in the past has appeared only in glimmers. (111)

In the end, Sara discovers that the healing she has found through her mother’s dying process has extended beyond her grief for this loss, to a healing of the hole in her heart left by her father’s

death. Some of the elements in that healing included not only her own growing self-awareness and acceptance, but also the cloud of witnesses that came to offer help—her siblings, her husband and children, her mother’s own friends, her pastor, and a myriad of caring individuals whose support collectively incarnated the presence of God.

The book is valuable on its own terms, as a memoir that speaks poignantly of real life, warts and all, real forgiveness, and real love. It is perhaps particularly striking that, although Corse is a trained psychologist, and she acknowledges how in her young adulthood she relied on her discipline to help her understand and process her childhood wounds, the book is remarkably free of psychological jargon or diagnostic language. It would have been easy (was it ever tempting?) for Corse to fall back on familiar professional analyses such as Alice Miller’s discussions of narcissistic parenting and the “drama of the gifted child,”¹ a Bowenian evaluation of triangulation, intergenerational patterns, and roles in the family system,² or a Self-psychological evaluation of deficits in mirroring and idealizing³ in the Corse children’s early upbringing. One could also easily parse Kübler-Ross’ five “stages” of dying⁴ (although, as is typical, not in a set sequence), and Corse’s description of Jane’s last days and hours offer a vividly personal example of typical speech, behavior, and perceptions of nearing-death awareness (sensitively described in Callanan and Kelley, *Final Gifts*⁵). Yet, Corse does not burden her narrative with theoretical didactics. Instead, she uses her obviously considerable psychological knowledge in the service of carefully peeling back the layers of her own affective experience and memory, trusting the reader to find in her descriptions those resonances that may have more universal applicability without needing to psychologize or turn her mother’s story into a case study.

I highly recommend *Cradled All the While* to chaplains, hospice workers and other medical professionals, and all who provide pastoral care and counseling. There are several powerful first-person narratives of grief, such as C.S. Lewis’ classic *A Grief Observed*,⁶ and Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son*,⁷ but I am not aware of any other book by a daughter so keenly describing the experiences of a mother’s illness and death.⁸ As a teacher of pastoral care to seminarians and graduate students in ministry, I have used the book in my course on death and dying. I have found that it breathes new life into their more abstract and theoretical readings about the processes of grief and dying, and sensitizes students to the tender, layered complexities of both caring and loss. We were privileged to have Dr. Corse as a guest in the class, and her honest reflections and disclosures were appreciated by the students as one of their most lively experiences in the course—Corse is entirely congruent in person with the Sara she so openly and engagingly presents to her readers. In her descriptions of Jane’s brief but telling interactions with three separate pastors, Corse offers both fine and cautionary examples that are instructive to students and experienced caregivers alike.

Finally, Corse learns that recovering from grief is not only “limited to the psychological and the physical...Instead of aching with greater loss, my long-wounded heart was healed. Spiritually, by grace.” (171) She had learned to find her center: “The first time I succeed in centering a spin, I find eternity at its core.” (11) Corse offers her readers a glimpse of the energy, the peace, and the grace of a loving, mothering God that she herself discovered—that we, like her, have been and are being “cradled all the while.”

Notes:

¹ Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996; orig. publ. 1981).

²Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

³First articulated by Heinz Kohut in *Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 2000).

⁴Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1997; orig. publ. 1969).

⁵Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying* (New York: Bantam, 1997).

⁶C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989; orig. publ. 1961).

⁷Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁸Two other primary pastoral resources are written from a third-person perspective: Harold Ivan Smith, *Grieving the Loss of a Mother* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), and Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (New York: Delta/Dell, 1994).

—Reviewed by **Sonia M. Nevis, Ph.D.**, *Gestalt Review* 2004

There are many books written about death, many theories about the stages of grief, all with the important intention of preparing ourselves for what comes with being alive.

Perhaps the most useful are the books that tell us about the experience and are not trying to teach us anything. Instead, these authors offer us a chance to accompany them on the journey. We take what we can from it and hope that we can use their experiences to help us with our own journey. We are all destined to accompany some of our loved ones to their death and we are certainly destined to go on our own journey.

No two deaths are alike, just as no two lives are alike. That leaves us never really having been prepared. All we have is the story of others who have been there, and that matters.

Sara's book is in the category of the most helpful. We know that her journey, with the complexity of feelings and infinite small choices, is Sara's unique journey. Ours will certainly be different. Her way of portraying her life completely, as a background to her mother's death, gives the book the full dimensionality that life and death deserve.

Read Sara's book, *Cradled All the While*. She subtitles it *The Unexpected Gifts of a Mother's Death*. I think as readers, we will all get different unexpected gifts, all important for not feeling alone. However, Sara's ability to capture the mystery, the love, and the support of God are gifts that we all will probably get from this book.