

Book Review

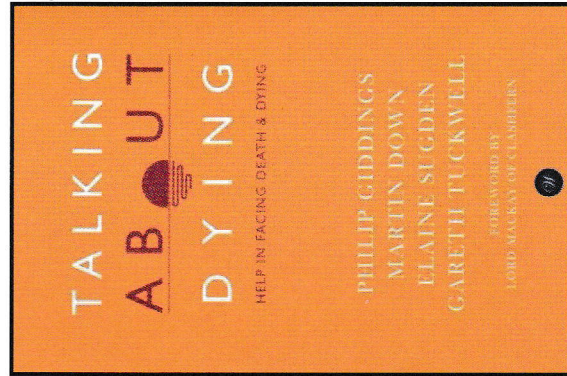
Talking About Dying: Help in Facing Death & Dying

Philip Giddings, Martin Down, Elaine Sugden and Gareth Tuckwell

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This book was not what I was expecting and I found it to be both surprising and disappointing in equal measure. As a resource book for Christians who are navigating life limiting illness, either personally or alongside a friend or family member, it is very good. Sugden's writing is fast paced, clear and knowledgeable concerning the medical world of tests, diagnosis, treatment options and the dilemma of difficult choices one faces when living with a life limiting illness.

As someone who works as a hospice chaplain, I found some of the assumptions around how Christians will experience their illness or death concerning. As people of faith Giddings and Down rightly exhort us to think about our death and our relationship with God, in order to be both hopeful and prepared. They explore some of the knotty questions and these are accompanied by a wide range of examples of situations people have faced. However, what was not sufficiently addressed was the fact that Christians can and often do experience significant doubt, despair and even alienation from God. I would have valued some reference to the rich seam of spiritual resources with the Christian tradition, such as experience of "The Dark Night of the Soul" as both the absence and



presence of God's consuming love, as well as the Biblical books of Job and the Psalms which can be sources of strength and comfort in the face of suffering and grief. The inclusion of certain prayers and hymns did not quite fit into the flow of the book. A chapter exploring the spirituality of suffering and illness in more depth would have provided more coherence and placement of such resources.

For a book so full of useful information and practical advice, I was disappointed to realise that I would not feel comfortable offering this book to someone newly diagnosed with a life limiting illness or unfamiliar with Christianity. This is due to the certainty expressed in regard to faith, (paradoxically the opposite of faith), which is potentially oppressive to those finding themselves feeling low, desolate or terrified.

The chapter by Tuckwell was a particular highlight, with its thoughtful, compassionate and nuanced exploration of healing, cure and the role of prayer in healing.

This book covers a great deal of ground, at times, I wondered if it was trying to reach too far, as it moves from life limiting illness to the death of a child, suicide, the place of prayer and healing and funeral planning. As a "Help in face of dying", it could be immensely helpful.

I am very grateful to Giddings et al for this book, it certainly gets the conversation started and adds to the conversation already underway for some of us. It is the endeavour of great love, expressing a deep desire to ensure that the challenging journey toward death or experience of it, should not be faced alone. But when one does step on this path, God and the Christian community are ready to assist.

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