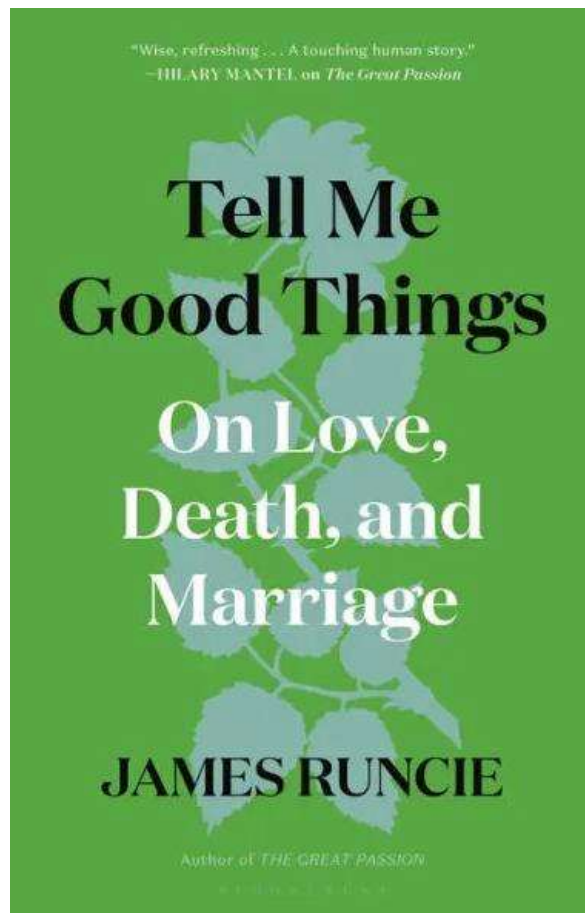


Acknowledging Death: Elderly couple deals with fatal disease

Posted: Sunday, April 22, 2023

"Tell Me Good Things: On Love, Death, and Marriage" by James Runcie. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023, 224 pages, \$27.00 (hardcover).



"Everyone in the world has had to face the loss of someone they love," James Runcie explains at the beginning of "Tell Me Good Things: On Love, Death, and Marriage," his recently released story of an experience we all share at some point in our lives. "There are countless tributes, biographies and laments written by the recently bereaved. In the best of them, the writing reaches out beyond therapy and recollection to share what Dr. Johnson called 'moral instruction in the art of bearing calamities.' They help those facing a similar devastation."

"My wife, Marilyn Imrie, died of motor neurone disease at five o'clock in the morning on 21 August 2020," he continues. "She was a drama director, a singer and an artist: mother to two girls, wife, sister, aunt and grandmother. She was seventy-two years old. We had thirty-five years together. This is our story, and this book is a love letter to her. But, as well as an account of trauma, it's the memoir of a woman who was an effervescent force for good in the world, a person who thought the best of people, embraced adventure and delighted in greeting her friends: 'Hello, Gorgeousness! Tell me good things!'"

OK. You have been forewarned: you'll need a box or two of tissues to get through this one. Few times have I had occasion to read a book that touched me so viscerally on so many levels. Honestly, with this review, it's difficult to maintain any modicum of objectivity. Some of that has to do with age, some of it has to do with how the subject matter hits really close to home. As Runcie so poignantly reminds us on virtually every page, none of us knows what's just around the corner – and few of us have contemplated what we would do when the unthinkable becomes manifest. I'd like to think I'd be able to see it through like this extraordinary couple did.

The backstory: In early 2020, just as the rest of the planet was slowly adjusting to the stark reality of Covid 19, Runcie and Marilyn were dealt a far more personal tragedy. That's when they learned that the painful and perplexing symptoms Marilyn had been experiencing for two years were the early symptoms of Lou Gehrig's Disease. With this diagnosis, during the isolation and strangeness of the pandemic, their lives were transformed in ways that would have been unimaginable only a few months prior. In this exquisite and moving memoir, the author chronicles the story of the love of his life's illness and death - including, as might be expected, all the moments of heartbreak, hopelessness and rage as well as those where they experienced all the beauty, brightness and even humor that can accompany the times that try our souls and cause us to question our sanity.

I found much of the narrative eerily relatable and saw how I might react under similar circumstances. The mixed feelings. The frustration. The sense of inadequacy Runcie must have felt on a daily basis literally screams at the reader as you delve deeper into his psyche with each paragraph. Consider the following from “Goodbye, Old Life!” one of the earlier chapters:

“Marilyn did not want her friends to know any of the grim and humiliating reality. She hoped that everything would continue to be as right as it possibly could be – even when it wasn’t. Although she was a ‘patient’ patient, she couldn’t accept or come to terms with what was happening. She never wanted to die. I couldn’t ever persuade her to make her peace or reach a state of resignation and I think that I will always feel a failure for not inspiring any readiness in her. She hated the fact that she was dying until the end.”

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Runcie has been Artistic Director of the Bath Literature Festival, Head of Literature and Spoken Word at the Southbank Centre, London, and Commissioning Editor for Arts on BBC Radio 4. He is the author of twelve novels, including the seven books in the Grantchester Mysteries series and the “The Great Passion.”

In an odd sort of way, I also gained a greater understanding and appreciation for the “English” perspective on death and suffering. Despite the fact that we are all human and have analogous experiences regardless of our culture and heritage, there are certain peculiarities associated with where we were born that are always a part of us irrespective of where our journey takes us. The following is from “May Her Memory Be a Blessing,” a chapter in which Runcie is obviously struggling to make sense of everything that has happened and is continuing to unfold.

“The Victorians viewed mourning with dramatic inevitability. You have been warned. Now it’s here. You have arrived in death’s waiting room at last. It reminds me of my father telling me that one of his parishioners was ‘in the departure lounge.’ When it came for his own turn to die, he said to me: ‘I know I’m at the gate. The best we can hope for now is that the flight’s delayed.’”

“We no longer live in the Victorian era and so we have to find a modern manner of mourning. How can we acknowledge death, talk about it and be kind to each other? What will be most helpful? There is bereavement counseling, therapy, faith, routine and memorializing (this book). There are visits to the grave, a favorite place, letter writing, conversations on the telephone, walks with friends. There is Time, the great healer. Time, with a capital letter. Time, that, we are told, makes everything more bearable: This too shall pass. But it doesn’t look like passing. There is no formality to grief.”

Even though much of the prose was bittersweet and unapologetically depressing, I still found myself smiling – and even laughing out loud – at some of the stories Runcie told as well as the way he committed them to the page. One of these moments came in “Dressing and Undressing,” near the end of the book. It deals with a rite those who have lost a loved one inevitably encounter.

“Looking at her full wardrobe, I decided I was going to keep some of her clothes. The girls could have a rummage, but I would not separate them out or sell them or even take them to the Venetian lagoon and sink them myself. So, I have decided to leave them alone. I can even imagine the clothes talking to each other, with their own memories, telling their adventures and their outings and what it was like to be picked out and worn by Marilyn.”

If you can’t relate to “Tell Me Good Things” right now, rest assured there will come a time when you will. As Audrey Niffenegger noted in “The Time Traveler’s Wife,” “It’s hard being left behind. It’s hard to be the one who stays.” We can learn a lot about how to deal with life and death from Runcie. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.