

Second Edition

*Light*  
*in*  
*the*  
*Shadows*

Meditations  
While  
Living with a  
Serious Illness

By Hank Dunn  
Chaplain



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**Millions of copies sold worldwide.**

*Light in the Shadows* is a collection of reflections on the emotional and spiritual concerns of those facing serious illness. This valuable companion book has been in publication for over 17 years.

*Hard Choices for Loving People* has sold nearly 4 million copies.

This bestselling book is now in its 6th edition and is used by more than 5,000 hospitals, nursing homes, faith communities, and hospice programs internationally for over 30 years.

## *About the Author*

Since 1983, Hank Dunn has been ministering to patients at the end of their lives and their families. He served as a nursing home chaplain at Fairfax Nursing Center and as a staff chaplain for the Hospice of Northern Virginia, now Capital Caring.

In 1990, Hank wrote a booklet to help explain end-of-life decisions to patients and families and encourage reflection on the issues discussed. As an afterthought, he sent the booklet out to other institutions to see if they would be interested in purchasing it for the people they serve. Interest in the material grew and Hank's first book, *Hard Choices for Loving People*, was born.

Hank is a graduate of the University of Florida and received his Master of Divinity degree from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. 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. He worked a year as a carpenter and for four years directed an inner-city ministry before moving into the chaplaincy in 1983.

He is a past president of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. He has served on the Ethics Committee at the Reston Hospital Center and the Chaplaincy Advisory Board at the Loudoun Hospital Center.

For several years, Chaplain Dunn volunteered at Joseph's House, a home for formerly homeless men and women who are terminally ill. He was also a Volunteer Pastoral Associate at Vienna Baptist Church, where he was especially involved in the retreat ministry at the Lost River Retreat Center in West Virginia. He has also volunteered as a chaplain at the Loudoun Hospital and at the Loudoun Adult Medical Psychiatric Services.

Hank Dunn is a frequent speaker on topics related to serious illness and the end of life. He enjoys backpacking, kayaking, and hiking.

## *Acknowledgments*

With both the First Edition (1999) and this current version, this work would not have been possible without the help of literally hundreds of people. I am thinking first of the patients and their families who have taught me so much about living with serious and life-threatening illnesses. Right up there with them are the healthcare professionals who have shared their insights with me as we, together, attempted to offer some solace. I want to thank Pat Gerkin who has applied her editing skills to make my English much more readable. She also has a great sensitivity to things spiritual.

On the First Edition, I received wonderful suggestions from individuals at the following institutions: LifePath Hospice, Tampa, FL; Hospice of Boulder County, Boulder, CO; St. Jude's Medical Center, Fullerton, CA; Sibley Hospital, Washington, DC; St. Elizabeth Medical Center, Covington, KY; Geriatrics, Medical College of Georgia, Augusta, GA; Hospice of Lourdes, Binghamton, NY; Texoma Medical Center, Denison, TX. Closer to home, I have received support and valuable suggestions from my then fellow chaplains at the Hospice of Northern Virginia (now Capital Caring). Zail Berry, MD, checked my work to make sure it was "medically correct."

In this Second Edition, a few people gave me very specific suggestions. Brad Beukema and Sally Fitzpatrick took the time to read the new Part Four and made most helpful suggestions for improvement. Joanne Lynn, MD, got me thinking about the difference between "letting go" and "letting be."

Two others stand out. I have been moved by what each of them has written. So moved, in fact, that I drove across the country a couple of times just to spend some time with them. They both offered some thoughts on the new material in Part Four. Sr. Elaine Prevallet, SL, lives in Sante Fe and gave me the phrase "the idol of control." Belden Lane, PhD, in St. Louis, helped me learn about desert spirituality and the truth that the spiritual life is more about subtraction than addition.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hank Dunn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Hank" and last name "Dunn" clearly distinguishable.

Spring, 2005

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# Introduction

In my more than two decades of work with those living with serious or life-threatening illnesses, 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 a hospital, and I have also volunteered 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 serious or life-threatening illness is more than just medical 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.

Since this book is spiritual in nature, I do reference God, Christian scripture (from my background in professional ministry), and insights from people of other religious backgrounds. Yet this book is intended for readers of any or no faith tradition. If you have different beliefs, are unsure what to believe, or have no beliefs, you can still benefit from these stories. From *Hard Choices for Loving People*:

When I say “spiritual,” try not to think of religion, a place of worship, or an organized way of thinking about God. I am using the word in the broader sense of “that which gives life ultimate meaning.”

Spiritual, in this sense, denotes that essence of ourselves that is greater than the flesh and bones that we inhabit. We are confronted most profoundly with our spiritual nature when someone we love is dying or does die. After the breath of life has gone out and the blood no longer gives vitality to the flesh, what is the meaning of this person’s life?

All the stories I share are true, but at times I have changed names to protect privacy. Each selection is written as a meditation—some thoughts to be pondered. They are meant to be companions for those with serious or life-threatening illnesses 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 jackhammers. Seated next to the window, not ten feet from the closest jackhammer, 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 serious illness, but we are able to give thanks *while* we have a serious 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 his book, *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 feel as if God is not in control of 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 while coping with a serious or 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 serious 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 an in-depth 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, "God forbid, but if you were to die today, is there anything that would be left undone?" A serious 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*

You 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 we usually consider to be the greatest wound—the death of a child. These people were experts in dealing with suffering and loss.

I brought a draft of some of the selections from this book. They took me to task over the phrase “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.

I also planned to read a piece I wrote about a patient's daughter, who was grieving, sad, and angry at God and everybody:

As her 95-year-old mother lay dying in a hospital, the daughter told me about all the losses she had suffered. She told me about 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?"

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."

After the group's reaction to "letting go," I took pause before reading the story. Who was I to tell these grieving parents this story, to tell them that "happiness is a choice"? I decided to go ahead with my 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 to 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.*