

Conference Minister's Corner

No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)

by Kate Bowler

Reviewed by Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman



"Someday we won't need hope. Someday we don't need courage. Time itself will be wrapped up with a bow, and God will draw us all into the eternal moment where there will be no suffering, no disease, no email.

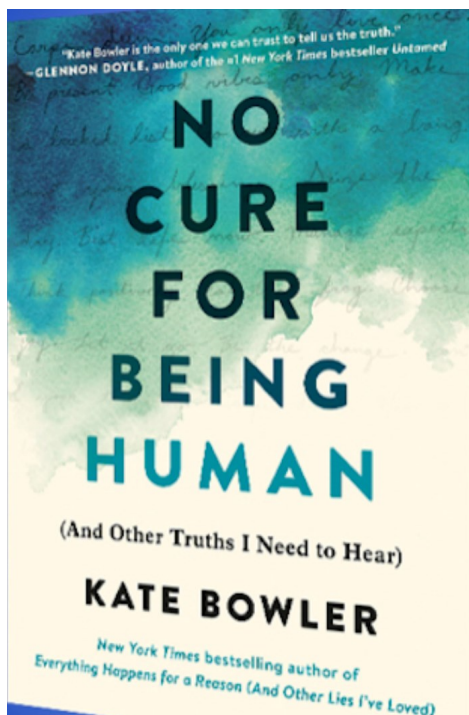
"In the meantime, we are stuck with our beautiful, terrible finitude" (191).

When history of Christianity professor Kate Bowler received her stage IV colon cancer diagnosis at age 35, it rocked both her world and the Duke Divinity community. Many of us looked up to her, and saw ourselves in her, and prayed fervently for her. I had just taken her *Women and Power in the Church* class, so it was quite the shock: *You mean the glowing, brilliant, hilarious, young associate professor who challenged and inspired us had cancer growing in her body that whole semester and none of us knew it? They're only giving her a year or two to live?* It almost felt like a betrayal.

But of course, it wasn't betrayal, because promises of perfect health were never made to her—or to any of us—in the first place.

So what now?

The *what now* is one question Kate asks in both of the New York Times bestselling memoirs she's published since that fateful diagnosis, as well as in her [TED talk](#) and the popular [podcast](#) she hosts. No matter the mode of communication, Kate has proven herself to be a master storyteller specializing in vacillating between the heartwarming (yes, she will make you laugh out loud) and heart-wrenching (soon thereafter you'll be crying). She acknowledges that "so often the experiences that define us are the ones we didn't pick" (183) as she wrestles with how to be a better human when those unthinkable experiences happen.



Kate's first book published in 2018 entitled *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* revises the narratives we tell ourselves and each other when the truly tragic happens. She critiques the words of well-meaning friends and acquaintances who offer easy answers and "God just wants one more angel in heaven"-style trite assurances.

That same skepticism towards American culture is interspersed throughout her second memoir as well, *No Cure For Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)*. She questions the cult of professional ambition and productivity: "But what if I die this summer? My final moments on the planet will be spent writing a stupid historical book no one will read" (109). She questions the allure of "best life now" self-help marketing: "I have seen the guides to endless progress for sale in airport kiosks . . . the formulas for a meaningful life," and yet she knows the truth that "there is no formula. We live and we are loved and we are gone" (xiv). And she questions our society's obsession with looking youthful via eliminating one's extra weight and crow's feet and stubborn grays: "Should we hate the evidence that we have survived? . . . Aging isn't the enemy. I am really *hoping to age*" (168). Her cancer has given her wisdom about life in America she wishes she didn't have to learn this way.

But the book goes much deeper than its cultural critiques. *No Cure* is also a memoir of grief and living well in uncertainty, a celebration of the depths of friendship and familial love, and a profoundly powerful case for finding God found in regular surprises.

After the funeral of his great-grandmother, Kate explains to her almost 4-year-old son Zach where to find God after he says he can't see God:

"Sometimes we feel God here,' I say, putting my hand on his small chest. 'If we are lucky, we see God in something really mysterious, like a miracle. But mostly we see God in regular surprises like love and forgiveness'" (132-133).

And those regular surprises are everywhere in this book. Kate's community of family and friends offer deep love and support and function as a protest against despair—everyone rallying around her in whatever ways they can. At one point, she organizes a team to run for colon cancer research sporting t-shirts that read WE'VE GOT THE RUNS. At another point, she gathers a group of fellow historians with a knack for research to compile a sprawling database with the latest cancer treatment information, a project that earns itself the nickname: No Kate Left Behind—"referring both to a bygone Bush-era educational policy and to the odd fact that all of us are named Kate" (93). And she sprinkles the prayers and wisdom of her community throughout the text, like sugar that makes the bitter truth of her (and our) "terrible finitude" more palatable. So whether she's on a gurney ready for surgery or in a church service, we hear from Kate's own father, her sister, her best friend, or respected leaders like Will Willimon, Luke Powery, and Richard Hays as they offer their pastoral care.

As *No Cure* progresses, it's clear that Kate has defied the odds—her experimental treatments have paid off and she's celebrating her 40th birthday, living longer than the couple years originally predicted, long enough to see a global pandemic. But of course, there's little cause for celebration, as there is still a good chance she will leave behind friends and a husband and a child who will never recover.

And so she names that there is no resolution to our lives—that life is beautiful and terrible, full of hope and despair, and that we'll never actually arrive at where we're headed: "How lucky, then, that we are not failing. Our lives are not problems to be solved. We can have meaning and beauty and love, but nothing even close to resolution" (192).

There may be no cure for being human, but Professor Kate Bowler teaches us that there are remedies for despair—the love of each other and of God. Despite the looming fear of death, all of her work points towards things that are life-giving. And so, at a tiny chapel off of Route 66 on the way to the Grand Canyon, Kate stubbornly pens a prayer to join with hundreds of others graffitied on the walls. She writes: *dum spiro spero*.

Which means: *While I breathe, I hope*.