

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Melissa Browning

Grace: A Child's Intimate Journey through Cancer and Recovery

Melinda Marchaino

For Group Reflection and Discussion

Melinda Marchaino writes of her own teenage struggle with cancer in her memoir *Grace: A Child's Intimate Journey through Cancer and Recovery*. From the early signs of illness and misdiagnosis to cancer treatment and the fight to continue dancing, Melinda tells her story with candor and wit.

Instructions

This discussion guide is built around several dominant themes in the book. While the themes are in order, feel free to jump around as the conversation progresses. For many of the questions, page numbers are listed to aid in discussion.

Navigating the System

1. Early in the book, Melinda shares a story of a medical technician who mocked her and her mom and made one of the worst days of their lives even worse (p. 9). Have you ever had a similar encounter in a doctor's office or hospital?
2. Within the medical system, chaplains not only minister to and pray for patients, but they also serve as patient advocates when the system treats them unfairly or when they do not understand the details of their diagnosis or treatment. Chaplains can serve as a go-between to make sure a patient's needs are communicated and being met. How could a chaplain have ministered to Melinda and her family during this time of misdiagnosis?
3. Melinda also mentions a problem with her insurance (p. 27) and later discovers her insurance won't pay for treatment for her eating disorder (p. 227). Was this just or unjust? How can we as Christians be advocates for a more just and caring medical system? What resources do we have in Scripture to help us imagine what a just medical system might look like (for example, Jesus' healing the sick)?

Caring for Self and Caring for Others

1. Throughout her cancer treatment Melinda talks about the importance of making others laugh or smile. She is concerned that her family and even her doctors and nurses be happy as she attempts to make jokes and "have fun" through treatment. Do you think you would be able to have this same positive attitude in a similar situation?
2. In the New Testament Jesus tells us we must come into the kingdom of God "like a child" (Luke 18:17). Here we learn that children can be role models. What can adults learn from Melinda's story about living and loving life?
3. Did Melinda sacrifice too much of herself when she worried how others would view her? Did she put on a happy face too often (pp. 15, 215, 234)?
4. How did this love of others help her find her way free from an eating disorder (pp. 267, 282)?
5. What can we learn from this story about the balance between caring for ourselves and caring for others?

Dancing and Celebrating Life

1. We learn early on that dance is an important part of Melinda's life, that it made her feel "normal" even though she was sick (pp. 32, 35). How did dance function as an expression of Melinda's spirituality? How was it a celebration of her giftedness (pp. 118-20, 188)?
2. Melinda was particularly inspired by two events: meeting Lance Armstrong (pp. 232-53) and a gift of ballet shoes from Patricia Barker (pp. 124-26, 199, 282). How did these events help her celebrate life in a new way? What can they teach us about taking time for others?
3. How does dance become a metaphor for becoming free from the cage Melinda sees as her body (pp. 106, 188)?

Solidarity and Good Gifts

1. Melinda talks about many gifts God gave her through treatment and recovery. Some of these were seen in nature, but most came in the form of everyday people. Once a janitor sang her a song (p. 196), and strangers at the gas station and grocery store asked to pray for her (p. 174). How do these stories exemplify our calling to be the presence of Christ in our world?
2. Chaplains and other ministers help people make meaning out of their suffering. How did Melinda make meaning from her suffering?
3. While Melinda sometimes feels solidarity when others show love, at other times she feels alienated from those who are healthy. She ponders how some people are watching Jay Leno while she is fighting cancer (p. 53), and she is sometimes jealous of the healthy girls in her dance class (p. 214). What can we learn from this about how those who are healthy can stand in solidarity with those who are sick?
4. The Teddy Bear Foundation becomes an important part of Melinda's treatment and recovery. This begins with the simple act of someone's giving her a teddy bear as a gift from the foundation (pp. 53-54). How do small acts of kindness change Melinda's outlook on her situation?
5. Melinda also talks about people sending her gifts and cards and bringing meals and how much this made her feel loved (pp. 59, 63-64). What does this tell us about the importance of hospitality ministries and other outreach efforts in our churches?
6. When Melinda meets a girl in the hospital named Rachel, she says, "I was in awe of the way that God created a bridge for us and used one life to touch another" (p. 67). Have you had a similar experience when God met you at a point of suffering by ministering through someone else?

The Body

1. Throughout the book Melinda talks about her "body." Sometimes she wishes to have her old body back, celebrating the smiling girl "on the fridge" (pp. 33, 61) while at other times she mounts a fight against her body, separating her "self" or her "mind" from her body (pp. 22, 37, 75, 87, 192). Separating the mind and the body is a theme that has been present since the beginnings of Christian tradition when early Christians prized the mind over the body. Do you think this is a helpful or a harmful way of seeing ourselves?

2. Could a recognition that God has created both our minds and bodies to work together allow a greater space for healing when sickness invades the body?
3. How did Melinda use the mind-body split to her advantage when fighting cancer? How did it eventually hurt her?
4. Melinda begins by trusting her body, knowing something was wrong even though no one trusted her. "I was in my body and they were not" (p. 5). How does the experience of living with cancer degrade this trust she has in her body?
5. Do you think her fight against her body (that helped her survive cancer) was part of the reason she had such difficulty with an eating disorder in her recovery?

Beads of Courage

1. Melinda collected "beads of courage" for each poke and treatment she underwent. How did these symbols give meaning to her suffering?
2. What symbols do we have within Christianity that give meaning to suffering?
3. How does Melinda identify with the suffering of Christ (pp. 40-41)?
4. Melinda also talks about cancer bringing good moments (p. 124). How does having cancer reshape Melinda's life in both good and bad ways?
5. Melinda ends the book by talking about the importance of "now" (p. 284). How is recognizing the "importance of now" a Christian obligation?

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next month:

In his memoir *All Over but the Shoutin'*, Rick Bragg gives his readers an intimate look at poverty and faith in the rural South. Bragg tells the stories of his family in a way that allows readers to imagine they had been invited over for dinner. This powerful book by a gifted storyteller won a 1996 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.