



Fall 2020



DUSTIN GRINNELL

The Healing Book

The news of Laura's cancer had greatly upset her husband, Dr. David Mitchel, then a renowned cardiac surgeon in Boston. A man of action, a problem solver, David was frustrated that he had encountered a problem he couldn't seem to solve. Out of his depth, he sought out the best oncology specialists in nearby hospitals and threw himself into the study of metastatic breast cancer, spending late nights in his study hunched over scientific journals and textbooks.

David and Laura spent many meals discussing medical advances and experimental cancer therapies. The conversations fatigued Laura, who was a retired preschool teacher, but she agreed with David that they would fight her cancer with everything they had. They tried all of the available cancer treatments: chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, a cutting-edge immunotherapy trial. All interventions failed, however. CT scans showed the spread of tumors. Several months into the assault on the disease, Laura took David's hand one night in bed and told him that she wanted to discontinue treatment. David avoided eye contact, flipped over and switched off the lamp. The next day, he burst into action.

Within a week, David had sold their Beacon Hill condo and bought a small cottage in Western Massachusetts. During move-in, David instructed the movers to arrange his study as it had appeared in their Boston home, with hundreds of books in several bookshelves, a laptop connected to a desktop computer and stacks of notepads containing ideas about cancer treatments. That first winter night in the cottage, David worked in his study while Laura stared into the fireplace with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

That night, Laura thought about the nightmare David said he'd had the night before he decided to uproot them and move across the state. In his dream, he had watched Laura die in his arms after failing a series of conventional treatments. It was then that he felt the pull against reason and science. The next morning, he committed to trying anything that might help him save his wife, even if that meant entering into the wilderness of alternative therapies, which he had always considered hogwash, even dangerous given the lack of scientific



evidence proving their safety and efficacy. David admitted that a man of science had become a man of hope.

David speculated that years of city living had overstimulated Laura's senses, keying up her body, making it vulnerable to disease by weakening her immune system and allowing cancer to develop unchecked by a strong defense. Tumors were always cropping up in our bodies, David had said, but if one's immune system was strong, they would be stamped out. If the immune system was weak due to the overproduction of stress hormones, however, a tumor could have the opportunity to grow and, if given enough time, threaten the whole system.

While the decision to relocate represented a change in treatment approach, David's skepticism of alternative therapies remained. It wasn't the doctor's style to consult "integrative" healthcare providers, and he and Laura certainly weren't going to travel to South America, or wherever, to experience the laying-on of hands from a shaman or faith healer. There would also be no talk of "sending love" to Laura's tumors or visualizing herself wrapping her arms around her traumatized childhood self that was supposedly the root cause of her illness.

First off, they would treat Laura's cancer with nutrition. "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food," David said, harkening back to Hippocrates. It was no secret to either of them that the standard American diet, which included large quantities of meat, sugar, dairy and refined foods, was effectively toxic and inflamed the body, damaging tissues and organs. And so, while listening to Mozart in their kitchen, they began to cook meals according to a plant-based diet, which were intended to give Laura's immune system the essential vitamins, minerals, fiber and protein to battle the cancer. Since sugar was a proven energy source for growing tumors, they sought to starve the tumors by rooting out all sugar-filled foods.

A month into nutritional treatment, Laura's cravings for sweets had faded. She ate beans and nuts, organic fruits and vegetables, and lean meats sparingly. She drank copious amounts of water and drizzled foods with olive oil. She limited consumption of red wine and drank several cups of green tea a day for its proven cancer-fighting properties. On Sundays they fasted, a practice that had been shown to



bolster the immune system and perhaps even slow the aging process by activating genes associated with longevity.

Since aerobic exercise was also good medicine, David and Laura took daily walks in the woods. They rescued a puppy and relieved stress by exploring trails behind their cottage together. In his reading, David learned that forests had been shown to produce a myriad of chemicals that were shown in some studies to relax the body and calm the mind. And so, he began referring to their walks as “forest baths.” Most days, after watching the sun rise over the mountains, they would walk out onto their deck and do tai chi, which, according to traditional Chinese medicine, removed blockages in the body that caused disease by moving “life force” around various energy centers. After the light exercise, Laura found herself in better spirits. Afterward, she had less pain and would sleep better.

Each night before bed, Laura began to kneel near the fireplace and pray. Other than maybe relaxing her body, David saw little value in sending wishes into the air. He had never hidden the fact that he was an atheist, and Laura had always said that she too “lacked faith,” or had at least found herself “unable to believe” and yet she didn’t share her husband’s strong convictions.

Sometimes, while wine drunk, they used to speculate as to where humans “went” after death. David’s position: the lights just went out. Laura wasn’t so sure though. Then, such speculations were mental play, good conversation, but death was no longer an abstraction now; it was on her doorstep. And so, Laura began to silently reexamine her beliefs.

On the days when her body ached and her thoughts swirled, a great fear of dying would take hold, and she would hope there was an afterlife, because at least that meant that this brief life wasn’t the only life. “Don’t we all want a little more time?” she thought. “Time to do the things we want to do? To spend more time with the ones we love?” Laura longed for a time when she could have breakfast with David without the shadow of her illness looming over them.

David wasn’t the type to entertain existential conversations, so Laura poured her musings into a journal. In her notebook, she could ask questions that would alienate her from her husband. Laura had done some reading that said that journaling might help her process “stuck”



emotions, which might be the root cause of her cancer. All Laura knew was that she felt better after expressing herself in writing. The hardest thing to manage was the fear her illness had brought, a ruthless anxiety about death that often woke her up in the early hours of the morning, her mind racing with worry.

Deep into winter, David began talking excitedly about bibliotherapy, a practice where literature was prescribed to ease the suffering associated with mental and physical problems. The ancient Greeks were the first to use bibliotherapy, referring to their libraries as sacred places of healing. After World War II, special libraries were even built in US hospitals where bibliotherapists matched fictional narratives with soldiers' problems.

Over time, the practice extended to the wider public and even became a profession. A bibliotherapist might prescribe Herman Hesse's "Siddhartha" to an overworked businessman dealing with a mid-life crisis. A dissatisfied lawyer could reexamine a life of striving for material success through the lens of Leo Tolstoy's novella, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." For those searching for meaning in a meaningless world, there was Albert Camus's philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," whereby the character Sisyphus eternally pushes a boulder up a hill only to see it roll back down after reaching the top.

David and Laura agreed that it was a bridge too far to assume that fictional narratives might slow the quiet spread of Laura's tumors. David viewed bibliotherapy through medicine's "three-legged stool." One leg offered drugs and medications. Another leg used surgery and other physical procedures. And the final leg included elements of self-care, like stress management, exercise, sleep and bibliotherapy. David talked enthusiastically about a study in which MRI brain scans had shown that the same brain regions are activated whether someone is reading about an adventure or experiencing it themselves. In all, reading as therapy could distract, teach, excite, calm and even transport us. "Literature is medicine for the soul," Laura wrote in her journal.

In his study of bibliotherapy, David learned about a literary critic's mother who had apparently been "cured" by reading. As the story goes, the mother had been delirious in the hospital when her father visited and gave her a dozen adventure novels to read. It had taken the woman weeks to read through the books, but by the end she was



healed. So inspired by this case, David wrote a perspective piece for a medical journal, opening with a quote from Voltaire: “The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease.” After that publication, he became obsessed with the mechanics of how books bestowed their healing properties. “The anatomy of bibliotherapy,” he called it.

An amateur bibliotherapist, David also began “prescribing” books to Laura. While she preferred her cozy mysteries, Laura read the books her husband gave her. “War and Peace,” “Anna Karenina” and “Moby Dick,” even adventure novels, like “Treasure Island” and “The Lost World.” David theorized that perhaps it was the mere escape that gave books and the reading experience most of their healing properties. Laura did find that fiction provided a break from thinking about her condition. However, the minute she put her book down, Laura couldn’t escape the gnawing suspicion that no treatment, conventional or otherwise, would remedy her illness.

As the snow swirled outside the cottage, Laura would read each night at the fireplace. In addition to distracting her mind, she found that the sound and rhythm of some books’ prose had a calming effect. It was interesting to think that her actual physiology could respond to the cadence, syntax and musicality of words. David shared research that certain works of literature contained prose that lowered blood pressure and reduced stress. Laura found passages in the novel “Lost Horizon” by James Hilton particularly soothing. In one part of the novel, Hilton describes the inhospitable, mystical Tibetan plateau using language that stilled Laura’s mind:

Without thought or knowledge, one could have guessed that this bleak world was mountain-high, and that the mountains rising from it were mountains on top of mountains. A range of them gleamed on a far horizon like a row of dog teeth.

After several weeks of using unconventional approaches to treat Laura’s cancer, David and Laura were ready to check the status of her disease. They drove into Boston for a day of testing only to find that Laura’s tumors had not spread or receded. Status quo. Laura now assumed that David’s efforts would likely fail, and she probably wouldn’t see another New England summer. The realization made her think that she had spent her entire life denying her own mortality. “It’s a terrifying prospect: to die while the world goes on,” Laura wrote in



her diary, “and so we bury it, repress it, keep this inescapable fact at bay by busying ourselves in the world.”

With oblivion more concrete than ever, Laura searched for literature that might help her reframe her view of herself and her place in the cosmos. One day, while reading Shakespeare’s play, “As You Like It,” a short speech took her breath away.

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...

Laura was surprisingly comforted by the notion that she was like a character in a story. It was a relief to consider herself part of a grand cosmic narrative in which she entered into ever so briefly and then departed so others could continue the story. She had played a good part on the world’s stage. She and David hadn’t had children, but in many ways the two- and three-year-olds in her classroom had been family. She had helped these children work through their emotions and tried as best she could to help them navigate the confusing and sometimes overwhelming realities of growing up. *What’s wrong with passing now, having played such a wonderful part on the world’s stage?*

When David wasn’t working and Laura wasn’t reading, they were watching funny movies; “Groundhog Day” was her favorite. Why funny movies? David had read the book, “Anatomy of an Illness: As Perceived by the Patient,” where the author Norman Cousins wrote about how he had cured a previously incurable autoimmune disease by binging on funny films. Cousins explained how humorous movies had provided much-needed amusement during his battle with his illness and allowed his body’s own internal healing mechanisms to go to work.

Most days, David studied in his office. When Laura was so ill that she couldn’t leave her bed, David would visit for a few minutes, wipe the sweat from her forehead with a warm towel and then return to work. At times, it was inspiring to see David work so tirelessly in an attempt to heal her. Another part of her felt angry that David was often absent. Would she have been healthier had David shown her more attention, been more loving? Surely his presence would have eased her suffering. And yet, he remained locked away with his books.



His obsession with bibliotherapy growing, David embarked on an ambitious effort to write his own novel using what he was learning about how literature could heal the body and mind. A purpose-built fictional narrative, a “healing book,” he called it. He closely studied the literary theories in “Poetics,” Aristotle’s book on the craft of dramatic writing. One device, the philosopher wrote, was that effective fictional narratives presented readers with obstacles that produced a catharsis, from *katharos*, or clearing of obstacles. This clearing of obstacles provided a purging of emotions that led to a reworking of how the audience or reader saw themselves and the world.

David worked and Laura began to walk the dog alone. The morning walks weren’t the same without her husband. What an elixir it had been to meander in the woods with David and laugh as the pup buried her nose in the snow looking for a mouse that had disappeared. Alone one morning, Laura spent hours trying to catch the dog, who had run off. When she managed to grab the leash, an image flashed into her mind of David hunched over his desk, writing vigorously, and she began to weep.

David’s book was written in piecemeal, chapter by chapter. Each night, Laura could hear the sound of her husband pounding the keys of his laptop from the bedroom. One night around midnight, she crept out of bed and peeked into his study to see him standing, scribbling on a pad of paper on top of a bookshelf, like a man possessed.

It wasn’t long before David gave her pages to read. The early parts of his novel were a bit rough around the edges—too much “telling,” not enough “showing,” as Laura’s English teacher used to say after reading her short stories in college—but the prose had an appealing lyrical style. Somehow, David had managed to pull off a neat trick. The voice in which he wrote was delicate, almost lilting. His writing style comforted her, and many nights Laura drifted off to sleep with pages in her lap.

As the weeks passed, the days began to warm and the snow melted, but Laura grew unexpectedly sicker. Her body frail and her mind often cloudy, she was now certain that the curtain would soon come down on her play. Early one morning, before the sun had risen, she rolled over in bed and thanked David for moving them to this beautiful part



of the state. The rising and falling of the cicadas in their backyard was as good music as any of Mozart's sonatas.

Laura tried to tell David that she no longer wanted a novel to soothe her worries; she wanted her husband by her side in her final days. There had been many lonely nights when she wished David would have finished his studies early, come to bed and pressed his body against hers. That would have been a form of medicine, would it not? There's nothing cutting edge about a hug, but it would have made her smile and feel warm and desired. An embrace wouldn't have taken away her cancer, but at least she wouldn't have felt so alone and cold during those long, dark winter nights.

David's book was nearly complete when Laura felt what she could only describe as a loosening attachment to her breath. She knew she had days, hours even, and yet David had drowned himself in his project. In a two-day writing frenzy, he finished his novel and rushed to Laura's bedside to read her the ending. Laura listened while David read, feeling tired, light, ready.

David's eyes welled up with tears, and he put the book aside and laid down beside his wife. He seemed to finally accept the fact that a book would not give Laura more time. Tears running down his face, David apologized for spending the winter buried in his work. Laura shook her head and told him it was all right. They may have been in separate rooms, but they were in the same town, under the same roof. The smell of him had never left her clothes. David shut his eyes tightly and said he was sorry for creating a healing book that didn't, in fact, heal.

Laura took David's hand and said that the books she had read, including her husband's novel, had comforted her and helped her fear death less. The literature she had been exposed to made her realize that she was part of something eternal, that while she would physically die, she could live on in David's heart and in the universal narrative in which humans continue to write as long as we are born. Indeed, David's book had not given Laura more time, but it had offered her comfort as she approached the end. His book hadn't helped her live; it had helped her die.

Early in the morning, David gazed at Laura softly and told her that he loved her and that he would miss her. Laura's eyes parted lazily, and she mumbled something that David couldn't make out. He was



rubbing Laura's back when she drifted off and her chest became still. David wrapped his wife in his arms and stared into the night sky until the morning came and the room filled with light.

Dustin Grinnell is a writer based in Boston. His fiction and creative nonfiction combine medicine and the humanities and have appeared in *Ars Medica*, *Hektoen International*, *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine and Perspectives in Biology & Medicine*. He holds a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Pine Manor College, a Master of Science in physiology from Penn State and a Bachelor of Arts in psychobiology from Wheaton College. He works as a staff writer for Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.