



Cherie Henderson //

Duke Divinity School historian Kate Bowler is the kind of person who surprised her parents by renovating their basement while they were out of town. She hopes they didn't need that treadmill; it didn't work with her new layout, so she ditched it. She's the kind of person who makes lists and executes plans. Though Canadian by birth, she fits in here in the United States, home of Henry Ford-style efficiency – all about using her time well (28-29).

Bowler learned at age 35 that her time might be short. Diagnosed with incurable colon cancer, she found herself in a situation that leaves 86 percent of people dead within two years. That was six years ago, and Bowler is still with us, having undergone surgery and experimental immunotherapy treatment that had her making costly trips to Atlanta every week for months. Now, she lives in a limbo of watchful waiting.

The resulting memoir, *No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)*, explores the experience of having an illness that's probably going to kill you but doesn't. It's thoughtful, as you might expect from an associate history professor, yet still highly readable, as you might not. There's dialogue, humor and plain talk – *No Cure for Being Human* is decidedly not a book from a university press, and that's for the better, because her observations can enlighten everyone who will have to die one day. In other words, everyone.

Certainly, some of what she has to say is familiar. Like many a cancer patient before her, she sees life differently after her diagnosis: "The mundane has begun to sparkle. The things I love – the things I should love – become clearer, brighter" (84).

But Bowler goes much further than this, taking on topics from ambition to embodiment. Throughout, she draws on Christian learnings as philosophy as much as faith as she describes how they inform her way of seeing and being without ever trying to evangelize. This is not necessarily surprising: Bowler challenged the veracity of the prosperity gospel in her last book, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

Bowler's religious background gives her musings a sturdy frame. On time, for example, she reckons with her tradition's three phases of time: the everyday pastoral; the tragic, when we recognize that bad things sometimes happen, and the apocalyptic, when we stand at the edge of the end. Bowler is told that a new tumor has appeared on her liver, and she buys burial plots: everything in its time.

One of my favorite sections – also adapted into an op-ed column for *The New York Times* – explores the phenomenon of the bucket list. Bowler's counselors advise her to make one, and she does dig up a decades-old list; item No. 16 is, "Take a scooter tour around Prince Edward Island" (66).

Being Bowler, she also obsesses over the concept of the bucket list, tracing it from the 2007 movie of the same name back to its 18th-century origins of death by kicking a bucket out from under the feet. But the real payoff comes when Bowler points out the tyranny of bucket lists: "Instead of helping us grapple with our finitude, they have approximated infinity. With unlimited time and resources, we could do anything, be anyone. ... With the right list, we would never starve with the hunger of want. But it is much easier to count items than to know what counts" (57-58). In other words, bucket lists deflect our attention from the meaningful existential questions of mortality.

Bucket lists imply that we can be satisfied if we can just check all the boxes. The book's greatest insight is that we will always want more, and that's the reality we need to make peace with. Even if Oliver Sacks, Jerome Bruner and Daniel Dennett are right that we experience our lives as narratives – a notion challenged by Galen Strawson and others – Bowler argues that we're never happy to see our own story end.

Her visit to the gaudy but unfinished Batalha Monastery in Portugal provides the closing metaphor, articulated by an elderly stranger with binoculars and high white socks: "We're never done, dear. Even when we're done, we're never done" (197). As it is, the Catholic tower's late-Gothic excess befuddles as much as it awes. Bowler's father declares it "wonderfully unnecessary" (198). Bowler suggests that the same is true of life, and that's okay.

Author: Cherie Henderson is a doctoral candidate in communications at Columbia University. Her dissertation looks at how the Western triumph story of illness informs contemporary end-of-life narratives. She has also worked at the intersection of death and humor. She holds a master's degree from Columbia in narrative medicine and was a faculty associate, fieldwork supervisor and post-graduate fellow in that program. She has initiated and led writing workshops for patients at Memorial Sloan Kettering cancer center. Earlier, she was a staff editor and reporter at *The Miami Herald* and The Associated Press. Other publications include *Self* magazine, *Columbia Magazine* and *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*.

Image: Penguin Random House