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FOREWORD

by

Richard Foster

The School of Dying Graces is a beautiful book. I do not say this lightly. When Richard Felix sat on our deck a few weeks after Vivian's death and told me of his desire to collect some of her journal notations into book form, I could indeed see a book: a tragic book, a sad book, a consoling book, perhaps even a hopeful book . . . but certainly not a beautiful book. The circumstances were too crushing, the end too tragic for anything like beauty to be connected with it. But I was wrong. This book is beautiful . . . beautiful and graceful and charming and inviting—just like the woman whose story it tells.

I have known Richard and Vivian for more than two decades. Both of our families came to Friends University in the same year: Richard as university president and I as a professor and writer-in-residence. Quickly our lives were intertwined, not just professionally but as friends. Both couples—Richard and Vivian and Carolynn and I—had young children who sometimes played together at backyard barbeques. Vivian and Carolynn were part of a small friendship group of women at the university who gathered informally to celebrate one another's birthdays and sometimes to plan more formal university-related events. One year our two families



had Thanksgiving dinner together, all exquisitely prepared and served by Vivian. Our friendship continued unabated when Richard accepted the presidency of Azusa Pacific University, for he graciously invited me to teach there regularly.

But friendship does not a book make! Not to mention a book of surpassing beauty. So, what is it that makes this story so compelling, so gripping, so beautiful? Three things.

First, the story is told well. This comes supremely from the hand of Vivian Felix herself. I have long known of Vivian's skill with the English language—she was, after all, an English teacher. Years back I invited her to be part of a small group of critical readers for my own writings-in-progress; I chose Vivian precisely for her facility with language. But, I had no idea . . . these journal writings, penned under the white-hot heat of suffering and brokenness and loss, are simply stunning. The words are well chosen and the images are memorable. Combined with a vulnerability that takes your breath away, these words produce a heart-language that is radiant. Such beauty always has a way of touching the subterranean sanctuary of our soul, and somehow even while detailing the deepest of anguish, it lifts us up into the good, the true, the beautiful. Listen to her words: "As I was praying I visualized my heart and on the left lower side there was a wound. As I watched it, the wound festered and came to a head. A tumor came out of it, fell, and was planted in the soil. After a while, a plant grew up and blossomed. I was left with the picture of a single green plant with a single stalk and, at the top, a lovely heart-shaped flower."

Second, the story is told with brutal honesty. Richard should be commended here, for he refuses to hide from us the awful savagery of "the Beast," as Vivian dubbed her particularly virulent form of can-



cer. In heartrending detail this book is an extended commentary on those poignant lines at the end of Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." It is sad indeed, this telling of the wasting away of one so lovely and so vibrant. And yet, as Richard obeys the sad time and speaks to us, not in pious platitudes, but in the stark realities of pain and sadness and anguish, we are slowly, almost imperceptibly, changed for the good. It is as if we are being immersed into the fiery baptism of Richard and Vivian's suffering and somehow—I don't know how—we emerge better, nobler, stronger.

Third, it is the story of a beautiful soul. To become beautiful of soul is perhaps the greatest grace of all, and in a way deeper and fuller than most of us, Vivian Felix entered into this grace. How suffering purifies! From the defining vision she received at England's Warwick Castle, to the tearful clinging to a rough wooden cross at Mission La Purísima Concepción, to the divine refrain "Trust me" spoken to her, to her determined decision to "enter the school of dying graces," to her quiet query to her husband, "Dare we imagine what it will be like to see each other in heaven?" Vivian grew in grace. Immeasurably so.

This is an important book, because in the midst of our death-denying culture, it is good to realize that dying well has a beauty all its own. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15).

Robert Frost wrote:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

With faith and courage, Vivian Felix chose to take the road less traveled. Through the pages of this book, we can travel down that road with her.

—Richard J. Foster



FOREWORD

by

Jack Hayford

It's my privilege to introduce this deeply moving, thought-transforming book—one that centers on two friends of mine, but also relates to two words, words that summarize the conflict they faced. As you will find, the conflict wasn't between my friends, for theirs was a profound partnership. Rather, the conflict they resolved and dominated was an ever-present battle between two words that are acute enemies.

Let me explain.

As a communicator, I've learned to read the faces of people and groups, to sense moods, to perceive the human response or the "spirit" awakened when certain words or ideas are spoken. Whether in private discussion or during a platform address, a noticeable reaction occurs when the word *hope* is even uttered. That is, of course, when the hearers recognize you are referencing that quality of hope that transcends the casual or the pop notions "Cross your fingers and . . ." or "Well, I guess we can take another shot and 'hope for the best.'"

Hope, in this instance, is infinitely more. Genuine hope is a substance, not a superstition—a reality, not a ruse. When its substance and reality are communicated—and they are, on this book's



pages—hope has a way of infusing strength, undergirding comfort, transforming faith, and begetting profound durability. And hope abounds here, in this remarkably dynamic testament to one couple’s experience facing a ferocious enemy’s assault. That enemy was cancer—the other word prompting my reflection.

As a pastor-counselor, I’ve found no greater opponent to hope than cancer. Spoken, the very word blackens horizons and dissipates hope like twilight before midnight. How often I’ve observed it—once spoken, the word *cancer* dropping an icy weight into the soul, crushing the spirit like a lead glacier. Hope is hard to conjure when cancer is mentioned; the word itself becomes toxic. Once declared in diagnosis, it seems to emit an acrid atmosphere—a sinister presence that ensconces fear, dares faith to lift its head, and drains hope from a soul just as disease drains health from a body.

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But I turn from my reflection, for this introduction is not about a poetic analysis of words, but rather an effort at giving a context for my belief in this book’s message . . . and my privilege in knowing the two people central to its story. I see *The School of Dying Graces* as a weapon against anything that assails hope, as a source of nourishing hope’s substance in anyone’s soul. Not only is this a true story, it’s a truth story: a message of vital life, even when facing death—an avenue to the power to rise up, even when circumstance puts you down.

In this book, you will meet two profoundly loving people: the author, Richard Felix, former president of Azusa Pacific University, and his gifted, gracious wife, Vivian—his companion in every life-enterprise ever set before them. The writer’s focus and foremost subject is his wife, and while part of this book’s beauty is in how it reflects the dynamism and love that so observably bound their two

souls together, Richard writes with more than tender sentiment. Far more, he discloses a power and spiritual discernment as he describes the journey he and Vivian took together. As you read about the heroic qualities of her faith, between the lines you'll inescapably encounter heart-stirring evidences of his own as well. I remember how awesomely moving this was to witness at the time, and I delight to see it chronicled here so warmly and accessibly.

My wife, Anna, and I were honored to be welcomed by Richard and Vivian into their struggle from the beginning. However, we were but a tiny, virtually insignificant fraction of those who watched the unfolding of that kind of miracle that only hope can produce. Since we had navigated Anna's cancer years before, we had faced that beast and under God's mercy received the temporal blessing of a full recovery. But walking with and watching Richard and Vivian, along with their family, friends, and the whole community of the university faculty and student body, we all witnessed something of a more ultimate joy. It was found then, and you can find it here, in the pragmatic vitality that flows toward any of us when we enter that dimension of hope that issues in "dying graces."

It's a hope not rooted in philosophy or even theology—it's found at the fountainhead of relationships. It begins with that relationship gained when we let God's great heart of love embrace us, and it advances as human hearts truly open to what he can do to enable the magnificently heroic even in the middle of the horrendously hellish. Richard and Vivian proved that the power of hope is greater than the power of cancer—as surely as the love of God is greater than life or death, or principalities or powers, or things present or things to come, or height or depth, or any other created thing. (See Romans 8:38-39.)

This hope, born of love's overcoming power, brought victory to the Felixes—a victory gained through the tenacity of their mutually sustaining partnership as they passed into the fiery crucible of cancer. To read their story is to discover the truly miraculous: not in a triumph over disease, but of an awesome, overcoming grace through it. It's the grandest triumph, because it is, indeed, the ultimate one.

—Jack W. Hayford



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The School of Dying Graces evolved from a dream I had at Salt Creek Beach a few weeks following Vivian's homegoing. God's promise in the dream was that Vivian would one day see her children and grandchildren in heaven because of her faithfulness to Him.

Soon I came to realize that would only happen if Vivian's remarkable journey was documented and recorded. I was the one person who had been with her 24/7 for nearly thirty months during the struggle with cancer. I had access to all of her journals during that period. God's divine thumb was firmly in my back to let go of the Azusa Pacific presidency and tell her story—not only for her children and grandchildren, but also for the thousands who need hope, a hope that can only be found upon entering into the school of dying graces.

I gratefully offer acknowledgments to my friends at Azusa Pacific University:

The board of trustees who placed great trust in Richard and Vivian in bringing us to APU; gave unwavering, above and beyond support during the darkest hours of our journey; and whose continued prayers and support made this book possible.

To the faculty and staff whose everyday, in-and-out performance resulted in making APU a “flagship university” as acknowledged by the February 2, 2004, issue of *Time* magazine. These women and men exemplify the four cornerstones of APU: Christ, Scholarship, Service, and Community. Their prayers and many acts of kindness will never be forgotten.

To the thousands of students who attended APU during the 1990s. They were the energy of the university. It was their passion to place “God First” that compelled us to accept the presidency at APU. They prayed and fasted around the clock, held prayer vigils outside and around our home, and actually came to the house and laid hands on Vivian, begging God for a miracle. My family and I will never forget their love and passion for our beloved Vivian. This book is their marching manual to practice these dying graces and make them their living graces.



Finally, some personal acknowledgments:

To Vivian's personal assistant, Laura Palusso. At the onset of Vivian's illness the board of trustees approved Laura to assist Vivian full time regardless of the situation and need. Laura was there at the very end. No one should be expected to give so much, but she did. Only God knows the fullness of her gift to Vivian.

To my administrative assistant, Marilyn Schulz, whose friendship with Vivian was unique and special. Through her efforts, my office was able to function efficiently during my many absences during those last months. She sensitively communicated the journey to APU's many constituencies.

To Vivian's sister, Millie Braselton, a godly woman devoted to her family and church. She and Vivian shared a special love during those last months, a love that has impacted our families forever.

To Vivian's niece Shelly Cui, who came from China to stay with us in Wichita in the early 1980s. Vivian helped her complete language studies as well as her bachelor's and master's degrees. During the early stages of Vivian's illness, Shelly asked us to assemble a group of friends to pray with her so she could give her heart and life to Jesus. She is one of Vivian's treasures in heaven.

Vivian and I served twenty-one years in the presidency of two wonderful Christian universities: Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, and Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California. I wish I could mention each of our friends who contributed so very much to our success at each institution. Of course, I am deeply indebted to the efforts of my agent, Kathy Helmers, and my friend Rob Wilkins for their literary contributions.

Finally, to Vivian's many, many personal friends from college days through our years in Indiana, Tennessee, Florida, Kansas, and California. Many of you have told me that Vivian was your very best friend. I wish that space would allow me to list each and every one of your names.



 **1** BRINGER
OF HOPE

*Give me a new name, Lord: "Bringer of Hope."
Let me through my experience bring new and
living hope to those who have no hope. Lord God,
I prayed two years ago, "Change me," and you have.
Now let me help others to live the abundant
life in you.*

3


My wife wrote these words from her personal Gethsemane, a place of great suffering that became holy ground for her most intimate encounters with God. I could not follow her there, though I longed to do so with every cell in my body.

I write these words from my own Gethsemane—a garden bereft of her presence, where I have anguished with God and against God. It has become for me the holy ground on which I have

tried to retrace her steps along a journey that led her figuratively and literally to the heart of God.

I could not enter with my wife into her school of dying graces. She cannot accompany me now as I harvest these graces for living.



Vivian died after an epic struggle with cancer. I had been certain that God would heal her, but God did not answer my prayers for her physical recovery—nor those of my family, our beloved friends, and a vast Christian community who loved us and supported us.

4



One early morning on a very warm day in Southern California, a year and a half after my wife's death, I attended a funeral for the mother of one of my friends. As I was leaving the cemetery, baking in the heat of my car, I pulled off to the side and stepped out of the car to shed my jacket. I folded it carefully and placed it on the backseat. As I shut the back door and turned around to get into the front seat, I found myself looking at a man about fifteen feet away.

He was kneeling at his wife's grave—weeping, calling out her name, telling her how much he missed her. As he fiddled with the flowers in front of him, he occasionally wiped the tears away from his face with the backs of his hands. Then he wailed some more. I stood there like a deer frozen in car headlights. The man suddenly turned and stared at me, and I saw my own face reflected in his. Pain and anguish cut to the core of my heart as I fell into my car and started the engine. But after driving a hundred feet or so, I stopped and crumpled over the steering wheel for several minutes. Grief came roaring into the front room of my very being, routing me from every room of my soul.

I later wrote to a friend:

I know that God is working at a deep place in my life. I am trying to understand each and every thing that is happening to me. I still journal daily. I will not be the same person at the end of this journey. Life in the future will be more about being than it will be about doing. Someday when Vivian and I rendezvous with Jesus, I am sure I will give God thanks for this season of my life. From a human viewpoint I cannot comprehend that truth, but through faith it will be so.

In the war against my wife's cancer, I had been given a job to do, eventually assigned to me by Vivian herself: to pray for her healing, while she prepared herself for dying. During the thirty months between the day she was diagnosed with breast cancer and the day she took her last breath on this earth, I abandoned myself to the task of fervent prayer. Until her dying breath—and, strangely, for many weeks after—I believed God would intervene with a miracle of healing for my wife. The more the miracle seemed delayed, the greater I imagined God's glory when the doctors, with puzzled smiles on their faces, would report that Vivian was free of cancer.

Inexplicably, nearly two months after my wife's death, I was still praying for her healing. To this day, it is something I occasionally catch myself doing. I once read that after the invention of the polio vaccine, fund-raising to battle the disease continued even though the threat had been eradicated. Once set in motion, with so much at stake, the charity machine took some time to shut down. Likewise, I had been fighting the Beast for so long that it was difficult to relinquish the struggle.



Our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary came in August, following Vivian's death in June. I believed I had failed at my task. Had my faith been greater, had I prayed more consistently and with greater fervor, then Vivian and I would have been celebrating our anniversary together, planning for our next year of ministry at the helm of Azusa Pacific University and future retirement. At that time, my only option besides blaming myself was to blame God.

Since then, on my better days, I have come to see glimpses of God's deeper and mysterious plan. But on that brilliant blue day, my sky was dark. That August afternoon I received a card with a photo of a woman's hand on top of a man's hand. Inside were the words:

God made our hands fit for each other.

Lower, in her own handwriting, my beloved wife had added:

Until our hands will meet together.

Before her death, Vivian had given the card to a friend, who promised to mail it the day before our anniversary. That was like her. She loved gardening, and she understood that a good harvest required loving consistency. I looked out over the garden that she and I had planted and tended together that spring, now overtaken by weeds. I remembered the love Vivian had for the process of growing living fruit: the nurture, the pruning, and the daily care.

With our thirty-fifth anniversary card lying on a nightstand by our bed, I fell asleep, and a terrible, recurring image returned: Vivian's discarded gardening tools, lying on top of the dirt in a careful line—spade, gloves, sunglasses, knee pads, and watering can. I awoke cold with sweat, startled anew: *Vivian is gone.*

As part of my grieving, I read and reread a series of journals that



Vivian kept during her illness. Over and over, through my tears, I was struck with the spiritual passion that had been seeded in her suffering. In reading her journals, I felt as if I were watching it take root, grow, and blossom into an otherworldly beauty. I began taking notes. In an effort to duplicate Vivian's spiritual growth in my own life, I simply retraced her steps—read the books she read, prayed the prayers she did, and followed the spiritual disciplines she had developed.

I had a double purpose in mind: to write a book detailing her experiences, using excerpts from her spiritual journal, and to heal my own heart. In the summer of that same year, I spent nearly every day in the library—reading the desert fathers and mothers, taking notes on prayer techniques, exploring solitude and silence, and imprinting the Word on my heart.

For a long time, for whatever reason, neither the healing nor the book came to me. Despite my best efforts to seek God, I felt incapacitated by an unmoving despair. A good deal more time passed before any light interrupted the darkness that surrounded me. Like rays bent into the colors of a rainbow after a terrible storm, my periods of healing have come slowly, unexpectedly, as pure gifts of God's grace.



In the days leading up to her death, Vivian had been wearing a necklace I gave her on our thirty-third wedding anniversary. It had been specially made as a heart in two pieces—one half for her to wear, the other for me, symbolizing the never-ending wholeness of our love. After she passed away, we realized that Vivian's necklace

had mysteriously disappeared. In the coming months, I found myself searching desperately for the necklace. Over and over, I pleaded with God for the grace to find the jewelry.

On the first anniversary of her death, I was exploring one of the closets in our old home, trying to find a place to store some boxes of baseball cards. As I stepped behind one of the boxes, I noticed a small dancing light from the corner of my eye. I looked down to discover Vivian's necklace, its pendant cut to the shape of an *R*. In haste, I reached for the necklace around my own neck—its pendant cut to the shape of a *V*—and put the two halves together. Once again, it fit to form one heart.

8



Now, four years after my wife's death, I have begun to understand how my own broken heart can begin to mend as I live a new season of life without her. I can see the impact of Vivian's life and death in the faith and lives of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people. In the way she faced adversity with faith and died with grace, she planted seeds that were already ripening into a great harvest.

Two of Vivian's favorite verses were John 12:24 and Romans 8:28.

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Through the eyes of faith, Vivian came to grips with the paradox that in the process of our suffering and dying, God's greater purpose

of life in full can be revealed. Through obedience unto death, Vivian began to catch glimpses of God working through her to accomplish purposes far greater than her own physical healing. More and more, she understood her faith was influencing others and weaving threads of God's present redemption into his eternal plan:

I don't know why I am dying of cancer when you could have healed me at any point during treatment, but I know I can live for you today. Lord, make me beautiful of soul, and then let others see into my soul. Let my mind constantly be on you. Let me play the game of minutes and utilize my time to pray for others. Expand my life outward, Lord. Let my life have ultimate meaning. Allow me to bring hope and your love to others.



Vivian lived longer—and better—than anyone could have imagined. Second Corinthians 4:16–5:1 paints the picture:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

Beyond the inevitable, devouring, and pain-filled path of a terrible enemy, in circular lines of communion, my wife increas-

ingly entered into the presence of the Eternal One. Through private prayer, immersion in the Word, obedience, and heartfelt worship, she was able to learn eternal lessons of God's power and goodness.

Lord Jesus, I have prayed again and again for you to give me new eyes to see you ever present. And you have. You have allowed me to see beyond the visible to the Kingdom that connects and overlaps with our present world. I have seen you in power and might. I pray your presence would be so real to me that I might live and rejoice as one transformed into your image.

10



My wife became a bringer of hope to thousands of people—hope that suffering can teach us how to live well, hope that while evil can ravage the body it cannot conquer the soul, hope that God will come to us in the very place where we are certain we have been abandoned.

Could my wife, after her death, become a bringer of hope to me? The question tortured me during the most intense phases of my grieving. I had been dealt the blow of losing all my hopes. My heart waited by the gate for her return, intent only on the sight of her coming back to me, while I tried to move mind and body forward without her.

This story is, in a sense, my answer to that question. Yes, it is possible to find hope beyond the death of all earthly hopes. It is possible to stand on the cusp of our very worst fears, endure the nightmare of their coming true, and find that on the other side we have been transformed rather than destroyed.

My turning point came as I gave myself to the graces of living that were forged in my wife's victorious dying:

- ◆ *The grace of letting go*—to hold with open hands what we are most afraid of losing, and to cling only to what we cannot lose.
- ◆ *The grace of seeing with the eyes of faith*—to be willing to see the greater miracles God may have for us.
- ◆ *The grace of dependence*—to give up control and embrace brokenness as a path to greater intimacy with God.
- ◆ *The grace of surrender*—to embrace suffering as a friend rather than fearing it as an enemy.
- ◆ *The grace of gratitude*—to be thankful for the beauty at the heart of life, even in the horror and disfigurement of disease.
- ◆ *The grace of transformation*—to cling to the transforming power of God's love.

In death and in life, I am learning, we are offered grace upon grace. The lessons may be costly, but the wisdom is priceless.

*“Lord, make me beautiful
of soul, and then let others
see into my soul. . . . Expand
my life outward, Lord. Let
my life have ultimate meaning.
Allow me to bring hope and
your love to others.”*

*—From the journal
of Divian Felix*





Richard and Divian Felix