

Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me

By KATE BOWLER FEB. 13, 2016

Durham, N.C. — ON a Thursday morning a few months ago, I got a call from my doctor's assistant telling me that I have Stage 4 cancer. The stomach cramps I was suffering from were not caused by a faulty gallbladder, but by a massive tumor.

I am 35. I did the things you might expect of someone whose world has suddenly become very small. I sank to my knees and cried. I called my husband at our home nearby. I waited until he arrived so we could wrap our arms around each other and say the things that must be said. *I have loved you forever. I am so grateful for our life together. Please take care of our son.* Then he walked me from my office to the hospital to start what was left of my new life.

But one of my first thoughts was also *Oh, God, this is ironic.* I recently wrote a book called "Blessed."

I am a historian of the American prosperity gospel. Put simply, the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith. Growing up in the 1980s on the prairies of Manitoba, Canada, an area largely settled by Mennonites, I had been taught in my Anabaptist Bible camp that there were few things closer to God's heart than pacifism, simplicity and the ability to compliment your neighbor's John Deere Turbo Combine without envy. Though Mennonites are best known by their bonnets and horse-drawn buggies, they are, for the most part, plainclothes capitalists like the rest of us. I adore them. I married one.

But when a number of Mennonites in my hometown began to give money to a pastor who drove a motorcycle onstage — a motorcycle they gave him for a new church holiday called "Pastor's Appreciation Day" — I was genuinely baffled. Everyone I interviewed was so sincere about wanting to gain wealth to bless others, too. But how could Mennonites, of all people — a tradition once suspicious of the shine of chrome bumpers and the luxury of lace curtains — now attend a congregation with a love for unfettered accumulation.

The riddle of a Mennonite megachurch became my intellectual obsession. No one had written a sustained account of how the prosperity gospel grew from small tent revivals across the country in the 1950s into one of the most popular forms of American Christianity, and I was determined to do it. I learned that the

prosperity gospel sprang, in part, from the American metaphysical tradition of New Thought, a late-19th-century ripening of ideas about the power of the mind: Positive thoughts yielded positive circumstances, and negative thoughts negative circumstances.

Variations of this belief became foundational to the development of self-help psychology. Today, it is the standard “Aha!” moment of Oprah’s Lifeclass, the reason your uncle has a copy of “How to Win Friends and Influence People” and the takeaway for the more than 19 million who bought “The Secret.” (Save your money: the secret is to think positively.) These ideas about mind power became a popular answer to a difficult question: Why are some people healed and some not?

The modern prosperity gospel can be directly traced to the turn-of-the-century theology of a pastor named E. W. Kenyon, whose evangelical spin on New Thought taught Christians to believe that their minds were powerful incubators of good or ill. Christians, Kenyon advised, must avoid words and ideas that create sickness and poverty; instead, they should repeat: “God is in me. God’s ability is mine. God’s strength is mine. God’s health is mine. His success is mine. I am a winner. I am a conqueror.” Or, as prosperity believers summarized it for me, “I am blessed.”

One of the prosperity gospel’s greatest triumphs is its popularization of the term “blessed.” Though it predated the prosperity gospel, particularly in the black church where “blessed” signified affirmation of God’s goodness, it was prosperity preachers who blanketed the airwaves with it. “Blessed” is the shorthand for the prosperity message. We see it everywhere, from a TV show called “The Blessed Life” to the self-justification of Joel Osteen, the pastor of America’s largest church, [who told Oprah](#) in his Texas mansion that “Jesus died that we might live an abundant life.”

Over the last 10 years, “being blessed” has become a full-fledged American phenomenon. Drivers can choose between the standard, mass-produced “Jesus Is Lord” novelty license plate or “Blessed” for \$16.99 in a tasteful aluminum. When an “America’s Next Top Model” star took off his shirt, audiences saw it tattooed above his bulging pectorals. #Blessed is the only caption suitable for viral images of alpine vacations and family yachting in barely there bikinis. It says: “I *totally* get it. I am down-to-earth enough to know that this is crazy.” But it also says: “God gave this to me. [Adorable shrug.] Don’t blame me, I’m blessed.”

Blessed is a loaded term because it blurs the distinction between two very different categories: gift and reward. It can be a term of pure gratitude. “Thank you, God. I could not have secured this for myself.”

But it can also imply that it was deserved. “Thank you, me. For being the kind of person who gets it right.” It is a perfect word for an American society that says it believes the American dream is based on hard work, not luck.

If Oprah could eliminate a single word, it would be “luck.” “Nothing about my life is lucky,” she argued on her cable show. “Nothing. A lot of grace. A lot of blessings. A lot of divine order. But I don’t believe in luck. For me luck is preparation meeting the moment of opportunity.” This is America, where there are no setbacks, just setups. Tragedies are simply tests of character.

It is the reason a neighbor knocked on our door to tell my husband that everything happens for a reason.

“I’d love to hear it,” my husband said.

“Pardon?” she said, startled.

“I’d love to hear the reason my wife is dying,” he said, in that sweet and sour way he has.

My neighbor wasn’t trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. Because the opposite of #blessed is leaving a husband and a toddler behind, and people can’t quite let themselves say it: “Wow. That’s awful.” There has to be a reason, because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.

One of the most endearing and saddest things about being sick is watching people’s attempts to make sense of your problem. My academic friends did what researchers do and Googled the hell out of it. When did you start noticing pain? What exactly were the symptoms, again? Is it hereditary? I can out-know my cancer using the Mayo Clinic website. Buried in all their concern is the unspoken question: Do I have any control?

I can also hear it in all my hippie friends’ attempts to find the most healing kale salad for me. I can eat my way out of cancer. Or, if I were to follow my prosperity gospel friends’ advice, I can positively declare that it has no power over me and set myself free.

The most I can say about why I have cancer, medically speaking, is that bodies are delicate and prone to error. As a Christian, I can say that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully here, and so we get sick and die. And as a scholar, I can say that our society is steeped in a culture

of facile reasoning. What goes around comes around. Karma is a bitch. And God is always, for some reason, going around closing doors and opening windows. God is *super* into that.

The prosperity gospel tries to solve the riddle of human suffering. It is an explanation for the problem of evil. It provides an answer to the question: Why me? For years I sat with prosperity churchgoers and asked them about how they drew conclusions about the good and the bad in their lives. Does God want you to get that promotion? Tell me what it's like to believe in healing from that hospital bed. What do you hear God saying when it all falls apart?

The prosperity gospel popularized a Christian explanation for why some people make it and some do not. They revolutionized prayer as an instrument for getting God always to say "yes." It offers people a guarantee: Follow these rules, and God will reward you, heal you, restore you. It's also distressingly similar to the popular cartoon emojis for the iPhone, the ones that show you images of yourself in various poses. One of the standard cartoons shows me holding a #blessed sign. My world is conspiring to make me believe that I am special, that I am the exception whose character will save me from the grisly predictions and the CT scans in my inbox. I am blessed.

The prosperity gospel holds to this illusion of control until the very end. If a believer gets sick and dies, shame compounds the grief. Those who are loved and lost are just that — those who have lost the test of faith. In my work, I have heard countless stories of refusing to acknowledge that the end had finally come. An emaciated man was pushed about a megachurch in a wheelchair as churchgoers declared that he was already healed. A woman danced around her sister's deathbed shouting to horrified family members that the body can yet live. There is no graceful death, no *ars moriendi*, in the prosperity gospel. There are only jarring disappointments after fevered attempts to deny its inevitability.

The prosperity gospel has taken a religion based on the contemplation of a dying man and stripped it of its call to surrender all. Perhaps worse, it has replaced Christian faith with the most painful forms of certainty. The movement has perfected a rarefied form of America's addiction to self-rule, which denies much of our humanity: our fragile bodies, our finitude, our need to stare down our deaths (at least once in a while) and be filled with dread and wonder. At some point, we must say to ourselves, *I'm going to need to let go.*

CANCER has kicked down the walls of my life. I cannot be certain I will walk my son to his elementary school someday or subject his love interests to cheerful scrutiny. I struggle to buy books for

academic projects I fear I can't finish for a perfect job I may be unable to keep. I have surrendered my favorite manifestoes about having it all, managing work-life balance and maximizing my potential. But cancer has also ushered in new ways of being alive. Even when I am this distant from Canadian family and friends, everything feels as if it is painted in bright colors. In my vulnerability, I am seeing my world without the Instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: *Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.*

I am well aware that news of my cancer will be seen by many in the prosperity community as proof of something. I have heard enough sermons about those who "speak against God's anointed" to know that it is inevitable, despite the fact that the book I wrote about them is very gentle. I understand. Most everyone likes to poke fun at the prosperity gospel, and I'm not always immune. No word of a lie: I once saw a megachurch pastor almost choke to death on his own fog machine. Someone had cranked it up to the Holy Spirit maximum.

But mostly I find the daily lives of its believers remarkable and, often, inspirational. They face the impossible and demand that God make a way. They refuse to accept crippling debt as insurmountable. They stubbornly get out of their hospital beds and declare themselves healed, and every now and then, it works.

This is surely an American God, and as I am so far from home, I cannot escape him.

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