

Everything Happens for A Reason & Other Lies I've Loved by Kate Bowler

There is some medical news that nobody, absolutely nobody, is prepared to hear. I certainly wasn't.

It was three years ago that I got a call in my office with the test results of a recent scan. I was 35 and finally living the life I wanted. I married my high school sweetheart and had finally gotten pregnant after years of infertility. And then suddenly we had a Zach, a perfect one-year-old boy/dinosaur, depending on his mood. And having a Zach suited me perfectly. I had gotten the first job I applied for in academia, land of a thousand crushed dreams. And there I was, working at my dream job with my little baby and the man I had imported from Canada.

(Laughter)

But a few months before, I'd started feeling pain in my stomach and had gone to every expert to find out why. No one could tell me. And then, out of the blue, some physician's assistant called me at work to tell me that I had stage IV cancer, and that I was going to need to come to the hospital right away. And all I could think of to say was, "But I have a son. I can't end. This world can't end. It has just begun." And then I called my husband, and he rushed to find me and I said all the true things that I have known. I said, "I have loved you forever, I have loved you forever. I am so sorry. Please take care of our son." And then as I began the walk to the hospital, it crossed my mind for the first time, "Oh. How ironic." I had just written a book called "Blessed."

(Laughter)

I am a historian and an expert in the idea that good things happen to good people. I research a form of Christianity nicknamed "the prosperity gospel," for its very bold promise that God wants you to prosper. I never considered myself a follower of the prosperity gospel. I was simply an observer. The prosperity gospel believes that God wants to reward you if you have the right kind of faith. If you're good and faithful, God will give you health and wealth and boundless happiness. Life is like a boomerang: if you're good, good things will always come back to you. Think positively. Speak positively. Nothing is impossible if you believe.

I got interested in this very American theology when I was 18 or so, and by 25 I was traveling the country interviewing its celebrities. I spent a decade talking to televangelists with spiritual guarantees for divine money. I interviewed countless

megachurch pastors with spectacular hair about how they live their best lives now. I visited with people in hospital waiting rooms and plush offices. I held hands with people in wheelchairs, praying to be cured. I earned my reputation as destroyer of family vacations for always insisting on being dropped off at the fanciest megachurch in town. If there was a river running through the sanctuary, an eagle flying freely in the auditorium, or an enormous spinning golden globe, I was there.

When I first started studying this, the whole idea of being "blessed" wasn't what it is today. It was not, like it is now, an entire line of "#blessed" home goods. It was not yet a flood of "#blessed" vanity license plates and T-shirts and neon wall art. I had no idea that "blessed" would become one of the most common cultural cliches, one of the most used hashtags on Instagram, to celebrate barely there bikini shots, as if to say, "I am so blessed. Thank you, Jesus, for this body."

(Laughter)

I had not yet fully grasped the way that the prosperity gospel had become the great civil religion, offering another transcendent account of the core of the American Dream. Rather than worshipping the founding of America itself, the prosperity gospel worshipped Americans. It deifies and ritualizes their hungers, their hard work and moral fiber.

Americans believe in a gospel of optimism, and they are their own proof. But despite telling myself, "I'm just studying this stuff, I'm nothing like them," when I got my diagnosis, I suddenly understood how deeply invested I was in my own Horatio Alger theology. If you live in this culture, whether you are religious or not, it is extremely difficult to avoid falling into the trap of believing that virtue and success go hand in hand. The more I stared down my diagnosis, the more I recognized that I had my own quiet version of the idea that good things happen to good people. Aren't I good? Aren't I special somehow? I have committed zero homicides to date.

(Laughter)

(Applause)

So why is this happening to me? I wanted God to make me good and to reward my faith with just a few shining awards along the way. OK, like, a lot of shining awards.

(Laughter)

I believed that hardships were only detours on what I was certain would be my long, long life.

As is this case with many of us, it's a mindset that served me well. The gospel of success drove me to achieve, to dream big, to abandon fear. It was a mindset that served me well until it didn't, until I was confronted with something I couldn't manage my way out of; until I found myself saying into the phone, "But I have a son," because it was all I could think of to say.

That was the most difficult moment to accept: the phone call, the walk to the hospital, when I realized that my own personal prosperity gospel had failed me. Anything I thought was good or special about me could not save me -- my hard work, my personality, my humor, my perspective. I had to face the fact that my life is built with paper walls, and so is everyone else's.

It is a hard thought to accept that we are all a breath away from a problem that could destroy something irreplaceable or alter our lives completely. We know that in life there are before and afters. I am asked all the time to say that I would never go back, or that I've gained so much in perspective. And I tell them no, before was better.

A few months after I got sick, I wrote about this and then I sent it off to an editor at the "New York Times." In retrospect, taking one of the most vulnerable moments of your life and turning into an op-ed is not an amazing way to feel less vulnerable.

(Laughter)

I got thousands of letters and emails. I still get them every day. I think it is because of the questions I asked. I asked: How do you live without quite so many reasons for the bad things that happen? I asked: Would it be better to live without outrageous formulas for why people deserve what they get? And what was so funny and so terrible was, of course, I thought I asked people to simmer down on needing an explanation for the bad things that happened. So what did thousands of readers do? Yeah, they wrote to defend the idea that there had to be a reason for what happened to me. And they really want me to understand the reason. People want me to reassure them that my cancer is all part of a plan. A few letters even suggested it was God's plan that I get cancer so I could help people by writing about it. People are certain it is a test of my character or proof of something terrible I've done. They want me to know without a doubt that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos. They tell my husband, while I'm still in the hospital, that everything happens for a reason, and then stammer awkwardly when he says, "I'd love to hear it. I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying."

And I get it. We all want reasons. We want formulas to predict whether our hard work will pay off, whether our love and support will always make our partners happy and our kids love us. We want to live in a world in which not one ounce of our hard work or our pain or our deepest hopes will be for nothing. We want to live in a world in which nothing is lost.

But what I have learned in living with stage IV cancer is that there is no easy correlation between how hard I try and the length of my life. In the last three years, I've experienced more pain and trauma than I ever thought I could survive. I realized the other day that I've had so many abdominal surgeries that I'm on my fifth belly button, and this last one is my least favorite.

(Laughter)

But at the same time, I've experienced love, so much love, love I find hard to explain. The other day, I was reading the findings of the Near Death Experience Research Foundation, and yes, there is such a thing. People were interviewed about their brushes with death in all kinds of circumstances: car accidents, labor and delivery, suicides. And many reported the same odd thing: love. I'm sure I would have ignored it if it hadn't reminded me of something I had experienced, something I felt uncomfortable telling anyone: that when I was sure that I was going to die, I didn't feel angry. I felt loved. It was one of the most surreal things I have experienced. In a time in which I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing me notes and socks and flowers and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. But when they sat beside me, my hand in their hands, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others. I was entering a world of

people just like me, people stumbling around in the debris of dreams they thought they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made. It was a feeling of being more connected, somehow, with other people, experiencing the same situation.

And that feeling stayed with me for months. In fact, I'd grown so accustomed to it that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it. So I began to ask friends, theologians, historians, nuns I liked, "What am I going to do when that loving feeling is gone?" And they knew exactly what I was talking about, because they had either experienced it themselves or they'd read about it in great works of Christian theology. And they said, "Yeah, it'll go. The feelings will go. And there will be no formula for how to get it back." But they offered me this little piece of reassurance, and I clung to it. They said, "When the feelings recede like the tides, they will leave an imprint."

And they do. And it is not proof of anything, and it is nothing to boast about. It was just a gift. So I can't respond to the thousands of emails I get with my own five-step plan to divine health and magical floating feelings. I see that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, gorgeous and tragic. I can't reconcile the contradiction, except that I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out. Life is so beautiful, and life is so hard.

Today, I am doing quite well. The immunotherapy drugs appear to be working, and we are watching and waiting with scans. I hope I will live a long time. I hope I will live long enough to embarrass my son and to watch my husband lose his beautiful hair. And I think I might. But I am learning to live and to love without counting the cost, without reasons and assurances that nothing will be lost.

Life will break your heart, and life may take everything you have and everything you hope for. But there is one kind of prosperity gospel that I believe in. I believe that in the darkness, even there, there will be beauty, and there will be love. And every now and then, it will feel like more than enough.

Thank you.

(Applause)