



Letters from the Land of Cancer

Walter Wangerin Jr.

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In Letters from the Land of Cancer, award-winning writer Walter Wangerin Jr. offers his profound insights into the greatest challenge we face: confronting our own mortality. "Shortly after the cancer had been diagnosed I began writing letters to the members of my immediate family, to relatives and to lifelong friends. The following book will consist mostly of those letters. They will invite you into my most intimate dancing with the cancer, even as that partner and I have over the last two years swung each other around the tiled floors of ballrooms and bathrooms. Dizzy still, and day by day, I sat and wrote: This is what I'm feeling right now. This is what I think...." From afternoon to afternoon of radiation, Wangerin wrote about confronting his mortality, about living with the messiness of undone tasks and bodily weakness. He wrote about the medical procedures he endured, the wild mood swings that unbalanced his days, and the fragilities and strengths of the relationships that surrounded him. Letters from the Land of Cancer is made up of these writings. Cadenced within the letters are Wangerin's eloquent meditations derived from his pastoral experiences with the faithful passage of death to life. Seldom has the great adventure of life and death been as beautifully presented as it is in this testimony to faith, love, and the shocking reality of hope.

Letters from the Land of Cancer Details

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From Reader Review Letters from the Land of Cancer for online ebook

Hunter Johnson says

Rending autobiographical account of the author's progression through cancer and its treatment. If that description doesn't immediately make it a non-starter for you, recommended.

Vicki_Loves_Libraries says

In December 2005, Walter Wangerin Jr. felt a lump above his clavicle by chance when he reached for a can on a grocery shelf. It was Stage IIIB Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer. The cancer had metastasized from his lung to his lymph nodes, but had not yet reached distant organs. It was still isolated to the chest area.

Walter Wangerin Jr is an award-winning author of over twenty books. His best-known stories include *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel* and *The Book of the Dun Cow*. Wangerin Jr. was a senior writing professor at University of Indiana: Valparaiso. He also preached at his church.

After being diagnosed with lung cancer, Walt Wangerin Jr. wrote a series of letters to his friends. This book is a compilation of Walt's letters over 2 years and 4 months. He survived beyond the average lung cancer survival of eight months after diagnosis.

I liked this book because Wangerin Jr.'s cancer experience reminded me very much of our cancer experience, but stretched over a much longer time period.

Wengerin Jr. describes much of the same pain that Garett experienced but would not discuss. Garett never mentioned his increasing pain to me at home, but when we would meet with our oncologist Garett would reveal that he was experiencing advancing pain in new areas of his body. I always felt a little hurt that Garett didn't tell me first, but I know that he did everything that he could to minimize people's worry about him.

There was a stunning lack of anger and bitterness in this book. Wangerin Jr. had an unshakeable faith. He incorporated his shining faith and biblical stories into his cancer story. He was at complete peace with his cancer.

In the prologue, a blunt physician tells Walt Wangerin Jr: "This kind of cancer doesn't go away. It will kill you. Sooner or later, this will be the cause of your death----"

As a side bar, Wangerin Jr. mentioned that he recently had four molars surgically removed. This is relevant because his dental surgeon told him that teeth trouble can be a symptom of cancer.

As virtuous of a person as Walt Wangerin Jr. was, even he admitted to feeling offended that the first thing people said upon learning of his diagnosis was "Did you smoke?" Wangerin Jr. acknowledged that he smoked until age 25, but had not smoked in the prior 37 years.

Early on in treatment, Wangerin Jr. explains "God does not cause human misery, nor does he desire the death of any person on earth. But he can and does participate in the complexities of human life. He takes, therefore,

advantage of our weaknesses to love our spirits and to prop up our weary bones."

I winced when Walt described a familiar-sounding racheting cough--the one that could not suck in enough Oxygen to allow a good lungfull of air. He questions what can be done when the irritant isn't something foreign in the lungs, but the lungs themselves.

This journal of the metastatic lung cancer dying process emanates grace.

Jake Willems says

A powerful meditation on life and faith in the midst of tragedy.

Karen Kritsch says

Author, writer, member of Christ, and patient come together to tell of his personal cancer journey. Articulate and balanced. I listened to him at Valpo and years later it is his words I seek, as he shares realities of the presence of cancer in Christian and human life.

Kelly says

My favorite parts of this book ~

Virginia, my elegant mother, lays her cheek against mine and sings:

I am Jesus' little lamb,
Ever glad at heart I am.
For my Shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my need and well provides me,
Loves me every day the same,
Even calls me by my name.
Day by day, at home, away,
Jesus is my Staff and Stay.
When I hunger, Jesus feeds me,
Into pleasant pastures leads me;
When I thirst, He bids me go
Where the quiet waters flow.
Who so happy as I am,
Even now the Shepherd's lamb?
And when my short life is ended,
By His angel host attended,
He shall fold me to His breast,
There within His arms to rest.

(Henriette L. von Hayn)

This is the closest I come to a word regarding my healing: a declaration that in the end it will surely come. But I am consoled, my dear wife, by your persistent praying.

Why can't I bring myself to pray for my own healing? Well, it seems a bit presumptuous.

Not that I don't believe in the prayer's effect. I've prayed the same prayer for others, with neither hesitation nor skepticism

Well, perhaps this is a genuine explanation: I don't fear death. I am peaceful in my present state. I feel no urgency for change. Why pray for one particular outcome when whatever God chooses for me is altogether fine by me?

Look: Shadrach, Meshach and Abedego, just before Nebuchadnezzar threw them into the fiery furnace, made a statement of faith so magnificent that I don't think there was another such until Jesus himself lived out the same faith.

Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that they be brought in.

"Now, if you are ready to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?"

They said, "We have no need to present a defense to you. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

Even if God gives them no sign at all, yet they will obey him!

Whichever the case, the three young men will not break their faith. Whether they live or whether they die, it is all one with them.

Even if my God should take no extraordinary measures regarding my life, I am nevertheless at peace.

They didn't pray. Simply, they stuck to the Lord God. He would do as he pleased. God was God however he chose to act.

Likewise Jesus: even hanging on the cross, dying, suffering what seemed the abandonment of his Father, yet he obeyed -even unto death.

Why, resting my soul upon the everlasting bosom of my Lord, should I be any different?

Christ is altogether more trustworthy than the leaders of this earth are proving themselves to be. Grief and fear and a pandemic of self-serving behaviors trouble the peoples; leaders increase the fear, distort the behaviors, invert righteousness, and their destructions abound. These things are true. They have been true since we hid from God - even if they do seem more extreme in these latter years.

And here, Linda, comes the real source of my peace on the threshold of death.

Watch in this chapter for the relationship between the Holy Shepherd and his flock: (John 10)

The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.

And this, finally, is the merciful consequence of the Savior's calling our names. Eternal life!

Linda, how did Jesus raise Lazarus, whom he dearly loved, from the dead? He called the dead man by his name! Lazarus!

And how did he revive Mary Magdalene, grieving the death of her whole existence? Mary!

So it shall be with me.

The shepherd will come - he who leads me out by my name and by the resounding gift of his voice. And he will say to my dead self: Walter!

And I will be again.

The creating word itself will give me ears to his voice. And a mind of soaring mystery to know it. And I like Lazarus will rise.

I, like Mary Magdalene, will emerge from the death of hopelessness and anguished tears and distress.

"Walter," Jesus will say, and in that instant my soul will know Jesus, that it is he. And in the light of his familiar voice - in the sweet re-declaration of my name - I will even know me, who I am, and therefore that I am!

Resurrected, do you see?

Right now, therefore, I am to hold lightly both death and life - and the life which shall be.

Tim says

This is a small and moving book. In a series of letters to friends and family Wangerin reflects on cancer, its treatment, its pain, and the selfishness it loses in him. He also revels in the family and community that support him. Rodney Reeves in his book on Paul's spirituality reflects on the general American Christian avoidance of death, "Just once I'd like to hear someone boast of the miracle of God's grace for the one who died. Her courage as she celebrated life in the middle of dying." Wangerin approaches that celebration - not with sentimentality, but with a realism that acknowledges his own limits and the power of grace. Death is not something he fears, but something he accepts because he has faith in the one who knows him by name. Letters 18 and 19 are especially powerful. In #18 he questions the use of battle metaphor when discussing life with cancer - "I suggest that the true opponent isn't this condition, but that for which it stands: mortality." Now he might have gotten more into I Cor 15 and the Orthodox understanding of death as the first enemy overcome in Christ's resurrection, but I understand his point in an American culture that believes we can control everything. In fighting against mortality we do fight against God and any limits. Letter #19 is a private conversation with a student who asked how he handled things. He answered, "Life or death. Either one is a gift for me. I don't yearn for one over the other." And he describes a peace that has come because he knows and trusts that Jesus knows his name (see one of the other reviews for a long selection from that section). Personal and beautiful, and very Wangerin in its delivery.

Tom says

This is a beautifully written and honest collection of letters and reflections from a prolific author on his experience with the cancer that will one day kill him. Wangerin is a Lutheran pastor and professor at Valparaiso University. His writing weaves together faith and frailty, detailed accounts both of the decline of his body and the acuity of his spiritual journey throughout.

The bulk of the writing is group letters sent to family and friends. A few letters never sent are included, as well as half a dozen interlude reflections.

The first thing I noticed was that the letters began in December 2006, but the book cover mentions Wangerin as living (this was just published). So, the effect is that of reading someone who is wrestling with their approaching death while all along knowing that he will survive at least four more years.

There are many profound thoughts along the way. Just to give one example, Wangerin wonders why we limit the experience of living with and (often) dying from cancer by resorting to battle language: fight, battled, lost, victorious, etc. Likewise, his poetic pondering on how resurrection takes shape is stunning.

As a future pastor, I found myself marking several places in this book where powerful sermon material may be drawn.

Tamara says

Read in two days. On my must read before you die list! If ever someone is suffering, I'm going to give them that book! Whether it be cancer or any type of severe suffering, this is now my top book to help people understand God and suffering.

1 of my top 4 books of 2013. The others are:

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Hammer of God

The Invisible Wall: A Love Story That Broke Barriers

Jacquie says

Powerfully written and honest.

Christine says

Walgerin is an excellent writer and this intimate account of the letters he wrote to friends and family while undergoing lung cancer treatment was insightful and touching.

Rhonda Mcanulty says

Inspirational. I related to so much of what he wrote, and yet he wrote it in such an intellectual manner. Inspiring me to update my blog!

Kara Bennett says

Sometimes the meditations were a bit abstract for me. However, the perspective on death and pain is unique and worth reflecting upon.

Carol Bakker says

I found this book at my public library while looking for another title. It is a memoir written (2006-2008) in letters to friends and family. It begins with the diagnosis of lung cancer, concludes at a period of remission.

I read this at the end of 2016. Before I had read two chapters, I had to know Wangerin's fate; how comforting to discover he lives! He used to be a pastor, then taught writing at Valparaiso University.

He asks quirky questions: Why does cancer have to be a battle? How is it heroic? He explains why he doesn't pray for his own healing. As a writer, he has to prioritize which projects to complete, which ones to set aside. One letter details how he views death. He incidentally quotes two writers whose names always remind me I want to learn more: Jaroslav Pelikan and Jeremy Taylor.

A quote, so appropriate for those contemplating retirement:

Ah, but as long as I make commitments to others—to teach, to sustain, to befriend, to love: as long as I willingly and knowingly schedule new commitments, I have no right to self-pity. My project, then. To get good and old. Spiritually to approach my losses with the same craft and talent and devotion which I bring to the writing of a novel, a poem, a sermon.

I appreciate this book. While I don't agree with some of his assumptions, he challenged my thinking. I have a visceral loathing for cremation (but an almost equally strong opposition to embalming). I found Walter's explanation of how he wanted to be cremated and the ashes buried, not scattered, plausible, which is a first.

Patty says

Wangerin is an amazing man. Very few of us would be able to share such intimate parts of their life. And that is what makes this book so good. Wangerin is living the last part of his life and he is willing to share it all with his readers. There are now many more things I understand about the land of cancer.

For two years, Walter Wangerin wrote to friends and family about his terminal illness, lung cancer. We are blessed that he is willing to share these letters and his faith in God with the outside world. I am so grateful.

Jim B says

I read this book at the time that my friend Carl found himself diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. There are many similarities with Walt Wangerin's life -- so it was easy to enter into the world of someone who suddenly sees everything through the eyes of someone with a cancer diagnosis.

As a man of faith, I could also relate to Wangerin's thoughts on another level.

I enjoyed how Wangerin described (near the end of the book) the change in the nature of time -- usually we think in terms of moving quickly or passing slowly, but he used illustrations of how time broadens out and is full, comparing touching his grand daughter's finger as a full experience, satisfying as living to see her wedding day.

I wish I could give the book higher praise, but I didn't feel the book had the cohesion or power of other memoirs in this genre.
