



## Teaching stories about cancer

Janie Brown

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*Janie Brown has put into book form 30 years of experience of caring for cancer sufferers and their loved ones*

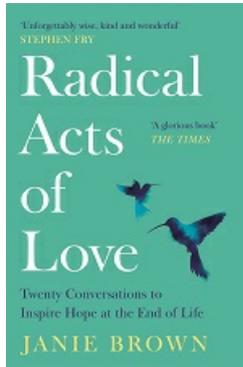


"You have cancer" are three words heard by 1,000 families every day in the UK. For most people, a cancer diagnosis lands as suddenly as a tree falling on a windy night in the forest, out of the blue, with little if any warning. The news of cancer fells a person and like the tree, the diagnosis takes many others down with it. Cancer happens to one person's body and affects every aspect of that person's life. Cancer also happens to partners, spouses, loved ones and friends whose lives are similarly changed forever. Many people are cured from cancer, and those who are not seek the courage to face the ends of their lives, with the support and wisdom of their community.

I have had the great privilege of working with such families for the past 30 years, as a cancer nurse and counsellor, and I have also had cancer crash down into the lives of my family and friends. When my spouse (a survivor) was diagnosed with cancer three years ago, though obviously devastated, we became an even stronger team than before. We went to every appointment together, we pored over pathology reports and blood results, and we sat side by side in the chemotherapy room. The person with cancer undergoing treatment can think of little else but getting through it. The supporter does her best to stay upbeat and hopeful, but death has a way of entering conversations as a silent observer, sending shivers of fear through everyone. The mystery inherent in our futures prevents any guarantees.

### **A teaching storyteller**

Each family I have met, and every person who has died, has left an indelible mark on me. There have been thousands by now, and they have taught me everything I know about living and dying. My friend Maureen, from the Cree Nation, told me several years ago that I had been gifted with these "teaching stories". She said that it was my responsibility, as the recipient of the gifts, to help the stories to live in the world. She said the ancestors then can live on, in some way. Twenty-two years into my career, I starting writing.



Eight years later, I had distilled 30 years of work into 20 stories, each one offering a different perspective about death from the illness of cancer; and so *Radical Acts of Love: Twenty Conversations To Inspire Hope at the End of Life* was born. The stories show us that there is not one right way to die, but many ways to open up to death, and to live well for the time we have left. Unlike in cases of sudden illnesses or deaths, we have the blessing of time. We can help our loved ones to accept what is, after all, an inevitability.

In my experience, most people dying from an illness like cancer are ill-prepared, which gives them very little control over how their death might unfold. If we refuse to accept death, even when it is close at hand, we can hurt our loved ones and deprive them of the chance to say goodbye, and to know our wishes for after our death. In my view, being open and accepting and prepared when the time comes

for us to leave this world is a radical act of love for our families. It will affect them deeply not just in their grief, but for the rest of their lives.

### What we know

The stories in *Radical Acts of Love* reassure us that we all know how to die, just as we knew how to come into this world. We also know how to settle our lives as best we can before we die - to make peace, to heal old hurts, to forgive ourselves or another, and even find joy amidst the sadness of leaving.

As a loved one, we can't hold on to hope when it is hopeless, nor pretend that fighting always wins the battle. We can however open up to the courageous conversations, and let our dying loved ones know that we will grieve and find a way to live on after they are gone, sustained by the love we have been given.

Two years ago, I knew the book was ready to enter the world, but I wasn't sure how that would happen. One person led me to another person, and then much to my surprise, I found my brilliant agent at the bks agency in London, Jason Bartholomew, also CEO of Midas, a thriving literary and arts PR company. Within two weeks of his letter going out to 19 publishers, I had a contract in my hand from the amazing Hannah Knowles at Canongate, the publisher that was at the top of my wish list!

Within two weeks of publication in March 2020, the UK was locked down by the global pandemic, the bookshops were closed, book and media events were cancelled, and I had to rush back to Canada before the border closed.

Regardless of this setback, it appears that one year later, at the brink of the paperback publication, and in another lockdown similar to the first, these 20 teaching stories are landing in the laps of the people who need their reassurance, and that is all that really matters.

*Photo of Janie Brown by Genevieve Russell*

***Radical Acts of Love* by Janie Brown is out in paperback today (4 February) from Canongate.**

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