

Dying well, Michael Mercer suggests, is about healing. Not physical healing, but soul work—emotional and spiritual healing that brings meaning to our final days and gives us the courage to let go. Hospice chaplain Mike Mercer reminds us that we need not make this final journey alone and that some of our best guides are those who have gone before us with grace.

✿ **BERYL SCHEWE**, chaplain, pastoral care director,
and author of *Habits of Resilience: Learning to Live
Fully in the Midst of Loss*

This is a thoughtfully written book. It offers a glimpse into the life of a hospice chaplain that yields important insights to help us on the “walk home.” It is also reflective of one man’s experience of truly listening—as Mike Mercer does.

✿ **DR. DALE THEOBALD, PHD, MD**, Senior Medical
Director for Community Home Health and Life’s
Journey, Indianapolis, IN

Chaplain Mike takes your hand and walks on the last road of life with you with compassion, insight, and humor. There is more life here than in any other book on death.

✿ **JEFF DUNN**, author of *Why Worry?*
A Catholic’s Guide For Learning To Let Go

In our society, few people ever talk about death, which can leave those who have received a terminal diagnosis in an awkward position. In this book, hospice chaplain Mike Mercer addresses, with the wisdom of his years of experience, the fears and concerns of someone facing death. Simple but profound, the author's observations and stories are a source of great comfort.

☀ **DAMARIS ZEHNER**, author of *The Between Time: Savoring the Sacred Moments of Everyday Life*

Walking Home Together is a book on dying that will comfort, inspire, and even evoke a sense of anticipation. As a hospice chaplain, Mike Mercer has lived squarely in the most intimate moments of the dying and developed a wisdom and kindness to help talk us through our fears, work out concerns for loved ones, plan practicalities, and remind us that our last days are still full of life and can be an enduring gift to others. He shows us how to say goodbye with purpose.

☀ **LISA DYE**, author of *30 Days with 30 Saints*

Michael Mercer

WALKING
HOME
TOGETHER



SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE
& PRACTICAL ADVICE
FOR THE END OF LIFE



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INTRODUCTION

A good walk home

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, WE WALKED. IT SEEMS TO ME NOW THAT we walked everywhere. We walked to and from school. We walked to our friends' homes, and I distinctly remember walking to my grandparents' house on the other side of town. We walked to fields of dreams where we chose teams and played our games. We walked to the neighborhood store and plunked down our nickels and dimes to buy candy, pop, and baseball cards. We walked downtown, to church for choir practice after school, and to the pool in summer. We got to baseball practice by walking, and we carried basketballs under our arms as we walked to the courts at the park. We leaned fishing poles on our shoulders as we walked to the banks of the river just above the dam in hopes of catching some bullheads or catfish. We walked to the record store to pick up that week's Top 40 list and—when we had saved up enough—

to buy the latest 45. Sometimes we rode our bikes, but mostly we walked.

We walked on streets and sidewalks, through grassy fields and mown lawns. One childhood house where I lived was connected to the entire neighborhood by a string of backyards uninterrupted by fences or barriers of any kind (there were fewer fences then), and the neighbors kindly let us treat it as a thoroughfare and playground. We could walk up and down the brick street in front or through the yards in back and get most anywhere children would want to be.

As we got older, we continued to walk but with new companions. It was then that we walked the neighborhoods with girlfriends and boyfriends, in mixed groups of those who were going steady and those who hoped to be soon. As time went on, some escaped the group in pairs and walked as couples, exploring youthful dreams and timeless mysteries together.

A good deal of our walking in those days was aimless. We were just “walking around,” we told our parents. But whether we went to a certain destination or not or for a particular purpose or not, eventually it came time for us to walk home. At some point we came back around; the walk was complete; we said goodbye and then bounded up the steps and through the screen door. We were home.

This book is about the walk home.

Whether simply on account of advanced age or through a terminal diagnosis you have received, you have reached a place in your life where you know you’re on the way home. You are on the

final leg of your life's journey. You will soon pass through a door called "death" and be home. Your home may be across town—a good long trek—or it could be a few streets away or perhaps just around the next corner. It may even be in sight, and in a few steps the door will beckon. Soon you will say goodbye to those with whom you've journeyed through life, go through that door we call "death," and enter another reality. You will be home.

My purpose in this book is to accompany you on this homeward portion of your walk. I would count it a privilege to be your companion, to help you think through what a "good walk home" might look like for you.

Henri Nouwen once wrote:

Is death something so terrible and absurd that we are better off not thinking or talking about it? Is death such an undesirable part of our existence that we are better off acting as if it were not real? Is death such an absolute end of all our thoughts and actions that we simply cannot face it? Or is it possible to befriend our dying gradually and live open to it, trusting that we have nothing to fear? Is it possible to prepare for our death with the same attentiveness that our parents had in preparing for our birth? Can we wait for our death as for a friend who wants to welcome us home? ❖ **HENRI NOUWEN**, *Our Greatest Gift*

In my daily work, I serve as a hospice chaplain. I work with individuals and their families who find themselves at this stage of life.

The older I get, the more I discover that each of life's seasons has its own path, its own challenges, and its own rewards. The "end of life" season is no different, and I think it is important that we give it some attention since we are all going to have to make that journey.

Last summer, I went to visit my Uncle Bill. He was the comedian in our family, telling jokes to anyone who would listen, making funny remarks about everything going on around him, sending us gag gifts for birthdays and holidays. He loved life and lived large, and we enjoyed every moment we could be around him.

Bill was also transparent about struggles he had experienced in his life. He had a problem with alcohol for years. He smoked constantly. He loved to gamble. He'd had some difficult relationships. Whenever Bill talked about these things, he exposed a soft and vulnerable interior. Underneath his clown-like persona lay a thoughtful and sensitive heart.

Bill and his family had just been through an exhausting two-year ordeal with his wife, my aunt. She'd had a cerebrovascular event that left her confused and debilitated. She had gone through rehabilitation and stints in facilities, and there were times the family wondered if she would ever recover to any meaningful extent or whether she would make it out of this situation alive. Somehow, in what seemed like a miraculous revival, she came back and began doing activities like cooking, playing cards, walking, and even driving. Still, she had to be looked after and helped, and my uncle was becoming worn down.

Then, Bill, worn out and filled with worries about his wife, was

diagnosed with lung cancer. The prognosis was not good. He called me one day and asked several questions about treatment and hospice care.

As he began to decline significantly, I decided I should pay my Uncle Bill a visit while he could still enjoy the company. I hoped to be an encouragement, but to be honest, this trip was for me too. I was feeling what we in hospice call “anticipatory grief.” So I boarded a plane and flew out to spend a week with Bill and the family.

We had a wonderful time together. I took him to chemotherapy sessions and we had heart-to-heart talks about his life, his illness, what he’d been through with my aunt the past few years, his relationships, even his childhood and perspectives I had never heard before regarding our family. We shared memories and stories. I updated him on my life, my family, my work. We discussed his ideas about spirituality and religion.

Because Bill couldn’t sleep at night, he would go across the highway to the casino in the wee hours, and I joined him on one of those outings. I even brought him a little beginner’s luck! I helped with a few small tasks around the house, and he played the part of the strict supervisor, rightly criticizing my all-thumbs approach to getting the job done. Most of all, we laughed.

He was so thin and gaunt, but nothing could stop Bill’s sense of humor. He continued smoking like a smokestack, going out to his truck so he wouldn’t disturb anyone else. Mostly he sat in his chair, watching TV, dozing on and off, keeping a limited daily routine of activities.

What impressed me most about my Uncle Bill was that he had been and continued to be extremely diligent about making sure things would be in place for his wife and children when he died. Bill had a successful career with the phone company and did pretty well financially. He shared with me how he had arranged things to make sure his family would be secure in the future. He had taken care of what would happen with his house and assets. He had talked with his children about options for taking care of their mother. He even shared about steps he had taken to heal some difficult relationships.

Bill knew that he would soon be going home. His wife's health problems and now his own had awakened him to a sharp awareness that the final season of life was upon him.

Of course, this was incredibly sad for everyone. However, he did not let the sadness paralyze him and keep him from doing what he could for the future. Indeed, just the opposite. Acknowledging his terminal condition gave him a new mission, a new assignment: there were new tasks to be completed, new perspectives to be considered, new conversations to be had, new decisions to be made, and new plans to be put in place.

If you are *aware* that you are in the final season of life, then you may consider yourself blessed indeed. It may sound strange, but this can be a gift, for such knowledge may bring a new clarity—the stakes are clear, and the ending point is understood. Like all who came before you and all who will come after you, you will die, and this is no longer a theoretical concept to you. You are actually on the way home, so it is time to plan for “a good

walk home.” You have been granted a season in which, by God’s grace and the loving assistance of others, you can craft a fruitful and peaceful conclusion to your life’s journey. To that end, I wrote this book for you.

When friends walk home together, they converse, and that’s the way I would like to proceed here. I’m sure you have questions, and I have tried to anticipate what some of them might be. My focus will be on some of the more personal questions that come up in this time of life: questions about meaning, perspective, and spirituality. I’d like to concentrate on what you’re thinking and how you are feeling, what your fears might be and what you envision for this final season of your life.

Others will accompany you on this journey, and you will want to talk with them as well: doctors, nurses, caregivers, social workers, a minister or spiritual counselor, an attorney, funeral home directors, family members, and friends. I won’t be able to answer all your questions, and I’m not going to try. but I hope that I can point you in the right direction for some of those needs.

Right now, it’s time for us to talk. Shall we walk together?



CHAPTER ONE

Time to come home!

*Living had got to be such a habit with him that
he couldn't conceive of any other condition.*

† **FLANNERY O'CONNOR,**

"A LATE ENCOUNTER WITH THE ENEMY"

I REMEMBER WHEN MY PARENTS BOUGHT ME MY FIRST WATCH. Their motives were not pure. But then again, I had a tardiness problem. I was five or six years old at the time, an active little tyke who had too much fun playing with my friends late into the afternoon, so much fun in fact that I always found a way to ignore my mother's voice calling me home for supper. It must have made her absolutely crazy. In my imagination, I see mom and dad sitting down to talk about it.

"What are we going to do about Mike? He just won't listen to me when I call him to come home. I'm always worried that some-

thing has happened to him, even though I know he's just playing with his friends. But it's so frustrating! Supper gets cold and we all get angry. What are we going to do?"

"Why don't we buy him a watch?"

That worked for, like, a day.

You see, I learned quickly that watches (at least back then) needed to be set and wound to keep accurate time. I hatched an evil plot to overcome my dilemma, and the solution was simple: turn the time back, go home late as usual, and say, with my most convincing, exasperated voice, "I don't know what happened, Mom! I think my watch must have stopped! Look, it says it's 5:00, not 5:30."

Yeah, like they bought that.

This silly story from my childhood illustrates a point: there are many times in life when it may be time to go home, but we don't want to stop what we're doing to make the homeward trek. We're having too much fun. Like General Sash in Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," life has become such a habit, we can't conceive of it ending.

If you are reading this book, it probably means that you or someone you love has heard the call to come home. Playtime is over, the sun is low in the sky, you can smell supper cooking in kitchens throughout the neighborhood, and moms and dads are calling their children home. Let me say it more directly: you have reached an advanced age and know your time is short, or you have just seen a doctor look you in the eyes and say, "It's terminal. Nothing we can do will cure your illness. You have a limited time left before you die." It's time to go home.

If you're like me, that's a message you'd like to ignore or pretend you didn't hear. In your mind you are saying, "Just a little longer, just one more inning, just a few more baskets. I'll wait until my friends get called home too, and then we'll all leave together. We can't stop now—we're right in the middle of the best part of the game!" Nevertheless, you can't get the voice out of your head: "Time to come home!"

I currently serve as a hospice chaplain, and before that I was a pastor in several churches. Over the years I have visited many people who heard that call in various ways. Here are some of the ways the news came to them.

"Joe, you are getting close to ninety years old, and you have many health problems. Your time is limited, and I suggest you enjoy every day as much as you can."

"Folks, I'm sorry to tell you but your little boy has leukemia."

"It's a type of brain tumor called a glioblastoma, and it's inoperable."

"I'm afraid there's no heartbeat. Your little girl will be stillborn."

"Yes, I know he's in the prime of his life, but he has a

very aggressive form of pancreatic cancer. He may only have a few months at the most.”

“Yes, an operation might help, but her heart is not strong enough for her to endure the surgery. All we can do is use medicine to manage her symptoms. I’m afraid she’s failing.”

“Yes, we could hit her cancer hard with chemotherapy and radiation, but in my opinion the best we could hope for is to extend her life a few more months, and the side effects will be severe. What would you like to do?”

People are getting news like this all the time—at this very moment in fact—learning that their time is at hand, the day is closing, and they are beginning the last leg of their earthly journey. Not one of us will avoid it. A minister I knew once used to say, “The statistics on death are staggering. One out of every one of us will die.” No matter who we are, no matter how much fun we’re having, no matter how much we’ve taken to the habit of living, at some point we will hear the call, “Time to come home!”

I was feeling sick one day, so I went to my doctor’s office for what turned out to be an upper respiratory infection. My regular family practitioner was booked up, so the office staff set me up with one of her partners. I was delighted to find this other doctor was a kind, gentle man with a positive spirit, his gracious manner enhanced by a comforting, lilting Irish accent.

He checked me over and made his diagnosis. Then he wrote me a prescription, counseled me to rest, and gave a few other instructions. Then, as we were talking he discovered that I worked for hospice.

“Well,” the physician responded, “my wife happens to be a hospice patient. She has end-stage ovarian cancer.”

He paused, and almost immediately I realized I knew his wife. She wasn't one of our hospice patients, but I had met her before in our community and worked with her on a couple of projects. She was a lovely Irish Catholic lady who had devoted her life to visiting the sick and caring for the unfortunate. Margaret was one of those rare people who breathed encouragement, comfort, and affirmation into every situation she entered. I had had no idea about her condition.

The physician's halting words made it obvious that he needed to talk. So I found myself extending my stay in the examination room quite a bit past the usual exam and wrap-up. After the doctor described how his wife was doing, I asked about *him*. “I'm sorry, I didn't realize Margaret was so sick,” I said. “How are you doing, Doc? Are you getting the support you need to cope with all this?”

“Well,” he said, “she's handling it a lot better than I am. She seems to have accepted things. As for me, well, I've told her that's all well and good, but it doesn't mean I'm not going to be pissed off.”

He chuckled at the same time a tear slipped down his reddened cheek. That was a surprisingly revealing, personal moment for a physician to have in front of a patient. I was honored that he felt comfortable enough to share it with me.

We talked a little more, and as I got ready to leave I asked him to give his dear wife a greeting, wishing both of them help and encouragement from God. In reply, the physician indicated that it had been good to talk. Little had I expected that a trip to the doctor for my needs would turn into an opportunity to minister to the doctor for *his* needs.

We never know, do we? Every day and in every place, in every season of life and in a variety of circumstances, people hear the message that it's time to come home.

Sometimes, this seems natural. When I visit elderly hospice patients, folks in their eighties or nineties, there can be a sense, even in the sadness, that death is expected. The person has lived a full, long life, and everyone knows that the finish line is somewhere in the vicinity. Such a death brings its own forms of grief, but the shock of untimeliness is not part of the equation.

I find the atmosphere quite different when someone in the prime of life becomes terminally ill.

We had a patient in his thirties who died quickly from a particularly aggressive form of cancer. Earlier that year, his wife had lost a baby. Then, in the fall, she discovered she was pregnant again. While they were grieving their loss and rejoicing in another opportunity to welcome life into their family, he got sick. The diagnosis was pronounced, and before you knew it, he and his wife were taking walks through the halls of the cancer center, sitting through chemo appointments, and finding their life turned upside down once more.

She had her baby. Shortly after that, she lost her husband. Now

she is a widow with a toddler and a newborn, and a bereaved mother who lost a baby. In less than a year, everything had changed.

Frankly, I'm not sure how anybody could be ready for something like that. But it happens, and it behooves us all to be realistic about life's uncertainty.

Of course, no one can live in constant fear and dread, but we can all be aware that bad things happen, sometimes to the most unlikely people, and we can try to build the kinds of supports into our lives that will bear us up when sudden storms threaten to overwhelm us.

As he aged, Henri Nouwen, the priest and teacher, thought more and more about the final season of life and its ending, and how he as a person of faith might learn to "befriend his death." In his book *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*, he reflected,

While sitting alone in my little hermitage, I realize how unprepared I am to die....

...Am I willing to make that journey? Am I willing to let go of whatever power I have left, to unclench my fists and trust in the grace hidden in complete powerlessness? I don't know. I really don't know. It seems impossible, since everything alive in me protests against this journey into nothingness.

Yes, "everything alive in [us] protests against this." Here we are,

right in the middle of the best part of the game, and mom's calling me to come home?

Makes you wish you could turn your watch back, doesn't it?

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CHAPTER TWO

How can I accept the fact that I'm going to die and yet not “give up”?

As our time winds down, we all seek comfort in simple pleasures—companionship, everyday routines, the taste of good food, the warmth of sunlight on our faces.

We become less interested in the rewards of achieving and accumulating, and more interested in the rewards of simply being. Yet while we may feel less ambitious, we also become concerned for our legacy. And we have a deep need to identify purposes outside ourselves that make living feel meaningful and worthwhile.

❖ **ATUL GAWANDE, BEING MORTAL**