



UNEXPECTED SAINTS: KATE BOWLER (1980- ) | katebowler.com

**“How Cancer Changes Hope”** | *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 2018

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**I once imagined my life** as an uninterrupted line from birth to decline. There would be some creditable achievements and great love sandwiched in the middle, of course, but time was a durable thing. I stood on the precipice of each new year with my checklist of resolutions in hand. I would achieve tenure, master the Russian language and visit the world’s largest statue of Paul Bunyan and his majestic blue ox, Babe, in Bemidji, Minn. My family can testify that I come by this brand of pragmatic determinism honestly. My grandfather Gerald Bowler lived in a small town in western Canada near the intersection of Bowler Place and Bowler Avenue. According to family lore, he had stared with a determined expression at an empty field for a long time with his hands on his hips and the subdivision simply materialized.

**But after I found out at age 35 that I had Stage IV cancer**, time did not point toward the future anymore. It was looped: Start treatment, manage side effects, recover, start treatment. I lived in the present tense. Even the seasons began to fade. The spring used to be about grading papers near the duck ponds at Duke, and summer was a long Canadian road trip to debate the merits of curling. *Is it a sport? Isn’t it just a hobby?* The fall was consumed by preparing lectures for seminary students and customizing Halloween costumes that could fit over snowsuits, and the winter began with the first inflatable reindeer terrorizing the lawn. The future had been as real to me as the present or the past.

Have you ever had an experience that upended life as you’d imagined it?  
What did the *before* look like? What did the *after* look like?

**Christian theology has rich categories for the future**, about the kingdom of God turning the world on its head, but I was hearing little of these ideas. Instead, my fellow believers assured me that my interrupted life would be finished in heaven. Satisfaction guaranteed! Their version of hope for me was an act of deferral to a time and a cosmic place where God would make all things right. But the sicker I became, the more “hope” was a word that pointed to the unbearable: a husband and a baby left behind, an end without an ending.

I was confident that hope had its uses, but I began to think of it as a kind of arsenic that needed to be carefully administered. As far as I was concerned, it poisoned the sacred work of living in the present: taking my medication, asking about a friend’s terrible boyfriend and counting my son’s eyelashes as he slept in my arms. I wanted to be alive until I was not. I tried to explain this to my friend Warren, an esteemed reverend-doctor who wears his clerical collar even on Tuesdays. I teach at a divinity school that trains pastors, so these are the conversations we have in the hallways, and I told him that I had given up on the future.

After a long pause he asked, “Would you agree that true happiness is to enjoy the present without anxious dependence on the future?” “I’m really hoping you are going to tell me that Jesus said that,” I said. “This is a trap, isn’t it?”

“That was Lucius Seneca, the ancient philosopher of Stoicism,” he said, laughing. “Look, it takes great courage to live as if each day counts. That was a fundamental insight of Stoicism. But we Christians are a people who must live into the future.” I had no idea what he meant. The future was a cliff.

What do you notice about Kate’s struggle with idea of hope?  
What could it mean to be Christians who must live into the future?

**Worried I would not have a future, I tried to live without one.** I sowed myself into the moment with its needles and white blood cell counts, diaper changes and grocery pickups. But even as I resolved to keep myself in the present, the future kept interrupting. I was scrambling to find my son, Zach, a larger onesie or discovering that Christmas had now become the season of “Please don’t pull that off the tree.” I finished the book I never thought I would see published, and I drove my 70-year-old father to a re-creation of Noah’s ark in Kentucky simply to amuse him. The heavens wheeled and the seasons turned as we were pulled beyond the everlasting moment.

**The Stoics** considered time to be cyclical, an eternal recurrence of motion from fire through the creation of elements back to fire again; the Enlightenment saw time as the arena of progress, a moral motion toward improvement and perfectibility. Much of Christian theology rests on the image of God as the ultimate reality beyond time and space, the creator of a past, present and future where all exists simultaneously in the Divine Mind. But where does that leave the bewildered believer who cannot see the future and whose lantern casts light only backward, onto the path she has already taken?

How do you imagine people have tried to answer Kate’s question?  
What questions or thoughts are coming up for you right now?

**Approaching the new year,** I wondered how I might renew hope for a future I can no longer see. So I rummaged around for inspiration in well-used daily planners and to-do lists, only to discover a stack of cards I had intended to mail long ago. Thank you for reintroducing me to tuna casserole. Thank you for inviting Zach to make a maze out of boxes. Yes, my dog often licks the television and thank you so much for taking him. There were photos that friends had hung by my bed of our last (surprisingly violent) round of Mennonite board games and of my misguided attempt to take my cello Christmas caroling. Someone had framed an image of Zach, grinning on my lap, my chemotherapy fluids hidden by a series of elaborate sock puppets we had created.

**The terrible gift of a terrible illness** is that it has in fact taught me to live in the moment. But when I look at these mementos, I realize that I am learning more than to seize the day. In losing my future, the mundane began to sparkle. The things I love — the things I should love — become clearer, brighter. This is transcendence, the past and the future experienced together in moments where I can see a flicker of eternity. So instead of New Year’s resolutions, I drew up a list for 2019 of experiences that had already passed: a record not of self-mastery but of genuine surprise. 1. My oncology nurse became a dear friend. 2. Even in the hospital I felt the love of God. 3. Zach is under the impression that I never get tired. *These are my small miracles* scattered like bread crumbs, the way forward dotting the path behind me.

Kate speaks of the terrible gift of a terrible illness.  
Have you ever received this gift? Or seen someone else with live with a terrible illness?  
What will you take away from this essay by Kate Bowler?

**“Gondola Prayers”** [katebowler.com/gondola-prayers/](http://katebowler.com/gondola-prayers/)

**When I was 5-years-old** our family went on one of those gondolas up a mountain in British Columbia, Canada, and just as our cable car suspended over the deepest part of the valley below, it stopped moving. It swayed at first, and then all went still. Nobody spoke. Except for a little voice, (and yes it was mine), that asked my parents, “How do we know this is on tight?” That’s the question when life gets really scary, isn’t it? When you are dangled over the abyss and there’s nothing between you and... the thing no one is saying except the little kid who says what everyone is thinking: “How do we know this is on tight?” Of course, that’s when we really start praying it is on tight. For everyone’s sake. In the face of such uncertainty, sometimes all we can do is pray. But what are we actually doing when we pray? And what did the Biblical writer James mean when he told his fellow Christians that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective”?

**Experience tells us that prayer isn’t a secret remote control** we can use to zap reality to our liking. Sometimes we pray and nothing changes. Sometimes prayers lead to miracles. Other times we feel like we need to do something special to get God’s attention. And for my five-year-

old self hanging over a deep ravine, it would be a perverse God indeed, who said “just be a good enough little girl and pray the right way, and it will all be OK.”

Is Kate's story reminding you of any childhood experience? Or childhood prayers? How you imagined God?

Talk to a friend about this

**What I love about history** is that it anchors us in a reality we couldn't otherwise touch.

James wrote his letter to offer practical advice to newly converted Christians about a foreign concept of worship. In their world, people prayed to a chosen or local gods or goddesses: women swore by Artemis or Diana, Hercules was reigned supreme in the town of Thebes, or Zeus in Athens. James reminds them that they are not praying to fitful and bad-tempered gods who will hurl lightning bolts if they are angered. We are under the eye of the one true God who has actually come down to us as a little baby, who knows us and loves us and hears our prayers. This fact changed everything about prayer, for first century Christians, and for us. Because since all things exist in relation to this God of love, our prayers do too. We are praying to the God whose very sweetness has broken through to us.

What is Kate Bowler's picture of the Christian God?

So when THIS God moves to put our prayers into effect, they ARE powerful and effective. But we don't make them so. **So what are we doing when we pray?**

Somehow, we are touching a reality beyond the senses. Did you know that it isn't the eyes that see, it's the brain? I read an article in the New Yorker article called “Seeing with Your Tongue.” A person experiencing blindness could learn to see with a device called a Brainport. The sense of touch takes the place of the optic nerve, transporting images to the brain. And somehow, perception is translated. I can't help but think that prayer works something like this.

In prayer we are brought into the presence of God, whose eternal reality translates for us. Crosses a boundary to create liminal space where transformation happens. We sense that we were created because we are loved. Just that. We are not a means, but an end. And we are more whole, more alive, with a wellness that we didn't create by some transactional effort on our part.

And there is some waiting necessary. To pray means we have to yield up space and time, and some of our darling preoccupations. For one hot minute there is a self-emptying that mirrors God's own. And as Simone Weil says, grace enters and fills the empty space wherever there is a void to receive it.

Once when Zach was little, my Mom threw a blanket over the dining room table, and the two of them crawled under to talk in whispers. His little face, so close to hers, was full of wonder that she wasn't tall anymore, but small and enclosed with him in the semi-darkness. Their tent was a holy place where secrets were shared. It is the same for us in prayer, but God is the grown-up and we are the child.

**The mystery of prayer** is that we may never understand exactly how it works, just that it draws us into intimacy with a God who hears. When even in our tiniest voices we wonder, “How do we know that this is on tight?” and we can expect, somehow, that someone hears us and answers: “I know, right?”

What words, phrases or images stand out for you?

What are we doing when we pray? What is your most honest prayer right now?

If you could ask Kate Bowler anything, what would it be?

#### A PRAYER for WHEN I FEEL ANXIOUS

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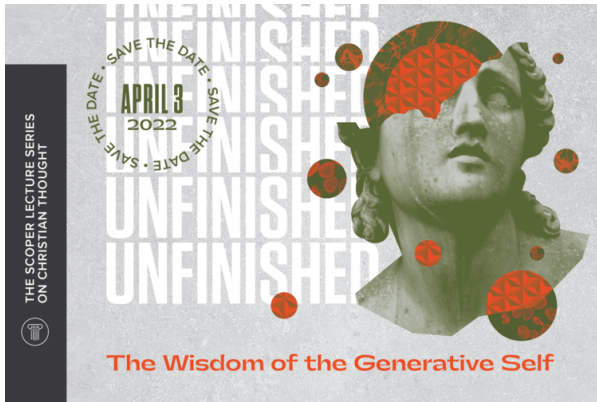
God, I'm not doing well. I can feel my heart racing & my mind on fast-forward. This isn't good, and I know it. But I can't seem to find the brakes. God, could you wrap me up, swaddle me, and hold me tight? That's all. Send me to my room to calm myself, but no sermons please! I carry all my own admonitions with me like a comment thread that's always turned on. They always seem to find their way to team up with my own well-established inner critic.

So God, talk to me louder. Talk to me in the secret place of my heart. Speak into the core of my being. Help me to listen to the songs your spirit is already singing there, songs of love and delight and rest and beauty.

So in the quiet, while I am waiting, comfort me. Remind me that you know me inside and out. Speak tenderly, and help me tell you all that is hard to say. And as I open my heart to you, let your healing and love flow in. And may it be, that if I need help from

wise counsel, give me grace to seek it. And if I need a community of faith to walk with me, give me the humility to recognize and seek it. Amen.

*Download all 7 Prayers for Uncertain Times [katebowler.com/7-prayers-for-uncertain-times](http://katebowler.com/7-prayers-for-uncertain-times)*



Sunday, April 3rd, 3:30-5pm in Old Cabell Hall  
Thursday, April 7<sup>th</sup> 7:00 pm Virtual Premiere

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With Kate Bowler

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