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Life on Hold: Finding Hope in the Face of Serious Illness

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Laurel Seiler Brunvoll
Multnomah (Mar 27, 2001)
Unknown $10.99 (288pp)
978-1-57673-760-6

"Are you ready to live your life with your Christian faith, even if it is a faith that does not have all the answers?" This question, posed by Chaplain Bob Steinke, places a choice before those with serious or terminal illness: "to be angry, resentful, embittered and unhappy in the face of an illness, or to look for a deeper meaning and purpose." It is a choice that Brunvoll and Seiler, daughter and father, help readers to make in favor of faith, meaning, and trust in God as they share their journey through the terminal illness of the woman who was their mother and wife.

Brunvoll is the owner of Writing Solutions, a Maryland writing and public relations firm. Seiler is chief of the Semiconductor Electronics Division, Electronics and Engineering Laboratory, at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Together they trace the difficulties, joys, and sorrows of dealing with serious illness, from diagnosis to what Joseph Bayley, author of Heaven, has called "deliverance to life beyond your imagining." Offering a Christian perspective on the meaning of illness and its effects, the authors give practical guidance on dealing with such issues as choosing a medical team, deciding on alternative therapies, dealing with emotions, telling family and friends, and how best to offer love and support to a very ill or dying loved one.

Sensitive issues, including that of physician-assisted suicide, are discussed with reference to Scripture and Christian reverence for life. Dr. Ira Byock, a past president of the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, is quoted: "Pain and other symptoms causing physical distress can be alleviated, even when they are severe. It is not always easy, but by being careful and comprehensive, and by being absolutely committed to doing whatever is necessary to control physical distress, it can always be done. Personal suffering that derives from the experienced loss of meaning and from the feeling of impending disintegration can also be addressed. This too, is not easy, but it can be done. How? One patient, one person, at a time."

Especially poignant are the journal excerpts written by Nancy Seiler in her long battle with ovarian cancer. Readers are admitted to her mind and heart as she encounters the losses caused by her illness as well as the spiritual growth that her faith in the goodness of God allowed her to experience.

Together with stories told by survivors of serious illness or by the loved ones of those who have passed on, these form a tapestry of exceptional beauty and Christian wisdom, giving readers a map of what is, for many, uncharted and much-feared territory.

KRISTINE MORRIS (June 15, 2001)

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