

Watching My Friend Die: The Honest Death of Bob Schwartz

Mark Hare

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Reviewed by Octavia Houtekier

“His struggle was not compelling because he was one-of-a-kind but precisely because in every way that matters Bob Schwartz was Everyman” (p. 10). *Watching My Friend Die: The Honest Death of Bob Schwartz* is told by the author’s perspective as a friend. The death of a loved one is heartbreaking and difficult to navigate as this real story illustrates. Hare writes this story for Bob and for anyone of any faith who can appreciate the struggle of death. Throughout the book Hare observes Bob’s experience while searching for the good death that we all hope for at the end of our lives. However, it becomes quite clear that Bob never gave into a good death; instead, he fought every step of the way for one more day with those he loved.

Bob Schwartz was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in January of 1997; he was 49 years old. Bob was a well-liked, engaging social studies teacher at McQuaid Jesuit High School. “He respected everyone,” Father Hogenkamp says, “and the kids knew it and they had the freedom to speak and to be wrong” (p. 41). Bob had a gift to reach kids that went farther than just imparting knowledge. He saw what students could become and did what he could to draw it out of them. He had an open classroom door, spent time after school helping students, never played favorites, and helped them to see beyond what was right in front of them.

He is survived by his wife, Patty, and his children, Eric and Jenny. Bob adored his family; he did what he could before he died to prepare them for life without him. He thrived off their energy and care while they were around him. He wished for their lives to remain normal, but that was not easy when he was living his last days at home. After a particular difficult moment of confusion followed by clarity with his father, Eric stated, “I looked into his eyes and it was as if all the confusion was gone. For a split second, he didn’t have cancer anymore. Thinking back on it now, it still moves me” (p. 97). His daughter, Jenny, was scared by her father’s diagnosis and wanted terribly to be strong for him. She held back tears as a way to help him. “Jenny and Bob wanted the

same thing: to put each other at ease and make each other comfortable, despite their own pain. That's the very definition of love" (p. 87). His wife, Patty, stayed by his side, often exhausted and relying on help from friends. When Bob finally agreed to in-home care, she was able to be just his wife. Bob wanted his last days to be happy and filled with familiarity.

His friends were a source of constant joy to Bob. Many played in his "band." He had a love of music and songwriting. He found ways to be around those in the music world who he admired. Among those friends was John Denver.

Denver's road manager never quite understood the connection, but he knew it was real: "I only had to be told once that Bob had backstage clearance. John always welcomed him and Bob had complete access whenever he came to a show." (p. 69)

Bob expected his friends to be around during his last days. He did not know how to stop fighting, and the only thing his friends could do was help him to move along toward the end of his life on earth. At times this reader felt that his desire to cling to life was almost unbearable for his family and friends.

It is important to note that the author refers many times to the Catholic belief of the communion of saints. This is the connection that exists among all believers, living and dead. "It is a deeply comforting belief—the knowledge that we are all walking the same path and that others have walked this path before us—that they are waiting on the other side, praying to God for the grace that we will need" (p. 104). Hare believes that Bob drew on those living and dead to ease his suffering. This reader agrees with the author's perspective on this belief and appreciates his honesty in sharing the story of a friend. This book offers a tangible example of the communion of saints and helps make it more personal for the reader. If you have lost a loved one to pancreatic cancer it is a hard reminder of the stages that one goes through due to the fast progression of the disease. However, it reminds us of the paschal mystery: the death and resurrection. Life would not be real without both joy and suffering. Anyone searching for a personal story about a man who lived life to the fullest each day would be pleased with the author's sharing of Bob's last days on earth.

Although the book is short in length, the author provides intimate details that help the reader get to know Bob. The story will reach out to you as you learn more about Bob, his family, and friends. It is an unembellished narrative of the 22 months that Bob fought to be remembered, to be someone who mattered. This reviewer disagrees with the statement that Bob Schwartz was not one of a kind. It is evident to me that he lived as God wanted him to

live. He did not take his gifts for granted and he reached out to anyone that he could help.

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