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Taylor, Cory - *Dying: A Memoir*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016 pp. 160 ISBN: 9781925355772

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Recently, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) announced that it may change its stance on voluntary euthanasia to one of neutrality which would align its position with the Declaration of Geneva. Currently, the AMA does not support doctors participating in treatments that actively seek to end a person's life beyond the cessation of futile treatment (Metherell, 2016). However, both the AMA survey underpinning its policy review and an ABC poll point toward a clear majority support for the need for medical practitioners to use their conscience when treating terminally ill patients. The release of Cory Taylor's *Dying: A Memoir* coincided with the resurfacing of this issue, providing a voice for those the policy immediately affects.

When she wrote her final book, Taylor, an accomplished Australian screenwriter and novelist, was 60 and dying of melanoma-related brain cancer. Sadly, Taylor passed away on 5 July, 2016. She is survived by her husband and two teenage sons.

By Taylor's own account, she had:

... lived a full life ... [her] circumstances [are] less a cause for sorrow than an opportunity to feel thankful for [her] unearned good fortune (27).

Yet Taylor's contemplation of all that her life and death entailed is frank and unflinching. The book opens with Taylor divulging she has already purchased a euthanasia drug online from China and stashed it away, an act that mobilises attention to our country's general reluctance to tackle the very notion of death. The fact that assisted suicide is outlawed here – unlike in countries such as say, Belgium and the Netherlands – leads her to wonder:

... if our laws reflect some deep aversion among medical professionals towards relinquishing control of the dying process to the hands of the patient. I wonder if this aversion might stem from a more general belief in the medical profession that death represents a form of failure. And I wonder if this belief hasn't seeped out into the wider world in the form of an aversion to the subject of death *per se*, as if the stark facts of mortality can be banished from our consciousness altogether (8).

Taylor then acknowledges that one of the most significant drawbacks of our reluctance to discuss death – particularly for those who, like her, have no religious faith – is that it deprives us of both the vernacular and convention to confront its reality. We have few means by which to make sense of it, regardless of whether our ultimate end is determined by ourselves or not. The fact of assisted suicide's current outlawing remains a source of conflict for Taylor, as she later describes it "a constant temptation (36)". She then proceeds to describe her ideal passing, involving a party with family and friends, love, laughter and tears, saying goodbye, taking her medicine and knowing the party will continue without her. "As someone who knows my end is coming," she states, "I can't think of a better way to go out (37)."

However, in addition to the relevance of Taylor's memoir to current debates on voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide, what resonates is its cogent and powerful insight into her life and what living it has meant. She reflects on her impending death with absolute candour and immense literary skill. For example:

When you're dying, even your unhappiest memories can induce a sort of fondness, as if delight is not confined to the good times, but woven through your days like a skein of gold thread ... You do reflect on your past ... You look for patterns and turning points and wonder if any of it is significant. You have the urge to relate the story of your life for your children, so that you can set the record straight, and so that they can form some idea of where they came from (25).

Likewise, with equal honesty and courage, Taylor embraces her regrets:

I have regrets but as soon as you start re-writing your past you realise how your failures and mistakes are what define you. Take them away and you're nothing. But I do wonder where I'd be now if I had made different choices ... (41)

Much of the book is dedicated to Taylor's contemplation of her life and relationships with her parents. She analyses who they were, their lineage, and draws parallels between herself and her maternal grandmother, who died before having the chance to explore her 'writerly' inclinations. She considers the nature of her parents' marriage, its implicit unhappiness and eventual demise. She reflects on her father's nomadic lifestyle as a pilot, which meant the family moved frequently, including overseas. She describes the closeness she shared with her mother, the fractured relationship she has with her brother and the family rifts which ensued following the deaths of both their parents. And with lucidity and pragmatism, she speaks of her suffering, her fear of death and how she has come to terms with it:

Yes, I'm scared but not all the time. When I was first diagnosed I was terrified. I had no idea that the body could turn against itself and incubate its own enemy. I had never been seriously ill in my life before; now suddenly I was face to face with my own mortality... It was incomprehensible, and so frightening, I cried.

"I can't die," I sobbed. "Not me. Not now."

But I'm used to dying now. It's become ordinary and unremarkable, something everybody, without exception, does at one time or another...

There is nothing good about dying. It is sad beyond belief. But it is part of life and there is no escaping it. Once you grasp that fact, good things can result (38).

Taylor traces her path to becoming the writer she is today, acknowledging her output as small, but the undeniable presence of writing as part of her from a very young age. She may not have always been writing on paper, she tells us, but she was always doing so inside her head. She says:

Writing, even if most of the time you are only doing it in your head, shapes the world and makes it bearable ... And that is what I'm doing now, in this, my final book: I am making a shape for my death, so that I, and others, can see it clearly. And I am making dying bearable for myself (32).

Indeed, what is striking about Taylor's account of her decline is her unreserved willingness to embrace it. She accepts it, ponders it with clarity and sophistication and in doing so, makes the inevitable end to the lives of many of us a somehow more tolerable prospect. She acknowledges her own decisions and the path her life has taken as a result of those decisions. Like many writers who are also mothers, Taylor's role as nurturer has no doubt played a role in her output being small. She not only acknowledges, but revels, in the satisfaction of this life choice, reflecting:

I can't help but take pleasure in the fact that my children are thriving as I decline. It seems only fitting, a sure sign that my job in the world is done (48).

Yet, most significantly, Taylor is open about her pain and the grief she is experiencing in knowing her life is slowly coming to an end:

The short answer of what I'll miss the most is Shin, my husband of thirty-one years, and the faces of my children.

The long answer is the world and everything in it: wind, sun, rain, snow and all the rest.

And I will miss being around to see what happens next, how things turn out, whether my children's lives will prove as lucky as my own.

But I will not miss dying. It is by far the hardest thing I have ever done, and I will be glad when it's over (51).

It is Taylor's state of being at one with her situation that makes her memoir so gripping, so profound and so beautiful. While her life has been rich, fulfilling and less complicated than many, it is her readiness to grapple with it that is so resonant and compelling. The book is equally important for what it says about an individual's final reflection as it is to debates on assisted suicide. In facing death, we can only hope to have accumulated as much wisdom and strength of character in looking back at our lives. This work will linger for any reader who considers a primary measure of existence to be one's inner growth, but more than that, who values the reality that life ends. Taylor wants us to remember her, to remember her work, and for her life to have made an impact through what she leaves behind. *Dying: A Memoir* is an assurance of this desire. It is deeply affecting and cuts to the core of life and death simultaneously. It highlights the need for more works like it – works of braveness and sincerity, where life and its limit is confronted head-on.

References

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About the reviewer

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