

*"A small treasure, unpretentious and transcendent."*

JONATHAN KOZOL

# Be Not Afraid

**OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF DEATH**



**JOHANN CHRISTOPH ARNOLD**

Foreword by Madeleine L'Engle

# Acclaim for the Book

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AUTHOR, "ORDINARY RESURRECTIONS"

This is a beautiful book of surpassing dignity and tenderness...I hope it will be widely read, not only by those who call themselves religious. Although written with great simplicity of style, it is nonetheless a work of moral mystery...a small treasure, unpretentious and transcendent.

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This gem of a book speaks volumes about God's love and made me cry tears of sadness, but also of joy. I commend it to all those in the helping professions.

# Be Not Afraid

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# Be Not Afraid

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Johann Christoph Arnold

  
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God is love; and he who abides in love abides in God.  
In this we may have confidence on the day of judgment...  
There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear.

**1 JOHN 4:16-18**



# Contents

*Foreword xi*

*Introduction xiv*

1

Foundations 1

2

Fear 12

3

Despair 22

4

Losing a Baby 32

5

Reverence 41

6

The Childlike Spirit 49

7

Anticipation 60

8

Readiness 68

9

Accidents 78

10

Beyond Medicine 88

11

In God's Hands 96

12

Suffering 106

13

Faith 119

14

Courage 129

15

Healing 142

16

Caring 152

17

Dying 162

18

Grief 173

19

Resurrection 189

*Epilogue* 199

*Index* 204

# Foreword

by Madeleine L'Engle

One evening while my children were doing homework, I was sitting at my desk writing, when one of our neighbors, a young man in high school, came in demanding, “Madeleine, are you afraid of death?”

Barely turning, I answered, “Yes, Bob, of course.” He plunked himself down on a chair. “Thank God. Nobody else will dare to admit it.”

Death is change, and change is always fearful as well as challenging, but until we can admit the fear, we cannot accept the challenge. Until we can admit the fear, we cannot know the assurance, deep down in our hearts, that indeed, we are *not* afraid.

*Be Not Afraid* is a wonderful book about the kind of fearlessness of death that comes despite the normal fears

we have, no matter how deep our faith. Indeed, it is only deep faith that can admit fear, and then move on to the understanding that God can work through our tragedies as well as our joys; that even when accidents and illness let us down, God never lets us down.

I am also grateful that *Be Not Afraid* addresses the paradox of our abuse of the great gift of free will, and God's working out of Love's plan for the universe. No, God does not cause or will the death of a child, but God can come into all things, no matter how terrible. God can help us to bear them, and even be part of them.

In a society that is afraid of death—not the normal fear Bob expressed, but the terrible fear that surrounds us when we are not centered on God—we tend to isolate the dying, implying that death is contagious. Yes, we all die; there are no exceptions; but we are not meant to die alone. I was taken through a beautiful new cancer hospital where in each room there was what looked like a small mahogany table. In a moment it could be pulled out and turned into a bed, where a family member or friend could be with the person who was ill.

I was privileged to be with my husband, holding him, at the time of his death. The grace to be with other people as they have made the great transition has been given me. Perhaps when I answered Bob's question with, "Yes, of

*Foreword*

course,” I was referring to awe, rather than fear or panic, an awe some of us are afraid to face.

I wish a friend had put this beautiful book in my hands when my husband died. It honors life, and in honoring life it honors death. It also honors the One who made us all with such love. God came to live with us as Jesus, to show us how to live, and to die, and that gives us assurance of the Resurrection, and of life in eternity—that is, of life beyond time and all that is transient, in God’s love forever.

*Goshen, Connecticut*

# Introduction

by the Author

Are you afraid of dying? Do you know someone who is? Have you ever wondered how you would survive the loss of someone you love? Whether consciously or not, every life is sooner or later touched by death, and thus every person must deal with these questions at one point or another. That is why I have written this book.

We cannot avoid death. It overshadows all our lives. We live longer than our grandparents; we are better fed; we lose fewer babies. Vaccines protect us from once-feared epidemics; hi-tech hospitals save tiny preemies and patients in need of a new kidney or heart. But we are still mortal. And even if we have been successful in warding off plagues that decimated earlier generations, we have no lack of our own—from suicide, abortion,

## *Introduction*

divorce, and addiction, to racism, poverty, violence, and militarism. We live, as Pope John Paul II used to say, in a culture of death.

It is also a culture of fear. Fearing old age, we hide our elderly in nursing homes. Fearing crime, we protect ourselves with guns and locked doors. Fearing people who don't look like us or earn as much, we move into segregated or "gated" neighborhoods. Fearing other nations, we impose sanctions and drop bombs. We are even afraid of our own offspring, turning our schools into virtual prisons, and our prisons into holding pens and morgues. One could add to all these anxieties the fear of terrorism and biological warfare.

With eight children, and many grandchildren, I know what it is like to ponder the future and be scared. Having stood at the bedside of dying friends and relatives—and having fought alongside them—I also have an inkling of what it means to face death. More important, I have seen the peace that radiates from those who have not only battled their fears but found strength to overcome them. That peace gives me courage and hope, and in telling you their stories, I hope it will do the same for you.

Ordinary men and women, the people in this book had their share of bad days, struggles, obstacles, and low moments. They cried; they were scared; they needed reassurance. Most would have gone under without

support. But to me their significance lies not so much in the way they died, but in the way they prepared for death, whether aware of it or not: by living life to the full, and not for themselves, but for others. None of them were anywhere near perfect, but in serving a cause greater than themselves, they were given eyes to see beyond their own needs, and courage to bear suffering without being defeated by it.

One person I knew who exemplified this was Father Mychal Judge. A Franciscan priest and a fire department chaplain, Father Mike was going about his daily business in New York City's Church of St. Francis when a fellow friar rushed into his room to tell him that he was needed right away at the scene of a fire. The date was September 11, 2001; the place, the World Trade Center, which had just been hit by two hijacked planes and was engulfed in flames.

Donning his uniform and rushing downtown, Father Mike was soon at the base of the Twin Towers, where he joined hundreds of others—mostly rescue teams—converging on the scene. The details of what transpired next are unclear: some say he administered last rites to a dying firefighter; others remember him standing alone in silent prayer. Whatever happened amid all the chaos, it was his final hour. Shortly before Tower One collapsed,



## *Introduction*

his lifeless body was discovered in the lobby and carried to a nearby church.

Aside from his chaplaincy work for the Fire Department of New York, Father Mike was an outspoken advocate for people dying of AIDS; he was also known throughout the city for his love of the downtrodden. With a pocketful of dollar bills “rescued” from friends who could afford to give them away, he always had something to give a needy person on the street.

In 1999 Father Mike and I traveled through Northern Ireland with a mutual friend, NYPD Detective Steven McDonald, promoting dialogue and reconciliation. We made a second trip to Ireland in 2000, and at the time of his death, we were in the final stages of planning a similar one to Israel and the West Bank.

Father Mike spent his last hour on earth encouraging others by turning to God; and that is basically the same reason I put together this book: to encourage you by pointing you toward God. In him, as these stories show, there is comfort and strength for even the most anxious soul.

*Rifton, New York*

# Foundations

My one-day-old sister Marianne died when I was six. I never even saw her alive, yet she influenced my childhood as few others did. Her birth and death had a decisive impact on my sisters and me, as well as on my own children years later.

It was 1947, and my family lived in the backwoods of Paraguay, in a small Christian commune that ran a primitive hospital. Just before Marianne's birth, after two days of extremely difficult, life-threatening labor, my mother's heart suddenly gave out. Luckily, the staff was able to resuscitate her, but she remained unconscious. My father pleaded with the doctors to perform a cesarean, but he was warned, "Your wife will die if we operate. The only way to save her is to abort the baby; otherwise both mother and baby will be lost."

It was an incredibly difficult situation: both my parents believed firmly in the sanctity of all life. Papa went out into the woods to pray.

When he returned, Mama had regained consciousness, though she remained in critical condition. Then, unexpectedly, the baby was delivered naturally. She had a small bruise on her head from the instruments, but otherwise she seemed healthy. My parents were certain that God had intervened.

Yet Mama sensed that not all was well with her child. Marianne did not cry, nor did she open her eyes. The next day, she died. A few weeks later, Mama wrote to her brother in Germany:

It is so hard to grasp that this child, whom we longed for so greatly, and who was born in such pain, left us before we got to know what kind of person she would be. Sometimes it all seems so unreal, like a fleeting dream. But the more I think about it, the more grateful I am Marianne was born alive. She brought us great joy, if only for a few hours, and she led us to a deeper love for one another. In this way, despite the brevity of her life, I feel that she fulfilled a task on earth.

As for Papa, he thanked God for the rest of his life that the baby had not been aborted. The experience cemented his belief that no matter how long or short a soul lives

## *Foundations*

on earth, it always has a divine purpose. He passed this belief on to me in the form of a deep reverence not only for the mystery of birth, but also of death, and for the sacredness of every human life, regardless of its span.

At the time, of course, I remained an ordinary youngster, full of mischief and frequently in trouble. Like most of the boys I grew up with, I had a passion for bareback riding and secret hunting excursions, and I loved to watch the gauchos work their herds and race their horses. My imagination ran wild with dreams of being a gaucho one day. Still, Marianne's impact on me was always there, like a seed that slowly germinated and took root in my heart. It is still there.

Life was luxuriant in our subtropical paradise, but disease and death lurked around us as well. We saw glimpses of human misery every day at our mission hospital, where I often went with Papa to deliver food and supplies. Many of the patients suffered from malnutrition. Leprosy and tuberculosis were prevalent. There were complicated maternity cases, children dying of respiratory ailments, meningitis, or dehydration, and men injured by falling trees or wounded by machetes after drunken brawls.

Papa often told us children about Jesus and how he came for the poor. He told us about men and women through the centuries who gave up everything for the

sake of Jesus. One of our favorite stories was that of Vassili Ossipovitch Rachoff, a young Russian aristocrat who left his family and wealth and walked from village to village to help the suffering and dying. I thought about Rachoff long and often.

As a teenager I spent several months away from my family, working at a mission house in Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay. My job consisted mainly of running errands and doing odd jobs around the house.

Often I skipped the Sunday morning service and disappeared into the slums, where I had many friends. Their living conditions were appalling—crowded bamboo shacks with open sewage running between them. The flies and mosquitoes were horrendous. Hundreds of children roamed the alleys, many of them orphans, and expert thieves. Some worked shining shoes—five cents a pair—a job I found so intriguing that I soon got myself a kit and joined them whenever I could. Bit by bit these children told me about their lives. Many of their parents had either been killed in fights or had died of tropical diseases. They had seen siblings die of illnesses or deficiencies, and they themselves had survived only to continue living in hardship, fear, and danger.

When a revolution broke out in the city, much of the fighting took place right on our street. We heard the

## *Foundations*

rumble of nearby tanks and machine-gun fire all night. Bullets whizzed over our house. From our windows we saw soldiers being killed. This was war, and I was thirteen, separated from my family, and scared. What if I were shot?

My great-aunt Monika, who lived in the house with us, noticed how afraid I was and consoled me. A nurse, Monika had served at the front during World War I, and she told me how dying soldiers would lay their heads on her lap and weep like little children in their pain and fear of death; how they cried with remorse for their sins; how they agonized because they would never see their loved ones again. Through her deep faith, Monika had touched them, comforted them, and turned them toward Jesus before they died.

Still, the questions ate at me: Why do people have to die? And why is there so much evil and wickedness in the world? Monika read me the passage from Romans 8 about how all creation groans for redemption. She lessened my fears, especially the fear of death. Like Papa, she told me that somewhere in the universe, Christ is preparing a place for us, and I felt it was a very real place, not something abstract. Many times I was reassured by this belief. I also found comfort in Jesus' wonderful promise in the Gospel of Matthew, "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world."

Some ten years later, I again encountered death in a very personal way. (My family was by now living in the United States, having left South America to help build up a new branch of our commune in Rifton, New York.) The Civil Rights movement was in full swing, and no one could be indifferent to it. Martin Luther King was (and still is) an inspiring figure for me. His belief in the cause of justice was unwavering, and he seemed utterly fearless, though he was hated by so many, and threatened so often, that death must have continually lingered at the back of his mind. Just days before his assassination he admitted as much—and explained why he refused to yield to fear:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land! So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I am not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

To me, King's life carried an important message. In the spring of 1965 a friend and I traveled to Alabama, and experienced firsthand King's deep love and humility. We

## *Foundations*

were visiting the Tuskegee Institute when we heard about the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a youngster who had been seriously injured eight days earlier when a peaceful rally in nearby Marion had been broken up by the police.

Bystanders later described a scene of utter chaos: white onlookers smashed cameras and shot out street lights while police officers brutally attacked the black rally-goers, many of whom were praying on the steps of a church. Jimmie, who had seen a state trooper mercilessly beating his mother, had tackled the man, and was shot in the stomach and then clubbed over the head until almost dead. Denied admission at the local hospital, he was taken to Selma, where he was able to tell his story to reporters. He died several days later.

At the news of Jimmie's death, we drove to Selma immediately. The viewing, at Brown Chapel, was open-casket, and although the mortician had done his best to cover his injuries, the worst head wounds could not be hidden: three gashes, each an inch wide and about three inches long.

Deeply shaken, we stayed to attend Jimmie's memorial service. The room was so crowded that the only place we could find to sit was a window sill at the back; outdoors, the grounds were packed as well.

Amazingly, there was not one note of anger or revenge to be heard in the service. Instead, an atmosphere of



courage and peace radiated from the congregation. And when everyone rose to sing the old slave song, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me ’round,” the spirit of triumph was so powerful that an onlooker never would have guessed why we had gathered.

At a second service we attended in Marion, the atmosphere was decidedly more subdued. Lining the veranda of the county court house across the street stood a long row of state troopers, hands on their night sticks, looking straight at us. These were the same men who had attacked Marion’s blacks only days before. As we left the service for the burial, we passed first them, and then a crowd of hecklers that had gathered at nearby City Hall. The police, who were armed with binoculars and cameras as well as guns, scanned and photographed each one of us; the hecklers, though unarmed, followed us with insults and jeers.

At the cemetery, King spoke about forgiveness and love. He pleaded with everyone present to pray for the police, to forgive Jimmie’s murderer, and to forgive those who were persecuting them. Then we held hands and sang, “We shall overcome.”

Though meeting Martin Luther King was a formative experience, no one influenced my outlook on death and

## *Foundations*

dying as much as my parents. Papa suffered a great deal in his lifetime. Several times he was gravely ill, almost to the point of death, but miraculously he always pulled through. Mama, who was four years older, was vigorous, active, and hardly ever sick. We children always assumed that Papa would die long before Mama. But God had other plans. In September 1979 Mama was found to have cancer of the lymph nodes. Her health deteriorated rapidly, and soon she, who had spent her life serving others, was an invalid who needed to be cared for—a fact she found hard to accept. Yet in spite of her great suffering, she trusted in God and submitted to what she felt was his will for her. She found peace of mind and faced the end without fear.

On the day the doctors informed our family of Mama's sickness, my parents wept, and we wept with them. Then they looked at one another—I will never forget the love in their eyes—and turning to us children said, "Now every day, every moment, counts. We must not miss any chance to show our love to our brothers and sisters, to the children, to our guests." Mama told us to trust completely in God's wisdom and leading. It was a heartbreaking but deeply moving moment.

Just months later, in the winter of 1980, three elderly members of our church died within a two-week period. All three had been close to my parents for many years, and

their deaths cut deep into Mama's heart. With each one, she became noticeably weaker. First Papa's mother—my *Oma*—died at the age of ninety-five. It pained Mama that she was not well enough to prepare *Oma*'s body for burial or to set up the room in which she was laid. She had always felt it a privilege to do this “last service of love,” as she called it, for members of our community.

When *Dora*, a woman Mama had known for almost fifty years, passed away only a few days later, I took my parents to see her for the last time. Mama looked at her with unforgettable tenderness, and though she was unable to attend the funeral, she still got out of bed and stood trembling in the doorway in respectful silence as *Dora*'s burial procession passed our house.

The next week *Ruth*, an old classmate of my father's, died. For her funeral, Mama got dressed and sat up in her bed. It was clearly more than she had strength for, but she insisted on showing her deep love and respect for *Ruth*.

Children from our church often came to visit Mama, and their confidence that she would recover had an immediate effect: when they were there, she became peaceful and radiated joy. Often she said with a sigh, “The children, the children!” She didn't know it, but they met many times in secret to pray for her recovery.

Mama died in March 1980, five months after her illness was diagnosed. Her death was such a heavy blow for my

## *Foundations*

father that he would never recover from it. Papa and Mama had been married for over forty years, and they had always worked together and depended on each other for advice. Now Papa was alone.

Over the next two years his physical strength declined rapidly. He read his Bible daily and held worship services when he could. He also spoke often about God's ultimate plan for all creation, saying repeatedly, "God's kingdom is all that matters. Each of us is so little, so weak. Yet each of us is also an opening for God's love to break into this world. That is what I want to live for; that is worth dying for." This attitude stayed with my father until the end.

During the last weeks of Papa's life, he could hardly speak, but it was still inwardly strengthening to sit with him – God's nearness was palpable, and it gave him a deep peace. He died early one summer morning, and it was a privilege for me, his only son, to close his eyes forever.

