Acknowledgments

I wrote this book while I was a guest professor in Canada, using the resources and facilities of the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I thank my hosts—Adrian Levy, head of my department, and Tom Marrie, dean of medicine—for their hospitality and use of library and IT services. My friend and colleague Aliki Karapliagou at the University of Bath in England was my graduate research assistant. Aliki helped me with the initial groundwork of identifying, searching, and retrieving important lines of literature. She also helped identify fresh lines of writing and research we needed when we regularly reached the limits of the personal accounts of end of life care. My wife and academic colleague, Jan Fook, and I held scores of private conversations and debates about the ideas and perspectives offered in this book, which helped me hone and refine my reflections, as she has so often done in our many years together. My Canadian colleague Margie King and two anonymous reviewers read the manuscript, and each provided encouraging and useful feedback. My old friend and colleague Glennys Howarth read every line of this manuscript, as she has often done for me, providing critical feedback from her perspective as one of Britain’s most senior death studies scholars. Keith Anderson, editor of the End-of-Life Care Series for Columbia University Press, was encouraging and enthusiastic about this project from the beginning. I was also lucky to work with Polly Kummel, my wonderful copy editor; meticulous and collegial, she provided deft guidance and mentoring for the final draft of my writing.

In 2003, during his own period of dying from a brain tumor, the British sociologist Ian Craib trenchantly criticized sociology’s lack of engagement with the emotional and personal while academically theorizing about the human experience of dying. Those critical comments influenced my own
efforts to write a book that would address this all-too-common omission. Whether I have been successful I leave others to judge, but I remain grateful for the truth and timeliness of his criticism. My heartfelt thanks go to all the aforementioned friends and colleagues for their support and inspiration. I also extend my eternal thanks to the many hundreds of dying people with whom I have conversed about their final time, either formally in research interviews or informally in private pastoral contexts. As a long-time witness to this experience, I hope I have been able to provide a worthwhile glimpse of the sadness and pain, as well as the inextinguishable light that, against all odds, seems so often to permeate and rise above both.

Finally, I thank the following authors and publishers for permission to quote from their publications:


Excerpt from the blog *Dying Man’s Daily Journal* by Bill Howdle (http://hudds53.wordpress.com/) reprinted by permission of Bill Howdle © 2011 Bill Howdle.


Excerpt from the poem “Age of Terror” in Candles in Babylon by Denise Levertov (New York: New Directions, 1982) reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. © 1982 Denise Levertov.


Excerpts from the poems “Elm,” “Death & Co.,” and “Lady Lazarus” in Ariel by Sylvia Plath (London: Faber & Faber, 1965) reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.


THE INNER LIFE OF THE DYING PERSON
For dust thou art,
and into dust thou shalt return.
—Genesis 3:19

Dust n Old English dust (probably about 725 AD), cognate with Old High German tunst, meaning breath.
—Chambers Dictionary of Etymology

breath [A.S. breath] 1. The respired air. 2. An inspiration
—Stedman’s Medical Dictionary

Dying has a bad reputation. Most people imagine dying as The End. In this literal way many people conflate the two ideas, thinking of dying as death and not the life before it. Either way, dying and death are sad and bad. In other words, many people believe that nothing good can come of dying. But this is very much a cultural understanding—and a limited and narrow one at that. This perspective is not found in the rest of nature. As far as we can tell, trees and rabbits do not view the threat of death in these ways, yet they react to the threat of death in similar ways to us. To understand why a dying human being should have anything in common with a dying tree, we must start at the beginning of life and not at the end. We must start with an understanding of our own mortality that links our basic reactions to the threat of death to what we are made from—organic, cellular life. No holistic explanation of our inner reactions to the threat of death is possible without this biological and social context.