

Acknowledgments

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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.

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THE INNER LIFE OF THE DYING PERSON

1

In the Beginning . . .

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.