

## Spirituality

[illegible]

by Kelly Hughes

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In his book *Streams of Contentment: Lessons I Learned on My Uncle's Farm*, psychologist Robert Wicks tells a story about how a fierce storm startled him into remembering the fragility of life. That reality "had started to move to the recesses of my daily awareness," he writes. "It always does when I don't consciously remember a simple, poignant reality: I am dying and everyone else is as well."

People seem to find this morbid, Wicks notes: "But am I? Don't we appreciate others' value to us and the brevity of our own life when we make friends with the reality of impermanence and the fragility of life?"

I have been rereading *Streams of Contentment* (full disclosure: I worked on the publicity campaign to launch the book in 2011), a book whose message feels especially helpful in the midst of pandemic and social isolation, with chapters on "Knowing Who We Can Be Now" and "Being Clear about What Is Truly Essential."

I am reminded of how quickly life can change every time I look out the front window at what was once a busy city neighborhood, or when I go out for a walk, mask on, scurrying past any human on the sidewalk.

I feel the need to see and talk to family and friends even though before March, I might have gone a week or more without talking to them in person and not have thought anything of it, assuming all was well and that I would see (and hug!) them soon. Oh, how this current trouble with its built-in memento mori heightens my appreciation of their value to me and the brevity of our time together.

*Streams of Contentment* is just one of many books I've turned to during the recent quarantine for some help, or comfort, or entertainment.

Books can help us make friends "with the reality of impermanence" and cope with the grief and weirdness of isolation and social distancing. They can help us make sense of what's happening — or help us accept that it doesn't make any sense. They can help us develop a new perspective and cultivate our God-given faculty of "soul seeing."





(Unsplash/John Weinhardt)

One can see by which books are selling well what people need right now. As I write, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, a memoir of his time in a Nazi concentration camp, is No. 78 among all books sold by Amazon, and No. 1 in three categories, Judaism, Popular Psychology and Existential Psychology. First published in 1946, the book was called "an enduring work of survival literature" by The New York Times.

Albert Camus' *The Plague*, originally published in 1947, is No. 62 in Classic Literature and Fiction on Amazon, and the book is out of stock at some independent bookstores. The end of the novel, with the quarantine over, is not without a reminder of how swiftly the good times, or even just regular old "normal" times, can end: "Rieux remembered that this delight was always threatened."

St. Teresa of Ávila wrote in her autobiography, "Always when I was without a book, my soul would at once become disturbed, and my thoughts wandered." The saint is referring to the difficulty she felt when praying without a prayer book, but I think

that soul disturbance is an apt description of what many of us are feeling today.

Here again, books can offer guidance to help us focus, they can help us pray, they can be "portable pastors," as the late author Phyllis Tickle once said. Books offer hope in hard times and wisdom when we need it most. They can help us see through appearance with the eye of our soul and perceive grace, beauty, love and truth.

They can be simply good company, too, making us feel less alone. Some delight, amuse and amaze us. Another book I've been dipping into over the last several weeks at home is the posthumous collection of essays by Brian Doyle, *One Long River of Song: Notes on Wonder*. Doyle, who died in 2017, could not have foreseen what the world would be like three years after his death. Yet he has so much to say to us right now, even in a section heading: "We Can Take Off Our Masks, or, If We Can't Do That, We Can Squawk Through the Holes in Them. A Squawk Is Better Than Nothing."

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Books can give us words when we can't find our own. In the essay "The Way We Do Not Say What We Mean When We Say What We Say," Doyle writes, "Perhaps much of the reason we so often do not say what we mean to say is because we cannot; there is wild in us yet, and in every word and sentence and speech is still the seethe of the sea, from whence we came, unto which we will return, which cannot ever be fully be trammelled or corralled or parsed, no matter how hard we try to mean what we say when we say what we think we mean."

Books can help us remember what we've lost and what will come back to us. *How Lovely the Ruins: Inspirational Poems and Words for Difficult Times*, edited by Annie Chagnot and Emi Ikkanda, opens with a poem by Adam Zagajewski: "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" that begins, "Try to praise the mutilated world./Remember June's long days/and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew."

*How Lovely the Ruins* uses as its epigraph a quote from William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, given in 1950. Faulkner tells the assembled of his belief that humanity will "not merely endure: he will prevail," because humans have "a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

It is the duty of the poet and the writer "to write about these things," he says. "It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

Books can serve us well, especially now, as those props and pillars.

[Kelly Hughes is a book publicist from Chicago. All Soul Seeing columns can be found at [NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing](https://www.ncronline.org/columns/soul-seeing).]

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