

“Disarmingly forthright and often funny...we'll all ride the grief train sooner or later — so why not start the conversation now?” —Barbara Brown Taylor

dessert first

Preparing for Death
while Savoring Life



J. Dana Trent

“If grief is the language of love, this unflinching book shows us how to love a little deeper.”

— Kate Bowler, author of *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*

“In this disarmingly forthright and often funny book, Dana Trent reminds her readers that we’re all terminal, and we’ll all ride the grief train sooner or later—so why not start the conversation now? Her ability to convey what she has learned as a hospital chaplain, a daughter, and a teacher grounds every page in the real world, making it impossible to resist her invitation to begin thinking about The End in a lifegiving way.”

— Barbara Brown Taylor, author of *An Altar in the World*

“We aren’t very good at talking about death. Thankfully we have people like Dana to walk with us. Her writing here is approachable and honest, and her compassion overflows as she leads us into the difficult but necessary places. *Dessert First* is both a deeply moving and incredibly practical guide for dying (and living) well. It’s essential reading for the mortals among us.”

— John Pavlovitz, author of *A Bigger Table and Hope and Other Superpowers*

“*Dessert First* really helped me. It helped me prepare for the deaths of people I love. It helped me prepare for my own death. Don’t worry: it isn’t a book written by Miss Morbidity. Dana Trent is funny and professional and human, exactly the kind of person you want to help you face life’s one actual certainty.”

— Brian D. McLaren, author/activist

“*Dessert First* is a delicious treat—nourishing and enjoyable. A timely reminder not to neglect the things that matter most. Practical, truthful, needed.”

— Philip Gulley, author of *If the Church Were Christian*

“What is a good death? How does one prepare? Dana Trent’s *Dessert First* is a complete book. It is filled with practical wisdom gleaned from religious reflection and practical experience as an end-of-life chaplain. She has somehow transformed that experience into a joyful assessment of life and preparation for its end. Trent’s wisdom comes in narrative form, which adds to the accessibility and, dare I say, enjoyment of this thoughtful book. It deserves many readers.”

— Richard Lischer, Duke Divinity School, author of *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*

“There is great freedom in accepting the reality of death. There is even joy. And possibly a great deal of humor. It is all here in *Dessert First*, a book about death that adds up to the fullness of life implied by the title. Dig in.”

— Erin Wathen, author of *Resist and Persist: Faith and the Fight For Equality*, and Patheos blog *Irreverin*

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while Savoring Life

J. Dana Trent



**chalice
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For Ron, with gratitude for all you did for Mom—and me.

Introduction: We're All Terminal

"You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?"

—Khalil Gibran, "On Death," *The Prophet*

"A book telling people how much I hurt would not do any good. This had to be a book that would affirm life."

—Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

"Is it a regional?" Mom used to ask.

Whenever I traveled by plane, she'd inquire as to an aircraft's size. If it held 100 passengers or less, her anxiety unfurled into a rant on the dangers of "puddle jumpers." This, coming from a woman who, as an infant, was flown in her father's two-passenger Cessna across state lines so that my grandmother could change her diaper.

But at the beginning of what became a turbulent regional ride from Atlanta from Birmingham, my mother's ever-present dis-ease with small planes rang true. Though Mom had died six months prior, as with most close mother-daughter relationships, her advice still haunted me.

The airline showed its innocuous emergency procedures video to us, a medium-sized congregation of unsuspecting passengers. We watched on headrest screens as earnest, cheerful employees parsed disaster protocol with far too much enthusiasm. Speaking from an array of skin colors, accents, body shapes, and sizes, they provided requisite information so that, should we plummet to our death mid-flight, *everyone* would do so *safely*.

In pressed navy uniforms and professionally whitened teeth, attendants demonstrated oxygen masks, signaled manicured hands toward floor-level exit lighting, and modeled inflatable life vests. The message was clear: *We're going to die in a way that meets federal aviation requirements.*

It was the first puddle jumper I'd taken since my mother died. This time, there had been no call to inquire, "Is it a regional?" I was 36 and mid-grief, facing the fact that I'd lived long enough to lose both parents, and beginning to wrestle with the idea that I was closer to the end of life than its beginning.

Why do these safety assurances, shown in every flight, every day, speak nothing of actual death? I wondered. Why are we in such denial about our sure end? Why not tell us something useful during these plane didactics, such as what to say to our loved ones should we get the chance, rituals to keep from losing our minds mid-downward spiral, or prayers invoking the benevolence of whoever holds the keys to our (hopefully) glorious destination?

My brother Ron, my mom, and I had seen the film *Sully* together. Mom had *loved* Tom Hanks's portrayal—but had also known there was only one *real* Captain Sullenberger.

And he was now retired. The once-in-a-million aircraft survival story had already been used up on the Hudson River.

Mom was now gone, but her disdain for "puddle jumpers" still echoed in my memory. Listening to the video of the flight attendant spiel, I wished that I were told something more true, more helpful, perhaps along these lines:

"In the event of a plane emergency, we *will* die. At that time, stuff yourself with as many of those delicious cookies or pretzels you want and place your oxygen mask on if it makes you feel better. But don't waste time fumbling for those damn water wings known as your seat cushion. Forget the exits; instead, review the multifaith rituals card we've placed in your seat pocket. Atheist? No worries. Breathe deeply anyway. Faith or no faith, take a second to switch off airplane mode and use whatever signal we have to text, call, or Facetime anyone you'd like. Hold hands with the passenger next to you; there's no time like the present to make new friends. As we make our final descent (literally), here are three useful ways to position your body to *ensure* you'll die on impact. No prolonged suffering on our watch! Thank you for choosing our airline."

“We’re all terminal,” I’d heard author Kate Bowler say in a lecture I attended six months after Mom died. “Some of us just have more information.” I’d begun to heed *both* their insights: I was terminal—we all are—and I *could* die anytime—even in this metal tube 30,000 feet above the Southeast.

Long ago, I’d done research on the cause for Mom’s anxiety: was there *real* danger in flying? Yes, at different points of the process. The likelihood of flight trouble is exponentially higher during taxi, right when they play that stupid safety video or perform the Gospel reenactment of “Federal Safety Regulations Require...” Danger also spikes during takeoff and landing.

On this trip, instead of studying the safety placard as instructed, I blared George Harrison’s “My Sweet Lord” loudly in my ear buds and recited prayers to the beat. I thought of Mom. If this regional was going to seal my fate, so be it. Mom would welcome me at the pearly gates, while my earthly loved ones have their marching orders: comfort my husband, Fred, in his grief; and, make sure people laugh at my funeral.

I was under no delusions that this particular in-flight ritual kept me safer than the emergency management choreography. But when we finally parked and they turned off the fasten seatbelt sign, I thought: *Mom, it wasn’t my time—yet.*

But one day—just like Kate Bowler and Mom cautioned, it will be. No oxygen mask, water wings, or hideous life jacket is going to keep me alive forever. My take on the ridiculous airplane video is that it’s a metaphor for life: we can put all the life-prolonging safety measures we want in place—diet, exercise, expeditions to the “fountain of youth”—but, one day, we *will die.*

If I began the flight—or life—with the end in mind, I might *begin* to consider what *really* matters now—and what *will* matter in those last moments, hours, days, weeks, months, or years.

Why not be forthcoming about my—and our—shared fate? Certainly, no one wants to hang out with Miss Morbidity 24/7, but both of my mentors were right: Why not acknowledge the actual *terminal* nature of life? Why not embrace *some* time during taxi, take-off, and landing for a quick life review? Why not do a gratitude check of all the people who’ve loved and tolerated us? What might we then do or say to our loved ones should we arrive safely at the gate? Or, God forbid, should something go

wrong, why not skip the oxygen mask and spend our remaining moments meaning-making?

“I’m boarding,” I would always say as I was about to depart from the airport *terminal* (a term my mother considered as a metaphor for a stroll toward the grave). Like clockwork, Mom would always ask: “Is it a regional?” Followed by, “I hate those puddle jumpers,” as if I’d never heard her tirade before. But she always followed the old standard by saying, “I’ll start praying.”

That, as it turned out, was actually useful.

The Death Chaplain

When I was 25, I spent a year gathering information about death without really meaning to. I was a freshly minted Duke Divinity School graduate and ordained Baptist minister beginning a hospital chaplaincy program. By chance (or perhaps not), I was assigned to serve patients at the end of their lives.

I became known as “The Death Chaplain.” It was an unexpected call to an alternative universe—one in which, just inside the hospital doors, nearly all my patients were living the worst—and sometimes last—days of their lives. In that space, at 25, I learned what “terminal” truly meant. I saw it stamped vividly on cancer diagnoses, chronic disease, accidents, assaults, suicide—and even on births. As the death chaplain to these patients and their families, I immediately stepped into a world of endings I knew nothing about. All year, I learned essential lessons about facing the most challenging aspect of our lives: our dying.

Looking back, it’s clear I began my chaplaincy year as a greenhorn, even though I *thought* I was a know-it-all graduate from a prestigious university seminary, fully trained in theology. I *did* know orthodoxy and scripture, and could read ancient manuscripts in their original languages of Hebrew and Greek. But no matter how many degrees I held, how many books I read, I still hadn’t learned the single most important truth of life: we will die.

It the world of hospitals, death is a natural part of life. My mother and brother—a nurse and doctor respectively, had *lived* in this world. Neither of them skipped a beat over blood, guts, vomit, mangled limbs, diseases, or broken bodies. In their eyes, illness—and death—were a part of *life*. The two bravely showed up for the sick and accepted the facts. “It’s just a body,” they’d say, when I’d balk over some medical horror they shared.

But outside those concrete hospital walls, for a naïve humanities student such as myself (and many others), this ugly side of the fragility of these bodies is glossed over—forgotten or hidden under a shiny veneer of picture-perfect social media accounts and digitally enhanced Christmas card portraits.

Though the death rate is 100 percent, there is something about being terminal that *shocks* us. Maybe it's that we spend our entire lives trying to keep our bodies going, staying alive as best we can—from the poorest among us to the richest. We attempt to maintain bodies that, ultimately, cannot be sustained. We do not want to land in the Emergency Department, only to disappear from the future family portraits or status updates. We want to *live*.

But the greatest lesson my mother, brother, patients, their families, doctors, nurses, fellow chaplains, and dying loved ones taught me is that we *are* terminal. After sitting with over 200 dying people (not all at once), I learned to unwrap the gifts our finite bodies—and their deaths—offer us: reality, courage, and curiosity. I became a friend of “terminal,” facing the fear in order to begin with the end in mind.

That is death's lesson: it teaches us how to live.

We're All Terminal

So, if we all die, why do we spend decades mastering skills and trades that change and disappear—while avoiding investing our time in that one certainty?

What if, instead, we gave some of that mastery to our biggest task, asking our biggest questions and embracing reality wholly? What if we opened ourselves to embrace the knowledge that we are *born dying*—would we *maybe* discover our truest and deepest *living* selves?

At a young age, even though I accepted biblical promises of my God's house of many mansions, I wore Doubting Thomas's robes. I longed for tangible evidence—blueprints and movie trailers—of what happens beyond this decades-long struggle of learning lessons too late. Heaven's architectural plans never arrived in my mailbox, but I did see glimpses of its mysticism in people's lives—and deaths.

In that early work as a Christian minister, theologian, and hospital chaplain, I learned the psychological and physiological processes of dying, the variations and nuances, from start to finish.

I also learned that modern medicine aids in a more comfortable, peaceful transition (for most of us working in hospital or hospice care). But what frightened me, and still squeezes the air from my chest, are the boundaries of our lifetimes and the obscurity of what comes after.

Before my chaplaincy, when I remembered that loved ones die and I will die, I used to melt into a puddle of tearful blubbling because I wouldn't *see, touch, or hear* from my loved ones again in this life. Until I began writing this book, I hadn't learned to befriend that normal, paralyzing fear; or the afterlife's mystery; or the deep, visceral grief we can feel when the door firmly shuts, and we are left behind to sort out its ending.

Because we are all in our various processes and understandings, this book is as much for me as it is for others. It is about learning to face death's reality in order to live our fullest lives—and ensuring that, when the time does arrive, we make it meaningful.

Death as a Meaningful Destination, Not a Dreaded Landmark

Perhaps the starting point means taking a step to embrace death as *real*, acknowledging it, and—heaven forbid—*talking* about it. How might we then learn practical skills, such as what to expect when loved ones die (and when we die), how to grieve, and what religion and spirituality can teach us about death and coping? How might we live with the end in mind?

When my mother was diagnosed with a sudden, terminal illness, both my brother and my husband were steadfast companions in sorting it all out. But what unspooled from there was a progression through the deep lessons I'd learned from being the death chaplain—understanding what it means to be “terminal,” and understanding that everyone dies. These are the lessons I hope to share in this book, lessons that transform our journey, helping us to live fully awake in the now; lessons concerning:

1. what death is, why we avoid death, and how we can change our mentality about death;
2. what various religious and spiritual perspectives say about death and lightening the path; and

3. how we can plan for what the Catholic tradition calls a “good death”—employing rituals to help loved ones and ourselves in these transitions.

Finally, this book is meant to encourage each reader to do what may seem impossible in this moment: embrace death as a meaningful destination on the journey, rather than a dreaded landmark.

Laughter and Tears Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Don't worry, though, this book isn't a downer; it is not about hopelessness or helplessness. It's about empowering us to embrace reality and to give ourselves and our loved ones a sense of ownership—of acceptance—of our deaths, which subsequently increases our gratitude for our lives.

Yes, death can be devastating and sad. It can also be outright funny and curious and adventuresome; you'll meet stories across the spectrum in this book, and I hope you'll find yourself laughing out loud—even as you ask some of life's, and death's, biggest questions. Lean into that, too. This journey will be an uncovering and uplifting of what your soul already knows to be true so that your head and heart can catch up.

How to Use This Book

This book gives its reader space and tools to reflect on the hard questions we all ask. Alongside its narratives, *Dessert First* provides religious, spiritual, and practical resources on death and grief.

Depending on how you process living and grieving, the book offers different ways to respond and process that grief—be it journaling, talking, deeper reflection, or taking action.

Ultimately, this book is an invitation—to cease our unrealistic thinking that airline safety videos will ease the sting of the word *terminal*. My hope is that, over time, we'll all learn to embrace that inevitability: we are all terminal. I hope you'll let these chapters be your guide for preparing for that precious end—and living your best life until it arrives.

Whatever your situation—whether you feel devastatingly alone in your exploration and grief, or feel supported and

comforted in it—my aim is to have the stories, reflections, and notes in this book help you on your journey. Know you are not alone in the grief, questions, wonderings, and life journeys. I invite you to consider this book your companion.



Chapter 1

Ashes to Ashes Road Tour

*"[Y]ou are dust
and to dust you shall return."
—Genesis 3:19*

*"A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last."
—Job 14:1–2, NRSV*

*Death is certain for all who take birth.
—Bhagavad Gita, Chapter Two, Text 27*

"We'll buckle her in," undertaker Jake said, placing my mother's ashes in the passenger seat of my Honda Civic. "Just so she's safe," he added.

A slender, one-of-a-kind mortician, his effusive tenderness emerged from under a shoe polish mustache pasted under gaunt cheeks. His hair matched his suit, shiny and synthetic, as if he'd just emerged from the set of a CSI franchise.

Undertaker Jake offered his bereavement a bit too eagerly, embodying a modern paraphrase of Shakespeare's "The lady doth protest *too much*." He was meek—until he wasn't. My brother, Ron, and my husband, Fred, considered this undertaker as two

characters (after some experiences with him): gentle Jake, polite with customers in the *front* of the house, and gritty Jake—an expletive-ranting mortician hurling demands on behalf of the deceased in the back of the house.

We had evidence for our claim. After all, people get to know their funeral home associate when they've spent three hours cloistered in a conference room with him, surrounded by ceramic urns and "Remember Me" plaques.

After we shook hands and Jake offered his condolences, he plopped a thick folder of death paperwork on the table, and began. "What was your dear mother's *precious* name?" He whispered, pulling a pen from his suit pocket.

"Judith Wade Trent," we said.

"J-u-d-i-t-h," he spelled, *slowly*, as if he could no longer recall the speedy efficiency of his Yankee roots. In the 60 seconds it took to write six letters, I knew we'd be there all day.

"Date of birth?" he asked, barely audible.

Mom's membership in the Silent Generation elicited a monologue of military stories of war and woebegone days...

Later, he further interrupted his tortoise writing to interject a point of care:

"I treat your Mom like my own—if I see anything going on out back, well, aye—oh—aye—I'll let 'em have it."

What, precisely, would be going on "out back"? I didn't want to know.

We discovered his pristine mortuary ethics emerged from a complex family system. We also learned that he is "skinny enough" to do embalming.

"I can get back there where the other guys can't," he offered, proud. Was there no room at the mortuary to give a loved one a proper, roomy embalmment?

We passed on the embalming.

"They'll call you as she's going in," he said.

In, as *in* the cremation oven.

"Yes, please," I said, regretting my affirmative as soon as I uttered it.

Death, I had learned, churned the oddest sequence of events, feelings, and conversations. One minute, the three of us had been sitting at our dying mother's bedside, witnessing the thin

space between here and eternity; then, in the next blink, we were spelling her name for a death certificate. One was profound; the other mundane. Months later, it occurred to me that this was death's constitution: the mystical transcendence of the human body, and the reality of being a human body. How could such meaningful, universal moments smack against such logistics? "Oh well, that's life in a beer barrel," Mom used to say whenever the sacred slammed into sensibility.

When we came to page five, Undertaker Jake asked if we'd like to see our mother. I nodded to Ron.

"Just to make sure she's dead," I whispered. "Seriously."

He accepted dutifully, because he's a wonderful big brother and a medical doctor.

"We'll get her all ready," Jake whispered, hand to his heart, disappearing like a vampire to the back of the house, where I imagined he rattled off orders to the team that they'd better make this lady look good, *or else*.

I drank Keurig cocoa while my brother and husband perused memorial merchandise and choked on coffin prices. We decided on a cardboard cremation box, an inexpensive sunset scattering box, and two silver urns the size of nesting dolls.

Jake re-emerged and led Ron to the dimly lit viewing room, where a screen separated them from Fred and me. Two minutes later, Ron returned, bringing a professional declaration of death.

"Dane, you gotta see her," he added. I wasn't certain. "She's beautiful," he assured. I followed him like I was four years old again, trusting my big brother not to lead me astray. We stood together and viewed our mother, stunning and angelic, laid peacefully in a temporary coffin, a euphoric sleep resting over her. Her cheeks were bursting with color, and her lips were pressed in her natural smile. The mauve prayer shawl a friend knitted hugged her chest, her arms draped gracefully over it. Fred's gift to her—a Hindu tulsi wood-beaded necklace—was wrapped around her right wrist; a Protestant glass-beaded prayer bracelet draped her left hand. They were symbols of the 48 hours of hospice vigil we'd just kept with her, representing Fred's Hindu and my own Christian traditions. Ron had been right: the three of us agreed that, throughout her life, we'd *never* seen her look so joyful as she did in death.