

Phyllis Tickle faces death as she enjoys life: 'Dying is my next career'

by [David Gibson](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

Phyllis Tickle has written more widely about the contours of American faith and spirituality than most in the past generation. And now, at 81, she's working on her own final chapter.

On January 2, the day her husband of six decades, Sam, succumbed to a long and debilitating illness, Tickle found herself flat on her back with a high fever, "as sick as I've ever been" and racked by "the cough from hell."

The fever eventually subsided, but the cough wouldn't let go. When she visited the doctor in April, the diagnosis was stage IV lung cancer that had spread to her spine. The doctors told her she had four months to live, maybe six.

"And then they added: 'But you're very healthy so it may take longer.' Which I just loved!" she said with her sharp laugh.

In 2008, with *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, she probed how a new and vibrant Christianity is recovering elements of the past and carrying them into the future. She continued to develop that theme in a 2013 book, *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy Is Shaping the Church*. She has yet more to say on that, cancer permitting.

"Tickle has earned her place as one of the modern spiritual masters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries," wrote Jon Sweeney, her friend and occasional collaborator, in the introduction to an upcoming selection of Tickle's writings in Orbis's Modern Spiritual Masters series. She has relentlessly tried "to come to terms with the essentially and elusively spiritual in the world about her."

Tickle started radiation treatment on May 21, mainly in an effort to forestall the possible collapse of her spine.

"At 81 you figure you're going to die of something, and sooner rather than later," she said, sitting at the kitchen table in her home on a 20-acre farm in Lucy, Tennessee. "I am no more afraid of dying than I am of, I don't know, drinking this

coffee.”

She pointed to her mug, which was actually filled with Postum since she has had to give up caffeine.

“Am I grateful for this?” she said. “Not exactly. But I’m not unhappy about it. And that’s very difficult for people to understand.”

Tickle had a near-death experience at age 21, she said, resulting from an experimental drug she was given to try to prevent a miscarriage. In the middle of the night, she stopped breathing; her husband, a medical student at the time, revived her and got her to the hospital.

“I was like a gargoyle up in the corner of the hospital room,” she said. “And I remember to this day looking down and watching Sam beat on me again and screaming for the nurses, and the nurses coming with the machines and the whole nine yards. And then the ceiling opened and I just went out the corner and into a tunnel, which was grass all the way around. Ceiling, sides, the whole thing.

“And I went to the end of the tunnel to this incredible—people call it ‘the light.’ I guess that’s as good a name as any. But an incredible peace, a reality, unity, whatever. The voice, which was fortunately speaking in English”—she laughs—“said, ‘Do you want to come?’ And I heard myself saying, ‘No, I want to go back and have his baby,’ meaning Sam.”

She turned around and went back down through the hole in the ceiling and into her body.

“You’re never afraid of death after that,” Tickle said. “You don’t invite that kind of thing. It’s a gift. It’s not like you can prepare for it or anything. It’s part of the working material you’re given.”

Tickle had been mulling over a book on aging before her diagnosis, and she hopes to finish it.

“I hope it won’t be another model, ‘this-is-how-we-die’ thing,” she said. “If it veers over to that I’ll be the first to burn the manuscript. Or pull the plug.”

She is also assembling a collection of her poems.

“I would have been a poet had I had the skill or the gift,” she said. “What I have is a very little skill and a very moderate gift.”

And she’s also chewing on another “big picture” book on what she sees as a “rapprochement between Western Judaism and emergence Christianity.” Musing on the idea starts her on a riff on the transformation of religion after the Reformation, which she then links to the recent Pew Forum survey that showed Christianity losing ground in the United States as the number of unaffiliated nones has grown.

“Christianity isn’t going to die!” she said. “It’s almost going through another adolescence. And it’s going to come out a better, more mature adult.”

For Tickle, the most interesting cohort in the survey is not the usual “spiritual but not religious,” but the “neither spiritual nor religious.”

“There is an honesty in their conversation and self-understanding that, it seems to me, makes them much more open to conversation and analysis and perhaps, ultimately, to persuasion than is true for other groups,” she wrote in a follow-up e-mail. “I may be wrong, but I am, as I say, fascinated.”

As she reflected on her life, Tickle said she has always seen herself as a listener. An inner voice has told her what to do. And she has always obeyed it.

“Just like I’m told to do this,” she said, referring to terminal illness. “Which is why it doesn’t bother me. The dying is my next career.

“You can call it whatever you want to. Spooky? I hate the word *mystical*. It has such a cachet now. Like an exquisite and high-priced perfume. But if that makes me a mystic, so be it.” —Religion News Service

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