

As I Lay Dying, by Richard John Neuhaus

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a chronicle of the Bundren family's odd journey to bury wife and mother Addie, is notable for its innovative use of narrative chronology, stream of consciousness and multiple perspectives. In *As I Lay Dying: Meditations on Returning*, Richard John Neuhaus uses intriguingly similar techniques to chronicle his serious brush with death and his recovery seven years ago.

This brief but substantive testimony to the complexities of mortality and the Christian promise of eternal life reveals a self different from the public face of the Lutheran-turned-Roman Catholic priest/theologian whose trademark is acerbic commentary. Here we have the gripping reflections of a profoundly weakened and passive patient in a hospital intensive-care unit. The threat of imminent demise hovered over the head of this self-declared "control freak" for a considerable period of time, and his encounter with death changed him.

Neuhaus deftly challenges common wisdom, and the too readily accepted insights of Freud, Tolstoy, Kübler-Ross and others. Previously skeptical about accounts of near-death experiences, Neuhaus had a dramatic near-death visionary disclosure that became indelibly etched on his consciousness. It brought comfort and consolation so that "I remember where I have been, and where I will be again, and where we will all be. . . . I have been to a good university, and what I have learned . . . is that, in living and in dying, everything (for me) is ready now," he writes. This bracing spiritual account from a rather unexpected source is worth digesting in measured doses.