

Graceful landing

by [Arthur W. Frank](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

My ultimate compliment to a book is that it made me forget I had a review to write and convinced me to read it for pure pleasure. And more: that I need what the author has to say. Philip Simmons is a middle-aged writer who, because he has ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or motor neuron disease, as many ill people and medical dictionaries prefer to call it), left his university job in the Midwest and moved back to New Hampshire, where he grew up. Simmons never writes the full name of his disease, perhaps because he wants illness to be, in a Zen sense, nothing special: "just a particular form of the universal human malady." Though he does not discuss ALS much, it is the ever-present background to how he experiences his family, his small town (including the town dump, which he memorably describes), and a variety of sacred texts.

Most people with ALS die within a decade--though some, notably physicist Stephen Hawking, do not--and that prospect makes Simmons too serious about his writing to think much about pleasing reviewers. Reviewers want a clearly summarizable argument, some one-line quotations that sound good out of context, and a few easily described flaws. Simmons gives us a collection of essays that take no overarching position, and many of which began as talks to church groups. He explores and savors life, treasured for each moment. "Life is not a problem to be solved," he observes.

I did note some quotable one-liners: "Wanting human suffering to fit some divine plan is like wanting to fly an airplane above tornado wreckage and see that it spells out song lyrics or a cure for acne." But good as that is alone, it's better in its context of a discussion of Job. Or this: "The world itself is the child's cathedral, and so it may be for us adults, if we can relearn our childlike openness to it." Again the pleasure of reading this is greatest in context, at the end of Simmons's account of his boyhood moonlit sledding adventure--and that in turn is embedded in the context of a reflection on emptiness.

As to flaws, Simmons's book is all about them: his increasingly flawed body works as a metaphor for all the vulnerabilities that flaw human lives. Flaws, however, are not something to be corrected; they deserve our wonder at how necessary they are to creation. Simmons's quotation of Wallace Stevens may be as close to a summarizable argument as he presents: "The imperfect is our paradise."

Having grown up in New England myself and hiked the White Mountains that Simmons loves, I was transported by his evocations of land and place, of woods, bugs and mud (another powerful metaphor). And *Learning to Fall* gave me the pleasure of spending time with Simmons himself, who comes across as a quiet fellow, though writing a book engages one in a nonstop monologue. Simmons's monologue encourages frequent interruption, and I often stopped and thought about my own life, seeing it through the lens of Simmons's experiences.

I paused longest at Simmons's nonrhetorical question, "But who among us gets to dictate the terms of his or her good fortune?" Heavy words from a man with young children who can no longer type but must use voice-activated software, and whose speech is becoming slurred by the gradual muscle wasting of ALS. Can we live our lives without believing that we can dictate the terms of our happiness? Simmons draws on Jesus, the Buddha, Marcus Aurelius and Meister Eckhart, among others, to help his readers free themselves from this oppressive illusion of control. That freedom is his gift.

Simmons writes about the fragile everyday stuff that can be most easily spoiled by being turned into prose, yet he leaves me all the more loving what he describes. He reminds me that love begins, and sometimes ends, by carefully attending--the kind of attention from which busyness distracts us. He restores me to attending to the world as it deserves and as I deserve. The last word can go to another great New England writer, Robert Frost, whose line about a tree that has fallen in one's path Simmons quotes. It falls "just to ask us who we think we are." Simmons belongs to a genealogy of time-limited witnesses to life's goodness and vulnerability, come to ask us who we think we are. Though Simmons lives deep in the woods, in a house he and his family continue to build, even contemporary Thoreaus have Web sites, and Simmons's is www.learningtofall.com.