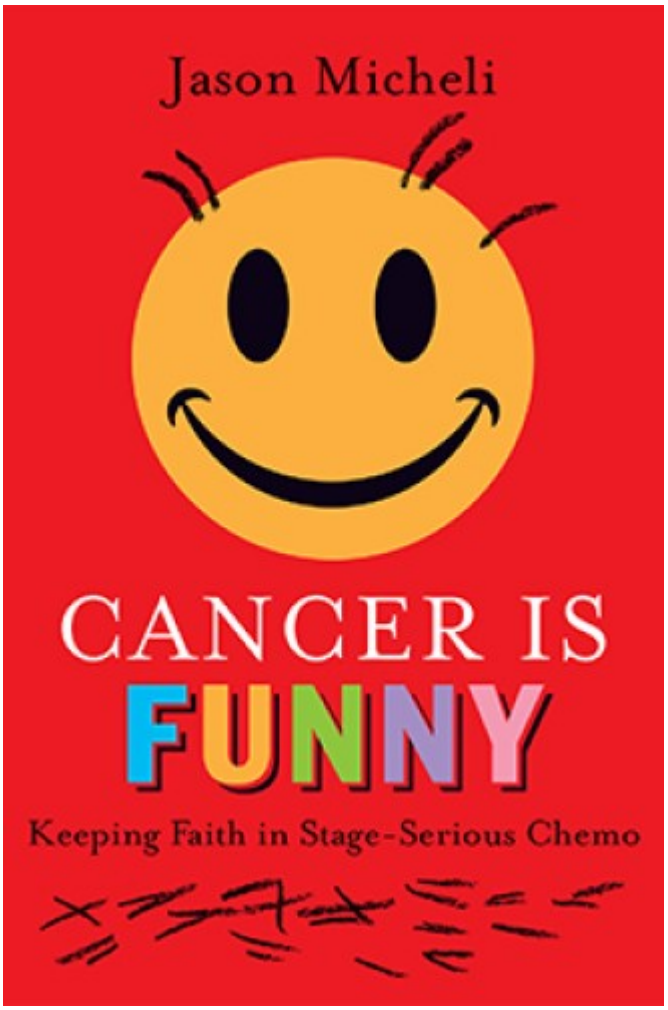
Laughing at what’s not funny

Like Jason Micheli, I have incurable cancer. His book helped me find humor in it.

by Deanna A. Thompson in the May 10, 2017 issue

In Review



Cancer is Funny

Keeping Faith in Stage-Serious Chemo

By Jason Micheli
Fortress,

This book arrived at my doorstep the day after a friend of mine died of pancreatic cancer—the third friend in six months to die of the disease. What a laugh, that cancer.

My husband winced involuntarily when he caught a glimpse of the title printed in multicolored letters just below a big smiley face emoji with its hair falling out. In our ninth year of communally living with my very own version of stage-serious, incurable cancer, it felt more than a little sacrilegious to have *this* emoji and *that* sentiment adorning my bedside table.

This may help explain why, when I cracked open *Cancer Is Funny*, I wasn't smiling.

Less than three pages in, I came to the heading "Cancer F@#$ing Sucks" and considered not hating the book. A few sentences later, the author, a thirtysomething pastor, husband, and father of two young sons, admits, "When I first found out I had stage-serious cancer, I thought my family and I had laughed for the last time." With that, Jason Micheli starts to gain my trust.

I'm still in the introduction when I meet up with Micheli's reflections on how in the hell cancer might be funny. Pitching his defense at skeptical readers like myself, he rehearses all the things he *doesn't mean*. He's not referring to the "ha-ha" register we use to avoid telling hard truths, nor to the humor that masks shame or insecurities. "No, when I say cancer is funny," Micheli writes, "I mean that your pretense falls away, right away with your pubic hair."

Something—surely not a laugh—catches in my throat.

Micheli then turns to the kind of funny he *is* talking about. He invokes ancient categories and sages who say that comedy is tragedy combined with the luxury of time. He is keenly aware that for all too many cancer patients, there's no such thing as the luxury of time. Which means there's little opportunity to laugh while in the throes of cancer.

Even so, Micheli invites us to consider that when you're living with stage-serious cancer, time may also condense, and laughter may become possible in ways it wasn't before: "Who you are and who you've been and who you might (not) be are

always ever before you, and as crowded as that sounds, it creates room for laughter. For when you don't know if tomorrow will come, there's no need to save face for it."

So laugh he does. And despite my personal vendetta against cancer—or perhaps because of it—I find myself laughing along with him. Out loud. Until tears stream down my smiling face.

The pastor with cancer talks about how his journey requires more of him than he could have expected, including trading in his collar for a pair of parishioner's shoes. He's forced into the role of patient, that very sick guy in the hospital in need of visiting, that young man in the prime of life asking existential questions about God's relationship to a very lousy diagnosis.

Micheli has a remarkable ability to capture the everydayness of life in the "crucible of cancer." His attention to the tastes (of chemically charged vomit) and the sounds (of the drill going in his backside for a bone marrow biopsy) alongside the emotional upheaval paints the most compelling portrait of life eviscerated by cancer I've ever read.

What's more, Micheli's is the most vivid accounting I've seen of how having cancer impacts a man's—or, more accurately, *this* man's—sense of himself as a man. We've gotten to the part of the review where I tell you that Micheli is very practiced at humor involving the male anatomy. He gives readers ample opportunity to appreciate his own estimate of his virility and his in-shape precancer body.

While there may have been more than enough male swagger in these pages for my taste, it sets readers up to feel as gut-punched as Micheli does when, with a knit cap covering his bald head, cheeks flushed with "chemo glow," and muscles atrophying from four rounds of chemo, he is mistaken for a woman when ordering a pink sangria for his wife at a concert he's psyched himself up to attend with his family. He's embarrassed "not only to be mistaken for a woman, but to be taken, as I surely must've been, for a homely one. *Was I*, I wondered in those languid seconds, *even masculine-looking enough to pass as a butch woman? And did reflecting on such questions*, I pondered, *make me vain?*"

He doesn't leave it there. We're right with him as his "anxiety turned to dread" and "dread to panic" as he's called out for being "neutered" of his former self. Micheli's wonderment at how none of the getting-through-cancer brochures prepared him for how cancer would "mess with my sense of myself as a man," exposing a lacuna in

resources aimed at helping those of us with cancer grapple with what we'll lose. But without falling for the "cancer's worth it because it's made me a better person" trope, he knows these experiences have changed him; "without feeling embarrassed," he writes, "I can now cry."

That Micheli draws readers deeply and firmly into the "parishioner's shoes" of life with cancer illustrates not just his pastoral heart but also his theology. The heart of the gospel message is not that God became human, he writes, but that God became Jesus. He's not interested in theologies that counsel comfort because God shared in some generic thing called "human experience," just as he's not interested in a generic experience of having cancer. For all of us whose lives are shaped by the conviction that God became incarnate in a first-century Jew, it's "the distinctive, particular ways we apply his unique story to our own" that link us.

The part of Jesus' story that Micheli is drawn to amid life with cancer is Jesus' death. Cancer handed him lots of opportunities to remember that in baptism we are ushered not just into the life of Christ but also into his death. The unique particularities of each of our sufferings with cancer "are ways we live out, live up to, our baptism."

Life with cancer also heightens Micheli's conviction that grace isn't just an undeserved gift, but "a gift you didn't know you needed until you received it." Cancer is funny, Micheli insists, in the way it has helped him see what the church actually is: a group of people living into their baptisms, dispensing grace to real people facing their own non-generic crucibles, like their collarless pastor in a parishioner's shoes.