Living and leading from our mortality

“Yearning for life is a part of what it means to be human.”

a conversation between Kate Bowler and Luke A. Powery

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Luke A. Powery and Kate Bowler (Image taken from video courtesy of Jeb & Company)

This article is excerpted from a conversation Bowler and Powery held last month for Duke Divinity School alumni to view online.

Kate Bowler: What has leading been like in this season? I know it’s a stupidly big question.

Luke A. Powery: You know, I don’t think of myself as a leader. I’m a human being—who loves people and loves God and is helping to navigate a community through this time. I’ve found myself to be an encourager, a cheerleader, someone to bring a sense of calm and maybe a balm when it’s needed, a sense of joy, of life.

I've had loved ones die during this pandemic, not due to COVID but just normal life. Life is still happening. But to have a sense of my own humanity—which is humility, *humus*, right close to the ground, from the earth—that's where I think leadership takes place during this time.

In some ways, the masks we're all wearing are a visual sign of our mortality, which I think could be a helpful sign for the church.

Bowler: We're all wearing our finitude.

Powery: We're all wearing our finitude, and that theology is not about morality, which is what we hear so much. It's about our mortality. I have been attempting to be a mortal leader.

Bowler: That ability to lean into people's need and pain and fear requires getting really comfortable with loss. It sounds like this year had a lot of loss in it.

Powery: It's about being grounded in our humanity and in the reality of what that means. It's like your book title, *No Cure for Being Human*. For you, what does it mean to be human?

Bowler: Before, I connected most with the idea that being human was agency, choice, the ability to make decisions and make tomorrow different than today. All that sounds hilariously American for a Canadian, but I always had this desire to be a human bulldozer, and when I couldn't act in the world, I always felt really stuck—and less myself.

And then I had the sort of luck that would not allow me those delusions anymore: a stage-four cancer diagnosis. I had thought I was a third of the way through my life. I loved the idea that everything was all possibility. And then when it wasn't, I honestly don't think I knew what being a human looked like. It felt like failure.

Part of this more recent season has been moving from cancer as a crisis to a feeling that life is a chronic condition. And if I'm going to have that kind of theology, my prayer needs to forever be both for my own pain and for the pain of the world. *God, let me see things how they really are.*

For me, that feels exactly like finitude: to be able to see the beauty and also the brokenness, to maybe widen that aperture a bit rather than just being on this superhighway of agency.

Powery: How should this notion of our finitude shape our living?

Bowler: Part of it is just trying to figure out what hope feels like if we know there's still an ending. I got really stuck on that, because I had thought that hope was a little bit more like optimism, or maybe even that hope has to always just be about me. *But seriously, Pastor, tell me my life is going to work out.* I almost want to beg you for it.

Right after I was diagnosed, you and others came to the hospital to visit me. The feeling of my colleagues and pastors praying for me and singing and being willing to be embarrassing before the Lord—that was really beautiful to me. To feel the Holy Spirit so intensely—like love, actual love—when I knew it wasn't going to be okay. It was shocking.

Over the last couple years, I've wondered if it makes me less faithful or less hopeful or a bad Christian if I want, want, want. The more I live, the more I want to live. One of the great questions to me is this: Can we accept our finitude if we never feel like we're done?

Powery: I think the yearning for life is a part of what it means to be human. If I think about your reference to the Spirit, I think *breath.* The Spirit is life, always breathing. In and out, always more.

"The masks we're wearing are a visual sign of our mortality— a helpful sign for the church."

Ezekiel 37 is a strong trope in my theology of preaching. It's breath—Spirit—all over that valley of dry bones and death and contamination. The dry bones are a stark image, but the breath is just as strong. "You shall live," we hear over and over, with the imagery of the open graves and the resurrection singing.

Maybe God is right in that yearning for life. It's really God drawing us, calling us forward for more.

Bowler: Yes. Always more.

You study lament, and the proximity of lament to joy. I feel the tragedy of this all the time when it's the love that's the hard part. It's the way we love our kids: nothing seems possible if we're not able to be there for them. If we are always headed toward an end—if our days are numbered—then what does it mean to try not to be

people of fear?

At least for me, it's felt more and more true that fear is always simultaneously this language of love. It's always showing me exactly what I am scared to live without.

Powery: I think fear might be the top trait for a disciple.

Bowler: What? Really?

Powery: I know we say don't fear, and yes, perfect love casts out fear. But the disciples are afraid *after* Jesus calms the storm. And then in the Gerasene demoniac story, when the calm comes the people are afraid. We see it over and over again, and maybe it's in one sense what we need to overcome. But we shouldn't be surprised that we're fearful people. It's just part of what it means to be human.

There's a haunting line from Nicholas Wolterstorff's memoir *Lament for a Son*, about losing his son in a tragic accident. He writes, "Every lament is a love song." I think our laments are expressions of love for people, or maybe love for life. All of the laments of this pandemic are a love song for something more beautiful.

It might be warped, wrapped up in the prosperity gospel and American exceptionalism and all of these things, but I think a generous reading is that, ultimately, people yearn for love, to be loved and to express love.

Bowler: I like the idea that this is a big love story. Sometimes it's for the people we were or the bodies we had or the relationships we had. And sometimes it's for the things that just never were, and that becomes hope for something that might yet be.

"Is this how I want to spend all of these numbered days? Will it ever feel done?"

The title *No Cure for Being Human*—in my life, sometimes that's about cancer or fear of not being my kid's mom, the really intense stuff. And then sometimes it's about how there's no cure for all of this love and desire for beauty and that beautiful, endless hunger for more.

Powery: Your book's subtitle is *And Other Truths I Need to Hear*. What are the truths that we need to hear as a church? And are the lies more popular?

Bowler: My interest in the prosperity gospel became this broad interest in self-help mythologies about how we can fix our life, that life is a problem to be solved. It was

really helpful for me to be able to see it in myself, too: Was I not outraged that I was not going to get my best life now? I had my own versions of these cultural clichés, which are clichés for a reason.

The bucket list was, for me, a really strong form of experiential new capitalism—the idea that a life worth having is one in which things can be numbered and then checked off. I'll just buy this feeling of satiation. Hot air balloons: check.

Looking at the ways we're given these formulas for how to live and how unsatisfying they are gave me an opportunity to just ask myself, Is this how I want to spend all of these numbered days? Will it ever feel done?

One small thing I landed on is that hope isn't what I thought it was: a story about us. Instead it's a story about God that's dropped like an anchor in the future. God is pulling us toward it, and that feels like a someday in which there will be no more tears. That feels truer than my present-to-future perspective.

Another is just that life takes so much more courage than I thought. Because there's no such thing as done, you have to keep reinventing the way you thought you were going to spend this life.

I think people imagine that Christianity is part of the cure to being human and that it'll look and feel a lot like certainty. If you just be the answer man, Luke, then you're going to solve this thing.

Powery: I think as I'm getting older, I'm becoming the question man. Questions are open-ended. Think of Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

"There's a song called 'Jesus Is the Answer.' Maybe Jesus is the question."

In the church, people often just want answers. That's why I like university settings. There are questions. It's experimental. It's been liberating for me. There's a song called "Jesus Is the Answer." Maybe Jesus is the question. When we encounter Christ, he asks us questions, or we have to ask ourselves. What are we really about? What do we really want to be in this world?

The final chapter in your book features your wonderful notion of unfinished cathedrals. Our lives as cathedrals of Christ, always unfinished. It's enough, but never enough. We live in that.

Bowler: We do.

Powery: I'm okay with that ambiguity. For me, it's been liberating. Hope is something that rises out of the valley of dry bones, out of the ashes of despair. J. Alfred Smith has this wonderful quote from a sermon: "Hope is a tiny sprout growing in cracked concrete." It's not what we necessarily expect. It might be just this tiny sprout, and we have the vast devastation of cracks and brokenness all around us, but there's that little thing of beauty, that little sign of hope in the present, not just in the far-off future but hope now.

One thing that stood out to me in your book is all these names, the litany of names, your story and what you've been through woven together with stories of others. It's like they are signposts of hope in your life.

Bowler: Yeah. That's right.

Powery: Do we have eyes to see? Do we have the imagination to see that tiny sprout? It's so very small.

Bowler: One of the great surprises of my life is the way that people are magic. Knowing somebody, getting the opportunity to have the beauty and truth of things reflected back to you, feels exactly like love.

Powery: In your book, you talk about something you call "operation remove applesauce." Someone said the blues is about laughing to keep from crying. I think the Kate Bowler existence has a bluesy kind of nature.

Bowler: Yes.

Powery: The idea of kids using your body like human Kleenex. I was cracking up. What do you see the role of humor to be amid our human suffering?

Bowler: For me, it's the ability to scoot up right close to the cliff. You can feel the upward draft of the truth. For some reason, humor lets us scoot up close to the edge and look over and say something about it. I have found it to be such a wonderful way of practicing being honest when I'm not always sure that I can.

Recently, I was just managing regular terrible stuff, and then I got bit by a copperhead snake and I had to go to the hospital. They started with sentences like, "You probably won't die," and then ten minutes later it was like, "Most people don't

lose a limb.” There was a lot of checking watches.

I laughed the whole time because I couldn’t believe I was back in the same place where I’d almost died multiple times, and laughing just let me be there for a minute longer to see that I’ve got a very sweet nurse marking my leg with a Sharpie to follow the process of the venom. I’ve got this really sweet medical student who appears to be 12; he does not know what’s going on, but he’s very eager to bring apple juice. It lets me be there for just a second to see the humanity of it. I walked away from that situation a couple of days later thinking, *That was a surprisingly positive experience.*

That’s life I guess. That feels a little like life.

Powery: What do you think Christians need to learn about life?

Bowler: There is no placing ourselves up high. No one is clamoring for our cultural attention. We are not the arbiters of fashion and taste that some forms of Christianity have been at different times. We are, I think rightfully, humbled—and way down here, we’ll have a better vantage point about how to live alongside people’s suffering and brokenness.

The reason God says to draw near to the suffering is not that it makes us better people. It’s just because that’s where God is. We’ve got a shocking opportunity now to be humbled. I think we should take it.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “These dry bones.”