



EXCERPT



Room of Marvels

A Story About Heaven that Heals the Heart

November 3, 2020 | \$15, 192 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4688-7

Room of Marvels is a masterful, dream-like tale that speaks to the eternal in the midst of our most painful earthly losses. This expanded edition of the beloved book has a new afterword from James Bryan Smith and a discussion guide for group use. Finding your room of marvels will give you reason to live. Again.

“Hope Is Confidence for the Future.”

“What does grief look like over time?”

That was a question my long-time friend and literary agent, Kathryn Helmers, asked. She went on to say, “I think you should write an afterword that addresses that question. It has been over seventeen years since you wrote *Room of Marvels*. How has your grief changed?”

So with that “writing cue,” I began to think about how my grief has changed over more than a decade and a half. Rich Mullins died in the fall of 1997, and my daughter Madeline died in the spring of 1998. They have both been gone from me for over twenty-two years. My mother died in 2001, so I have learned to live without her for almost twenty years. My father, Calvin Smith, died in 2003, and then my spiritual father, Dallas Willard, died in 2013. In truth, I regularly feel the pain of *all* of these losses. I will come across an old photo album, or a song by Rich will start playing on a Spotify playlist, or someone will quote Dallas, and the pain of the loss is felt once again.

In the book, Tim, the main character, laments, “Grief does not assuage. Mine has not diminished or healed.” This occurs not long after he has lost three dear people. Of course, Tim is really me, and at the time I wrote those words, it accurately described how I felt. But that is not how I feel today. The grief does assuage, and it does diminish in its intensity. And while it is not “healed,” there has been a great deal of *healing*. It feels different over time. The grief that was once crippling becomes a sweeter sort of pain.

I think this is mainly due to living daily and deeply into the magnificent story of the Christian life. As Dallas Willard often said, *hope*, by definition, is not wishful thinking but *certainty* in a good future. *Faith* is confidence for the present, and *hope* is confidence for the future. The older I get and the longer I live into this story, the more certain I become that the end is going to be good. Very good.

Eucatastrophe is a neologism (new word) created by J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*. He put together two Greek words, *eu* (which means good) and *catastrophe* (which refers to destruction) to describe something terrible and wonderful at the same time. It is “the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears.” Tolkien calls resurrection “the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible,” saying that it “produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love.” That perfectly describes how I felt in



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James Bryan Smith is the author of *The Good and Beautiful God*, *The Magnificent Story*, and a number of other books. He serves as the director of the Apprentice Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation at Friends University. A founding member of Richard J. Foster's spiritual renewal ministry, *Renovaré*, Smith serves as a teaching pastor at Chapel Hill United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas.

writing this book and in how I have felt over the years, especially those days when this grand story I live in—through prayer, solitude, Scripture study, sermons, etc.—intersects with my soul. It is within that story that joy and sorrow are reconciled.

And yet . . .

The grief does not end. I no longer feel the weight of these losses that I once felt, but they are still real. And they never go away. And I have learned not to wish them to go away. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great theologian, helped me understand why. I read his words in the bulletin for Dallas Willard's funeral.

There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve even in pain—the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and full the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.

As I sat in that cold folding chair, full of deep grief, it was as if Bonhoeffer was whispering into my downcast soul, saying, "Don't ask for the grief, the sense of absence, to go away. That sense of absence is now your bond with Dallas."

The idea that God does not fill the gap for us was suddenly something I could not be afraid of but embrace. The gap, the grief, the absence I feel to this day from the losses of my dear friend, daughter, mother, and two fathers, has been healing, but is very much alive, and I would not have it any other way. The grief is how I stay bonded to them. But that is just for now. I know—I have certainty based on the very real resurrection of Jesus in my daily life—that I will one day see them again.

—Adapted from the afterword



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