

OSLC Library Book Review:

Marva Dawn (1948-2021)

BEING WELL WHEN WE'RE ILL *Wholeness and Hope in Spite of Infirmary* (2008)

*Audience:* Written for those suffering from (or supporting others with) chronic illnesses and disabilities.

In a time of infirmity, the illness IS one's work. Taking care of all the disciplines that our health problems require IS the other part of the small daily fidelity to which we are called, beside the faithfulness of being attentive to God. We can be well simply by our diligence in being who we are at the moment. -Marva J. Dawn



Marva J. Dawn (PhD, Notre Dame) was a Lutheran theologian, author, educator, and teaching fellow in spiritual theology at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. Some of her books include *Joy in Divine Wisdom*, *The Sense of the Call*, *Talking the Walk*, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, *My Soul Waits: Solace for the Lonely in the Psalms* and *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society*.

In this practical and inspiring book Marva Dawn examines the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, and physical afflictions that people with chronic illnesses and disabilities face on a daily basis. Dawn uses her own personal illnesses and pains as examples throughout the book – her own struggles with chronic illness include diabetes, partial blindness in one eye, a serious injury to her foot that put her in a wheelchair for an extended period of time, breast cancer, chemotherapy after a mastectomy, and a kidney transplant.

Statistics show that 45 percent of U.S. citizens have some sort of chronic illness or condition and that means that more than 135,000,000 people are looking for resources to help them cope. When chronic illness or disabilities come into our lives, we experience a loss of our dreams of well-being and what we anticipated doing in the future. Instead of asking “Why?” Dawn suggests that we consider “What is God doing in the midst of this?” and “Where do I catch glimpses of the Trinity's grace?” Dawn stresses that for the follower of Christ, illness cannot, and should not, be borne alone. This call for community is vital for both the person in illness (as a reminder to seek out relationships with others) and for those who are not ill (as a reminder to look after those who are ill and not let them lapse into isolation). She recommends focusing on our caregivers who are bearers of love and comfort to us in our times of tribulation. The challenge is to move beyond bitterness and lack of trust into letting God be bigger in our lives and putting our adversities into a biblical perspective.

This book offers hope that we can be well when we are ill (which, as Dawn emphasizes, does not necessarily mean “feeling well or doing well”.) Her case for being well is built on the teaching of scripture, particularly the Psalms, which she uses frequently to show where our hope lies. In each chapter, as she reflects on scripture, she encourages the reader to memorize and meditate on scripture and the liturgical prayers of the Church.

One of my biggest problems in dealing with the breakdown of my body is that I keep looking in the wrong direction. I look to the past and the capabilities I once had, instead of looking to the future and what I will someday become in the presence and by the grace of God. Perhaps that is the strongest temptation for you too. Our culture reinforces that mistake by its refusal to talk about heaven, as if it were an old-fashioned and outdated notion. We also intensify the problem by craving present health (as limited as it can be) more than we desire God. -Marva J. Dawn