

ORDINARY LIFE

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ORDINARY LIFE

A Memoir of Illness

KATHLYN CONWAY

The University of Michigan Press Ann Arbor

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The names of some of the people described in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

For David, Zach, and Molly

Foreword

Alexandra Minna Stern, Ph.D.

Howard Markel, M.D., Ph.D.

In the final pages of this book Kathy Conway writes, “During my illness I searched for narratives that would structure my experience and offer me a vision of the future in which breast cancer would end.” *Ordinary Life* is a testament to this search: a poignant memoir that nevertheless pushes against the limits of the illness narrative genre. While telling the emotional and painful story of her cancer diagnosis and treatment for first-stage breast cancer, Conway raises profound questions about what stories illness narratives can convey, whether they are transformative for the author or reader, and the expressive capacity of language.

Ordinary Life is an exquisitely written book that leads the reader through Conway’s encounters and relationships with nurses, doctors, and the larger medical system. Conway does not hesitate to share intimate dimensions of her interior life—her marriage, children, friends, family, apartment, and psychoanalytic practice. But under her seemingly unadorned and candid description of the everyday, Conway captures a depth of experience that is palpable and at times quite raw. Her message is amplified by the devastating diagnosis, successful treatment, and eventual forgetting of an earlier cancer, Hodgkin’s disease, at the age of twenty-six.

When it was first published a decade ago, *Ordinary Life* was well received for these very reasons. Critics found Conway’s unconventional approach to the cancer memoir and her refusal to tell a story of inevitable personal growth or human triumph over adversity to be refreshing. For many readers and for other cancer patients, her book

provided relief. Not everyone's cancer story had to fit the peculiarly American story line of positive self-regeneration. Instead, in retrospect, cancer could be the agonizing, uncomfortable, and frightening experience that it had been. One of the truly original literary moves of *Ordinary Life* is that, even as Conway rejects well-trod autobiographical templates in which to fit her narrative, she struggles out loud to make her story part of an integrated narrative.

Ordinary Life remains a subtle and powerful counter-memoir that we are delighted to reissue and include in our book series Conversations in Medicine and Society. With about eight published titles, our series is bringing diverse books—from medical history, illness memoirs, and physician's stories to health policy monographs—to a broad audience. *Ordinary Life* contributes to this list by offering a unique and valuable perspective on living through cancer. One of the reasons we were so eager to reissue *Ordinary Life* is that it is a memoir replete with conversations. By creating her own storytelling style, Conway engages in soft-spoken yet fierce conversation with some cancer memoirists. At the same time, *Ordinary Life* demonstrates the importance of conversation, be it with a spouse, friend, child, physician, or stranger, in the navigation of cancer treatment. Finally, not one to shy away from frank self-reflection, Conway asks a great deal of herself in this memoir, searching for an original set of coordinates that she can recognize as authentic to her experience.

Ordinary Life prompts readers to reflect on the stories they tell about themselves when they are ill or suffering from a physical malady. We hope you read this moving memoir about cancer in the inquisitive and determined spirit in which it was written.

Preface to the Paperback Edition

When *Ordinary Life* was first published most stories about illness were told as narratives of triumph. They depicted people battling their disease; remaining optimistic; and, in the end, expressing gratitude for their illness as an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. As I struggled through chemotherapy for breast cancer while caring for my young family, I could not manage this transformation. I was cranky, angry, and ungrateful. I wrote *Ordinary Life* to tell the untriumphant story of how illness left me feeling frightened, alone, and without the emotional resources to deal with this threat to my life and my family.

I feared, however, that people would find my book too depressing or would judge me for not rising above my difficulties. Neither happened. The reviews of *Ordinary Life* were positive and enthusiastic, and the book was chosen for the Rose Kushner Award. Many people went out of their way to express their appreciation to me for writing my story. Some people newly diagnosed with cancer insisted that ignoring stories like these did nothing to diminish their fear of what might happen. Family members of people who were ill thanked me for helping them understand their loved ones' experience. Even those who felt less disrupted by their illness found much of my experience familiar.

My fears about the reaction to *Ordinary Life* reflected my awareness of our cultural reluctance to acknowledge illness, a reluctance that has only deepened in the last decade. There is still very little room in our society for illness and disability. The premium placed on perfecting one's body creates an uncomfortable environment for those whose bodies are damaged by illness or disability, financial and other limits on the availability of health care represent our societal unwillingness to address our growing health

needs, and the continued reassurance from self-help gurus that the proper behavior and attitude can forestall or cure all illness minimizes the challenge the ill and disabled face. Even as our population ages and most of us are dealing with illness in ourselves or our loved ones, our often impersonal and increasingly strained health care system allows little opportunity for the serious conversation many of us desire about how to live with pain, physical limitation, the daily grind of illness, and the fear of death. Most of us understand there are things in life we cannot control, and we long for a more honest grappling with how devastating illness can be.

Fewer memoirs of illness that deal with the more difficult aspects of illness have been published of late. The market continues to be dominated by self-help manuals and uplifting stories of triumph. Hopefully this will change. In a culture that denies the reality of physical and emotional illness we need stories of people and their families who face the disruption, fear, and loss that illness entails. These stories contribute to a badly needed conversation about the challenge of living with illness or disability.

As I reread *Ordinary Life* I realize I could not write this story now. As my children move enthusiastically into adulthood and my husband and I busily engage with work, family, and friends, I can recall the outline of my experience with breast cancer but not the substance or feel of it. Perhaps this is the luxury of having an illness that plays itself out as an acute episode. Nonetheless, *Ordinary Life* represents for each member of my family a part of our life together. As we encounter illness in ourselves and those close to us, it is humbling to recall the strains illness placed on us but encouraging to remember the very human ways we stumbled together through it all.

Kathlyn Conway
2006

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