

"You are as alive as anybody else"

By [Janet Potter](#)

June 18, 2014

If you've heard of *The Fault in Our Stars*, the recently released movie based on John Green's bestselling book, you've probably heard that it's about teenagers with cancer. And while this is true—the main characters, Gus and Hazel, meet in a teenage cancer support group—one of the movie's greatest triumphs is not letting the characters be defined by their cancer.

Green spent six months as a volunteer chaplain at a children's hospital after college, when he was considering becoming a priest. Although he claims to have been an awful chaplain, *The Fault in Our Stars* is in part a reflection of what he learned. The experience left him with the distinct impression that we misunderstand and therefore mistreat the terminally ill.

When I saw Green speak last fall, he said he was tired of books and movies about sickness in which "the sick people only exist to teach healthy people lessons." Sick people usually die in that type of book, he said, so that their friends and family can learn to appreciate the everyday.

Green doesn't want people who read his book to learn to appreciate the everyday, he said. He wants them to appreciate the complexity of the lives of the people around them, even if (especially if) those people are sick. What surprised him most about his time as a chaplain was that the kids didn't want to talk about how sick they were or how much they'd miss their families. They wanted to talk about crushes and hobbies and their favorite bands.

There's a scene early in the movie, when Gus and Hazel have just met. He asks her, "So, what's your story?"

"I was diagnosed when I was 13," she begins.

He interrupts her: "No, no, no—your real story."

Gus and Hazel's love story is intertwined with the progression of their illness, but it's also distinct from this. Illness at a young age doesn't turn them into ethereal, precocious beings, like Beth March in *Little Women*. (Gus plays video games for hours a day; Hazel obsessively watches *America's Next Top Model*.) They're not suffering from cancer, they're living with it.

Green now spends time talking with young cancer patients a few times a month, either in person or in online video chats. [In a recent \*New Yorker\* profile of Green](#), Margaret Talbot describes how in one of these meetings a 16-year-old boy asked Green what to do about "the distance that can arise between the healthy and the dying." Talbot writes:

Green said that people sometimes built a wall between themselves and those with chronic illnesses, because it was easier for them to think of sick people as "other." He continued, "But if you are alive you are as alive as anybody else. And the full breadth of human existence is available to you. The wall is a lie."