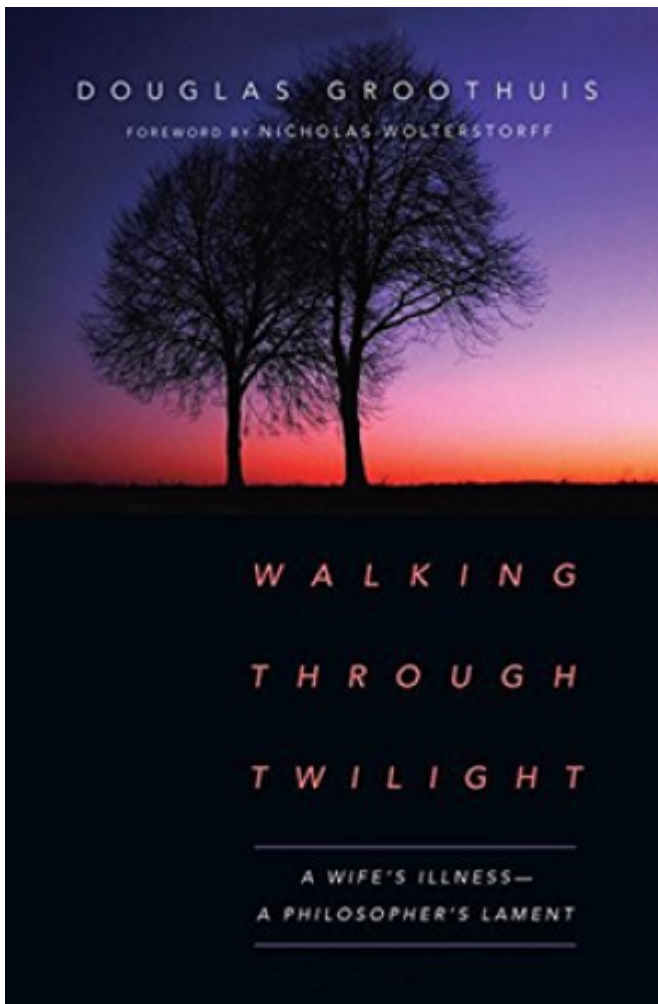


A Christian apologist's memoir of suffering

Telling the story of his wife's tragic illness, Douglas Groothuis combines lament with grace-filled love.

by [Charles Strohmer](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Walking through Twilight

A Wife's Illness— A Philosopher's Lament

By Douglas Groothuis
InterVarsit

This eloquently written memoir begins with a tragic reversal of fortune that came to Douglas Groothuis and his wife, Becky. Its opening lines reveal that Groothuis speaks not only for himself but also for Becky, a once talented author, editor, and member of Mensa who suffers from primary progressive aphasia (PPA), a rare disease that disables the speech and language centers of the brain. In poignantly described scenes—in their home, at a restaurant, in an art gallery—readers meet an embattled couple, one of whom is nearly completely unable to speak or understand what she hears. “She must fight a bloody war,” he writes, “to secure the simplest word.”

Groothuis, who teaches philosophy of religion and ethics at Denver Seminary, does not offer a timeline of his wife's mental deterioration. Instead, he recounts many experiences along what he calls the “darkening footpath.” And he does not mince words. His willingness to be dead honest about his confusion, anguish, denial, anger, and lament is both painfully moving and biblical in its realism. In his introduction to the memoir, Nicholas Wolterstorff aptly captures this tenor when he writes that Groothuis “does not flinch from the painful reality this ravaging disease has wreaked in his life and that of his wife.”

Each chapter bears out this unflinching honesty, as do chapter titles like “Rage in a Psych Ward,” “The Temptation to Hate God,” and “Learning to Lie to My Wife (as Little as Possible).” Under the tyranny of Becky's illness, Groothuis writes:

I learned of depths of sorrow and distress I had never known before. . . .
Little did I know how much psychological agony a human soul could bear. .
. . I learned how it feels to weep often and to cry unexpectedly, even in
public. When my eyeglasses are smudged, and I take them off to look at
them, I often find the marks of tears. I now behold much of the world
through tears and am alert to the tears of others.

Yet this is no woe-is-me memoir. Groothuis writes in order “to offer courage, hope, and meaning.” Scenes throughout the book run from the tender to the tragic, giving

witness to the couple's experiences of grace and meaning on their distressed path. There is the amusement and comfort the couple receives from Sunny, their almost-human goldendoodle. There is the weight of Becky's illness on Groothuis in his classrooms, where he struggles to answer the question: "How can my sufferings be nobly born before students?" A probing chapter reveals the lessons he has learned from lamenting online. And an interlude titled "Resting" is so intimate a sanctuary moment that I wondered if the veil should not have been left drawn across it.

The story is rich in wisdom from Christian writers such as W. H. Auden, G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis. Groothuis also draws clarity and inspiration, often during his darkest moments, from unexpected sources: the essayists Michel de Montaigne and Christopher Hitchens, the music of Pink Floyd and Metallica, and the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Groothuis's greatest solace, however, is found in scripture, especially in the Bible's literatures of lament and wisdom. He digs deeply into these scriptural waters, refusing to rely on cliché or rest in simple explanations. The book of Ecclesiastes is a particular saving grace for him. He writes that it offers "the perspective and language of lament necessary for my own sad sojourn. . . . It is a deep well of tough wisdom for the weary and wasted soul."

Groothuis and his wife also find moments of relief, surprisingly, in simple laughter. "Becky's humor," he writes, "while not so fine-grained as it was, remains more intact than most of her other mental functions." A laugh momentarily "removes us from Becky's memory loss, speech loss, happiness loss, and the near loss of faith." He writes of one such moment, which happened one evening after dinner:

I anomalously left a piece of pie with cream on the dining room table and went to my desk to do some paperwork. (Me doing paperwork can be quite humorous in itself.) Becky soon walked to me with that piece of pie, but without a fork. I said, "Where's the fork?" She looked perplexed and said she didn't know where they were. I went with her into the kitchen, opened the utensil drawer, pointed, and said, "Well, there they all are." We both laughed again.

Grace-giving love is the underlying narrative that runs through Groothuis's story. Because of that love, this memoir will help readers who are beset by real troubles to face them with courage, wisdom, and hope.

