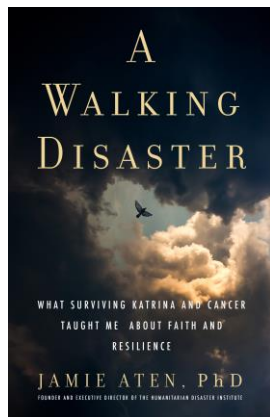


## BOOK REVIEW

# A Walking Disaster: What Surviving Katrina and Cancer Taught Me About Faith and Resilience

By Jamie Aten

Reviewed by Eugene Dykema



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\$15.95

Some stories are immediately compelling, such as “Doctor becomes ill, experiences being a patient, and learns the other side of the story.” Jamie Aten’s story has a plot like that.

Jamie Aten is an academic disaster relief researcher and the founder of a disaster relief research institute. If the academic pattern formed his disposition toward disasters—and there are at least hints that it did—things changed on the day he received the news of his own personal disaster: stage 4 colon cancer. Aten was 35 at the time. His job was now to make sense of his own disaster and its suffering. He tells the story in his memoir, *A Walking Disaster*.

At much of its core, Jamie Aten’s memoir is not about disaster relief. It is about what happens when relief doesn’t come, at least not on hoped-for terms. It is also about the *how* of making sense of disaster. How can one make meaning out of radically altered circumstances?

He tells his struggle in often excruciating detail. In shock at his circumstances, he nevertheless feels somewhat prepared. After all, as a disaster researcher, he “had a box with which I could organize my experience.” He would discover he needed a bigger

box. Fatigue and discouragement would require that he change his mental and emotional models of how to cope with disaster.

One problem is that his disaster doesn’t follow script. Most of the disasters he was familiar with pass quickly, blow over, if you will. He is not prepared for the protracted suffering he will have to endure. Neither his personal strengths nor much of the received wisdom about how to cope with disaster are up to the challenge. He finds that optimism is not enough, that resilience can’t go the distance, and that many of the concepts he learned don’t work. On the latter, he already knows to avoid “critical incident debriefing” and the “just world hypothesis.” But when he tries to apply “second wave cognitive behavioral therapy,” he finds it useless. And awareness of survivor guilt does not prepare him to recognize it when it occurs. “...implementing best practices while weathering a disaster was easier said than done,” he concludes.

He is aware that suffering is far worse if it appears meaningless. The struggle to find meaning, however, is fraught. If gone about the wrong way, the abyss yawns. To seek and fail to find meaning is to be set up for true despair. The path matters. His story walks the edge of that abyss.

His reliance on his strength at the outset means that it is difficult to let go of the role of helper and accept being helped. He finds all gifts to be mixed blessings. He easily becomes indignant over what, in his opinion, is the insensitivity of others. All the usual types of questions occur to him: Where is God? What is he doing? Should I ask God for healing? Does he intervene? But other implicit questions shadow his path. What should I ask for other than relief? What is the greatest asset for recovering from disaster, strength or weakness? Perhaps above all: where is the meaning in the suffering that disaster brings?

It seems that the *how* of finding meaning in suffering is the central issue here. Aten’s story is up close and personal and the detached, academic pattern of making sense doesn’t fare well. Instead, it is the human touch, sometimes literally, that really matters. It is the subjective, not the objective, that rescues him. He

admits that the strength of his lifetime religious path went from emotion, to intellect, and then back toward emotion. By the end of the story, it transcends both.

The book does not finally answer his big questions about suffering. It doesn't really try. In short, he doesn't find answers; he finds God. God gives him not answers, but himself, and it is enough. At both the transcendent and the human level, it is not learning, technique, or strength that answer. It is relationship, as is said, "all the way down," though here "all the way up" might serve better. And the thing that seems to prepare us for relationship is more likely to be weakness than strength.

On a personal level, the story ends relatively well for Jamie Aten. Saddled with a permanent colostomy, he is daily reminded of his wounds. But he is a better person for his experience, and he knows it. He celebrates this with gratitude. And he even celebrates the struggle, in fact lauds it, as the thing that reconciles for us our sometimes-grim reality with hope stretched from now to eternity. In this light, ironically, relief is not the highest good and can potentially come too soon.

But what about professionally? As a researcher he wants to build on what he learned from his own experience. He rediscovers the Christian virtue of fortitude, names it spiritual fortitude, and makes an index number out of it so that "scientific language" can be applied. Is an index number the best way to carry his experience back into his research? I am skeptical. The pattern of the formation of spiritual fortitude in Jamie Aten's life looks radically different to me than can be described in scientific language.

I wonder if research can be conducted on a basis that is more faithful to the holistic, formative process that Aten went through. Formation of his spiritual fortitude was dynamic and evolving, embedded in a context of communal belief and practice. Investigation of what this looks like on a broader scale cannot be contained by an index number approach. If I were attempting this, I would begin by looking in a direction involving the tendencies of both sides of the brain, such as suggested by Ian McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary* (2011). I would also seek to retain more of the contextual and relational such as suggested in Esther Meek's *Loving to Know* (2014). Meek refers to her approach to knowing as covenant epistemology, expressing the depth of the knowing relationship. As the title suggests, love is seen as central to knowing, a proposition that seems to echo Aten's experience.

Through a horrifying experience, Jamie Aten found a path toward what we all seek: the reconciliation of reality with hope. He came away with greater knowledge of God, of himself, of the importance of community, and of the spiritual meaning of disaster. As a memoir, it is a deeply personal account of his journey, but everyone can benefit from looking over his shoulder.

## References

McGilchrist, Ian. 2014. *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Meek, Esther Lightcap. 2011. *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

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