

A Whole New Life Study Guide

A Whole New Life by Reynolds Price

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Plot Summary

Reynolds Price was fifty-one years old when he was struck with a devastating disease. He was a successful and renowned playwright, author and poet. Additionally, he had for years been part of the English Department faculty at Duke University where he taught writing classes and literary classes on icons such as Milton. He lived alone in a spacious, modern house on a large piece of wooded land on the outskirts of Raleigh, NC. Price was close to his brother, Bill, and his family and had many friends from around the country and world. He had fond memories of his deceased parents and childhood. There was really nothing to complain about. Price had led a happy and successful life and was still going strong.

At 51, Price was in relatively good health other than the usual things like farsightedness and creaking knees that one suffers from natural aging. However, Price began to notice strange sensations. He became extremely intoxicated from just one gin and tonic—his drink of choice that usually had little or no effect on him. He was late one day and told his legs to run but they could not. Price began to have trouble walking in a straight line without visibly wobbling. He feared he might have multiple sclerosis and that fear kept him from seeing a doctor for months after the symptoms first appeared. Finally, the symptoms became so severe that he was forced to see his doctor.

After extensive tests, Price was informed by his doctors that he had a tumor that was pencil-thick and that run almost the entire length of his spine. Surgery was his only option. After the day-long surgery, he was told that the tumor was malignant and that only ten percent had been removed, leaving the necessity for more surgery at a later time. Recovery was difficult. Even with the surgeon's careful hands in cutting away the malignant tumor, so many nerve cells were destroyed that these "dead" nerve endings caused excruciating pain to the point of being unbearable. Through more surgeries, more recoveries and more pain, Price finally had to face the reality that he was a paraplegic. Although the pain worsened, his senses that allowed for the mobility of his feet and legs were destroyed and lost forever.

It took Price literally years to recover and adjust to his new life. He was fortunate to have many friends who supported and helped him during these dark times. He was able to deal with his pain most effectively through biofeedback techniques and hypnosis. He overcame his depression brought on by his ordeal by throwing himself back into his work and actually emerged, in his words, a better person and a better and more productive writer. The account of the harrowing challenge that Price was made to face and endure, ends on the happy note that he views his life as a happy one and would not be willing to trade any part of it with anyone else. Every aspect of his life, good and bad, made him who he is.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

By 1983 at fifty-one, Reynolds Price was successful and healthy. He was a very accomplished writer and playwright and long-tenured English professor at Duke University. He lived alone, by choice, in an idyllic setting near a pond, surrounded by woods and wildlife. Up to that time, Price had relatively few physical problems in his life. Recently, he had to deal with a torn ligament in his knee, a waning of sexual desire and far-sightedness—all of which he attributed to the aging process. He'd never been an athlete. As a child, he was always happy when gym was over and never participated in much team play. As an adult, he tried jogging for a short while but soon realized it wasn't for him.

In early 1984, Price experienced a few unusual physical changes. Just one drink of gin and tonic made him extremely intoxicated. In one instance, he was late for an appointment and, though his brain told him to "run," inexplicably he could not. Price began to have trouble walking in a straight line without wobbling. Finally, in May, Price visited a Duke University doctor who, after a check of his reflexes, advised him to immediately enter the hospital for a complete neurological work-up.

After several tests, some very uncomfortable, a myelogram proved to hold some answers. Price learned that his upper spinal cord was swelled and being crowded by an unknown mass and that surgery should be conducted immediately. Price was visited by the neurosurgeon who would operate on him. He explained that there was a cyst, benign tumor or cancerous tumor that was crowding the vertebrae in his spine and causing him to lose sensation. Being told he had no option, surgery was scheduled for the next Monday. The surgery was risk—paralysis or death could result.

Price was allowed to return home for a short visit on Sunday afternoon as long as he returned to the hospital by 5 pm. The next morning came quickly and with his brother and friend, Jeff Anderson, he was wheeled away to an uncertain future. The surgery lasted ten hours after which he could move his arms and fingers but was too groggy to ask any questions. In intensive care, as the anesthesia wore off, Price began to feel the excruciating pain that would become his constant companion.

The tumor was malignant but seemed to be a slow-growing. Price took as much morphine as was allowed and floated through the next few days. Dr. Friedman explained that the malignant tumor was pencil-thick and ten inches long. It was so intertwined with nerves that, during surgery, it was only possible to remove ten percent of it. Price was, of course, very disappointed to learn that after all day in the operating room, he still had most of a malignant tumor down his spine. To battle the remaining malignancy, Friedman recommended immediate and intensive radiation therapy. One good bit of news was that the type of cancer Price had was not one that spread to other areas.



After natural fears and anger and several nights of nightmares waned, Price resolved to fight his disease with all he had. Once upright, Price learned to use a walker and cane but numbness was growing in his legs and feet. Eventually he walked on his own, a little shaky, but without assistance. He passed many hours once he got home listening to classical music which he felt helped prepare him for the battle ahead of him.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Although Price could still get around, the numbness in his lower extremities was increasing. Diana Betz, Price's first physical therapist, visited him at home and worked tirelessly to help and support him. Although a huge challenge lay ahead, Price felt optimistic and prayed daily for God's assistance.

Price learned from the oncologist in charge of his radiation therapy that his tumor was the largest in fifty year of records at Duke Hospital. Price would be receiving the maximum radiation allowed for the spine—four thousand rads which were to be given five days a week for five weeks. The radiologist advised Price that there was a small risk of paralysis from the radiation. If Price had no new symptoms for two years following radiation, he would be considered cured. Price had a vivid dream about being with Jesus at Lake Kinnereth in Israel. In the dream, Jesus forgave him for all his sins and told him he was cured. The dream and its message stayed with Price forever.

Radiation therapy was rugged, totally exhausting Price after each session. He was lucky to have friends drive him back and forth for his sessions. A friend from Florida stayed with him for weeks, making sure he had nutritious, home-cooked meals and physical assistance when needed. The first week of radiation was not as horrible as he had envisioned. What was difficult was seeing the varying stages of emaciation of other cancer patients waiting for treatment, especially the children. As the radiation progressed, however, Price experienced great swelling in his legs and ankles, and spreading numbness, weakness and pain. Price was aware that while the radiation might be killing the tumor, it might be killing him as well. Amazingly, he never had any nausea.

Price wrote a poem to his tumor entitled, "The Eel," which was a humorous salute to its snake-like shape. However, he could not resume work on his novel and had difficulty reading which had always been a favorite pastime. Price began seeing only his closest family and friends which some took as a sign that he was dying and had given up. On the contrary, Price was praying and meditating to strengthen his resolve. When an Indian doctor heard about his meditation practices, she sent him some tapes of Dr. Carl Simonton, who was a pioneer in visualization and self-healing. As the tapes suggested, Price began to visualize his antibodies attacking his tumor. Price felt the tapes benefited him. Although he tried valiantly, the physical therapy was not strengthening his weakened body.

Price received many letters of love and support. Some he could read immediately—others he had to file away for another day sensing their content would be too emotionally draining. Fellow writers like John Updike and Phillip Roth were quick to offer their support. Poet Stephen Spender visited often and writer Toni Morrison sent books and warm reminders of their work together. Leontyne Price called and read a poem that



Price had written for her a decade before. The poem, "The Dream of a House," had passages that were eerily prophetic of his current state. A dying friend called to tell him he would not die from the cancer.

After radiation therapy concluded, the oncologist advised Price that he had all the radiation he could have in his lifetime. The radiation had failed to stop or even slow the tumor, the implication being that paralysis and death were imminent. Price was placed on steroids and other drugs to control the inflammation around his spine; however, the heavy dosages of medication led to Cushing's disease, a condition marked by an oddly swollen face, huge appetite and terrible mood swings. Price was beginning to have spells of deep depression and fears about his condition. He also began to fall quite often. Dr. Friedman unfortunately had no solution other than to perhaps scrape more bone from his vertebrae. Although tempting, Price refused to give up but he knew he could not navigate through life alone. He needed someone with him.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Price mustered the nerve to abandon his pride and asked his cousin Marcia Bennett if he could stay with her and her physician husband, Paul, while he recovered. Marcia stayed with him two weeks before they drove to her home in Goldsboro, NC. Paul was on a missionary trip to Asia for a month. Price could take showers and shave but beyond that, he needed assistance. Price and Marcia enjoyed each other's company, often reading to each other from the Bible.

Price took up his boyhood hobby of drawing. At Marcia's urging, he drew pictures of his vision of his encounter with Jesus at Lake Kinnereth. Over the next several years, Price would draw dozens of sketches of Jesus and that encounter and other renderings of Him. The drawings held much meaning for Price. He began to pray and connect with Jesus again and even started to feel a desire to return to writing.

The physical deterioration that Price was enduring could not be ignored. He fell more often, couldn't lift his feet and more than once had to be lifted from the floor by a strong neighbor and carried to his bed. His stomach muscles could no longer be controlled and overnight his waist grew by ten inches. Marcia had to buy him new, extra-large pants and bigger shoes as his foot size grew from size 9 to size 12 from the swelling. Pain down his spine was a constant. The steroids he was taking caused violent mood swings.

Asking God one dark night how much more he would have to take, he heard a voice say "more." The next morning Price asked Marcia to have her minister come over and give him communion. After the minister prayed with Price and gave him communion, he felt stronger and ready to face the challenge of that one word he heard: more. Price knew that he could not continue to stay with Marcia and Paul although they offered him a permanent home with them. Price had contacted a fellow Duke grad named Daniel Voll who had aspirations to become a writer. He offered to stay with Price at his home in Durham for as long as he needed him. Price took him up on the offer.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Dan and Price settled in, with Dan taking over the downstairs dining room for his office. Dan had bathroom grab bars installed in the bathroom so Price could pull himself up. Dan happily cooked dinner for Price and friends who visited. Price withdrew from steroids and was taking only Tylenol for pain. Diana Betz was still coming for physical therapy sessions. In early November, Price was offered a commission to write a play for Hendrix College in Arkansas. Price tore into the work for the next two months and wrote a story about the relationship between a young man and woman—something the students could relate to. Price actually patterned the story in part after his parent's relationship. During this time, Price's physical health was rapidly declining with growing weakness and numbness and ever present pain.

Price finished the play, "August Snow," that fall and was inspired to resume writing "Kate Vaiden." Although he took a few short ventures out with Dan's assistance, Price was housebound, fearful of leaving almost to the point of agoraphobia. He learned later that many friends thought that his self-imposed isolation was because he was dying from AIDS. Several close friends did die of the infection but that was one condition that Price did not have although the rumor persisted for years.

By April 1985, Price was still uncertain about his future—sometimes feeling strong at other times feeling he was speeding on his way to death. Though Price would literally have screaming fits, Dan remained his loyal, patient friend and always managed to talk him "off the ledge." To get another opinion on his overall condition Price decided to see a new neurologist, Dr. Ross Shuping. After a careful examination, Dr. Shuping told him he was not in good shape for walking and that that condition would not improve. He also told him that he wasn't dying. Dr. Shuping recommended that Price enter a vigorous rehabilitation program where he could learn to live an independent life. Price waited ten weeks before entering Duke's rehab program in Greenville. He was still in denial about the permanency of his condition—correcting the therapists who referred to him as paraplegic. There were two sessions each day, morning and afternoon. Some patients had to learn how to hold a fork in a paralyzed hand while others, like Price, learned wheel chair skills.

Price gained greatly improved upper body strength. He began to appreciate anew the senses of sight, hearing and smelling and the sense of feeling in the skin that was still awake. The unpleasant reality of learning new bathroom skills was a challenge that no one would want to face. Therapy was difficult but made at least bearable by the shared experience with the other patients. Price became extremely close to a young man who had been severely injured in an accident.

Although Price was showing improved strength and learning new skills, his pain had become unbearable. He was examined at the Pain Clinic and placed on methadone.



Over the next two years, he became hopelessly addicted to that drug and others and lived what he termed a "clouded life." Price had to contend with uncontrollable spasms that ranged in severity but could be somewhat contained through exercise. The drugs made him groggy but in most instances, relieved little pain. Price would learn some two years later that solutions to his pain had been available under the same roof where he was receiving therapy.

By summer of 1985, the MRI had become available. It was an innovative tool that took pictures of soft tissue that x-rays would miss. Price's first MRI revealed that his tumor had changed in the thirteen months since his surgery—meaning that it had not grown nor been reduced. The swelling in his lower body and legs was grotesque. He heard of a Jobst extremity pump from a friend and began using it to force fluids back into circulation and keep the skin in the swollen areas healthier.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Once back at home, Price returned to his work and finished his novel, "Kate Vaiden," by that September. Close friends Jeff and Lettie Anderson offered to build a special wing on their new house to accommodate Price. They offered him a home with them the rest of his life. It didn't work out, but Price was eternally grateful for their loving offer. Price and Dan traveled to Hendrix College for rehearsals. It was Price's first plane trip post-surgery. Price enjoyed working with the young students playing the roles he had created. He was so inspired when he returned home, that in a matter of weeks he had the first draft of a new play, the sequel to "August Snow" which was entitled, "Night Dance." A short while later, the first draft of the third in the trilogy, "Better Days," was completed.

Just after Christmas 1985, Price's weakness and spasticity grew much worse. He returned to Duke, teaching several English and writing classes. Dan who had been with him more than a year planned to leave in February. Through a friend, Price found Lawrence Wall, a first-year graduate student at Duke, who was willing to take on the responsibilities of assisting Price in his daily life. One day while alone, Price tumbled over in his wheelchair. At first, he didn't seem to suffer any additional pain but as a few days went on, the pain became so severe that he wasn't able to lift his head. His brother convinced him to go to the hospital. It was suggested that perhaps he broke a vertebrae when he fell over in his wheelchair. He underwent a series of tests and x-rays to determine if there indeed was vertebrae damage.

There had been so much damage to his vertebrae from surgery that the doctors could not definitively state whether the fall had caused more. However, what was certain was that the tumor was on the move up his spine toward the brain stem. Dr. Friedman recommended additional surgery due in part to new tools that had recently had come into use. Price elected not to have surgery—at least for the time being. He wanted to return to school and finish out the semester. A few months later, however, the pain was so oppressive that it was difficult for Price to even characterize it. Nausea and mental malaise were now accompanying the pain that increased by the day.

After the semester ended, Price was back in the hospital resigned to having the surgery. During the surgery, several large cysts were drained and shunted. Several inches of the tumor were removed. The doctor planned to remove the rest of the tumor during a subsequent surgery. Price experienced a new demon when he returned home. Withdrawal from the steroid Price had been given to prepare him for surgery caused severe panic attacks that hit him many times during the day. Spinal fluid leaking from the wound that was not healing properly put him back in the hospital. Finally, the incision healed, the pain was less severe and Price returned to writing. "Kate Vaiden" was published that summer to positive reviews.



Another surgery in the fall removed most of the remaining tumor. Price returned home with renewed hope and experienced no serious complications. As Price reflected on his years of hospitalization, surgery and recovery, he offered some suggestions to modern doctors about their lack of bedside manner and, in some cases, basic humanness. A doctor, he said, should display some emotions and a will to help the patient. It would be a lift to the patient's morale and help him maintain his dignity.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Price returned to teaching in January 1987. Eric Rector became his new assistant after Lawrence departed. "Kate Vaiden" won the National Book Critics Circle Award and Price completed another novel entitled, "Good Hearts." The tumor was not growing according to the latest MRI images. Dr. Friedman recommended that Price enter biofeedback therapy to deal with pain but Price resisted, thinking it would be a waste of time. The pain was again unbearable and Price contacted Friedman for relief. He explained he was having phantom pain from dead nerve cells and prescribed an antidepressant that could ease his pain. The drug, amitriptyline, did seem to provide help, and rather immediately. Price later decided to begin biofeedback where he learned to focus on specific parts of his body. Doing well with that program, Price moved onto hypnosis.

Price began working with Patrick Louge, a hypnotist with the Duke Department of Psychiatry. Even during his first session, Price felt an immediate relaxation and release of stress. When he woke from his first session, he felt pain but it was minimized and seemed remote. He continued sessions with Louge for several months during which time he learned self-hypnosis skills.

Price was able to achieve pain control through hypnosis and relied heavily on its power. Eight weeks after beginning biofeedback and hypnosis, Price was essentially free from pain. The pain was there but he had trained his mind to not focus on it, circumvent it. Price was at a stage where he was ready to give up the pain and move on and was ripe for the persuasive powers of biofeedback and hypnosis. Price explored memory regression with his self-hypnosis skills and recalled memories that were long forgotten and even some he had never consciously been aware of. This recall allowed him to tap into those memories and write about them in new works. Price was determined to get off the methadone he had been taking for three years. On the advice of his doctor, he did so slowly and suffered only a few nights of mild withdrawal.

Eric would be leaving soon and not having found a permanent replacement, Dan agreed to come back for a few months. Dan had been with Price during some of his worse times, but on this stay, with Price's pain control techniques, the two had a chance to concentrate on building their friendship. In his English class, Price contributed to the class and had his students critique his work. Price usually defined the subjects as he wanted to steer his students toward writing about real emotion and away from writing about warring factions in outer space. The students inspired Price and they were likewise inspired by him.

Dan convinced Price to purchase a Dodge van fitted with ramps and hand controls so he would be more independent. The hand controls proved to be too great a challenge for Price but he did enjoy the ease of access via the ramps. David Lang became Price's new assistant and was challenged early on with a trip to Manhattan to hear Leontyne



Price sing at the Metropolitan Opera. While there, Price was inducted in the prestigious American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. That summer he and David traveled to Atlanta to visit Kathryn and James Taylor. Taylor, the singer and musician, was performing at a live concert to which Price and David were invited. At first afraid to tackle a concert crowd, Price attended and enjoyed the concert after James made special arrangements for him.

Two MRI's confirmed that there was no return of the tumor but Friedman thought that eventually the tumor would reappear. Price finally adjusted to his new life as a "gimp" and felt proud that he had beat the odds and withstood and coped with the pain. He knew there might be "more" ahead of him, but he would take it on as it came to him.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Although most would call Price's disease and its aftermath a catastrophe, Price saw it as definitely an "upending" element in his life but not a disaster. In fact, when measuring his first fifty years against the years since his life was so changed, he realized that he had been given more in love and friendship and had become more giving, patient and productive those latter years. Of all the self-help books he read searching for answers, none told him how to "want" the new life he hadn't ask for. It was Price's experience that three abstract thoughts were key to his survival: 1) you can only rely on yourself for a way out of any situation; 2) no matter how loving people are, they cannot give you back your old self; and, 3) you can no longer be that other person, so you have to embrace that new person.

The third point was the most crucial in Price's experience. He had to mourn the person he used to be but then proceed in life with who he had become. The second point referred to people who wanted Price to be something he couldn't be—and that was his old self. They were well-meaning people who were paying tribute to who he was; but he was a new Reynolds Price—the old one was dead. The first spark of hope for Price was his prayers which gave him a feeling of purpose, fragile though it was. In Price, like in all men, there was the basic human instinct for survival. The main element in Price's life that allowed him to avert his focus off his misery was his work. His work became more inspired after his illness and recovery than before.

Paralysis made Price more observant and more patient—two elements that are beneficial to one who writes for a living. Perhaps it was the foregoing that contributed to the amazing productivity Price experienced in his writing having published thirteen books in the ten years since the tumor was found. The only disruption in Price's otherwise happy life, were the four years of recovery, pain and adjustment. Price realized that when Jesus told him he was cured, He was not referring to his legs. Rather, he was telling him that he had been cured in a much more profound and lasting way.



Characters

Reynolds Price

Reynolds Price was a successful writer having authored numerous works of poetry, stage plays and novels. He also held a teaching position at Duke University's English Department for many years. At age fifty-one, Price's life changed forever when he was stricken with a malignant tumor that rested on his spine. The tumor was pencil-thick and almost covered the entire length of his spine. The first symptoms he experienced included an inability to run and difficulty walking in a straight line without wobbling. Even though he knew deep down that there was something very wrong with him, he deluded himself for months with the notion that it would pass and refused to see a doctor for months following the first signs of trouble. Finally, his symptoms had worsened to a level that they could no longer be ignored.

Price endured years of recovery and adjustment to his debilitating disease. He faced an uncertain future, one that even his doctors were reluctant to predict. Price's adjustment to his new life was difficult. He at first refused to refer to himself as a paraplegic even though the loss of senses and numbness in his legs increased by the day. Price's most difficult challenge was dealing with the constant pain that was caused from dead nerves destroyed during his surgeries. After years on methadone, he finally abandoned the drugs in favor of the powers of biofeedback and hypnosis that while not eliminating the pain taught him to refocus his mind eventually rendering the pain to a remote place and one that was not all-consuming.

After his acceptance of his new life, Price described how his harrowing experiences with a life-threatening and life-changing disease in the end made him a more loving and giving person and a better and more productive writer. He loved his life even with all its bumps.

Dan Noll

Dan Noll was a friend of Reynolds Price who helped and supported Reynolds Price through the darkest days of his recovery from a malignant cancer that invaded his spine and upended his life forever. As soon as Noll was aware of the horrible fate that had befallen his friend, he contacted Price and offered to be his full-time caregiver and would absolutely refuse any compensation for doing so.

Like Price, Dan Noll was a writer. However, Noll, a much younger man, was just beginning to have some success in selling and marketing his work. Although he made Price's comfort and needs his first priority, he set up his office on the ground level of Price's three-story home and worked daily on his writing which helped inspire Price to return to his writing. During the time he was dedicated to Price's care, well over a year on his first stay, Noll was there to witness the very worst bouts with adjustment and pain



that Price suffered through. Price's howls in pain were often accompanied by those from Noll who wanted in some way to share in the agony. Price later realized and appreciated Noll's dedication and patience in putting up with him during his darkest hours.

Noll, who was concerned about Price's future and his ability to live as independently as possible, convinced him to purchase a van that was fitted with hand controls and access ramps. Several years after Noll's first departure, he returned for a brief time to help Price who was unable to find a suitable living assistant to stay with him and see to his needs. Price attributes his recovery in large part to his supporting friends. Noll was on the top of that list.

Bill Price

Bill Price, Reynolds Price's brother, was always at Price's side during his surgeries. He often had talk his older brother into seeing his doctor when new symptoms would appear.

Allan Friedman

Allan Friedman was Price's neurosurgeon. Price found Friedman to be remote and clinical, almost cold. Only in later years did he learn that Friedman was emotionally involved in his recovery.

Jesus

Price's prayers to Jesus helped him through his most difficult times. He felt his vision of Jesus in a dream was a genuine encounter with Him. Jesus' words that Price was forgiven for his sins and was cured stayed with him forever.

Marcia Bennett

Marcia Bennett was Price's beloved cousin. Paul Bennett was Marcia's physician husband. Price stayed with the Bennetts for several months following his first surgery. Paul told others in the family that Price had little chance for survival.

James and Kathryn Taylor

Kathryn Taylor was a good friend and was married to the singer/songwriter James Taylor. For a concert in Atlanta, James Taylor made special arrangements to accommodate Price's needs so he could attend.



Leontyne Price

Leontyne Price was a friend who called Price after his first surgery. She read the poem to him that he had written for her some years before. When he felt comfortable visiting Manhattan after his recovery, he attended an appearance by Leontyne Price at the Metropolitan Opera.

Diana Betz

Diana Betz was Price's first physical therapist. She came to Price's home for the therapy. Price admired her dedication and appreciated the extra effort she put in for him after working a full shift in the pediatric ward.

Yoji Yamaguchi

Yoji Yamaguchi was a friend who visited Price after he returned home from his first surgery. Price related to the story of another lost soul, Robinson Crusoe, which Yamaguchi read aloud to Price.



Objects/Places

Duke University

Reynolds Price taught in the English Department at Duke University. He also spent many days and weeks as a patient at the Duke University Hospital.

Israel

Reynolds Price visited Israel during two vacations, one of which was right before he became ill. He had a special fascination for the ancient land.

England

Price did his graduate at Oxford University in England. He received a scholarship from the prestigious university for his tenure there.

Raleigh, NC

Price lived in a large house in a remote, wooded area outside of Raleigh, NC. After he became ill, he was forced to have his home remodeled to accommodate his wheelchair.

Lake Kinnereth

Price had a dream in which he had a vision of Jesus at Lake Kinnereth in Israel. In this encounter, Jesus told him that he was forgiven for his sins and that he was cured. The vision was important to Price and stayed with him forever.

Goldsboro, NC

During his recovery, Price stayed with his cousin, Marcia Bennett and her husband, Paul, for several months. They offered him a permanent place to live in their home in Goldsboro, NC which he declined.

Hendrix College

Hendrix College in Arkansas asked Price to write a play for the drama students to perform. The school did not know he was ill when they sent the request. Price wrote the play, and two more afterward, for the school. This work gave him the necessary confidence to go on with his work as a writer.



Greenville, NC

Price spent a month in a rehab center in Greenville, NC. There he learned wheelchair skills and methods for independent living. He became very close to a young man who had been injured in an accident.

Manhattan

Although Price had recovered enough to travel to Arkansas and Georgia, he had a fear of going to Manhattan and coping with the crowded, busy city as a paraplegic. Eventually, he found the strength to travel to New York where he attended the Metropolitan Opera and received an important literary achievement award.

Themes

Dealing with Pain

Reynolds Price never knew what real pain was until he had to deal with that generated from nerve cells damaged during surgery to remove a life-threatening malignant tumor from his spine. The damage was not due to any incompetence on the part of the surgeons; rather, it was unavoidable due to the nerves that were intertwined and intermeshed in the tumor which had probably been growing on his spine for years. Price was told that some of the pain was from "phantom" nerves that were dead. The pain was much like the soldier who loses a leg but still has a toe that is itching. No matter what the source, the pain was excruciating, unending and escalating by the day.

The doctors prescribed pain medications and even anti-depressants but most days these drugs and combinations of them had little if any impact on the pain. Price was placed on methadone and, in answer to his concerns, was told that he would not become addicted by the amount he would be taking. Unfortunately, the methadone was just about as ineffective as all the other drugs. The pain was so distracting that he could focus on little else. Trying to build a new life with his current circumstances and returning to his writing were both put on the back burner while he tried to deal with his pain.

Little did he know that located in the same buildings where he worked as a professor in Duke University's English Department and where was hospitalized for his surgery and recovery, was the resolution for his pain. Upon the advice of one of his doctors, he began taking biofeedback therapy and hypnosis. With the techniques he learned from these disciplines, he learned to divert his focus from his pain rendering it less powerful and more remote. Only after these therapies that proved to be profoundly effective for Price, was he able to go on with his new life and function successfully under its rules.

A New Way to Live

There could be nothing more devastating to an individual than to be left alive but, virtually overnight, be forced to live a new life, one that has little resemblance to the one enjoyed and taken for granted for over fifty years. That in essence is what happened to Reynolds Price when strange symptoms finally urged him on to doctors and hospitals from whom he learned that he had a life-threatening disease. He had a tumor that was pencil-thick and covered almost the entire length of his spine. As anyone would be when told this kind of news, Price was in deep despair. Although his initial concern was whether he would survive the malignancy, after surgery his worries refocused on the growing reality that he would become paralyzed and thus have to give up the independent life he had enjoyed for so long.



Separating and removing the tumor from the thousands of nerve endings was the job of the surgeon. Needless to say, it was impossible to rout the tumor out without destroying precious nerves. The dead nerves caused phantom pain beyond one's imagination and ultimately caused Price to begin to have numbness and ultimately loss of senses from his mid-torso down through his legs and feet. He became wheelchair bound and dependent on others for even the most personal and basic of needs.

There was no gradual transformation for Price. Although the numbness was not absolute for a short while following surgery, there was no doubt about its trend. The important message in the phrase, "a new way to live," is the "to live" part. Price had the same basic survival instinct that most humans have. Although he could have opted to end his life, he decided instead to accept the new way to live that was thrust upon him.

Becoming a Better Person through Adversity

Reynolds Price attributes his recovery and his ultimate success, after the dark years of following surgery for a life-threatening disease, in part to his closer relationship with Jesus. In one of the lowest points of his ordeal, Price had a dream—to him it was a vision—in which Jesus tells him that he is forgiven for his sins and that he is cured. The vision meant the world to Price and stayed with him forever. Although he had taken Jesus' word that he was "cured" in the physical sense, many years after recovery and a positive prognosis, he knew that the message had a deeper meaning than just a reference to the recovery of his physical body.

Once Price abandons all hope that he could return to his old life—the one in which he could walk and live independently—he began to grow in many ways. He was more spiritual, he was more loving and more open to receiving love and support from others. It seemed a miracle to him, but he became a better writer after going through the hellish years of pain and recovery. He emerged into the single most productive time of his years as a writer. He authored a trilogy of plays about relationships, some based on his own parents. The hypnosis that helped him deal with his pain also opened up memories and emotions from years before that he either had forgotten about or never even knew he had. He was able to draw on these recollections to write realistic drama that was filled with genuine emotion.

Price became a better teacher. In his writing classes at Duke University, he inspired the students to dig down deep in their writing by submitting his own original writing to be critiqued by the class—an action that he would have never dreamed of taking before his battle with his disease and its aftermath. Price became a prolific writer, having written some thirteen original works in the ten years following his surgery, a pace that far outshined any preceding decade. Price recognized that although his mobility was limited, there was an unexpected reward. By being limited in movement, he was forced to become more observant and patient—two skills that every writer needs and ones that served to enhance his already exemplary talents.



Style

Perspective

The book, "A Whole New Life - An Illness and a Healing," is written in the first-person narrative and is the personal experience of the author, Reynolds Price, himself. Price was a renowned author and Duke University English professor, when, at fifty-one years of age, he was struck with a devastating and life-changing disease. A malignant tumor had taken residence on his spine. The surgery to remove the malignancy caused permanent paralysis of his legs, changed his life forever but failed to provide any reliable prognosis about his future, if indeed he had one.

No one else could have adequately portrayed the harrowing account of Price's journey through darkness and uncertainty to final recovery and acceptance of a new life that had little resemblance to his former life than the author himself. His expertise in writing and teaching provided the perfect set of tools to relate his story with clarity and accuracy.

The fact that he used his experience as an inspiration to others who may be faced with similar challenges is obvious when he tells the reader that he has become a better person—more loving and giving—as well as a better writer—more patient and observant—because of his battle with the worthy adversary that attached itself to his spine and upended his life. In the end, Price is careful to proclaim that he would not trade his life for any other. His experiences are all part of who he is.

Tone

Although the subject-matter that Reynolds Price writes about in "A Whole New Life - An Illness and a Healing" is a difficult one to contemplate, Price's account of dealing with his life-threatening and life-changing disease is done with grace and dignity. He relates the dark days of his pain and recovery in detail; however, there is no overt bitterness in his words. Since Price has enjoyed a successful career in both writing and teaching, it is obvious that he employed the skills he learned in those pursuits to both provide a clear picture of his ordeal and create a learning tool for others who are or may in the future face such a challenge.

Price provides enough details of the rough transition from one day living independently to the next having to rely on others for such basic needs as personal hygiene and eating. Anyone can understand the enormity of the challenge that was thrust upon him. Although Price touches upon the understandable depression he experienced, Price has gifted his readers by not maintaining focus on these experiences.

By ending his account on a high note, he has created an inspiring legacy for his life. He led one kind of life for fifty-one years and quite another after that. However, once he accepted the new Reynolds Price and the fact that he could never go back to his other



life, he cherished his new existence for the love and support he received from friends and for the better person and writer the experience made him. He did not cover anyone else's life. He was quite happy with his own life, warts and all.

Structure

The story of author and poet Reynolds Price's difficult journey through devastating spinal cancer begins when, at age 51, Price begins to have strange symptoms including a difficulty to run and an inability to walk in a straight line without wobbling. The symptoms first made Price fear that he might have multiple sclerosis. The account is broken down into seven chapters which cover the beginning of his illness through his difficult recovery and his final acceptance of the new life that was forced upon him by the upheaval his disease caused.

Price relates his story in a clear and concise manner and in a basically a chronological order with just sprinkles of his experiences in his younger days as a child with his parents and as a young writer. The majority of the book covers the aftermath of the illness and his difficulty in adjusting to the new Reynolds Price and letting go of the old one who no longer existed.

Although the subject matter is certainly not a joyful one, Price provides an uplifting conclusion to his story by illustrating his total acceptance of his changed life and by providing practical advice to those who are or who will face similar challenges in life. He tells the reader that he basically loves his life, even the parts that he definitely would never have chosen. He relates that the life-threatening and life-changing events he suffered made him a better person and a better writer.



Quotes

"What they had to give was their honest presence; and while that constituted a lot, soon I asked them to let me be. If I was going to fold up again, I'd do it on my own time." (Chapter 1, page 18)

"Paul had said, 'It means six months to paraplegia, six months to quadriplegia, six months to death.'" (Chapter 1, page 32)

"David Sabiston promised to be at my ninetieth birthday party; so I learned, late in life, that such homely offerings to the gravely ill can have a weight that even the giver may not foresee. They can quickly swell into amulets for health and hope, even in minds more rational than mine." (Chapter 1, page 33)

"I'd likewise never shared the romantic indulgence of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov who declares himself unable to yield to a God who demands or condones human suffer." (Chapter 2, page 54)

"So the longest-postponed implication of a solitary life was now another blank wall at my face — live alone and you'll die alone. For numerous days, dry-eyed as a snake, I weighed that cold fact in my mind. It felt as heavy as a stockyard axe." (Chapter 2, page 70)

"I suspect we're the keepers of our own moral books; our only sure punishment comes from ourselves." (Chapter 3, page 76)

"Whether the force would confirm my healing or go on devastating me, for the moment I barely cared. No prior taste in my old life had meant as much as this new chance at a washed and clarified view of my fate—and that from the hands of a strange young minister in a room which didn't belong to me." (Chapter 3, page 82)

"Slow as it went, I knew as well as any crossroads mechanic that starting a cold engine is half the battle; and I never let my writing faculty seize up again, not till now at least." (Chapter 4, page 88)

"Name three good reasons for teaching school—June, July and August." (Chapter 5, page 126)

"What they [the students] both, I hope, was one sane view at least of how live fiction can work its way into strangers' minds and how all else is likely to be both lethally boring and useless to humans." (Chapter 6, page 167)

"In my case, life has meant steady work, work sent by God but borne on my own back and on the wide shoulders of friends who want me to go on living and have helped me with a minimum of tears and no sign of pity." (Chapter 7, page 186)

"I heard tow of Franklin Roosevelt's sons say that the primary change in their father, after polio struck him in mid-life and grounded him firmly, was an increased patience and willingness to listen. If you doubt that patience must follow paralysis, try imagining that you can't escape whoever manages to cross your doorsill." (Chapter 7, page 189)



Topics for Discussion

What were some of the first symptoms of disease that Reynolds Price noticed? What disorder did Price fear he might have?

Where was the malignant tumor located? How much concern was there that the malignancy would spread? What shape did the tumor have and what poem did Price write in its "honor?"

How did prayer help Price through difficult times? What vision of Jesus did he have in a dream? What did Jesus tell Price in his dream? How did Price ultimately interpret Jesus' words?

What methods failed to adequately relieve the pain Price experienced? What was the main cause of Price's pain?

How did biofeedback help Price deal with his constant pain? Why did hypnosis and self-hypnosis prove to be the best methods in dealing with his pain?

What difficulty did Price have in adjusting to his new life? What three factors did Price list as essential in dealing with a traumatic change to one's life?

What literary achievements did Price realize after his battle with cancer? How was Price honored for those literary achievements? How many books did Price write after becoming ill? How did his disease make Price a better writer?