

THE
DAVE
TEST

A RAW LOOK
AT REAL FAITH
IN HARD
TIMES

FREDERICK W. SCHMIDT

Abingdon Press

Nashville

THE DAVE TEST

A Raw Look at Real Faith in Hard Times

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For David Mark Schmidt, M.D.,
my brother

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FOREWORD

FRED SCHMIDT IS A THOUGHTFUL, COMPELLING, insightful theologian who has done all the necessary homework of his craft. But that is not what interests us here. What interests us here is that Fred has a brother. His name is Dave. He was surgeon. He had a brain tumor that finally killed him. Fred, in what is given to us here, is deeply engaged with his brother, Dave, in being with him, in being with him in his walk to death, in reflecting on and learning from that companionship of candor and loss.

The title of the book, *The Dave Test*, refers to a set of questions that have emerged from and shaped that intense companionship and its work. They are questions about getting real and being truthful with the wretchedness of death and loss. To pass the Dave Test is to face reality, loss, and grief without denial

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or phoniness or cover-up, to face it in all of its uncompromising demand. The chapters of this small but important book are reflections, one at a time, on the questions that constitute the Dave Test. What comes through here is mature faith that is shaped, informed, and judged by this deep love for a brother who majored in honesty and who for that reason eschewed all the phoniness that passes for care and faith and hope among us.

It strikes me that what Fred outlines here is a concrete embodiment of the drama of the book of Job. That sufferer was famously caught between the reality of loss that could not be denied and the easy, conventional explanations offered by the “friends” who voice the settled conventions of faith who are, in fact, not interested in the bodily reality on the ground. The work of the book of Job is an adjudication of that tension between the lived reality and the explanatory conventions. Job refused to lie or to yield, even when caught up by the tsunami of the creator God.

Fred sees himself and especially Dave in the same contestation. Only here it is not the rigor of self-assured covenantal rigidity of Job’s companions. It is, rather, well-meaning friends and their practice of reassurance. The pseudo-faith they mediate is a practice of denial that wants to explain away the bodily reality that is in front of them. As a result the church, in this reading, stands exposed by its clichés, its certitudes, and its easy assurances that are popularly mouthed among us. But of course it is not simply the church; the same practice of denial permeates popular culture and its assumed well-being that can be generated by the chase of some commodity that may take

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many forms. But all such commodity solutions are designed to conceal bodily reality; in that much-repeated portrayal, everyone is happy, everyone is young, everyone is in good health or soon can be by a procedure or a product, world without end! I suppose it is no surprise that the church is tempted to imitate such a seductive culture.

In the end, however, Fred's presentation is not primarily concerned to indict church or culture. It is rather to share with us in quite concrete form what he has learned that could make a difference as we walk with other sisters and brothers who face such loss. He has learned what is always again to be relearned, because it is so contradictory of our common propensity and our usual practice. Friends that effectively stand by Dave love freely; acknowledge their own mortality and so need not be Promethean in their manner; are available to those in need, to God, and to themselves; are vulnerable, and speak with candor. Of course! But it is so hard! It turns out that this lived reality, reported here with such poignancy, is the core wisdom of our faith tradition:

-That **truth makes free** . . . not happy, not easy, not successful, but free!

-That **perfect love casts out fear** . . . well, maybe not all fear, but most of it. Dave is less fearful with Fred there!

The book is an uncommon account of what our society does not want to know and cannot remember, but what we need to know in bodily ways if we are to live the life and die the death that is given to us.

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I read this book with great attentiveness because it rings true. More than that, I read it with great attentiveness because I also have a brother, Ed. Ed lives with kidney failure, and his doctors have given him a limited time for his life. Ed, moreover, is like Dave, no bull-shitter. He can spot a phony a mile away. He is rooted in faith, but he is totally impatient with phoniness. For me every reference to Dave sounded like Ed, and I can see myself in Fred's place. But then, every reader who pays attention will make something of a like identity as stand-in for Fred with some Dave who is at risk.

This book will be cherished. Because all of us, like Fred and Dave, face loss. We are never ready, I imagine. And we have no resources for that except ourselves, framed as we variously are, by our narratives of faith and unfaith, of compelling truth and fulsome denial. We may be grateful for Fred's self-giving to Dave and for Dave's relentless honesty. The truth of our life does not come in explanation. It comes in presence! In the end Fred finishes with *faith* and with *loneliness*; perhaps the two come together:

"I am utterly dependent upon the One who loves us both and am grateful in ways that escape expression. But, oh, how I miss him."

Final words for final loss!

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary

July 17, 2013

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“GOD, HELP ME, WHERE DO YOU START?”

That was the plea an old friend from high school posted on Facebook a few weeks after his sister’s death. She was forty-eight years old.

Where *do* we start? How do we care for ourselves and for one another when life . . . well, when life just sucks?

When jobs or life-giving relationships end?

When a physician says that we have weeks or months
to live?

When a child dies?

When an illness or a handicap forces us to live around
its demands and limitations?

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Those questions have dogged me for years and for a lot of reasons. Some of them are personal. Some of them are professional. I am an Episcopal priest. People expect clergy like me to know what to say in awful situations. But we don't always know. Sometimes we don't have a clue what to say.

Recently that quest for what to say in bad situations acquired new urgency. Seven years ago I learned that my brother, Dave, has cancer. He has not just any kind of cancer but life-ending cancer—the kind that guts your life, leaves you with nothing, and *then* kills you.

Dave is also a Christian. So initially he looked to the church for answers to the “God-help-me-where-do-you-start” question. That isn't surprising. He is a Baptist, and going to church runs deep in Baptist bones.

But Dave doesn't go to church anymore. The church really doesn't speak to his life.

He explains it this way:

If the preacher isn't using stained-glass language that I can't pin down and apply to my life, then instead he is blowing sunshine up my ass, telling me the whole experience is a blessing in disguise.

I'm a fifty-something hand surgeon. I operated on 120 patients a month until I discovered that I have brain cancer. I have a glioblastoma grade four tumor. All but 3 percent of the people who have this type of tumor are dead within a year.

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What in hell am I going to do with my life that is going to be more of a blessing to other people than what I was doing?

It's hard, he points out, when you've been told that you have a brain tumor to hear people tell you that "God has a plan," that "the best is yet to come," or that God is giving you "a blessing in disguise." When you say that to someone who has a tumor that claims the lives of all but 3 percent of those who have them within a year, the words are worse than useless.

It's no surprise, then, that the two friends he has who speak most readily and directly to him about the spiritual demands of life are no-nonsense, plainspoken recovering alcoholics. They lack the churchy, theological vocabulary of a priest or pastor. They haven't studied the Scriptures in any formal sense of the word, and they don't go to church.

What they have done is sharpen what they believe, testing the shape of their spiritual convictions against the hard realities of life. They care for one another, face the truth, tell the truth, and look for truth that they can hold on to.

"The institutional crap doesn't mean anything to them," my brother observes.

Both men—and others whom I have met—are people who pass what I've started calling *the Dave Test*.

The Dave Test is a set of ten questions you can ask yourself when life sucks or before you talk to someone whose life is in the same sort of place. It is a test that will keep you from

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Thinking and saying hurtful things
Looking for comfort at the expense of others
Using stained-glass language
Defending broken ideas about God

It is a test that will keep you

Honest about just how harrowing life can be
Present to your friends
In touch with God

What we are told and what we say to others when life goes to hell can be crushing or comforting. It can ring true, or it can sound like a pack of lies. If you are looking for God, honesty, answers, direction, and peace (or if you are trying to help others find them), then apply the Dave Test before you open your mouth or believe what you are told. No flinching, squinting, or sugarcoating the truth.

Each chapter of this book is devoted to one of the ten Dave Test questions:

Can I say, "Life sucks"?
Can I give up my broken gods?
Can I avoid using stained-glass language?
Can I admit that some things will never get better?
Can I give up trading in magic and superstition?
Can I stop blowing smoke?
Can I say something that helps?
Can I grieve with others?
Can I walk wounded?
Can I be a friend?

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In each chapter I tackle one of those ten questions, offering some thoughts about how you might find your own, more durable answers and deeper ways of living and exploring answers that might be misleading or hurtful.

I invite you to use the Dave Test not just to examine the value of what you think, do, and say. I urge you to use the questions to craft a different way of living and caring for yourself and for others.

The Dave Test is not a method. No one ever saved a friend by arming oneself with the right answers or by making compassionate noises. What we need when we suffer are companions who are, by nature, able to walk with us and love us. Each of those people will look a bit different. Some of them will look *very* different from what you might expect.

When I shared an earlier draft of this introduction with Dave, he sent it along to one of his friends who wrote back:

Thanks, buddy! It reads well and is embarrassingly kind toward your two asshole friends. Doesn't he know how we laughed when you fell in the lake in Canada?...Yes, he mentions going to the shooting range, but why doesn't he mention that we comment that you can't see for shit?...P.S. Where are you? Are you and your truck available on Friday afternoon? And don't give me shit about being out of town or not feeling well. This is all about me.

There is no prescription for caring this way, and this version of caring might not be your cup of tea (or bottle of beer).

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You may not like the language or this kind of humor. For example, my wife would not talk to her friends the same way that some guys talk to one another.

That's not the point. You don't need to use the language of Dave's friend's e-mail as your model. Here's what happened:

Dave's friend acknowledged Dave's illness and its difficulties.

He treated Dave like a whole human being who didn't need to be coddled or pitied.

He used humor.

He talked to Dave like an adult whom he still expected to function in the world.

And he gave Dave a job, even if it was just lending Dave's pickup truck to a friend.

There were other things that didn't happen:

My brother's friend didn't try to make himself comfortable at Dave's expense by minimizing his struggle.

He didn't assume a faintly tragic tone and try to make Dave a project or a charity case.

And he didn't try to make himself feel good at Dave's expense by somehow calling attention to "what a really good friend he has been."

That's a lot to accomplish in the few lines of an e-mail message, but it's all there and captures the goal of this book. *The Dave Test* is designed to start us on that journey of becoming our own versions of people who care: people who can be them-

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selves, who have found a new place to sit with their own suffering, and who can walk with friends in the hardest of times.

This journey is about soul craft. It's about growing up and about becoming fully alive, fully human, and completely available to the people we love.

Suffering and sorrow are not things God sends our way, but they can and do radicalize life. We can allow that radicalization to grow within us. We can let it change, deepen, and ennoble us. Or we can run from the challenge it presents. But if we do run, then we will live our lives in hiding—hiding from ourselves, from one another, from life's realities, and from God.

My hope is that this book will provide a place to do the kind of soul work that will spare us that experience and enrich our shared journey.