

The Cancer Journey: 10 Emotions

“On June 14, 1999, I had a right modified radical mastectomy to remove an invasive ductal carcinoma. Ten years have passed and there isn't a day that goes by without acknowledging this journey at some level. In the beginning, this uninvited—and mind-numbing—voyage was distorted by a cracked prism of muted and blurred colors. When I squinted very hard, the view would suddenly burst forth with distinct edges and hopeful clarity only to slip back into a murky and surreal world of distortion and confusion. The following sampling of emotions outlines where this road has taken me; or, better said, where I have chosen to go.”

- Michael H. Samuelson

Shock

"Cancer." The word is so horrific that it has become a metaphor for anything that is ugly, insidious, all consuming, and deadly. But, hey, it's only a metaphor; not the real thing. You know, an exaggeration for effect. Not the actual thing; not the pathology, the disease, the "Big 'C'" that got Uncle Tim.

And then someone says the word in the same sentence as "you."

"I'm sorry, what did you say? Cancer? Me? I have cancer?"

Both the question and the head-nod response seem to echo as if whispered loudly in a hollow tube placed too close to my ear. The volume is fine, but surely I misunderstood. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" I begin to float, time is just a word that rhymes with dime, and the echo grows louder...

Denial and Detachment

There must be a mistake.

"No," he said." No mistake. Your test was positive, you have cancer."

I'm thinking..."No."

Okay. Yes. But, it really isn't that bad, right? I mean, not like what killed Uncle Tim. Not what we think about when we hear the word, "CANCER." At least, not in this case; my case. Right?

"You're sure? Well, what does it mean? What do we do, now? What do I do, now? Your office, as soon as possible? Sure, okay. (pause) What does this mean, again? Are you sure?"

Why do they call the test result, "positive?"

Sadness and a Profound Sense of Impending Loss

I take so many things for granted. There is a future. I will grow old with my best friend; I will watch my kids grow up. I will play with my grandchildren. I will retire. I will, I will, I will...

Then, again, maybe there is no future. I won't grow old with my best friend; I won't watch my children grow up. I won't play with my grandchildren. I won't retire. I won't, I won't, I won't...

I miss them, already. The pain comes in waves and hits me in the stomach. Hard. I can't breathe.

Fear

I'll shave my head before I watch it fall out. On second thought, no. I'll hold on to every hair I can.

Oh, God. I'm frightened. I don't want to die. Not now...not ever. But, really, not now. Will I have to have chemo? Will it make me sick? Retching in the corner. *Wanting* to die.

Oh God. I'm frightened. I don't want to die. Not now...not ever. But, really, not now.

Spirituality

I don't remember it that blue. The sky. I don't remember it that blue. A deep, forever blue...

Okay God, time to talk. What can I do? What do you want me to do? And, WHY? Is this random? Is there a purpose and if so, WHAT?

The flower is so delicate. The colors spread out perfectly. The artist took such great care. I don't remember ever seeing that silky texture before. So smooth like a fine powder...

What if you don't exist? What if all of this is just a frenetic spiral of activity without purpose, without thought, without consequence. What then? Who will listen? Who will care?

The rolling thunder used to sound so peaceful, now it just sounds lonely and lost. Like a child wondering without hope. The voice that was once forceful, demanding, confident, and in control, is now muffled and questioning, growing faint in the distance.

I don't remember it that blue. The sky. I don't remember it that blue. A deep, forever blue...

Okay God, time to talk. You name the terms.

Anger

What will be, will be. I will be like the Brits; lip stiff and head held high. I will accept this with quiet dignity and count my blessings.

Wrong. I'm angry. I'm so angry I can't see straight. At this point, quiet resolution seems obscene and, in many ways, too easy, too convenient. Yes, I am frightened, frustrated, and confused. But—hear it again—I am angry. I am so angry I can't see straight. So, screw the Brits. I'm not ready, not yet.

Cancer, you are a sneak and a thief, and you just broke into my house. MY house! Well, get ready for a fight. The poet was right; I will NOT go gently into that good night. Screw the Brits and screw CANCER!

Bring it on...

Analytical Focus

Statistics and probabilities, anecdotes and home cures, speculation and facts. Tons of advice and deafening silence.

I want to know everything I can about my cancer; this thing that is living in me, this rude and unwelcome guest. I want to know its size, how fast it is growing, how it got here, and—more than anything else—how to get rid of it. Did you know that ___ people get this cancer, every year? Last year _____ people died with this cancer. _____ were my age, and the risk factors are x, y, & z. The treatment options are _____, _____, and _____.

In addition to traditional treatments, _____ is being done in Asia, some guy on the Internet suggested _____ and Bill, my neighbor, said his Uncle said his doctor told him to try _____.

The world is put on hold, I am becoming my cancer, I am consumed by this experience. I hate it and, yet, I am drawn to it like an abusive lover. I want nothing to do with it but I can't get it out of my mind. It invades the most intimate chambers of my soul and won't let go...

What's the old saying, "Stay close to your friends and even closer to your enemies?" I will know this enemy, I will go eyeball to eyeball with "The Monster" and I will not blink...

Re-Entry (excitement, fear, confusion, resolve)

Patiently waiting. After the surgery, after the meds, after the pain, after the cards and well-wishers, life sits...patiently waiting.

Immediately after denial and intellectualization comes the creeping—then leaping thought that I may die. Every twitch, every cough, every bump, every everything, confirms this. No, there's no maybe about it, I am going to die, soon.

"Your margins are clean," says the doc, "Your chances of living a long and healthy life are looking good."

What does that mean? I'm going to live. I'm going to live? I'm going to live! But, what does that mean...

Pearl Harbor, The Kennedy Assassination, 9/11. After a defining event Life is never the same; not really. Pearl Harbor, The Kennedy Assassination, 9/11, "You have cancer." Life is not the same. So, what does, "I'm going to live" mean...now? I don't know; I'm not sure. Different, I do know that. Better? I hope so. More finely tuned? I know so.

Obligation and Responsibility

Why was it caught in time, this cancer, this Monster? Why am I here? Age-old question with a new twist. I could have died, perhaps, statistically, I should have died. But, here I am. I can't believe (choose not to believe) that the universe is random. Things DO happen for a reason. The path is usually right in front of us but we keep mucking up the view, making it harder than it needs to be. One thing is certain; I feel an obligation, a welcome obligation to live life just a bit fuller—okay, a whole lot fuller. I take care of myself even better than before. I take chances, not foolish physical chances but chances outside my comfort zone. You know, the wouldas, couldas, and shouldas of life. I've left Walter Middy to dream in the easy chair while I DO things.

I also feel a responsibility to help others. Not just those with The Big "C" but those with the metaphoric "C" as well. A word of encouragement, a telephone call, a dollar where a dollar really matters. Mostly, however, I feel a responsibility to demonstrate Life as a collection of moments...not years.

Perspective

Broken dishwasher, flat tire, disagreeable boss, bad cold, rainy weather, the Red Sox lose in the bottom of the ninth. Bummer, but it ain't cancer!

Michigan loses to Ohio State—okay; now I'm pushing it!