

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

“MY WALK WITH CANCER”

By

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My Walk with Cancer **The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy**

Cancer, I suspect, has touched nearly all of us.

In fact, let's see. . . .

If you are willing, do me a favor, please, raise your hand if either you or someone in your immediate family — a partner, a sibling, a parent, or a child — has had, or still has some form of cancer. . . . (Please raise your hand, and please keep it raised. . . .)

Now let's add in our friends and acquaintances and other, more distant relatives. So, please raise your hand (or your other hand) if one of your friends, acquaintances, or a more distant relative has had, or still has some form of cancer. . . .

Thank you. As I suspected: cancer has touched nearly all of us. But my colleague Wayne Arnason wisely reminds us of something important about this when he says:

Take courage, friends.
The way is often hard,
the path is never clear,
and the stakes are very high.
Take courage,
For deep down, there is another truth:
you are not alone.¹

Indeed, our story from a few minutes ago also reminds us of the importance, it seems to me, of friendship, of love, and of simply being “present” to one another as we “walk together” through the wilds of life, which, indeed, are wild.

This, then, is perhaps our first lesson: to remember that we are not alone.

II

I have cancer, and I am acutely aware that a number of you do, too. And others among you have had cancer — quite a few actually. And among cancers, they are not all the same, and I do not want for a moment to pretend that they are.

So, let me briefly, but importantly, clearly acknowledge that there are over 100 different kinds of cancer, each with its own name and treatment, stage and grade. Some, like many of the pancreatic and lung cancers, tend to be much more lethal and threatening. Others, like many of the prostate cancers and lymphomas, such as I have, are generally far less lethal and threatening.

Either way — whether with face pressed-to-the-glass or with a more confident prognosis — cancer almost inevitably, I would suggest, rings the mortality bell. Yes, it rings the mortality bell. It reminds us, in other words, that we are mortal, that we each and all shall one day die. That's the price of being alive. It reminds us that we are, in the words of old, ultimately but “Dust in God's Pocket.”

¹ Arnason, Wayne, *Singing the Living Tradition*, # 698.

The Buddhists believe that it is beneficial to think about, and to meditate upon, our own death with some regularity. I would agree. Remembering that we are but “Dust in God’s pocket” is sobering, and arguably, depending on a whole host of things, a bit depressing and morose, perhaps, and yet it can be oddly refreshing and spiritually informative. In either case, we are reminded that

This is the day – indeed, this is the one wild and precious life – we are given.

Moreover, we are reminded that no matter what our age, it may actually be later than we think. So, let us pay attention.

So this, then, is the second lesson: that cancer, in its many forms, stages and grades, almost inevitably rings the mortality bell, but that this can be a useful wake-up call to realizing the preciousness of our own life, and of the lives we share.

III

Again, I have cancer. But *I* really am one of the lucky ones. I say this because the kind of cancer *I* have is a relatively “good” cancer to have – if, as my wife Lois aptly points out, “good” and “cancer” are two words that can both be allowed to appear in the same sentence!

Of the over 100 kinds of cancer, I have cancer of the lymph, or lymphatic, system. More specifically, what I have is called non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Of the approximately 20 different types of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, fortunately, mine is a slow-growing, follicular, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. A slow-growing (or “indolent,” as they say), follicular, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, while incurable, is typically eminently treatable, and generally results in excellent prognoses. In fact, people often live for decades with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and ultimately die of something else. And, clearly, that’s what *I* am shooting for!

But, at the same time, periodically, I have to have treatments, and let’s be honest: despite all the favorable stats, these things don’t always work out as we expect.

But, if nothing else, I want you to hear this: that I really am doing well. And I expect that to continue. So, that, I would suggest, is a third take-away: Drew really is okay.

IV

Next, I do not want to assume today that my walk with cancer has any universal applicability to anyone else’s walk with cancer. Again, the severity of the threat alone can make a world of difference in how one is able to respond. And yet, my hope is that in sharing at least a little bit of my journey, you, in fact, will be able to extrapolate to your own wisdom from the intersection of my journey with yours, and with the journey of others whom you know and love.

So, with these various caveats and qualifications, let me proceed, now, with the balance of these reflections today, to simply share with you some of my journal entries over the course of about a year, together with whatever editorial explanations may be needed.

V

On September 28, 2006 (about a year-and-a-half ago), I had a golf-ball sized tumor and lymph node removed in day surgery, which resulted (eventually), in a definitive diagnosis: again, that I have a follicular non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Shortly after my diagnosis, I began a journal — a cancer journal — and it opens with two Buddhist aphorisms — from which I continue to derive significant comfort and inspiration. Here, then, are those two Buddhist aphorisms:

First: "In times of difficulty, take refuge in compassion and truth."

And second:

"In the end, these are the things that matter most:

- How *well* did you love?
- How *fully* did you live?
- And how *deeply* did you learn to let go?"²

* * *

Before reading my first real journal entry, beyond the Buddhist sayings, you need to know (or be reminded), first, that my wife's name is Lois, and, second, that one of my earliest working metaphors for my having cancer was "Walking the Dog." That is, like having a dog, my cancer, I was learning, was going to take some time, and some serious attention. As with a dog, you have to feed it and walk it, occasionally take it to the veterinarian, and so forth, but that it probably wouldn't kill me. It could, but probably not. So, "walking the dog" was the metaphor I used for taking care of my cancer.

Here, then, is my entry for October 23, 2008.

October 23, 2006

My cancer awareness seems to be shifting to a deeper zone — more serious, somber, and reflective. I've found myself surprised several times today by suddenly bursting into tears. As, for example, when Lois said in an email (in reference to picking up my CAT scans for me), "Hey!" she says. "I'm walking the dog, too."

Oh, dear god, bless her heart — yes, of course! Lois is walking the cancer dog with me! And boom, I'm gone for 10 minutes of sweet tears of love and gratitude.

Two days later, October 25, 2006

I won't tell you I haven't wept lately. I certainly have. But, oddly, and most wonderfully, the tears I've wept lately have almost all been sweet tears of overwhelming gratitude. I ride waves and waves of gratitude — gratitude and love.

² Kornfield, Jack, *Buddha's Little Introduction Book*, p. 109, 85.

As a congregation, First Unitarian is near the top of my gratitude list. I feel such love and support, competence and readiness to do whatever needs to be done. I take great comfort in that deep sense of trust and love.

* * *

Some months later, in March of 2007, following my first regularly scheduled, quarterly CAT scan since I had initially been diagnosed, I found I had a recurrence. Another tumor had developed where the previous one had been removed. It was decided that now was the time for some chemotherapy, or “bio-therapy,” actually, which I’ve come to call “chemotherapy lite,” because it truly is a kinder, gentler type of chemotherapy.

April 16, 2007 (about a year ago)

It’s a bright, sunny room of many countenances. It’s the “chemo-room.” My second time. Sue, the heard oncology nurse, is reading the list of possible side effects of chemotherapy to a new initiate – “fever, diarrhea, chills, loss of hair,” on and on she goes, ebbing back and forth from the banal to the fatal. Meanwhile, the blood pressure machines periodically chirp and gurgle, pleasantly. I’m waiting for my blood test results; my white cell blood count is down some, but it’s still okay. I’m uneasy about this whole thing. I’m nervous. I haven’t even been hooked up yet, but I imagine foreign sensations coursing through my veins. My mouth is full of cotton. . . .

After hooking me up to an I-V attached to a pole, I started reading Mary Oliver’s new book called, *Thirst*. Turns out, it’s mostly poems about her grapplings with sorrow after her lesbian partner of 40 years died. Sorrow as a spiritual practice – grief as a part of loving and not just its end. I’m not at all sure this is the best reading choice – especially for someone trying to cheat death with a bag full of very expensive chemicals designed to rally my own immune system to destroy an unwelcome visitor. But one thing I’m learning is that cancer presents a multitude of rich opportunities for spiritual growth – even in the presence, perhaps especially in the presence, of decay and potential death. How ironic – to learn life from death. But, wait! Yes, of course! This is an *ancient* lesson from folklore and myth: that it is not until we have faced death that we are enabled to more fully live.

Maybe, it occurs to me, I should do a sermon sometime on, “What Cancer Has Taught Me So Far.” And what *has* it taught me? Something about Emily coming down the stairs in “Our Town,” crying out that the time to be awake and aware is now! That the sacred, the holy, if you will, is available, right now, in the ordinary.

What else is cancer trying to say to me? . . . Something, perhaps, about the importance of community, love, silence, my T’ai Chi practice, and being in the present. What else? That elusive something that Dostoevsky is forever stalking in *The Brothers Karamazov* in his long, penetrating conversations between Ivan, Alyosha, and Father Zossima. . . . But what *is* that “something” exactly?

Okay, so come right out with it, Mr. Cancer. What is it that you want from me? My body? My soul? And what would it look like if I gave them to you? Or if I withheld them? How much of it is my call in any case? And what am I supposed to learn from all of this?

April 2, 2007

I just had two powerful, little “kensho” moments (that’s a Buddhist term) of awakening and insight. Both were intense. Both were also accompanied by a sweet little torrent of tears....

One was yet another glimpse of the “holy” amidst the ordinary — being “present” to the *mystery* of the depth of the ordinary — *this* sip of coffee, *that* envelope being slit open.

The other was the living awareness of living — dancing as it were — with cancer. What *is* the script we’re playing out here? Is this how it begins to end?

I certainly don’t want to be melodramatic, nor do I want to fatalistically contribute to my own demise, but — excuse me! — I do want to be *present* to my own one wild and precious life — *whatever* the script is that we’re playing out here! And it sure would be easier if I knew what the script was!

April 17, 2007

Again, I find myself struggling, at times, to understand my experience, to live in the depths of it. I WANT so badly, like Thoreau, to back life — and this cancer experience — into a corner and discover the true nature of it — whatever it is. I want to be fully present to it, whether fair or foul. As Thoreau put it:

I wish to learn what life has to teach,
and not, when I come to die,
discover that I have not lived. . . .
I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow
of life.

May 1, 2007

Another one of cancer’s simple, but salient lessons, I’m discovering, is taking the gift of taking time. Time to simply be. Time to reflect. Time to be with those we’d truly like to be with. Time to be present to our “wild and precious life.”

* * *

Following eight weeks of chemo-therapy lite, my new tumor was gone. Since then, thankfully, I have had nothing but clear CAT scans each quarter. I have also begun a standard regimen of preventative maintenance chemotherapy, which I have once a week for four weeks, every six months. So, I did a round of “maintenance” chemo in January, and I’ll do another round in June — and presumably every six months thereafter for two years or so.

October 19, 2007

I cried again today as the radio music surged on soulfully about the sweet beauty of life....Why these tears? Something is going on here.

Yes, *it is*. The man in the Long Black Coat has shown himself by rattling his keys downstairs in the vestibule. . . .

It's been 20 years, or more, since I read Tolstoy's wonderful parable, "The Death of Ivan Ilyitch." I solemnly vowed, at the time, to remember to learn from this story: to pay attention! When death comes a-knocking, to be ready! To be ready to take the test – whatever the test is.

**October 22, 2007 and
April 13, 2008 (today):**

...Yes, it's been quite a year – quite a year-and-a-half. One amazingly challenging and rich year – and a half. It's been a year of astonishingly rich gratitude and love, tender poignancy and sweet, sweet anguish at the prospect of stepping up one day to the inevitable walk into oblivion – or whatever it is – whether in the near term or, more likely, in the far term. In any case, as always, I am gently reminded by Jack Kornfield to remember that:

In the end, these are the things that matter most:

- How well did you love?
- How fully did you live?
- And how deeply did you learn to let go?"

* * *

POSTSCRIPT:

From the bottom of my heart, friends, I want to thank you – as a congregation, as a staff, as the Board – for all of your love and support, for you've all been terrific! I feel incredibly blessed and nearly overwhelmed with gratitude, as I have been through most of this walk.

So, let us continue to share our journeys and support one another as we walk together in the wilds of life.