Finding Myself in Illness

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I'm going to die.

Well, each of us is going to die. Death and taxes and all, but I don't mean it in the New Age spiritual awakening "You know, we're, like, totally all dying, man" way.

I mean what my radiation oncologist meant when he shook my hand, smiled at my wife, Whitney, and asked plainly, "You do know you're going to die from this, don't you?"

I was 34 years old. I had no major medical history. Surgeons removed a tumor from my brain the diameter of a baseball. A week and a half later, my oncologist told us that the tumor was a deadly brain cancer called glioblastoma, and our unremarkable lives as recent suburbanites and parents to young kids became anything but.

An awake brain surgery—followed by inpatient rehab to relearn to walk and feed and bathe myself—were the first obstacles. Radiation and chemo were the next hurdles. Now, the chronic stress of living with a tough diagnosis is a daily reality. Despite this, watching our three young kids (9, 7 and 5) blossom into their own people brings joy.

There is a general notion that serious illness, life-threatening illness, liberates a person from daily concerns and leaves you to tick off the boxes on a bucket list. But that isn't quite right.

The reality of serious illness is that everything about life changes, and also, absolutely nothing changes. Life is flipped on its head, sure, but the dishes. So many dishes. And the laundry. You need to let out the dog and sign for the package. I was facing the existential distress of a deadly brain cancer; a seizure could strike at any moment; I was off balance because the aggressive brain surgery left me weak on the left side of my body. But the bills need to be paid, and it is good to vacuum.

Still, it isn't all minutiae. I found wisdom in illness.

Like my friend Chad said to me over coffee during a conversation that may have been too serious for Starbucks, "Jeez, man, you sound like you're going through a midlife crisis!"

And that’s as good a definition as any for young adults diagnosed with cancer: a midlife crisis. While there is no well-defined cultural analogue for terminally ill young adults, the midlife crisis phenomenon, with its concern for legacy, goals, success and existential distress, isn’t bad. That is why my experience is both unique and generalizable.

Between sips of coffee, Chad went on to suggest that my life is “compressed.” If you can imagine a compressed life—Caution: Contents under pressure!—you’ll begin to grasp what I have learned.

Our compressed lives offer something to share with others. Academics call it “existential maturity” or “posttraumatic growth.” Another term for it? Old-fashioned grit.

We dying folk have it.

I’ve always felt comfortable as a public speaker, a storyteller in search of a story. Now I’ve found it. In illness, I have found myself.

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