About Me (Before Cancer)

October 23, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

Who am I?

To hopefully put some context to all of this cancer talk, it is probably a useful exercise for me to share a bit about who I am – and was – and how I have come to this rather undesirable place in life.

I am, in a sense, a bit of an everyman. Although I of course like to think that I am special, my history may suggest otherwise. I grew up in a town – in Appalachia of all places – that used to be considered by marketers testing new products as the second most average place in all of America. Presumably, Peoria still holds the title as most unextraordinary. I went to public schools, came from a nuclear family unit of four people – one sister, one mother and one father (each being of the "traditional" genders for those roles) – and we had a dog that today would be considered a "hybrid" but back then was simply called a mutt.

After graduating from college in West Virginia, I eventually committed the unforced error of enrolling in law school. I attended New York University, figuring that if I wanted a different experience from that which I had had to date coming to New York was as opposite of my history as possible (at least domestically). After surviving law school, I went to work for a very prestigious corporate law firm "on Wall Street." (I say this in quotes as by the time I started my tenure it was no longer in its Wall Street location though still in Lower Manhattan.) I largely enjoyed the work – until I didn't. I did love the people, however, and it was a great start to a career.

After leaving the big firm world after seven years that aged me at least double that amount, I had various legal jobs. Now I have my own firm with a former colleague and another partner. I love my partners, I love my clients and I absolutely loathe being a lawyer. Two out of three is not that bad, but like most lawyers I would probably do just about anything other than law if I could.

Since, however, I am not really trained to do anything else – and being a lawyer predisposes one to only seeing the negatives out there, a skill which I already possessed in spades – there was but one avenue that seemed to make sense. Continued misery. Fortunately, my cancer came along so it has given me the incentive to do the one other thing that most lawyers probably would like to do and that we come closest to qualifying for: writing. When one obsesses daily about the choice of words and the placement of commas (I truly have had the experience of debating the interpretation of an important agreement due to a questionably placed piece of punctuation), writing seems like a somewhat natural fit.

Fortunately for me, one asset that my non-extraordinary background bestowed upon me was humor – the ability to appreciate it and to wield it, sometimes for good, sometimes just to antagonize my mother-in-law. I am, in spite of being from West Virginia, Jewish. That experience alone was farcical enough that I could not but help realize how ridiculous so much of life is and can be. The sheer incredulity with which New Yorkers learn of my Appalachian-Jewish upbringing is a constant reminder of how comical my life has always been. As a result, writing about the experiences of my cancer by finding the humor therein has come somewhat naturally to me.

All humor aside, cancerous and otherwise, the most important thing to me these days is my family. I am quite blessed to have a wonderful, beautiful wife, named Melissa, whose only error in life seems to be her choice of husbands. She has given me the two most wonderful sons, Will, age nine, and Andrew, soon to be six. We are further blessed that Will and Andrew are quite attached and kind to one another, each immeasurably adoring the other. Their lives are, in my view, quite rich: Although we do not pressure them (much), they are exposed to so many activities and opportunities, while still having plenty of screen time (too much if you ask any given pediatrician), that in many ways I am happily envious.

It is certainly worth noting at this point that Melissa is a doctor, a not unimportant factor when dealing with a spouse with cancer. Melissa is a neurologist, but she is often required to play an oncologist at home. I routinely pepper her with questions – both about my own type – or brand, if one prefers – of cancer, Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia, and those with which others are sadly afflicted. With respect to the former, depending on my degree of alarm, I will request that she reach out to her network of oncologist friends, colloquially known as "hemoncs", with my cancer concern du jour. Most fortunately, she is a member of a wide-ranging network of female physicians who are a wonderful resource for one another, both clinically and personally. This is yet another way in which doctors are superior to lawyers – I am not a member of any such group nor do I know of any. At least none that are free.

When it comes to questions of others' cancers, the conversation typically unfolds as follows:

Me: "I heard so-and-so has X cancer. How bad is that?"

Melissa: "Not good."

Me: "But can't one live without that organ?"

Melissa: "Yes, perhaps, but by the time the cancer is typically found it is too late."

One thing I have learned with cancer is that time plays an outsized role in it. In general, time is not a cancer patient's friend.

I should also mention that we have a dog, but unlike my childhood pooch this one is a purebred – a Golden Retriever. She is my constant companion and also quite the bed hog. She is not officially a service dog or one of the ever-expanding universe of what passes for a "therapy dog," but if love and devotion to her family is any part of the criteria then she qualifies. We also have two cats.

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