My Brain Cancer Sabbatical Year: Release and a Vision for a Just Society

It's my *shmita* year, a year to let go. Curious? Confused? Intrigued? Smiling? Read on.

June 20, 2022 By Adam Hayden

This month, June 2022, June 10 to be precise, marks six years after I was picked up by a medical transport van from the "brain trauma unit" at an acute inpatient rehab hospital on the northside of Indianapolis, with Whitney, to attend our first office visit with my neuro-oncologist, nearly two weeks following surgery. My significant motor impairment following brain surgery landed me in a rehab hospital to relearn how to walk, bathe, dress, and feed myself. We knew the tumor was large and appeared "mean" (my surgeon's words), but we hadn't yet received the official diagnosis–the pathology.

On June 10, 2016, we heard the word glioblastoma for the first time. This arbitrary date serves as a surrogate marker for when I "got" brain cancer, and so we recognize this date as significant. In truth, both the imaging and my surgeon's perspective suggest a non-malignant brain tumor had been growing for months (years?) that ultimately underwent a "malignant transformation" to become an aggressive malignant brain tumor.

Patients identify different dates of significance to revere their diseases (In a Kierkegaardian fear and trembling sort of reverence). For some, the date of surgery, often a craniotomy, marked by a "cranniversary" each year. For others, it is the date of diagnosis. Others, still, may point to their first seizure, or the day they went to the Emergency Department with a headache unlike any they ever experienced. Consistent with the devastation of this disease, too many patients die before any significant date returns on the calendar, and it is the date of death that sets a new rhythm to life.

The common thread is the significance of a date—not the date, but the significance of time: time passed; time remaining.

Regular readers may have picked up on my agitating in my last two posts. "I'm Telling You for the Last Time" carried a sort of urgent finality to it. The next post, "I Don't Know How to Write About Brain Tumors," shared a struggle for identity. These posts, as has this blog done since its inception, is a protracted balancing of two competing attitudes: The urgency of the moment when the future is uncertain juxtaposed with a slow awakening to life and what matters in the midst of its end. The former calls for reaction and the latter, for response.

My Shmita Year

The shmita, or Sabbatical year, is a tradition among the ancient Hebrew people, with contemporary analogue. The so-called Sabbatical year, the year of release, like most of Jewish tradition, finds time, neither place nor edifice, to be of central importance. The six days of creation, and the seventh for rest. Building a sanctuary in time is how Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described the weekly Sabbath, or Shabbat, a 24 hour period of release from work. The shmita year is also on a cycle of sevens: seven years. Born of the agricultural society of ancient Israel, the Hebrew people were called to work the land for six years and let the land lie fallow on the seventh.

This month I embark on my seventh year of survival with glioblastoma. For six years I have worked the land of my disease, and now I let the field lie fallow. Coincidentally, in Israel, it is the shmita year, Jewish calendar year 5782, beginning September 2021 through year 5783, beginning September 2022.

The shmita year is not only a year to let the land lie fallow, but connected to the deep roots of justice and care for the poor and the other that is at the heart of people who wrote and are described within the Hebrew Bible, “In the Shmita year, debts are to be forgiven, agricultural lands to lie fallow, private land holdings to become open to the commons, and staples such as food storage and perennial harvests to be freely redistributed and accessible to all” (My Jewish Learning).

Contemporary movements within Judaism are applying the ancient Sabbatical year to new traditions and challenges: “Shmita, with its dual acknowledgment and transcendence of the agricultural and economic realm, offers an opportunity for social reset and renewal to the entire Jewish world — and beyond” (Hazon).

Hazon states plainly: Shmita is the vision of a just society.

In pursuit of a just society, I’ve found that I’ve traded my own pursuit of justice for to-do lists, the strange competitiveness for patient advocate grants and scholarships for selection in certain conferences, conversations with agents and editors about publishing work, and the sense that if you say “No” to one opportunity, whatever it is, you may not get the invite for the next.

In the commodification of people’s lived experience and capitalism’s pursuit of more, shmita is yet more powerful: “In a world of ‘get up and do,’ not everyone is equal; however, in a world of ‘rest and restrain’ everyone is equal. And this [equality] is the root of peace” (paraphrased from the Shmita Sourcebook and this commentary).

The Jewish Pastor’s Kid

I share family roots of both Christianity (Dad’s side) and Judaism (Mom’s side). I am a Jewish

pastor's kid. I say that with a grin because it probably gives plenty of cause for certain stripes of both Jews and Christians to be perplexed, if not dubious. At any rate, it is the historical context of these traditions, the geopolitics of ancient Southwest Asia and Northern Africa that feature most prominently in its development, and the storied history of Biblical authorship that compel me to study and discuss. There is theology, good and bad, that falls out of the historical project, and the explicit and implied Christian anti-semitism that conceives of the Hebrew Bible only as a marker pointing to the Christian messianic figure, Jesus.

A central theme that I identify in this history is liberation for all people. I see myself with a unique set of skills and life experiences: growing up in the church, discovering my Jewish heritage, studying in college and synagogue settings, committing myself deeply to justice, viewing the world anew as a disabled and chronically ill person, and recognizing that with white supremacy posing an existential threat to American democracy, the liberation of Jewish people in Christian spaces is one way to combat persistent anti-semitism.

In the release from the work I have known, it is pursuing these themes that I view as part of my reset, and to take this work seriously, I need to negotiate certain trade-offs.

Rest and Release

I enter my seventh year with this disease with rest in mind. I am declaring an intention to step away from the blog for a time. I am not sure what that time will be. I'll say this: Glioblastology began as a way for me to process my experience as a newly diagnosed person with brain cancer. The blog has transformed with me as I gained further insight and experience. Now, the time has come to lean into other facets of my life that could use continued study and internal transformation in service of a just society. I could be back here next week, but more likely, the rest will be longer.

Thank you for toiling with me for these six years. More posts will come, in time.

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/brain-cancer-sabbatical-year-release-vision-just-society-adam-hayden