Chemotherapy and Radiohead's "Optimistic"

This song's refrain is what we must cling to—you can only try the best you can.

November 24, 2020 By Robin McGee

As the pandemic accelerates throughout the world, I soldier on with chemotherapy. I have undergone 9 infusions and anticipate another three. Then, hopefully, I can take an 8-week break over Christmas before starting again. My most recent MRI suggested stability of the tumour volume, after a very significant reduction (75%) after my first 5 infusions. Although the scan says it is unchanged, subjectively I feel a reduction in pain and pressure in recent weeks, which seems to indicate ongoing treatment value. But my fatigue becomes more pervasive as it continues.

At this time, I am unwilling to risk the surgical option of total pelvic exenteration—losing every single pelvic organ. Such a surgery would be drastically morbid. It would not cure me anyway given the many grains of disease in my pelvic sidewall. A recent meta-analysis of palliative exenteration predicts a survival of only 14 months after such a debilitating surgery (40% of patients spent those months in and out of hospital with severe complications). So why would I do that?

Atlantic Canada is one of the few COVID-19 safe spots in the world at this time. We have very few cases—only one probable case in NS today. Nevertheless, I take every precaution I can. Andrew does all the foraging and other heavy lifting. I lay low. We try to exercise each day – often this is only a 30-minute walk. I have hired a nurse privately (the lovely Hope Gillis at NovaHope.ca) to help me monitor my health and troubleshoot the inevitable healthcare roadblocks. Because of the pandemic, I have refrained from alternative in-person treatments like acupuncture for neuropathy.

I am on a deferred leave from work at this time. I continue with what patient advocacy I can. I have told my eyesight-COVID19-cancer story in recent cancer-related webinars and articles, and keep up my end on planning committees for healthcare improvement. I respond the press and to readers of The Cancer Olympics. These activities provide me some purpose during this life hiatus.

So daily life is quite quiet. I try to keep up with my share of daily chores, although I confess I often lapse into doing puzzles. It quiets my mind and gives me continuous

and immediate reinforcement—something very much missing for me given the emptiness of my social life. As a news junkie, the insidious rise of Fascism in the United States occupies my thoughts. I keep compulsively going back to the news every few hours, unable to resist that siren call of that impending disaster. Puzzles help me push away that horror for a short time. How sad is that?

In one spot of good news, our son is moving back to Nova Scotia from Ontario this week. He wanted to anyway, and my recurrence made it even more important. He will start his Ph.D. in neuroscience at Dalhousie in September 2021. We found him and his fiancé an apartment in Halifax, so they can self-isolate for the necessary 14 days as soon as they arrive this coming weekend. They will emerge from quarantine on Thanksgiving Sunday.

Today's song is the ironically titled "Optimistic" from Radiohead's famous 2000 album Kid A. I choose it because its tension between cynicism and hope is like a surreal soundtrack for our current COVID19 crisis. The sonic tone, at once raw and distorted, captures our dystopian reality. The imagery, replete with survival and extinction metaphors, alternates between grim ruthlessness and anguished altruism. As we watch the world convulsed by the catastrophe of the virus, we feel like "nervous messed up marionettes." This song's refrain is what we must cling to – you can only try the best you can. The song exhorts us to endure, to hang on. It is all that I can do. And all that the world can do, because we have no choice.

Flies are buzzing round my head
Vultures circling the dead
Picking up every last crumb
The big fish eat the little ones
The big fish eat the little ones
Not my problem, give me some

You can try the best you can
You can try the best you can
The best you can is good enough
If you try the best you can
If you try the best you can
The best you can is good enough

This one's optimistic
This one went to market
This one just came out of the swamp
This one dropped a payload
Fodder for the animals
Living on animal farm

You can try the best you can
You can try the best you can
The best you can is good enough
If you try the best you can
If you try the best you can
The best you can is good enough

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