I Could've Had a V-8!

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I truly dislike conflict. I will often go to substantial lengths to avoid arguments, debates and other forms of controversy. This may come as a surprise to some as I am both highly opinionated, in my opinion, and a lawyer. With respect to the former, I do espouse a lot of views — but only to those whom I know will agree with me. A profile in courage I am not. As to the law gig, I am merely a corporate lawyer. I have not been in a courtroom since the day I was admitted to the bar nearly two decades ago (save for the one time I was called for jury duty but was promptly "excused" after calling the plaintiff's attorney an ambulance chaser).

And having cancer has done nothing to make me wish to become embroiled in more conflict. Although I am as a result of it generally more irritable and, because I tend to forget many things compliments of the chemo brain, more likely to be accused (rightly) of not doing something I said I would, I am even more careful to try and avoid any kind of a "situation." As I see it, getting through the adversities that cancer has so generously bestowed upon me is more than enough struggle in my life. Why add to it?

Nonetheless, sometimes conflict is unavoidable and the past few days conspired to put such discord in my path. It all began, as it so often misleadingly does, innocently enough. In fact, it started with a subject that is more likely to bore than inflame — life insurance. At a school function, another parent whom I barely know was lamenting about having to explain such insurance to a client as, you see, he apparently sells it. I, innocuously and in an insincere but nevertheless convincing effort to seem as though I cared, inquired as to whether life insurance was as popular a product today as in the days of yore. Apparently offended by my lack of knowledge of the differences between term, universal and other insurance lingo as well as my unfamiliarity with the most up-to-date actuarial tables, the antagonist in this tale stated bluntly that all must have life insurance. Against my better judgment, something with which I am often at odds, I foolishly replied that "no one is going to sell me any life insurance." Aghast at the comment, my soon-to-be nemesis retorted, "Why? Are you sick or something?!?"

It is basic knowledge that one should not ask a question if not able to handle the answer. So, I gave him the answer — and then some: "Why yes, now that you ask. I am sick. I have cancer." After some mumbled words that may have constituted an apology of sorts — he may be my newest source of ire, but he is not responsible for the cancer — he nonetheless offered to see if he

could get me a quote on life insurance. I would have thought he'd cut his losses at this point, but maybe he just really loves selling insurance.

I escaped the rest of the evening without further discussion of either my cancer or life insurance, not knowing which was a less pleasant topic over which to converse. My luck abruptly ran out a mere 36 hours later, however, when once again I was confronted with Mr. Met Life. I offered my customary salutations, but he wanted to dig deep. He informed me, in what apparently passes for a joke in the insurance community, that he now has a poster of me in his office that attributes to me the phrase, "I hate life insurance; ask me why" in his office. Although I do not in fact hate life insurance — it just doesn't seem like something one could have strong feelings about one way or the other — I chose not to engage. Regrettably, and rather astonishingly, my foil was far from done however.

In what was seemingly an attempt to express compassion, which may be a challenge for an insurance salesperson (I don't know since I do not, obviously, purchase their products often), he began to liken my chronic, incurable cancer to his own situation: lyme disease. I don't like to pull rank, and I do not wish to minimize the suffering that those who have been unfortunate enough to be afflicted with lyme disease must endure. After all, it's really not a competition to see which disease or illness is the worst. (Although if it were, I am pretty sure cancer beats most everything — you don't become the Emperor of Maladies without a few nefarious tricks up your sleeve.) He was not, however, trying to out suffer me, which would have been a relief but for that which came next.

"You know," he said, "there is no such thing as an incurable disease." Interested in how he knew this vital piece of information that none of the more than half dozen leading experts on my cancer I have seen over the years were apparently astute enough to know, I allowed him to continue uninterrupted. "I had chronic lyme disease, but now I am better. It is just a matter of better nutrition." (Of course, he also has told me that he can no longer play tennis with his elementary school age children, while I can still in fact run nine miles regularly, so I am not totally convinced how much better he in fact is.)

From time to time on this blog I have written about the do's and don't's (mostly the don't's as they are funnier) to say to someone with cancer. And I am also fortunate to have made many friends in Cancerland (to quote just one of them — thanks WM!) who have shared their innumerable experiences with asinine comments and suggestions. Thus, it should not have come as a complete shock to me that someone who thinks it's amusing to make an anti-life insurance joke by using a cancer endurer as a prop would say something this insensitive, insulting and, to be blunt, stupid. But I was nonetheless astonished to the point of disbelief. Fortunately, I had a witness who happens to be a very good friend of mine but is objective nonetheless as he neither sells insurance nor has cancer. Thank heaven (for both!). And he later attested to what I had thought I had heard.

I could write much more about why this is so hurtful to those of us with cancer, from the suggestion that somehow we are negligent in our own care to a sense that we are just weak. As cancer endurers, we all hear this far too often. The good news, though, is that I know this poor,

uninformed man is not singling out cancer or its victims because the next day I saw him yet again and he informed me that vaccines are just a conspiracy foisted upon us by the pharmaceutical industry and their mindless minions, doctors. I guess if I also believed all of this then I too would think having life insurance would be a good idea.

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