Day 4,366 – Road Trip Reflections After a Summer of Radiation Therapy

On a hiking trail after completing salvage radiation therapy for prostate cancer, I experienced frustration and then acceptance

November 14, 2022 By Dan Zeller

About two weeks after I completed my salvage radiation therapy, the concessionaire that runs lodging in some of our national parks was having a flash sale, and I was eager to book something to pamper myself after the summer of radiation. I was still beat up from the therapy, but I went ahead and booked the room anyway, thinking that it's easier to cancel the reservation if I wasn't feeling up to it than to make one later on.

I came close to cancelling the reservation, but didn't.

Immediately after my last blog post on 11 October, my side effects took an unexpected turn when my bowels started acting up.

Normally, I'm a pretty regular guy with one bowel movement a day, usually in the morning. But for those four or five days before my trip, I was having three to five movements a day in conjunction with an irritated anus (itchy and burning sensations). Fortunately, things calmed down just before the trip and I went anyway.

Loss of bowel control has been one of my biggest fears with doing the radiation so, needless to say, this was quite alarming for me. I never actually lost control during any of these episodes—it was just increased frequency which was workable but annoying. It's definitely something I'll discuss with the radiation oncologist when we meet on 10 November.

Going into the trip, I knew that I wasn't in the same physical condition as I was before the treatment, but I was a bit surprised by how much had changed.

I hiked the Zumwalt Meadow trail in May 2021 and did just fine. It's a relatively flat trail at about 5,000 feet / 1,500 meters elevation with a somewhat tricky part through a rock fall area. I hiked the trail again on this trip, but found it was much slower going for me. As I got to the rock fall area, I could feel the burn in my legs as I was climbing up and down the rock steps placed on the trail. I guess that's the hormone therapy kicking in, weakening my leg muscles.

Zumwalt Meadows Trail from Google MapsDaniel Zeller

Each day in the park, I found myself heading back to the room in the lodge for an afternoon siesta. Perhaps it was the altitude, the cool morning autumn air, and the hiking that did me in (or a combination of all), but I found that my stamina was diminished and needed the little nap.

Of course, that whole experience affected me mentally and emotionally as well. Initially, I was frustrated that I couldn't do some of the simple things that I did before—or at least couldn't do them as easily as I had done them before. But those feelings didn't last too long, thankfully.

By the end of the trip, I turned more to acceptance than frustration.

I accepted the fact that, for this trip, my body had been beaten up pretty badly and I really did nothing to prepare for it between the time the side effects were subsiding and the start of the trip. After meeting a gregarious couple who were in their 80s navigating the rock fall area very cautiously, I reminded myself that what matters most is that I'm out here doing this—just as they were—and it mattered less how fast or agile I was. We just have to adapt to our new limitations.

Even so, it can be difficult to accept the fact that my body may no longer be able to cash the checks my mind is wanting to write.

But I also recognize that I need to take ownership in restoring or preserving my fitness level by doing more physical activity. There are things I would like to see and do yet, and if this is my new "best," then some of those may now be in question, and that would be disappointing to say the least.

In the end, it was good that I went and learned what I did. It helps frame my mind for what I need to do going forward, and what may or may not be possible for future trips.

Be well!

My original plan was for three nights in Kings Canyon and then return home, but at the last minute, I decided to add another day and drove through Yosemite National Park and over Tioga Pass to see the autumn colors in the Eastern Sierra Nevada mountains near Bishop, California. You can check out my posts on my other blog here:

Kings Canyon and Cedar Grove Lodge

Tioga Pass to Eastern Sierra

Enjoy!

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