An End to the Silence

It’s been quite some time since I posted anything. Frankly, this somewhat troubled me. But recently a couple of thoughts came to mind.

May 13, 2021 By Jeff Neurman

As those legions of you who await each of these blog postings with bated breath are certainly keenly aware, it has been quite some time since I have posted anything. And while I have had an occasional tweet and recorded a couple of podcasts with my priceless friend Rudy Fischmann, I have had very little to say. About cancer or otherwise. But certainly not much to offer about our old nemesis cancer.

I had been, to be frank, somewhat troubled by my lack of anything. As both a lawyer and blogger/wanna-be writer, I usually think that I have a great deal to share that is of vital importance that the rest of humanity cannot possibly exist without which being enlightened. Thus, I was worried that civilization as we know it might come to an end as a result of my failure to post these invaluable blog postings and other musings. (And, to a lesser extent, due to a largely uncontrollable and mismanaged pandemic. But that is just a secondary issue.)

Yet when I stopped to think about why I was engaged in this long silence, a couple of thoughts came to mind. First, and probably foremost, I was just tired. Tired of thinking about, dealing with and generally co-existing with cancer. I am not sure if healthy individuals can fully grasp this, but once one has heard the words “You have cancer” there is no going back. Remission, NED, “cure” – it really matters not. The exposure to cancer is enough to alter your path irrevocably. Cancer is always there—sometimes front and center, sometimes making you sick, sometimes making you panic, sometimes just lurking in the parts of one’s mind that consciously we try to avoid. But there it always is.

In my case, however, of late I have been relatively fortunate (heavy emphasis on the word “relatively”). After my last oncologist visit, I was given dispensation to extend the time between visits to a whopping five to six months. This, to put it in context, was after years of ever-decreasing respites between such examinations. And naturally this is a positive development—my wonderful and highly-skilled oncologist determined that she could manage to get by without seeing me as frequently for the time being. I was all too willing to comply.

But all good things must come to an end, and so it is with my hiatus from having my lymph nodes prodded (or at least scrutinized via Zoom). I now am procrastinating, dreading calling her office to schedule the agreed upon next visit. In a strange way, the longer time between visits has made the thought of the next appointment more overwhelming than when they were a regrettably near-

regular occurrence. I guess this is a good problem to have, but it is a problem nonetheless. The other day, as it dawned on me that I needed to see the doctor in a couple of weeks, I was seized by a moment of panic that, while an all-too familiar feeling from my not-so-distant past, was one that I had been spared for some time. My mind, perhaps because I had gotten out of practice of keeping it away from its most negative tendencies, slipped past my guard and went to those terrifying places that all of those with cancer sadly know too well.

And this made me both apprehensive and angry. I think the cause of the apprehension really needs no further explanation, but perhaps I should shed some more light on the anger I experienced. One of the problems with a temporary reprieve from 24/7 cancer is that at a certain point the realization that the reprieve is only temporary becomes all-too apparent. The life I had been managing to lead for the past few months now was potentially subject to revocation. And, more troubling still, the dreams for the future that had been able to take root during this period of calm could be extinguished in an instant (or, to be more precise, in the time that it takes to count my lymphocytes). Thoughts about kids' graduations, vacations to be taken, golden years to be enjoyed. All of this seems, unfairly, at best premature to contemplate.

Contemporaneously, I have noticed that I have become seemingly much more adrift. This may seem inconsistent with what I stated above—wouldn't it seem logical that freedom (albeit temporary) from the constant cancer-centric thoughts should liberate me to focus on pursuing other aspects of life, whether personal or professional? For many, I am sure that is in fact the case. A partial break from cancer allows them to devote otherwise involuntarily diverted energy back to their careers or avocations about which they are passionate.

Yet I have had the essentially opposite experience. Admittedly, the passion that I felt for my profession pre-cancer was of the negative sort—i.e., why on earth did I ever pursue this career? But beyond that, my ability to find attachment to meaningful activities or pursuits has somehow avoided me, particularly in the time post-chemotherapy. Many who have been through similar treatments and diagnoses use the experience to motivate themselves to do things that, frankly, they may have been too hesitant to do before. A sense of "what do I have left to lose?" takes over, and probably quite healthfully. But for me, cancer made my world infinitely smaller. Tasks that would have been not worth a second's thought pre-cancer have become overwhelming. Devotion to anything beyond my immediate family (which does, of course, include the dog) is just beyond conceivable. So without these goals or passions or whatever one should properly term them, I am largely just existing. I am, however, existing, surrounded by my two beautiful sons and exquisite wife—and, again, the dog. And that is enough for me for now. I like to think that some day—hopefully some day soon—I will rediscover that part of me that was a high-achiever and motivated to do more. But I just don't know when or, honestly, if that will ever happen.

So for now I must compel myself to pick up the phone and make my next appointment. I will, of course, be well-medicated during both the call and, especially, during the exam. But where I will go from there only time will tell.

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