Lessons Learned from Cancer Part I

May 14, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

To say cancer changes your perspective on life would be an understatement. There are physical changes, financial costs, and numerous emotional tolls that you'll encounter along the way. For me, cancer forced me to take a good, hard look at my life. Just as I teach my students, cancer taught me many lessons.

Find What's Important

Prior to cancer, I was involved in about ten different side projects. I was like a dog chasing a ball (little did I know I was about to lose one). If something sounded like it would be a cool idea or help improve education, I went all in.

However, there are only 24 hours in a day. If I'm spending 8 of them sleeping and another 8 at work, that only leaves 8 hours for cooking, exercise, and leisure time. The more projects I took on, the more quickly that 8 hours of freedom dwindled down as I poured myself into more and more random endeavors. Because of this, I was neglecting my relationships and things that really matter, like my personal relationships and spending time with my cat (yes, I am a crazy cat man).

About halfway through chemo, I realized this. I made the decision to walk away from nearly all of these projects, which seemed hard at the time, but now, I am seeing the benefits. Ultimately, you get one shot at life (unless reincarnation is a thing, in which case I want to be a hawk or an eagle in my next life). I can't spend all of my free time doing things that ultimately won't have a lasting impact on my life while ignoring the people who love and support me.

This realization also pushed me to make some other big changes in my life. I'm leaving my job at the end of the year. I have been very fortunate to have a supportive school and a wonderful class this year, but the fact of the matter is I spend over an hour and a half commuting every day. (You could say all this driving drives me nuts, but I only have one.) I'm going to be working at a school that is less than ten minutes from my house next year, and that gives me more time with my fianceé (who will be my wife by then), our pets, and working on spreading awareness with ABSOT.

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