Moving Forward but Not On — Part 2

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October 2, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

Last week, upon realizing that it had been a full year since the successful completion of my chemo, I decided I should take a bit of a self-assessment and review how that year had passed. (To clarify, when I say "successful completion" of chemo I mean merely that I endured all of the strongly recommended installments thereof, put the cancer into remission for at least the present and had fewer occasions than anticipated where I had to use the bed pan — which is not even a bed pan these days but rather an inappropriately-colored sky blue slinky-like device with an awkwardly sized opening that forces the cookie tosser to surround not only the mouth but also the nose thereby only increasing the need for such a device once the show begins). Granted, it has now been more than a year since the chemo ended as another week has passed, but, as also noted in last week's post, I am of the Jewish faith and consistent with that we like to drag out the celebration of any holiday for days, New Years included. See, for example, Hanukkah — eight days. Sukkot — eight days. Passover — eight days. So this may — or may not — be the last installment in this series.

I ended last week's review post with what passes for me as optimism — "not all has been negative, so far." The one non-negative element that I touched upon, albeit briefly, was that writing this blog — and similar articles and other pieces for various media outlets — has been a source of great comfort to me. In fact, as one of the members of my cancer tribe so insightfully pointed out just this morning, many of us with cancer just need a place to articulate that which we are experiencing and to have a means to connect with others who are, sadly, sharing similar trials. And, as he pointed out, often it is just not possible to have these frank and frequently painful discourses with our loved ones. They are just too close to the subject matter — i.e., us. It is painful for them and for us, and we already are enduring enough pain as it is. I have never heard of anyone with cancer complaining that the pain — in whatever form — was "surprisingly manageable" much less inconsequential. Cancer is not a flu shot.

Connecting with other cancer endurers has had one very pleasant and completely unanticipated outcome: I have met many wonderful people. In fact, so many of these kindred spirits are so terrific that it almost makes having cancer worth it as I undoubtedly would not have had the opportunity to become friends with them but for the cancer. (Of course, the key word in the immediately preceding sentence is "almost".) These newly-made friends come from all over the globe and from all different backgrounds, religions, political ideologies and types of malignancies.

But cancer, with its enormous power, can bridge the divides that virtually all other avenues fail to span. If we could only harness cancer's power for good — and not evil — we would really be on to something.

I think this spanning of differences is possible because cancer, notwithstanding the endless list of terrible things it does and causes, does sometimes provide much needed perspective. When a person is fighting a foe as unstoppable as cancer, most of the nonsense that we allow ourselves to become bogged down in just does not really matter. Republican versus Democrat. Atheist versus church-goer. Mary Ann versus Ginger. Yankees versus Red Sox. None of these — save for maybe the last one — is as important a divide as the commonality that battling cancer creates.

In a sense, having cancer is like pledging a fraternity (back when they had fraternities and hazing was still regrettably tolerated). The shared misery that one is subjected to tends to form strong bonds among those undergoing it. Whatever differences there might be between the pledges/cancer sufferers, they pale in comparison to the loathing felt towards the collective oppressor. The only difference is that cancer is more expensive than joining a fraternity (but only slightly) and the drugs are a bit different. Both do, however, tend to involve a disturbing amount of vomiting.

The other "gift" that cancer and chemo have combined to give me is a greater sense of what truly matters. It is not as though cancer radically changed my notions of what makes me happy or what I value in life. Rather, cancer just brings it into sharper focus, perhaps because one with cancer is very much aware of time and how little of it there is. Thus, spending this most valuable of commodities on that which is unimportant, undesirable or plain unworthwhile becomes anathema to many of us.

In my own case, as anyone who has read basically any of my writings knows, I am not overly enamored with my choice of professions. Practicing law basically makes me unhappy. This was true before cancer and chemo, but now it is much clearer that spending my time doing that which brings me little other than frustration and additional anxiety is not how I wish to use whatever amount of time I have left. Of course, it still helps pay the bills, so I cannot just dramatically walk out one day (I also cannot do that because I work for myself so I am not sure who would be there to witness this theatrical display). Yet it has encouraged me to pursue interests that I might otherwise have continued to rationalize away as pipe-dreams or too unconventional. Now, I haven't the time for those unproductive thoughts. On balance, I cannot say that I am in a better place today than I was a year ago. Physically I am stable — but fortunately I have managed to shed about half of the chemo-induced gross tonnage I added. And I have been able to resume exercise — a mixed blessing — at near pre-chemo levels. But mentally, the situation is a bit more murky. Despite my increased clarity of purpose as discussed above, the increased anxiety and enhanced awareness of the fragility of life have left me in a sort of purgatory. What I must do to get out of this intermediate state I do not know. Jews do not have this concept so I am truly at a loss. If any of my non-Jewish cancer tribe members have any suggestions, please let me know.

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