The Party's Over

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October 9, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

I have been quite troubled over the last several months—now nearly a full year—that I have had so little to say about cancer and my life with it. Without giving away the cliff-hanging resolution to this post prematurely, I think my unexplained silence has basically been the result of having had enough with all things cancer for a while.

Of course, it is a luxury to be able to just decide that one has had enough with cancer. (Perhaps "luxury" is a bit too strong of a word—it doesn't provide the same level of enjoyment as would a fancy purchase or a tropical vacation. At best, it's the absence of anything, which is kind of hard to get excited about on a sustained basis.) Compared to many others with similar diagnoses, I am fortunate in that I had been able to more or less turn off thoughts about cancer for an extended time.

Yet we must define our terms. "Turning off thoughts about cancer" is really a euphemism. A more precise depiction would be that I was able to stop incessantly worrying about it for a spell. It is really the difference between agonizing over it for no identifiable reason and worrying about it for a reason that is probably unrelated. (Hopefully.)

And that's really the best that I think one can do when diagnosed with cancer. Cancer is not a disease that is treated, goes away and that is the end of the story. What no one bothers to tell you when you become saddled with a cancer diagnosis is that your life as you knew it, in some very meaningful ways, ceases to exist.

Fortunately for my loyal readers, however, cancer is a better survivor then nearly all its unwelcoming hosts. Thus there is only so long that any semblance of a reprieve may be afforded. And so it is no coincidence that once again I find myself at my desk typing away as my temporary denial has come to an end.

Oftentimes, the harbinger of the termination of escapism from cancer is an upcoming oncologist appointment, replete with scans or, in my case, the involuntary withdrawal of numerous vials of blood that I would have assumed I otherwise needed. But this time it is actually something less patently apparent that is ushering in the specter of this biological plague: The multiple shortcomings of my body generally.

If one were to objectively canvass my person, there would certainly be no paucity of shortcomings over which to muse. Some of these are age-induced; for example, I think I may be developing liver spots on the back of my hands a la all of my relatives who managed to reach a minimum age of 80. I wonder if there is a politically-correct term for liver spots. I am not overly into the PC-movement, although I generally believe that if someone wants to be called X and not Y then I should be accommodating. But liver spots really just are a dermatological combo platter of two fairly repulsive things: liver and spots. A functioning liver, well that's fine. But as a source of nutrition, no thanks. And spots? I am not a leopard. Plus I have external validation that becoming bespotted is not a good look for a human as one of my sons (I won't identify the guilty one) commented the other day that my body is covered with all kinds of these discolorations. Don't kids just say the darndest things?

My appearance aside, which frankly should have been left aside even in my heyday, which I don't remember occurring, the bigger concern now is more internal matters. I have been plagued by rather frequent migraines in my post-chemo existence. Migraines are not a new addition to my physical malady grab-bag as I was initially diagnosed with them at the ripe old age of 13, with my first brain MRI at the advanced age of 15. And although the medications to treat them have allegedly improved, these new drugs have been less effective than my increased willpower to just not be bothered by them any more than I must.

Of perhaps greater concern is the persistent cough and, to be a bit graphic, phlegm that has plagued me for many years now. My oncologist, who is wonderful, has not been troubled by this more mucus-y version of me, relating that many patients with my cancer have all manner of allergy issues. Wanting to believe that was all there was to it, I made the mistake of seeing an allergist. And while most people would consider that the results of an allergy test showing that one's body is not really put off by any allergens, I was quite disturbed by this lack of histamine sensitivity. For now I must ponder what is causing these issues, which at their worst interrupt my sleep at night with fits of coughing and, more frustrating still, similarly erupt during my precious naps.

The allergist posited that it is probably a combination of factors, which, he stressed, none of which he would be concerned about. That being said, if two more weeks of doubling-up on Nexium doesn't do the trick then a trip to an otolaryngologist is in order. While I do have a good ENT, I do not have a good track record with them. This is in no small part because the most serious and immediate consequence of my cancer pre-chemo was enlarged lingual tonsils that made swallowing a bit of an adventure. (And when I say "enlarged," I mean enormous as one ENT told me he had never even seen anything like my tonsils "even in a medical textbook." Another doctor was more diplomatic, merely terming them "impressive." I like to impress people, but not generally with my lymph nodes.)

So, here I am, like so many sufferers from cancer. Wondering if this problem that continues to defy the experts is of course really quite simple: cancer. I don't know if that is being irrational or not. It doesn't matter. Rationality is part of my pre-cancer life as nothing about having cancer makes any sense. But the good news is I think I will have plenty to write about now that the party is over.

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