

Practice Makes Imperfect

I think what people who are fortunate enough to not have cancer often fail to realize about the disease is that it never really leaves you.

June 3, 2022 By [Jeff Neurman](#)

It seems a bit nonsensical to say that I have been fortunate with my cancer as of late. For some time now, things had been going along as close to what a normal person (i.e., one not cancer-afflicted) would experience. Although I cannot honestly say that a single day passes without thinking for at least a moment about my cancer, it was mercifully not at the top of my list of worries each day (which, because of who I am – including who I was pre-cancer – is quite the extensive list to be certain). But as with any other area of life, when one gets out of practice one's performance suffers.

And so it was that I found myself last night, for the first time in a long time, frozen almost out of the blue by all of the worst fears and nightmares that all of us with cancer have but try ever so hard to push away from our conscious awareness.

It all started innocently enough – with what by all appearances seemed to be a head cold. (By the way, I don't know if there is another type of bodily cold one can get; if you know, please drop me a line. I am always looking to increase my knowledge of human maladies.) The issue, however, was complicated by two factors. First, this (head) cold had been with me for the better part of seven weeks. It waxed and waned a bit, but it never fully resolved. And before anyone hypothesizes that it is in fact Covid, recall that I am married to a physician who seemingly enjoys swabbing each of the members of the household after a solitary sneeze. Thus, I had an ailment that, for any normal individual, should have lasted no more than about ten days, whereas I was pushing 50.

Exacerbating greatly the problem was, as per one of my recent posts, the chronic cough by which I am plagued. One thing that will not provide any succor to a persistent cough is a respiratory infection that generates all types of extra viscous fluids in the throat and upper chest. The coughing had in fact become so incessant that I was tempted to drive myself to the hospital fearing that I needed some supplementary oxygen. (Although my wife can be a bit wearisome with the Covid swabs, she does have some more useful gadgets around the house such as a blood oxygen meter which showed that such extra O2 was not really necessary.)

But I was starting to border on complete lethargy, extreme exhaustion from a full-scale inability to sleep more than 30 minutes between coughing fits and a general sense of hopelessness. Of course, it is these factors – particularly the last – that cancer seizes upon to fully wrest control of your life from you.

Not knowing what to do, my wife, as delicately as possible, floated the idea that I should reach out to my oncologist. While I cannot speak for everyone with cancer, I think I do represent many of us when I state that any visit to the oncologist – particularly an unplanned/emergency one – is cause for a high-degree of alarm. Completely unprepared for this possibility, I immediately became deeply, deeply unsettled. What if everything I had relearned to enjoy – not constantly thinking about cancer, not having my blood drawn every month or two, not living in incessant fear – was all of a sudden to be snatched away from me. I am not usually a stick-my-head-in-the-ground kind of person, but I just really wondered whether I had the fortitude to make an unscheduled visit to see my cancer doctor. Because what if she found that the good blood counts and other measures I had been “enjoying” for the last couple of years were coming to an abrupt end? I was, quite honestly, overcome with fear. It seemed to me at that moment that all that I had been able to make properly important in my life again – my boys’ and their baseball, playing music with my sons (I am definitely the worst of the three of us), enjoying the remodeling of our basement which, ironically, had just been completed that day – was going to be taken away from me. A set of tremendous despondency wedged its way into my psyche so that my mind was occupied 100% by depression and terror.

I think what people who are fortunate enough to not have cancer often fail to realize about the disease is that it never really leaves you. Terms like “cure”, “No Evidence of Disease”, “Survivor”, “remission” promise a great deal more than they deliver. The hold that cancer has over you – knowing that it can come roaring back with an unimaginable vengeance at any moment – is an enormous burden to live under. And even putting it out of the foremost of one’s thoughts, as I had, is almost worse. Because when cancer – or even just the possibility of cancer – rears its terrifying head one is almost completely unprepared.

Today I can fortunately report that I seem to be somewhat better. So I am using this as a reason not to reach out to my oncologist, although my wife still thinks it would be wise to do so. But whatever electronic missives we do or do not send with to my doctor, the damage has been done. I was painfully reminded again of how quickly matters can deteriorate and how little control those of us with cancer actually possess. The good news is that I guess I will be getting back into practice.

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