A ’Stranger Things’ Episode

October 31, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

I write this on the eve of my orchiectomyversary. As luck would have it, it was also the day season two of the Netflix show Stranger Things was released. The show was a good marathon towards the end of chemo, so I figured binging it would be a good and harmless way to spend a Friday evening.

I barely made it through the first episode.

(Minor spoilers to follow, but nothing that impacts anything significant for the second season of the show.)

The first season’s plot revolves around a boy, named Will Byars, who goes missing from his home. He’s found by the end of the season, but at the start of the second season, he’s experiencing visions related to the trauma he experienced while missing. He shares with his doctor that he’s seeing things.

It’s nearly one year to the day of when he disappeared into the Upside Down (kind of like a dark mirror of our world). His doctor listens and states that Will’s experience is normal. It’s called the “Anniversary Effect,” which apparently is a real thing. The doctor explains that the Anniversary Effect is when an “anniversary of an event brings back traumatic memories. Sort of opens up the neurological floodgates, so to speak.”

Nearly thirty seconds after the doctor said that line, I started feeling very overwhelmed and anxious for a variety of reasons. I began thinking about some minor inconveniences from earlier in the day. Our HVAC (which we had installed less than three months ago) wasn’t pumping hot air, so I had spent two hours earlier bouncing between calls with the installers, the home warranty company, and the manufacturer. Finally, it was resolved (the installers would come out the next day), but by then, it was dinner time. Since Mal and I had plans to start the show, I couldn’t go to the gym like I normally do.

I figured I’d just get my workout in the next day, but with the installers coming, I wasn’t sure if that would happen or not. I also wanted popcorn, but a student had brought me a donut that morning. Fitness and clean eating have become a priority to me, which is healthy. However, tonight, a skipped workout, a donut and some popcorn created a feeling of anxiety.

Why am I sharing these trivial things? All of these things happened hours previously and without much fanfare. Ordinarily, they would be minor nuisances.

But as that scene flashed before my eyes, they all suddenly and unexpectedly hit me like a ton of bricks. I may not have faced a Demogorgon like Will, but I began my battle against another otherworldly creature a year ago: cancer. It dawned on me—I was facing my own Anniversary Effect.

I suppose this is what being triggered feels like or perhaps a mild anxiety attack. It's not a fun feeling. I couldn't necessarily pinpoint why I was feeling that way, beyond the impending day of remembrance for Lefty, and therefore, I wasn't sure what I really needed to do to move forward.

I decided not to watch episode two, as I didn't want any more fun surprises. I tried to explain to Mallory what I was feeling but as usual, what I say doesn't quite match my head thoughts.

Instead, I retreated to solitude to write this piece, which admittedly isn't any more clear than my attempts at a verbal explanation, and headed to bed. Before I fell asleep, I did some research on the Anniversary Effect, and I found that non-Netflix doctors recommend to distract yourself with other things as the moment approaches, so sleeping seemed to be a wise choice. Can't stress over things if you're sleeping.

As I've shared time and time again, I know it's going to be an up and down journey, especially when I hit these not-so-fun milestones. The positive words I wrote in my "One Year Ago" post are still 100 percent accurate. Those represent my overall feelings as I approached the day; even though what happened today seems to negate that post, this was a moment in time that I felt I needed to share.

Do I feel better as I wrap this up? Not dramatically, but a little better. Writing things down helps me get them out of my head. At the very least, I have a record of what I felt at the time. Some of my favorite posts, like "The Post Op," "Spring Break Paranoia," and parts of "Six Months Later," have been written in the heat of the moment while I'm feeling vulnerable. I can't figure out what I want to say out loud so I write it and let it come out that way. I wasn't sure what would come of this piece. However, I know myself enough to know that I process things best by writing. That's what I needed in that moment, and that's what I did.

Of one thing I was sure. My anxiety had just been turned up to…Eleven.

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