I Didn’t Want to Ring the Bell

July 23, 2020 By Lindsay Norris

During work today, I decided to hop upstairs to the treatment area to take a quick selfie with the bell and reflect for a moment. It’s been exactly three years ago today that I stood there grasping the rope in one hand and Harry in the other, with a crowd of loved ones and co-workers (and a camera crew!) surrounding me with huge anticipatory smiles. I had “made it”. The day I had been counting down to (and that got moved back several times after hospitalizations and delays) was finally here! Yes, I was thrilled, and that day was amazing… but something I really haven’t shared before is: I DIDN’T WANT TO RING THE BELL.

I didn’t want to ring it because I didn’t really feel like I had “accomplished” anything yet…and I certainly had no proof this was truly my last treatment. What if the scans I was scheduled to get a few weeks after showed my cancer was back and I was headed back to the chemo chair just days after? I’ve seen it happen. So why would I ring that bell and jinx it all?

I didn’t want to ring the bell because the “treatment phase” had become comfortable. It was my normal. As difficult and trying as getting chemotherapy was, I knew I was doing something to fight my disease by sitting in that chair. I had been sticking with the motto of taking it one step, one day, sometimes one minute at a time- and then to come out on the other side of treatment left with just more time to wait for what could be next was way too overwhelming. Too many unknowns.

I didn’t want to ring the bell because I couldn’t stop thinking about those who never will. Is it a slap in the face to be sitting back in the treatment chair and overhear a loud bell signaling the end of someone’s treatment, when you know you’ll be getting yours indefinitely? There’s actually been a lot of chatter about this is the cancer world…bell or no bell. And I truly see both sides of this one. How do you celebrate this milestone while protecting those who will never reach it. Cancer friends…comment and let me know your bell stance. I’m curious! Is it time to move on from the bell?

Well, spoiler alert: I ran the dang bell. The look on my kid’s face and those surrounding me was enough to make it worth it for me. And if I’m honest, I did get more emotional about it than I thought I would…and I felt a little bit of that tingle in my eyes today as I stood for a second to remember the scene from three years ago. Has it been easy since then? Heck NO. In fact, the hardest work started that day. Managing life after cancer has so many challenges and layers, not to be compared to my metastatic or terminal friends and their experience, but certainly very difficult in its own way.

All bell debate aside, today marks another year off treatment and my heart is so grateful. {Most of} my side effects are gone, and I know the further out I get the closeness of that “sick” feeling will continue to fade. I can still hear the squeakiness of my 5FU pump overnight. I can still feel that twinge of nausea when I see or smell something that reminds me of chemo. I can still taste the saline from port flushes/ unhooks and blood draws. I can still feel myself holding my breath waiting for labs to be good enough for treatment to be a “go." I so closely remember the disappointment when treatment got delayed or reduced and being so sure that THAT was the reason I would have a recurrence. I still remember the kindness of the treatment nurses with the snacks and blankets (and immense knowledge of treatments and side effects) and feel fortunate to still get to say hi to them often. I still remember day 4 being consistently the worst and I’d rarely get out of bed. I still remember seeing how thin I was and feeling pretty helpless about it. I still remember how touching anything remotely cold felt electric to my fingers or throat. I still remember the clumps of hair that would break off in odd patterns around my head. I still remember debating waking the kids up so my husband could take me to the Emergency Department in the middle of the night. I still remember missing birthdays (even my son’s), parties, events, basically everything and the world spun on around me. I still remember pulling the car over to get sick on the side of the road. I still remember the incredible pain of the bowel obstructions chemo caused. I remember all of YOU filling the cooler on my porch for weeks and weeks so my family was fed. I remember Camden taking on every extra role he needed to at home and even more. I remember my doctors and teams so patiently listening to my growing list of anxieties. I remember never feeling like I would get through it all, and then (so far) I did. Three years away from chemo feels like a big accomplishment. and I’m celebrating today in honor of those who didn’t see it.

Ringing Out

Ring this bell
Three times well
Its toll to clearly say,
My treatment’s done
This course is run
And I am on my way!

— Irve Le Moyne

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