

The Upside of Cancer

by
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The diagnosis of kidney cancer, coming over the telephone, folded me over as surely as a blow to the stomach. I've learned, in the grave illnesses of relatives, to go straight to finding out the facts and sticking to the facts and the facts only: What I know, rather than what I fear. That was one defense, among others that kicked in pretty quickly. But what defenses do you really have against that fact? I was determined to stay positive, both for myself and for my extended family (my wife Shellie, my sisters and brother and their families, and Shellie's family). The effects that the experience of diagnosis, surgery, and recovery had on me, some light, some weightier and further-reaching, I see as benefits—taken together, my upside to having had cancer.

Others have found an upside; some cancer survivors have even said it was the best thing that ever happened to them. Lance Armstrong, the Tour de France champion, turned his fight into a drive to support cancer patients and survivors that has raised, to date, \$80 million. My mother once told me that that her first breast cancer, at age 29, saved her life: she had been seriously depressed before she got the diagnosis, and having cancer forced her to fight to live.

My episode started about a week before that phone call from my urologist. For a year or two, I'd been getting really tired in the evenings and turning slower times on my bike commute, which I blamed on age. Then one day at work came the symptom that permitted no excuses: my urine was a dark, dense pink, the color of grapefruit pulp. Spontaneously, I said, "What did I eat?!...I'm in trouble." I wonder what the guy in the next stall thought.

Renal cell carcinomas of the clear-cell type don't respond to chemotherapy or radiation. So if surgery doesn't get rid of the cancer, you may be in for a rough time, and the odds of bad outcomes increase dramatically. Kidney cancer is often asymptomatic, and mine grew for at least five years before it blew its cover. Pissing a dark grapefruit color was my first piece of great good fortune. A month's passing between that day and surgery may seem like a long time, and at some points Shellie and I wished things would go faster, but a lot of steps were required to get me to the table: CT scan, MRI, referral to Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and a new, oncological urologist, John Gore, who would be my surgeon. Some

days Shellie or I, or both, were just holding on, trying to be game when fear was draped all over us. After all of that, an operating room had to come available. That was the second point of luck. Dr. Gore's scheduling nurse thought it would be a matter of weeks, but after she dove into her computer, chewing her cheek, she asked, "What are you doing next Tuesday?" "Nothing!" I jumped up and bounced about. Surgery would be a radical nephrectomy, taking out the kidney and the local network of lymph nodes. The tumor was fairly big—it had taken over all but a sliver of the kidney. But, counter to Dr. Gore's suspicions going in, it proved to be contained, meaning that it had not spread to any of the structures or tissue around the kidney or to the local lymph nodes. The containment of the tumor seems like my third stroke of fabulous luck. With about five years of CT scans ahead of me, my bout with cancer looks to be, as Dr. Gore put it, like a car wreck that I survived.

I started finding upsides right away. Even before the diagnosis, the presence of three possible kinds of cancer on the Evil List (that's when you have a symptom and your doctor gives you the list of possible causes, and you shorten the list item by item) gave me a new standard for whether to finish reading a book: I asked, "If I do have cancer, would I finish this book? Hell no!" and I hurled it aside, like Dorothy Parker, with great force. Well, in my mind I hurled it.

On the other hand, in the five weeks of recovering from surgery, I had lots of time for reading. Gotta love that. My mother-in-law sent me *Unbroken* and I banged through it in a couple of days, so she sent me another book. I discovered one of the best books I've read in years, Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down*.

Having cancer made cancer something I could laugh about. Serious people think this helps you physically, but why be all sober about laughter? I'd rather have a little fun. If you can't get a laugh out of cancer, what's the point in having it? My brother-in-law called with support, and in the diffident way of guys, said, "So, Jeff, what are you up to?" "Oh, just sitting around having cancer." Getting laughs out of the shock value and sharp curve that's gotten thrown into normal life wore out its welcome, however—humor is ruthless, it always needs something new.

At the end of Shakespeare's *Love's Labors Lost*, the love interest of a wise-acre named Berowne challenges him to take his sense of humor to hospitals and make those who are gravely ill laugh. In this, Shakespeare seems to define, as the critic Harold Bloom put it, the "limits of comedy." An interesting idea,

but to me, it comes at humor and suffering from the wrong end. You may be hard put to make a seriously ill patient laugh, but patients with a sense of humor will likely crack jokes to visitors about their most dread foe. In her third career, Mom used to visit shut-ins. For a while, she went into their rooms with a clown persona—an idea that, as I recall, didn't last too long. Perhaps she met what Shakespeare expected for the lover Berowne. But when, in the wake of a heart attack, she found herself in the other position, lying in the intensive care unit that she would never leave and unable to talk because of her breathing tube, she still managed to crack wise, spelling a one-word joke in the palm of my hand. Julia Sweeney's film *God Said Ha!*, about her family's experiences as her brother fought—and lost to—cancer, was hilarious as well as profoundly touching.

Some of my jokes, on the other hand, just got looks that were either mystified or appalled—or something else, I don't know what. For a while, my favorite line was that when you have cancer, you can eat more without gaining weight: After all, you're eating for two! (ka-ching!) Well, it was true. My cancer, anyway, was an effective aid to weight loss.

During the suspense between the diagnosis and surgery my family showed me the love that is part of my life but that I have taken for granted. As word spread, hand-written notes and emails came from those with whom I didn't normally converse by writing. It may not seem like it should be a revelation to see how much people care for me and how important I am to them, but such a health crisis shines a bright light on what is dimly lit in normal life. Before cancer, I didn't see how deeply the roots of love are threaded throughout those to whom I matter. When I get together with my sisters and brother now, I see in their faces how very happy they are that I'm healthy again. Recently, speaking of that time, Shellie started to say in a lightly jokey way, "I was afeard, I was quite afeard." After a pause, her voice dropped into serious: "I was terrified."

These benefits have also left me with questions. Was it being shown love or the threat of curtailed life or recovery's time out from normal living and preoccupations that made me re-examine some of my priorities and goals? Somewhere in the five weeks after surgery, I wondered whether it was time to give up on screenwriting, after 17 years of failure. "Did I just get my life saved in order to give up on what I care about most?" I asked myself. "No, no, no, no, and no!" So, I thought, onward goes the hunt for the golden

fleece. A few months later, however, screenwriting came to seem a game that I had proven over time I wasn't cut out for. Therefore, I set it aside—with more pain than hurling a book with great force. The first benefit, the inspiring insight, was then negated by the second, which set me free. I'm not sure those decisions had anything at all to do with cancer and recovery, but simply grew out of who I am.

In retrospect, that time was a sojourn like those of certain fictions: In *A Brief Vacation*, by Vittorio de Sica, a poor Italian wife and mother's finding love at a tuberculosis sanitarium; in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, the young bourgeois, another tubercular case, in the Swiss Alps—I don't remember how the young man changed internally, but the setting and his physical life there are memorable. My magic mountain was at sea level, spending a lot of time in bed and walking down to the local coffee shop. After some time in this retreat, I felt as if I were walking up to my problems with a fresh approach, and yet with solutions that lurked somewhere in the back of my mind but that I'd never tried. It seemed to me there are fewer causes to get angry, not so many reasons to take a stand, less fear of judgment. This time out gave me a little practice at stepping around a few more of the mental and emotional snares than I did before. But it only took a few months of normal life to tangle me in anger and fear as ever before. I don't know how extensive or lasting a benefit that sojourn was. It felt great at the time, but the honeymoon was soon over. Has anyone solved the problem of the relationship of normal life to a retreat? Even if brief, this fresh approach to life and self was welcome.

What I am more sure of is that cancer and recovery shifted my perspectives. It's as if some force moved me closer to certain people, and at a different angle and distance to others. The change of perspective even changed the past.

While Shellie and I were in Utah with her family last Christmas, before I knew what I had growing inside, a bunch of us drove down I-15 in a snowstorm to visit relatives. My brother-in-law, against the better judgment of everyone in the car and probably his own, was sure that the fumes in the gas tank would get us to the last small town before we left the freeway for rural roads. He was nearly right: we ran out of gas about a mile shy of his target exit. I didn't feel like sitting in the car, so I volunteered to go for gas. Within a hundred yards a Suburban picked me up, a nice couple somewhere in their later sixties. Originally planning to just give me a ride to the gas station, they decided then to also take me back to our car. The

husband knew a local road that would let him get on the freeway, drive down to our car and continue in their original direction. As we were driving back to my party, the wife asked me to open my window a crack. “The gas fumes bother my lungs a little bit—I have a lung issue.” I tend to boldly go some places that most would more discreetly not. So of course I asked her what her lung issue was. After a moment’s hesitation, she said, with a bright, easy smile, “I have lung cancer.” That fetched me up short. Her husband was silent. Then here goes Jeff again: “So, all things considered, how are you doing with that?” Unflapped, she thought for a second and said, “I’m actually doing really well.” At that point, I did recognize that I’d gone far enough if not further, and just wished her continued doing-well.

When I thought back to that ride and conversation this spring, after my diagnosis, it occurred to me that there might have been a sort of visitor from the future in that Suburban, the Jeff who knew what I wouldn’t find out for another three months, perkily adding to the conversation but unheard by anyone, “Yeah, I have cancer too, I just don’t know it yet.”

Now I find myself a little closer to where this woman lived: I understand, a little better, her good cheer and her forthrightness. I imagine that she sees that cancer may be a shock and a horror for everyone, but she’s doing okay. Or that her prognosis is good, she’s beating it—or it’s bad, but she’s still enjoying life. So that she could say, “All things considered, I’m doing well.” Perhaps she had, as I would in the spring, taken a decision to be positive, a commitment that does not deny the frightened times, the fatigue, the horror and hatred of the monster that had changed from being part of me to an enemy eating me up and using vicious wiles to do so. Perhaps she had a point of view that was none of that, but something of her own, a point of view different from mine, yet one that took both of us to the same place: A little surprise at the shock and horror on the faces of those who find out, because I’m okay, and I know it. As well, I think I know exactly her calculation in that pause before she told me what her lung issue was: “Has what I’ve said committed me to tell? Would it be silly not to? Okay, I’ll tell—and here goes.” That Jeff of four months later could have told her, “Honey, I understand a piece of what you’ve faced. I’m there, too.”

Mom survived breast cancer twice. If she were still alive, I wonder what she, who scarcely ever mentioned it to us kids, would have had to say about the arc of having and surviving cancer. I so wish she could read this.

With this new perspective, I had a much shorter mental walk to show sympathy to others who are dealing with a difficult health issue or have a family member who is doing so. On the other hand, I was shocked to suddenly find myself the object of pity or wonder. The second day home from the hospital, Shellie and I were taking a walk. Circling all of two city blocks was my current personal best. I was going really slowly. My walking stick was a cedar two-by-two. In the past, when seeing someone old, terribly overweight, or otherwise disabled, out walking, I looked with pity, wonder, or judgment at the hard time they were having. On this walk, I noticed an old woman looking at me with something like pity or wonder. Sci-fi has nothing on reality for magically transporting you.

Fully recovered after a couple of months, I found what may be the greatest upside of all: I learned how fantastic normal is. Feeling really 100 percent again, in terms of energy, good feeling, and mental sharpness, including an improved kinesthetic sense that had me feeling more grooved in with cornering when descending on the bike. I had no idea until I recovered how unwell I had been for at least a year before surgery. To understand for the first time how subpar I had been in that year or two of fatigue and slower bike times, and now to feel so good by contrast, I feel better than I ever have. Realizing this flew me high as a kite for a couple of weeks. I told everybody about it. I'm still amazed.

One of the baristas at my favorite coffee joint asked me the pro-forma question "How ya doin'?" I was actually at a loss for a reply. I got stuck thinking, "How could I be anything but great?" The lows came, the snares trapped me, but for a few weeks, there was nothing, I mean nothing, that could make my days anything less than great. I still can't say anything but "great" when the question is asked, no matter how perfunctory. It still makes me think about my answer. It's still meaningful to me. What an upside.

That question, though, from people who know I've had cancer and ask how I'm doing, is real, not a matter of form. And they're really enthusiastic about how well I look. I used to say that the great thing about turning 50 is that if you're in good shape, you get double points for it. I assume you get triple points when you turn 60. After cancer, it's a whole different realm from points. It's the light in their eyes and the joy in their voice when they tell me I'm looking great. At the same time, I'm always taken back, a little. I think, "But I've had months to recover. Of course I'm okay!"

“F*** Cancer.” I saw this on a biking jersey, but with the F-bomb spelled out in full, no asterisks. Boy, did I respond from the gut to that. For a minute, I had to have that jersey—but on reconsideration, thought it might be a bit much on the advertising side. And not very nice for any kids and parents that I might ride by. Still, my reaction to that jersey showed me how much I hated cancer, more viscerally and far more fiercely than I’ve ever hated anyone or anything before. How exactly that jersey expressed what I felt. Later, at a family get-together amid the jaw-dropping cliffs of Zion National Park, my cousin-in-law Keith, who’d recently lost his mother to kidney cancer, asked me if I thought I’d been in denial about what I’d been facing. In response, I told him about how much I’d discovered that I hated cancer. That evening, alone, perhaps because of what I told Keith, maybe realizing what I felt or just feeling what I’d faced and been through, I started crying, crying harder than I had since the diagnosis: wringing out not necessarily pain, but something that makes crying a mystery. Is this an upside? Sure. (Today, I think that this cry was my finally getting and recognizing the impact that this whole experience had had on me.)

When Lance Armstrong was winning the Tour de France, I guessed that on every training ride and in every race, he was personally riding against and defeating Death. His rivals were just riding against each other. How could they beat a guy who was riding against Death? It was an idea. Who knows whether I was right. Now, back on the bike after surgery and biking more than I did before, every ride has extra joy to it. Is this loving life more or spiting death? What I know is that I love the biking experience more, being able to, more. I ran up stairs the other night. Shellie asked me why: “Because I can.”

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