

My eyes blinked open suddenly as consciousness returned after the colonoscopy, and I saw my husband Jack standing by the gurney in the outpatient clinic. Before I could say anything, the doctor leaned over my shoulder and said in an urgent voice, "You have cancer!"

"Geez, what kinda bedside manner is that?" I thought in a fuzzy blur. A few hours before, when I had arrived at the clinic for a routine screening, I had felt fine. It was just the last step in a series of routine checkups.

20] Giving Thanks for Cancer

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"But, you'll be OK," the gastroenterologist added as I sat up. "It's still small, we think we caught it before it spread beyond the gut. But you need to get it out now. I've already called the surgeon."

A few days later, I reported to the hospital for the surgery to remove the tumor and a series of lymph nodes, in order to check whether the cancer had started its deadly march throughout the body.

Out in the waiting room, Jack sat with our two adult sons and several friends who had come to help them wait it out. There were people at home praying at the same time. Fundamentalist Christian neighbors in my rural southern hometown, Episcopalian Christians from my best friend's church, Unitarians from my church, and Buddhists from the Zen school where I practiced meditation, they were all on the case. Finally the surgeon came out and said I should be fine and that they'd have the pathology report in a couple of days.

I was on the phone when the surgeon came into the room several days later, and it took a minute to disengage the chatty person on the other end of the line. Looking at the doctor's face as he waited, an uneasy feeling began to form in my stomach.

"We got the results back," he began.

"Good news or bad?" I asked tensely.

"Well," he said, "It's not as good as it could be, but it's

not as bad as it could be, either. There were three positive lymph nodes, which means it did get past the gut, so now you'll have to go through chemotherapy. We thought for sure we'd gotten it!" He was visibly upset and angry about it. His voice was very measured and tight.

"Have you lost patients who were at this stage?" asked Jack in a worried voice. "Yes," the doctor said slowly, "we have, but we've saved a lot of them, too. Fortunately, the liver was still clean, so it's still pretty hopeful. I'll send in the oncologist to talk to you about the chemo." He left the room, and we sat in a numb, shocked silence. All the confidence that it would be fine had evaporated.

A few minutes later, a very tall, reserved man stood in the doorway, introduced himself, and described the procedures to come in great detail, but we had only one question: "What are the odds?"

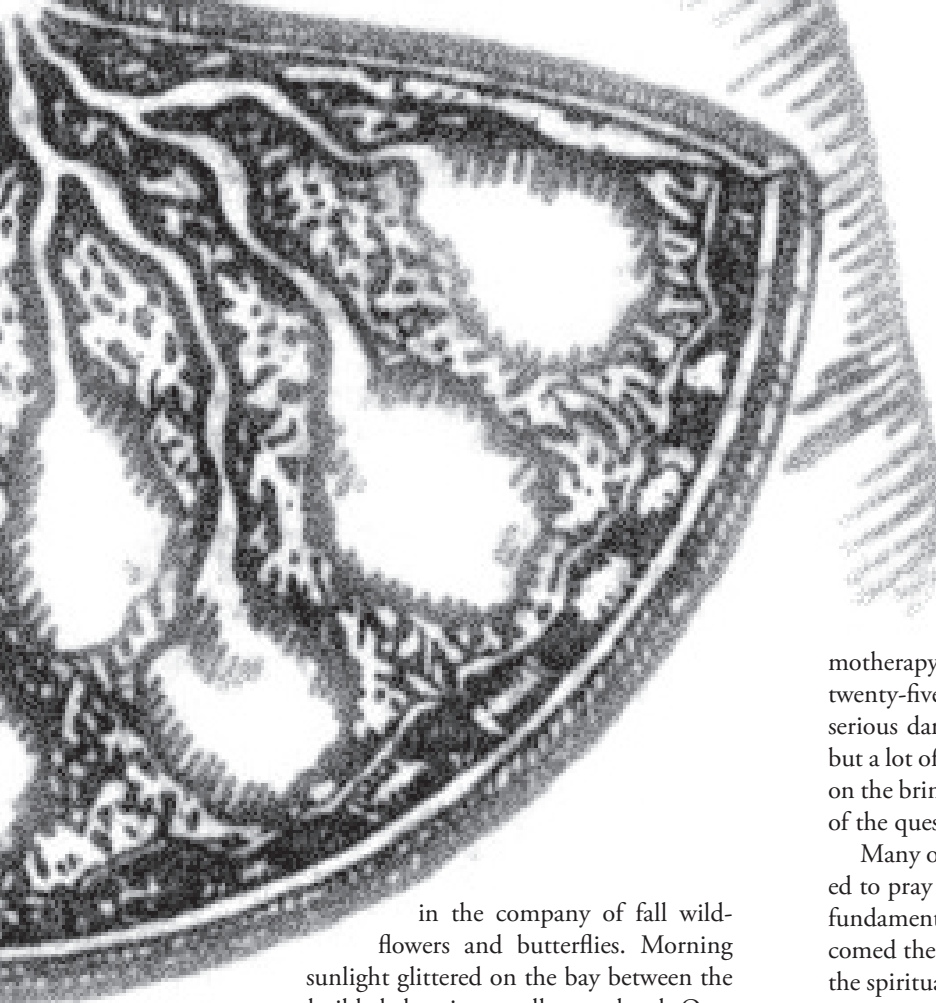
"According to the statistics, you'll probably be fine, but if the disease does return, it will be terminal," he said quietly.

"OK," I thought, taking a deep breath, "now I get to see what, if anything, I've learned from all those years of spiritual practice."

Following surgery, I spent weeks recovering at home. My friends, who had filled the hospital room with flowers, shifted to food. In addition to the practical value of all that home cooking, the care and love that all those casseroles, salads, and soup carried with them was deeply healing.

During those weeks of recovery, I spent a lot of time sitting under huge old trees next to the Gulf of Mexico,





in the company of fall wildflowers and butterflies. Morning sunlight glittered on the bay between the trees and gilded the pine needles overhead. Over and over, I was swept not with fear, but with gratitude and joy for all the wonderful things of life, and with the absolute conviction that if death came, nothing would be lost. I knew I would be fine whichever way the situation turned out.

Later, my husband and I made a trip to the huge Moffat Cancer Center in Tampa for a second opinion. On the way south from the Florida Panhandle, we canoed the Weekiwatchee River, a gorgeous spring run with crystal clear water, underwater emerald meadows, schools of fish darting past us, manatees, and eagles.

The healing that came from being there was palpable, even as it had been under the tall pines at home. It worked because nature is so much bigger than the individual ego and is so ancient that my individual fears become irrelevant and disappeared. There was only joy and gratitude to be part of a system that creates such natural beauty, even though the death of individuals is part of it.

In Tampa, lost in the urban rush hour traffic and later in the huge cancer center, personal fear came back. There was nothing in this world except the creations of human ego which are threatened by death. Then I realized how rare and valuable a gift it was to have so much daily access to the church of nature, the church of the original scripture, if we can ever learn to comprehend it.

Back in Tallahassee, I went to Zen meditation at the local Unitarian church for what would be the last time in quite a while, as I got sick from the chemotherapy. It was wonderful to be in my own spiritual home, and when I

came home late that night, there was a present. The Zen school with which our group was affiliated had sent a bonsai tree, and there were about thirty e-mails from members of the school all over the world. I went to bed and lay there in the dark, feeling great happiness from all the prayer, care, and love being sent my way, and then something else happened. Energy from somewhere else pervaded my body—healing energy, compassionate loving energy—what Christians call the Presence of God, what Buddhists call Great Mind. And maybe it was just a rush of endorphins in the brain, but my belief is that it was far more than that.

Half-way through the six months of chemotherapy, I ended up in and out of the hospital over twenty-five days, really sick. I never felt like I was in any serious danger given that medical support was available, but a lot of friends who came in were convinced that I was on the brink of death, and the doctors didn't say it was out of the question.

Many of our neighbors came to visit, and always wanted to pray before they left. Although I am not a religious fundamentalist, neither am I an atheist, and I always welcomed the kindness, the concern, and the prayers, even if the spiritual language was not the same as I was used to in my own religious practice.

This culminated in the appearance one Sunday afternoon after I got out of the hospital, of about twenty members of a little lay-led church. Everybody gathered around my husband and me in the front yard, but in the little village of Panacea, where neighbors still know each other, it was well known that neither I nor my husband was an orthodox believer. They were a little uncertain about how to begin with a couple of lost souls, one of whom might be facing an early death. Every prior visit had had a touch of “repent-and-be-saved” in the prayers.

So I began by thanking them for their care and for all the covered dinners, and added that I had also thanked the members of my church for their support that very morning. The word church reassured everybody that we were on the path to salvation, and they began to share the value of their faith. I found that I truly agreed with everything that was said, with the exception that theirs was the only way. Then I said that the most mistaken thing anybody can say in this sort of situation is “Why Me?!” because sooner or later we will all face these sorts of troubles, and eventually we will all most assuredly die of something. Rather, I said, a health crisis is a wonderful teacher if we let go of anger and fear and open up to what it has to teach.

The preacher agreed immediately and added, “We should give thanks for cancer because it brings us closer to God, and that is the most important thing in life.” Then he turned and looked at the other members of his congregation. Nodding at individuals one by one, he said “And

you should give thanks for the breast cancer, and you,” nodding to another, “mental illness, and you,” nodding to another, “should give thanks for that shooting, and you,” to another, “for the heart attack.” Everyone he pointed to agreed. One man and his wife, who had both had different cancers at the same time, shared stories of how they had become wiser from facing their ordeal.

So was he right? Should we indeed be not only brave but even thankful if we get cancer? I sat down, reflected on my own case, and realized that the preacher WAS right. In addition to the wisdom of the river, the forest, and the sea, here’s what else I am thankful for:

1. To fully know what it is to be human, it is just as important to go through the hard times of old age, loss of social roles, illness, and approaching death as to go through the more pleasant phases of youth. It’s all part of seeing things as they truly are. If all the hard stuff could be avoided, it would be only a half view of what a human life actually is. The hard parts provide unique insight and wisdom if one is open to the experience

2. Cancer means that one must really live in the present moment. A major teaching in Zen is the importance of living totally in each moment rather than being lost in the past, or in fearful or desire-ridden fantasies of the future. Despite years of formal meditation practice, I could never quite do it. Now I can, and it makes all the difference in the world in experiencing life as the gift that it is. If I feel healthy and energetic in a given moment, I can live it fully and not take it for granted, or destroy it by fear of what may lie in the future. There’s no need to turn healthy moments into sickness with mental stress.

3. During the second hospital stay, I directly experienced the impermanence and fragility of the rational intellectual analytical mind. I watched it slowly disappear when I got really sick, and I watched it slowly reappear as I got better again, and learned that by shutting down the egocentric analytical verbal mind, the body has a built-in system that makes it easier to face the final decline that we must all sooner or later experience.

4. I no longer take positive things for granted, no longer get all upset about the stresses of daily life. What used to be big problems are no longer that important relative to the possible closing out of a lifetime in the near future. Life is much less cluttered with personal issues.

5. Mortality and the impermanence of an individual lifetime become very real rather than intellectual philosophy, but it is a wonderful aspect of reality. Birth and death endlessly produce unique new minds and consciousness, new insights and talents. If Mozart never died, Stravinsky could never have appeared. And beyond human culture, life in its creativity endlessly generates new marvels. As Darwin pointed out in the closing of his *Origin of Spe-*

cies “There is grandeur in this view of life... that... from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.” It is possible to let go of personal fear and to perceive the brilliance of the process and to know that one’s approaching death is part of a vaster and extraordinary reality.

6. I have met some extraordinary people among those who treat cancer patients, doctors who are humble and compassionate (I guess it’s hard to be arrogant when you lose so many patients,) and nurses who make what could be a grim setting in the hospitals and clinics cheerful and upbeat, giving their patients the courage to get through what they must go through.

7. Facing the ultimate questions of meaning in life, I have finally been able to really drop the ego-based worries over career and finances that have driven me nuts for years, have let go of stuff that was wearing me out, and replaced it with things I really want to do. And so far it’s working fine—the sky has not fallen as a result of these changes. I enjoy each day a lot more.

8. That consciousness can survive the death of the brain is no longer strictly a matter of faith. There is a growing amount of rational evidence that points in that direction, enough to provide hope if not certainty. And a fractal system, like the universe in which we live, is self-similar at all scales of size. So if there is consciousness at the scale of humans—which there obviously is—there should be consciousness at larger scales as well. It may be that what we in the West call God is precisely that larger-scale consciousness. If so, then death might not mean giving up the beauty of life. It might only mean a better view of the larger wonders of the universe.

So I have learned to give thanks for cancer, for all the tough teachers who teach us what we would never learn voluntarily. When we stop resisting and stop whining that things haven’t turned out how we planned, when we realize that this, too, is part of the experience of living a full life and growing in wisdom, compassion, and strength as a result—then when a major disease comes—we can truly give thanks for it. It’s a very intense and rich way to live, like having a challenging teacher always in your face, forcing you to live at your highest level of insight, ability, and courage.

Reinhold Niobuhr, a Protestant theologian, said:

“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope;

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith;

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.”

This is what I’ve learned so far. 