

Giving Thanks for Cancer

Anne Rudloe JDPSN

Anne Rudloe died peacefully in her home yesterday, April 27, 2012. I've been fortunate to work with her on her blog over the past few months. She asked me to publish upon her death the piece that follows, which she wrote years ago right after being diagnosed with cancer. It's been my great, good fortune to spend some time with Anne and her husband, Jack. Though we've known each other from a distance for many years, it's only in these past few months that I was able to spend some personal time with them. When I saw Anne last week, her eyes were bright and her presence unencumbered. She expressed gratitude for the ability to sit and look over the bay from her front window. If you watch the video that this post is based on, or if you read more of her publications, or if you had been lucky enough to spend some time with her, you're likely to know straightaway that she moved through nature and the whole of her life with the familiarity and the knowing of a wild one. Ever on the edge, Anne didn't hold back anything. In her life and in her death, Anne faced what was before her with an openness that has been of benefit to many beings. Fare thee well, my friend. —Penny Alsop

My eyes blinked open as consciousness returned after the colonoscopy. Before I could say anything, the doctor leaned over my shoulder and said in an urgent voice, “You have cancer!”

“Geez, what kind of a 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.

“But you’ll be OK,” he added. “It’s small, we think we caught it before it spread beyond the gut.”

But it had spread. And after surgery to remove the tumor and a series of lymph nodes, I spent weeks recovering under huge old trees next to the Gulf of Mexico in the company of fall wildflowers and butterflies. Morning sunlight glittered on the bay and gilded the pine needles overhead. I was swept not with fear but with gratitude for all the wonderful things of life and with the absolute conviction that, if death came, nothing would be lost.

Later, my husband and I made a trip to the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa. On the way, we canoed the Weeki

[7



Wachee River, a gorgeous spring run with crystal-clear water, underwater emerald meadows, manatees, schools of fish darting past us and eagles overhead. The healing that came from being there was palpable, even as it had been under the pines at home. There was joy to be a part of a system that creates such beauty even though death is part of it.

Halfway through the chemotherapy, I ended up in and out of the hospital over 25 days, really sick. I never felt as if I were in any serious danger, given that medical support was available, but a lot of friends who saw me were convinced that I was on the brink of death and the doctors didn't say that it was out of the question.

Neighbors came to visit and they always wanted to pray. I welcomed the kindness even if the language was not the same as I was used to in my own religious practice.

This culminated in the appearance in my front yard one Sunday afternoon, after I got out of the hospital, of about 20 members of a little lay-led church. Everybody gathered around my husband and me, but in the little village of Panacea, where neighbors still know each other, it was well known that neither my husband nor I 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.

So I began by thanking them for their care and all the covered dinners 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 situation is "Why me?" because sooner or later we must all face this sort of trouble, and eventually we will all die of something. Rather, I said, a health crisis is a wonderful teacher if we can let go of anger and fear and open up to what it has to teach.

The preacher immediately added, "We should give thanks for cancer because it brings us closer to God and that is the most important thing in life." He then 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, nodding to another, "for the heart attack." Everyone he pointed to agreed.

So, was he right? Should we not only be brave but even thankful if we get cancer? I 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 I am thankful for.

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 it is to go through the pleasant phases of youth. The hard parts can provide insight and wisdom as nothing else can.

Cancer means one must really live in the present rather than being lost in the past or in fearful or desire-ridden fantasies of the future. It makes all the difference in the world in experiencing life as the gift that it is.

I experienced the impermanence and fragility of the rational, intellectual, analytical mind. It slowly disappeared when I got really sick, and it slowly reappeared as I got better. By shutting down the egocentric mind, the body actually makes it easier to face the final decline.

I no longer take positive things for granted or get all upset about the stresses of daily life.

Mortality and the impermanence of an individual lifetime become very real rather than an 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 had never died, Stravinsky could never have appeared. It is possible to let go of fear and to perceive the brilliance of the process and to know that death is part of a vaster and extraordinary reality.

I have met some extraordinary people among those who treat cancer patients, doctors who are humble and compassionate—I guess it is hard to be arrogant when you lose so many patients—and nurses who keep what could be a grim setting cheerful and upbeat, giving their patients the courage to get through it all.

I have finally been able to really drop the ego-based worries of career and finances and replace them with things I really want to do.

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. 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 all the tough lessons that teach us what we would never learn voluntarily. When we stop whining, when we realize that this too is part of the experience of living a full life, then when a major disease comes, we can truly give thanks for it. It's an 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 Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian, said, "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful 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. ♦

Follow this link to see the video that this essay comes from:
<http://youtu.be/5y9JR8u1XhY>