
May I Be a Cancerous Survivor?

by William G. Bartholome

Every illness has both biological and psychological dimensions. But illness is a profoundly social phenomenon as well. Here I am . . . living in the light of death . . . still/here above ground . . . still "terminal," but this process . . . this last chapter of my life has now been going on for four years!

Four years ago this June, I underwent "palliative surgery" for what is officially known as Stage IV adenocarcinoma of the esophagus. At the time of my surgery, my cancer had already spread or metastasized. So, obviously I must acknowledge that I am continuing to survive well beyond the time frame of my prognosis. Yet, given the notorious nature of my cancer I am reluctant to embrace anything like the well-accepted social role of "cancer survivor." I was told in no uncertain terms that it wasn't a matter of whether my cancer would take me down, it was only a matter of when.

On the other hand, as the readers of this journal know, I have also come to appreciate that having a chance to live with a terminal illness — to live with death on one's shoulder — is to live a significantly enriched form of existence. I have decided that I want to "live like I am terminal" for the rest of my days regardless of what happens with my cancer.

Which brings us to the strange sounding title of this meditation: "May I be a cancerous survivor?" May I be seen and treated like a person who is very much "with cancer," and yet, for reasons that are not clear, also surviving? I use the word "may" deliberately. I know I "can" live this way. In fact, living this way is the only way I ever want to live.

In an important sense, I don't want to have to "give up my cancer." I don't want to have "dodged the bullet." In spite of enormous social pressure, I don't want to put this cancer episode behind me and go on with my life or — horror of horrors — go back to the life I was living before. Living for these four years with my mortality has so changed my life that for me, now, every aspect of my life is miraculous. As Walt Whitman once wrote: "I know nothing but miracles."

Take, for example, the incredible explosion of life and beauty we call spring. I don't want to ever live a fall and winter expecting to see spring. I want to live each day of the calendar of each year of my life as if it will be the last time I am "above ground" to live that day . . . the day of a daughter's birth . . . our wedding anniversary.

I know now that Death is sugar. Death is what sweetens and enriches life to an extent I never realized. Yet, I know that most members of society do not live this way. Their lives are not illuminated by the light of death. Most Americans live as if they were, for all intents and purposes, immortal. They also live lives that are cut off from the dead, even from family and friends who have preceded them into death. Their systematic denial of death adds to my social isolation and to the isolation of thousands of those who are struggling with chronic illness, life-threatening illness, terminal illness and, especially, from those who are dying.

I am not asking for permission to play the "sick role." I spend little of my living in the well-recognized social role of "patient" or "cancer

patient." And, given the nature of my illness, I am not willing to wear the label "cancer survivor." So, I find myself asking, will I be allowed to live this highly deviant kind of life? Will those who make up my web of being let me be both part of their lives — as a son, brother, uncle, spouse, father, doctor, teacher, colleague, friend — and, at the same time, cancerous?

Living this long with a terminal illness has also allowed me the opportunity to undertake a sustained and fairly systematic examination of the implications and meaning of my unusual existential situation. For example, reflecting on my situation helped me enormously in understanding the relationship between my situation as a "terminal one," and the reader's situation as a "mortal one." Being "terminal" and being "mortal" are very similar (Did I hear you say: ". . . all too similar . . .?") existential situations!

Dealing with these existential questions has also opened up for me the spiritual dimension of my illness. It has been a spiritual wake-up call. Like many of you, my spiritual experience and reflection is powerfully shaped (both positively and negatively) by the fact that I was raised in a particular religious tradition. So for me, spiritual issues, questions, and challenges are often theological. How do I fit my illness and my struggle to live with it into an understanding of what life is all about . . . into an understanding of myself in relation to God?

Living a life haunted and hounded by death, I seem to have rediscovered a sense of myself as living a life that is haunted and hounded by what the poet Francis Thompson called the "Hound of Heaven." I find myself, once again, struggling with my unbelief.

So, in the course of my spiritual reflection, I often find myself pondering the metaphor: "Death as God." For me, to die seems like experiencing the process by which I came into being — only, in reverse. To die seems to require that I be willing to give myself over to the same power or force by which I came into being in the first place. I didn't,

after all, call myself into being in this particular time and place.

I am beginning to understand that to die is to undertake a profoundly spiritual and, for many of us, theological set of tasks. In the physical realm, to die is to embrace the skeleton that lurks inside me; to embrace the ironic fact that the gift of life contains within it the gift of death; to acknowledge that in some sense, I was born to rot. God is out to get each and every one of us. None of us will be allowed to escape from life without undergoing the decomposition that takes us back to dust.

In the psychological realm, to die is to experience the end of the ego; to allow the process of personal growth and development to come to an end; to allow the light of my embodied consciousness to "go out." In the social realm, to die is to undertake the systematic rending of each strand of the web of being in which I exist.

Each of us was borne in the belly of a woman/mother and nourished at her breasts. Each of us was once a totally dependent infant, literally *enfant*, a "voiceless one." We are, only because we were embraced and nourished and cared for by a community of humans with and through whom we exist.

And, finally, in the spiritual realm, to die is to give one's entire being over to that ultimate source of mystery . . . to enter into the Great Beyond . . . to place oneself in the hands of . . . of . . . ? Don't many of us say, "Into the hands of God?"

In many respects, then, Death and God are cut from the same cloth. Isn't living in the light of death living a life illuminated by an intense Spiritual Light? For me, living with death on my shoulder feels a good deal like what I have always thought it would be like to live with God on one's shoulder. To bend one's ear toward Death is to listen for the voice of God.

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