
Are You Still Terminal?

by William G. Bartholome

September 1997 — a little over three years now since my surgery for adenocarcinoma of the esophagus. Since my cancer had already spread to involve multiple lymph nodes in my chest and my liver, we assumed that my surgery was “palliative” at best. Its purpose was to maximize the length of my life and minimize the symptoms I would have to endure before dying, especially those relating to obstruction of my esophagus. After my first year living with my illness, I shared some of my thoughts with the readers of this journal in a short “meditation” entitled, “Living in the Light of Death.” In that text I attempted to share with you my sense of that year as a precious gift. After two years, I wrote a second “meditation” entitled,

“STILL/HERE Above Ground” in which I shared additional thoughts about the value of wearing the label “dying” and provided a brief description of a planned “ritual of withdrawal from the world” for my dying process.

So I hear you asking: what about it, are you still terminal? Regardless of what happens to me in terms of my cancer, I will continue to be “terminal.” Since my oncologists tell me that my lengthy reprieve does not change my prognosis, there is a “reality” that informs my view of my situation. I have been told all along, in no uncertain terms, that it is not a matter of “if” my cancer would take me down, but only a matter of “when.” But I have also discovered that living life as a person with a terminal illness has enriched my life beyond my wildest expectations. I don’t think I can (and have

absolutely no desire to) return to the life I was living pre-cancer, to not be terminal.

I will continue to use, regardless of what happens to me, my adopted “calendar method” of living life. I live each day of the year, each Valentine’s Day, each Fourth of July, each

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Christmas Day, as if it is the last one of those days that I will be on earth to experience. I am living this fall season with the expectation that I won’t be around to experience another fall. This approach is less impossible, I would argue, than trying to live each and every day as if that day were one’s last day on earth.

But living life in “chunks” of one year has forced me to live in the present. It has enriched my life. It has allowed me to do something that I was not doing before my illness, something I think we must all find a way to do — to live with our mortality. Being terminal is nothing more than being mortal in a shortened time frame.

Living in an age-denying and death-denying culture robs us, cheats us, of the value that only a consciousness of our mortality can bring to our

lives. Few of us seek to maintain relationships with those who have gone before us. Few of us lead lives that are informed by the lives of the dead other than by those of a handful of saints and heroes. Yet death has been called the wellspring of human existence.

My consciousness of my impending death has allowed me to come to an understanding that this wonderful, intense "fleshy phase" of my existence is quite limited. And it has allowed me to discover that what ultimately happens [will be] in the much longer phase of my existence in which I will live on only in the mind and hearts of those whose lives I have been privileged to touch . . . in the lives

of my wonderful wife, our children, family, friends, students, and patients. I want to spend the rest of my days living in the moment — living in the light of death, living as fully and richly as possible regardless of how much time I have left. But I have also come to know how important it is that I live an unforgettable (if not outrageous) life, a life that is so powerfully shaped by joy and caring and loving that I will live on at least until the last days of those who knew me in the flesh.

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