

# **My Walk with Terminal Cancer and God**

## Lifelong Faith Journey

I grew up in the Congregational Church, rarely missing a Sunday service since my Dad was the pastor. That established a foundation for my lifelong faith journey that continues to grow and mature to this day.

In 2000 my ex-wife and I transitioned to the Methodist Church, where between the pastor and weekly Bible study teachings, my faith deepened in many meaningful ways. For the first time I felt I had a true relationship with God.

My divorce in 2013 was particularly painful. God became my partner in my attempts to process the pain, and figure out who my wife's cheating partner was. One night when I got up to use the bathroom God spoke the name of her partner to me as clearly as I am speaking to you now. God had answered my prayers in a manner beyond my wildest expectations.

My depression deepened after she moved out to the point where I no longer had the strength or will to continue. Suicidal thoughts became more common until one evening when I laid upon the couch and prayed to God, telling him that my life, whether I lived or died, was in his hands. I turned everything over to God and went along for the ride. Slowly, inexplicably, things improved and my depression waned. To this day God continues to carry me and provide what I need to survive.

## Cancer

On July 13<sup>th</sup> of this year Denice and I met with an oncologist who informed me that I had Stage 4 (Secondary) liver cancer. When I asked what the prognosis was she made it clear that liver cancer is not curable, but that chemotherapy would likely slow the cancer growth. The oncologist estimated I had somewhere between 3 months and one year, perhaps a bit more, to live. I'll leave it to your imagination to appreciate what those words meant to Denice and me.

And so end-of-life preparations were begun while we concurrently worked with the medical community at NH Oncology and Concord Hospital to get the chemotherapy started. Due to several delays in planning and discovery, a total of four hospital stays to resolve breathing difficulties, the chemotherapy did not commence as originally planned. Liver cancer is evil! During the 2-3 weeks while waiting for chemo the cancer literally ate away at my body to the point I became dysfunctional, both mentally and physically, and was likely a week or less away from death, when the chemo finally began.

During these dark hours, surprisingly, I did not become angry or resentful – thanks no doubt to God’s healing presence. Undoubtedly God appreciates the value of a positive attitude when battling cancer and worked to ensure I would not sink into depression. Sure I was exceedingly disappointed that Denice and I would not have the time to do all the fun things we so enjoy together, and to participate in our families life as they grow and flourish.

Initially, while I knew God was “around”, I was not praying to God as had been my prior practice at breakfast; in fact I was not consciously communicating with him at all. However I did come to realize that God was surrounding me in his loving arms 24x7 and taking a very active role in the direction the cancer progressed.

While I appreciate the side effects of chemotherapy are devastating for many, for me it proved to be a miracle drug. Within a week of my first treatment my head cleared, I began to eat and drink again, and I started to feel human. Denice is very diligent in monitoring my blood test results and she and the medical staff marveled at how quickly things returned to normal levels; a highly unusual turnaround. In fact after three chemo treatments we met with the oncologist who noted that “I am an outlier, in a good way”. That was her way of expressing her surprise and pleasure at how well I was doing. Perhaps her way of saying my improvement constituted a miracle.

During my last hospital stay, when I had been a week without a shower due to my port being open, I asked the nursing staff if I could take a sponge bath. They provided the necessary items and I retreated to the bathroom to get soaped up. During the process one of the heart monitor leads came off my chest, which immediately sent an alarm to the nurse’s station, triggering a response. My nurse came in to check on me and offered to assist with my sponge bath. Taking a washcloth she began to massage my back, which triggered powerful feelings of warmth and comfort, the likes of which I have never experienced before.

Initially I didn’t give much thought to the bath experience, but in the days to follow I came to realize that what I had felt was God’s healing power being bestowed upon me. The New Testament offers many examples of Jesus healing others by the laying of hands on the afflicted. The nurse, Jennifer, was at that time acting as an angel of God. Turns out such healing and

God's angels are not limited to Jesus time, they continue today, for which I am very grateful. It became clear to me that God was taking a very active role in my healing process and is responsible for my being an outlier. And the many, many people who continue to pray for me is a powerful message of love that no doubt is also positively influencing my healing.

Surprisingly to me, I find myself expressing gratitude to God for each day that I am granted, and particularly the healing that has permitted me to do some of the things that bring joy to my life. A couple of weekends ago Denice and I traveled to Vermont to visit with my youngest daughter Kate and her family. I had suggested a short hike might be fun so Kate took us to a local hill with a 1.1 mile trail and roughly 500' of elevation gain, that terminates in a beautiful view overlooking the area south of Burlington, Lake Champlain, and the Adirondack Mountains in NY. Who would have thought a Stage 4 liver cancer patient could accomplish such a climb; another marvelous gift from God! God has transformed what could be an angry, bitter experience into one of gratitude that has deepened my love for Denice and my family. Indeed God works in strange and mysterious ways, and for that I am eternally grateful. (Psalm 30: 8-12 optional)

Denice and I met with my oncologist this past Friday to review where things stand and what's ahead in my treatment plan. Dr. Walsh, my oncologist, entered the exam room beaming. She gleefully reported that the recent liver scan showed a remarkable reduction in the number of, and size of the remaining, tumors. She excitedly offered twice to show us the scans that show the liver cancer prior to initiation of chemo treatments, and a recent scan. The tumor reduction was unmistakable, and beyond what would normally be expected. In fact Dr. Walsh noted that "I am the poster child for the practice"! And why have the chemo treatments been more effective than expected? Unquestionably for me that is a direct result of God's healing power at work in my body!

While I'm expressing gratitude I would be remiss if I did not include Denice among those who are working very hard to keep me comfortable, well fed, alive, and loved. This journey has been very hard for her but she continues to step up to the plate and take care of me, while continuing to work full time. Denice is yet another gift from God.

### What's Ahead?

At this point I have no idea how long I have. It is well understood that short of a miracle, my cancer is terminal. So I'm taking it one day at a time and savoring the little things that, when

healthy, we take for granted. Sure, I'm praying for a healing miracle but I realize that, while God is fully capable of healing me of the cancer, it is his choice to do so or not.

My hope with sharing my journey is that it will help others understand and appreciate how deeply God loves every one of us, and his willingness to help us get through the dark hours that inevitably come.