

Living fully with the fear of death

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Recently, a friend shared that she was in a dreadful holding pattern waiting to hear if a pain she's having in her ribs is bone cancer. She is terror with a calm exterior. Hearing her talk reminded me of my own fears about cancer coming back.

How do cancer survivors handle the fear of reoccurrence?

I believe what we focus on can manifest, so it's important to be aware of the underlying thoughts I'm harboring that could do me harm. The fear lies in wait, submerged in my psyche, just below the surface, waiting to burst through and remind me how much I dread those words from my doctor: "It's back."

Before I was diagnosed, I was afraid of getting cancer because of what I'd seen my loved ones go through. I didn't want to know firsthand how hard it was to keep that positive attitude, bear the pain of surgeries, chemo and radiation and find the strength to keep going when fatigue and pain was dragging them down.

Now I know what it's like. I know how hard it is; I know what it entails and that makes the fear even more acute. I cannot hide behind ignorance or pretend that it wouldn't be that bad. Not to mention the strong possibility that the second time around, it may have spread and treatment would be even more aggressive.

I imagine cancer survivors walking a thin line between being grateful for a day free of cancer and terrified of the day it could return. Hearing those words from my doctor I see myself thrown headfirst back into the roiling river, unable to breathe, stay afloat or have any choice in my direction.

Even writing about it causes a tightening in my chest and a shortness of breath. I have to remind myself that I am well. That breathing deeply helps relax my mind and body and that I need to explore further how to handle this challenge and face it head-on. This is a call to action and an area I want to explore. In doing so, I realize how important it is that I am mindful of how this topic affects me and that I will make time to go "in"

and restore my body and mind through prayer, meditation and exercise.

It will help me to deal with other situations or difficulties that I am afraid of or have chosen to avoid. I will be kind and protect myself and only go into difficult territory when I am ready. I will be gentle, I will be strong, and I will be courageous. And when I have found answers that help, I will share them.

After writing this I did a meditation to dig deeper into what I need to learn about my fears. This is some of what was revealed:

Fear is avoidance. It puts up roadblocks to what is needed to truly heal. Fear is not the problem; fear is a symptom of unanswered questions. Here is the question: What would I do if I got cancer again? The big deal is figuring out how you would cope, handle it, and if you would live to see another day. *Fear of death is the fear of a life not fully lived.* Fear of reoccurrence is a part of life. It is the acknowledgment of the possibility of this life being over.

What have you done so far? How have you lived?

Would you be satisfied if today was your last day? Terminal illness provides clarity that only comes from glimpsing the end. There is a knowing, an understanding that only comes from walking close to the edge. Wavering on the tip of the iceberg and feeling it sink gives you a rush of desire and a will to survive, a will to live ... fully! The best way to deal with reoccurrence is to live each day like it is your last. The more you do that, the more you will forget about nearing the end. Living fully provides a buffer from the fear.

I can readily admit that some days I follow my own advice better than others. Sometimes I fall back into old routines and hope that it doesn't trigger a return of the disease. I find that the farther away I get from my cancer experience, the easier it is to allow memories of what I went through to sink to the bottom of my psyche.

It is only through prayer, meditation and reaching out to others on their cancer journey that I stay engaged and on target. Some ruts are deep and alluring, beckoning

me to return to old ways that don't serve me. I know that the more I create new pathways and stay clear of the old, familiar coping mechanisms, the more I will be released from those foreboding thoughts of returning to the cancer proving-grounds.

Cancer is a rite of passage. It is hard, it is relentless and it has been an opportunity for me to change how I think and live my life. I will continue to work on putting fear in its place, making sure it does not take center stage in how I move through the world. That's all I can do.

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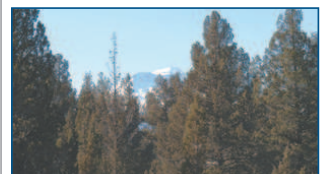
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