

## A Personal Journey With Cancer

### Week 1 - The Hardest Thing

It's cancer again. I had just seen Dr. Workman a couple of weeks earlier and the blood tests for the old cancer were excellent. Now is *almost* asks me "Why did you have to get this?" Luck of the draw I guess. I have joked that I might as well try another one.

Of course, it is no joke. It's a killer. I don't know what the statistics and all that are. It doesn't matter any way. All that matter is that I have it. I don't know why my family doctor said what he said to me when he first examined me: "This is serious Paul." As if I did not already suspicion that when I found that tender spot in my abdomen.

Then Dr. Workman says the treatment will be "aggressive" and I will be tired. Tired. 5 letters to describe so much. One of the nurses calls it "very aggressive." Well, whatever it takes.

But this is hard work. This is the hardest work I have ever done. Before it is over it will get worse. It's not pleasant. It's hard to describe. I have no words to describe what happens inside, the physical feeling, the emotions. For one thing it makes it difficult to do everything. It is like that worst day of the flu when you have to force yourself to breathe – except multiply that a few times.

Having whined a little, just trying to help a reader understand, let me pause for more honesty.

I think of a good friend in Muncie who has suffered for years with the daily pain of fibromyalgia. Geepers that's a tough battle too, wearing on mind and body every day. I think of people whose battle with cancer includes both chemotherapy *and* radiation. That sounds worse to me. I think of a friend in Cloverdale who has had monstrous battles with health issues her whole life. That sounds worse to me.

I heard Jamie Lee Curtis on TV one day talking about how life is hard. She said, "I am trying to be honest." She talked about how people want life to always be fair and easy. Everyone wins, everyone gets a ribbon. (The Bible says that our reward is in heaven.) She is right, life isn't fair. But only if you want to look at it that way. Life is what you make of it. I say life is great.

I told Paula one day that I sure never expected to go through health issues like this. Who knows what life will bring? Another time I shared that we can either spend our life waiting for the storm to end, or learn to dance in the rain. It is up to us what we make of it. Going through chemo is hard work. Living with fibromyalgia and any of a number of other diseases is hard too. Living with the loss of a mate, or a child is hard. The stress of losing one's job is hard. Add whatever condition you wish to the list.

One thing I cling to. I know I can face all things through Christ, who strengthens me. I am loved by God. Whatever I go through, or am fortunate enough not to go through, in this life – it will be ok because at the end I will be in God’s love and care. Jesus loves me, this I know.

Paul Fulp

## **Week 2 - Welcome to the Club**

They seem like brothers and sisters in a strange kind of way. I don’t know who they are, don’t know their names, don’t know what kind of cancer they have. But there they sit when I walk into the lab for chemotherapy. They are already getting chemo dumped into them. I always want to say hi, or least smile and nod. They may not want to talk or greet a stranger. But they suddenly look like part of a strange pulled-together family. We are in it together. We are “one” in having these deadly treatments be part of our journey.

Something in me wants to sit down with each and ask about their story. How do you feel? What are you going through? What kind of cancer do you have? How many times have you been here, and how many more to go? Is this your first time with cancer? Honestly, what are your prospects? But I nod and smile and walk on by.

Then when it comes time to leave I feel the same urge again. Sometimes I share the smile again. Sometimes I say “good luck” or “God bless.” I wonder about them – what they are thinking and feeling. See, I feel blessed because I have a faith-blessed perspective on the battle. I imagine that some of them don’t. I want to reach out to them, to share hope with them, to share the Good News with them. And yet I hesitate.

I went to the hospital a couple of weeks ago to meet a new friend for just that purpose. Sue is going through this for the second time as I recall (my own recent treatments have dulled my memory). She was having difficulty from the additional radiation. It was fun to meet her for a moment. I heard today that she got to take a golf-cart ride in some warm spring weather. I’m happy for her.

After sending the first chapter of my story to my mailing list, and the North Conference email list, I got flooded with mail. Well wishes, prayers, encouraging words. More appreciated than anyone can know. But more – stories. Personal stories. Stories of friends and family members. It seems like I tapped into this unusual family of pilgrims bound together by a common health threat. Bound by a need to share, to be honest, to grieve, to battle. More than an unwelcome club. A family. A serendipitous surprise.

Maybe I have something to learn here. Maybe I should quit holding back. Maybe I should risk a little and talk to someone. God will guide me to work this through I know.

Something else I know too. I see many of those faces in my mind’s eye and can’t forget about them.

### **Week 3 - Healing and Well-Intentioned People**

In his Easter sermon this year, my dear friend Mark Fenstermacher shared a little of my story with his dynamic congregation. I was thrilled that he used my story to witness to the power of Resurrection faith. In his comments, Mark made reference to our discussion about “well-meaning people who say if you just pray to God, and have enough faith, the cancer will go dancing out of your body.”

Recently I had a guy tell me about a cancer just falling out of a guy’s jaw onto the table. I don’t know if that is some kind of urban legend or just what some people need to hear for some hard-to-understand reason. Maybe to prop up their conceptions of God. And maybe those things really happen for some people. I don’t know. If so, Awesome!

Not for most of us. And if not for us then are we to become bitter because we got cheated? Or believe that for some reason God won’t heal us when he would another? I remember a pastor-friend in NIC who lived close by. We saw each other frequently. He was a man of huge faith. He was young and strong and healthy and came down with cancer. I know he put up a valiant battle. Tons of us prayed for him, but his healing was not to be in this world.

All my life I have heard all kinds of “explanations” from people trying to make sense of it all. Some of the explanations make me sicker than chemo. I don’t like the implications of understanding God that many of those things say. They just don’t stack up with my understanding of God as shown in Jesus.

I refuse to buy into it. I refuse. I refuse. I refuse. Oh, did I already say that I refuse to believe God plays favorites or uses people or is in the dirty tricks business. Don’t even go there with me. Not to be “preachy” but I have been watching this guy Jesus all my life, looking for the heart of God. The “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know” faith is the rock foundation of my battle with this strange disease.

My healing came 5 years ago – even before I knew I had cancer the first time. It had not yet been diagnosed. One night I was “stewing and worrying” about my future. It suddenly came to me that God had taken care of me my whole life. I did not just say that everything had gone smoothly in my life. But God has taken care of me my whole life. That Tuesday evening I had a little talk with God. (He happened to be home when I called!!) I turned the whole thing over to Him that night. Whatever it was that was wrong with my body, whatever was coming my way I knew I could not change by worrying about it. That would only rob me of the joy of day I had. So I told God that it was His to take care of.

That calls for complete trust in God. To know, deep in your soul, that God loves you and will care for you. I realized that I am not meant to live forever in this world. But God has always taken care of me, and always will. In that moment, I was healed. About two months later I was finally diagnosed with cancer. That was a separate issue you see, because I was already healed.

Now, friend, I ask you. Which way would you rather be healed? Would you rather have your body healed but your spirit broken? Or would you rather have a

healing of your spirit? No matter what happens to your body. I know which one I want and celebrate! We are ALL going to check out of this world at some point in time. We are not meant to live here forever. In fact we begin to die the day we are born. Being healed in the spirit brings this incredible peace that allows me to celebrate every day no matter what my outward circumstances.

I have been healed. Others have shared with me how this battle has been a blessing for them too because in the middle of it we found this incredible peace, and this partnership with God. I have a sister who came close to checking out after a heart attack. She shared with me about this same peace – even if everyone around you is scared. I have been healed. I still have cancer, but I have been healed.

### **Week 4 - Altitude**

40 years ago I met an incredible woman who taught me so much about life, about the way we go about it. She was full of wit and practical little thoughts that taught you more than great long sermons or books or lectures.

During the days when I worked with her in the church she would frequently give me a quick adjustment with a simple question: “How’s your altitude?” Did you carefully read that question? No, that’s not a typo in there. That’s the way Dorothy would ask it. How’s your Altitude? Obviously I have never forgotten.

Not long ago I stumbled into a phrase that I sure like a lot: “Life is not about waiting on the storm to pass, but learning to dance in the rain.” Where on earth would we be without rain? Even late at night as I write these words, there is quite a storm going on outside my office door. Flashes of lightning. Loud rumbling thunder. And rain. Paula might think I have really lost it if I were to walk outside and stand in the rain!!

I remember how last summer we needed rain so badly. The pasture across the road was bare. No grass for the cows over there. Paula just put out grass seed a day or two ago. Now God is watering it for her.

How’s your altitude? Are you complaining about the storms and rain in life, or dancing in the rain?

We were not built to live in this world forever. You know that. I know that. That was one of the delightful realizations that became more than just a mental concept when God healed me five years ago. The reality is that I am going to die. Someday. Someway. Maybe cancer, maybe not. But I have been set free of that anxiety, and set free to soak up the beauty and joy of each day.

The news program says a 17-year-old girl died this afternoon out on the interstate just this side of Cloverdale. I drove past there and knew that at least there were a couple of trucks off the road and the road had been closed. I did not have any way of knowing the rest of the story at that time. For all I know that could be me out there tomorrow. Not to worry.

I'm not about to sit here and say that life has always gone the way I wanted it to. Thank you God. But it sure has been good. If I were to come to my end tomorrow as unexpectedly as that young girl, I would sit back and say, "Wow! What a ride!"

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Oh, for 5 years I have heard people talk about how important it is to keep a positive attitude. What is the source of that positive attitude? How do you have one? For me personally, that's easy. It is in my faith and the perspective that faith gives. The peace I talk about comes from my faith. It is so powerful to have peace about the idea that this life is not all there is, that I will be ok one way or the other, etc.... and all of that comes, for me, because of the Resurrection Hope of the Christian faith.

### **Week 5 - No Blame**

I just have to write about something. Before I ever start, let me beg some of you to understand that I do not intend to offend you. I don't ask you to deny what you feel. I don't ask you to deny your feelings or your struggles to attempt to understand this strange "fate" we share. I'm not interested in making you feel guilty for thinking about this. I am not attacking you, but I want to write about my own faith perspective that gives me life and energy everyday.

I have observed over many years that some people when facing disappointment and tragedy seem to have to blame someone. So often I have heard people say that they have gotten angry at God, blamed God, wanted to know why God did this to them. Will you think with me for a moment?

God did not do this to me. God is my best friend. God is my eternal friend. When I look at the life of Jesus, everything He said and did – He tells me that God is the best friend I have. He loves me (I'm honestly not sure why sometimes!) with a love that just won't quit.

It is simple logic that someone who loves me that much would not do anything to hurt me.

In fact just the opposite is true. God is there for me. God is my strength. Not to knock my dear friends in this world, but in the big picture God is the best friend I have. He walks before me and holds me and gives me courage. He transforms my attitude from one of complaining or blaming into one of being thankful and letting each day be a celebration.

Many notes say that the writer prays that my faith will be strong and not fail. Are you kidding me? Why would a little thing like cancer cause me to lose faith? Cause me to think God doesn't care for me anymore? Cause me to turn my back on him? He is my strength, I would never for a single moment think of blaming God for what is happening to me. NEVER!

God, please help those who are unsure of You, to know what a strength You are, what a peace and joy You are, and how precious they are to you.

## **Week 6 - God Heals in So Many Ways**

On April 29, I just woke up from a nap to see the news of an 11-year-old girl who died somewhere of diabetes because her parents refused to get her medical treatment. They believe in prayer. Well, good for them.

I am not going to be especially nice here. I may offend some. Don't read any further if you don't wish to hear it.

Letting a child, or anyone, die intentionally for lack of medical treatment is criminal and should be prosecuted. I have no tolerance for it.

What is sad is that the people, who seem to perpetrate this foolishness, as far as I have ever heard, are always Christians. The very people who should be the most enlightened people in all creation, the people who should know the heart of God best, the people who should seek the wisdom of God the most, the people who should know the value of people in God's eyes the most. Yet in an area like this "Christians" (and I use the term loosely here) act like ignorant pagans with no understanding of the brilliance of what our creative God has done and does, and the way that creative God who uses every resource at His disposal invites us to live after Him.

God put before us all the resources in our physical world for medicine. He gave us incredible minds to put together method and technique and resource to make our lives better. God intends for us to use the resources and the mental abilities He has given us for good. These are God's good gifts to us, and our use of them is our gift back to Him.

Someone will say that if it is God's will for us, He will heal us. I say if God wanted us to live in wood frame houses, He would have given us 2 x 4's. But He gave us trees and we used the intelligence He gave us to figure out how to provide shelter for ourselves. God gave us intelligence to drill into the earth for water and the intelligence to create pumps to bring water to the surface for our use. To die of thirst waiting for water to bubble to the surface on its own would not make one any more spiritual.

Why, even the societies that have in the past sometimes been considered pagan know the wisdom of medicine. And know that the knowledge and resources are a gift from the Creator God. Christians, more than anyone, acknowledge that all of the earth is God's creation and His wonderful gift to His children. The earth and all its resources are for the enjoyment and stewardship of the human family.

So we give thanks to God for all of this. I celebrate and thank God for medicine, for doctors, for nurses, for scientists and lab technicians. Thank you Lord for all your blessings.

**Thanks for support**

**Thanks for the warriors**

### **May 21, 2008 Update**

To my good friends at CUMC ... and anyone who reads this: I had blood tests at my doctor yesterday. The news is that the "markers" for cancer that would show up in my blood are GONE! Doctor will still schedule a "pet scan" in a couple of months that checks the entire body for any sign of cancer. BUT the good news now is that it is gone.

Thanks for all of you for your prayers, your cards and your support !!!

Paul F.