

Cancer Affects Us All —
A Personal Reflection

Dear Friend,

All of us by now know people facing cancer - it could be a family member, a close friend, or ourselves. I have decided to write, not an essay, but instead a very personal letter, from my heart to yours, from someone who has lived through Stage IV cancer. In fact, cancer took the life of my best friend, then infected my own body, and then attacked my 19-year-old son (also Stage IV).

Sometimes concerned people around us think it best to encourage a kind of denial, saying that everything will be fine, that you will sail through this, that life will be back to normal soon. I never appreciated those sentiments, and I will not offer them to you. The reality is that cancer kills most of the people it infects, and I don't think you will be helped by evasions and easy assurances. This could be your last illness. Whatever the outcome, cancer changes your life forever. I now date nearly everything in my life based on whether it occurred before or after my illness.

No matter what course cancer takes in your life, I want to give you some very good, and very surprising news: Facing cancer in the case of my friend, myself, and my son were all what I would call "peak" experiences in my life. Those times were the most painful, but, as shocking as it sounds, also among the "happiest."

Let me try to explain how that could be so, in hopes that you too can transform what is certainly a shock and time of anguish into something deeply meaningful and even beautiful...

When confronted with a potentially terminal illness, it is time to face the big questions of life. We can no longer pretend we will live forever, and we can no longer be satisfied by living day to day in pursuit of comfort and pleasure, as if we were mere beasts. We need to ask what human life is about, what meaning there is in suffering, why God allowed this, and am I ready to die - has my life been well lived?

I suppose we should have looked for answers to these questions all our lives, but a disease like cancer finally forces us to face them. I believe that is one of the great benefits of such an illness. Ready or not, you must begin to face the core issues of human existence. And if you think through and embrace the answers, your inner life can be transformed, even if outwardly your body is deteriorating.

My first direct experience with cancer occurred when my best friend called to say she had terminal breast cancer. At the time she had five young children. She was calm about it, very matter of fact, because she was a woman of deep faith (Roman Catholic), and she had spent much of her life contemplating the truths of her faith. As she wrote to a friend, "I am not afraid to die, not by a long shot. Ever since I knew I had incurable cancer I have thought long and hard about how I live my life and what I think death means. I have loved the life God gave me....I want to see God; I want to see the One who thought all of this up. I cannot imagine that

He will be less interesting and beautiful than all of the things He has made...this life is short. Eternity is — well, it's eternal”.

Her battle with cancer was to last years, and during a time of remission, she even gave birth to a sixth child. Despite her physical deterioration, she continued to be one of the busiest people I have ever known - raising six children, maintaining a home, serving as President of a non-profit, organizing local political campaigns, giving radio and TV interviews, and finding time to climb in the white mountains. And because her body had adverse reactions to nearly all medications, she was not even given relief from the pain of her terminal condition. I remember the last time I saw her, as she lay semi-conscious on a couch in her home only a day or so before her death, she still seemed genuinely interested in the people around her, and was not absorbed in her own dire situation. She showed me how to live, and die, heroically.

Her example was an inspiration to many, and a book was written about her life, entitled: “The Appalling Strangeness of the Mercy of God.” What influence did such an untimely death have on those around her? This is something we simply cannot know in its entirety, but her life was surely an example of how good can come from suffering and tragedy.

A few years later, although I seemed in excellent health, I noticed a growing lump on my neck. I dismissed it with a laugh, joking to friends, “It is probably a big lump of cancer and I have only a few months to live.” But when I finally had a check-up, my doctor realized it could be serious and the tests revealed I indeed had cancer. It was Stage IV because the lump was so large. So, my dear friend, do not shrug off symptoms, do not delay getting to a doctor for tests!

I learned that most people with that cancer at that stage had an average of 16 months to live. At that time I had nine wonderful children, and by far the worst emotional pain was to consider I would never see them grow up, marry, and have children of their own.

If you have cancer, you are bombarded by an avalanche of attention and concern from relatives, friends, church members, and doctors. Life becomes something of a blur - all the new circumstances and considerations make one feel disoriented. There are moments of panic, of despair, of deep sadness - times when I would cry myself to sleep.

I did have the conviction that good could come out of this illness. I expressed this in a letter to my children not long after the diagnosis:

“...Some people seem outraged that something like this would fall upon me now. I feel no such outrage. I have dark times when things are hard to bear emotionally, but there is not a moment of feeling resentful or angry at God.

I will tell you the truth. Most of the time I feel flattered [to have been chosen to undergo such suffering]. My life [to this point] has been filled with blessings...a wonderful wife, nine children I admire and love, good health, a loving brother and sister and mother, rewarding work and the opportunity to travel and learn. One way of looking at a life like this is to see that God knew I was not capable of handling more suffering.

At this point, either God saw that this cup of suffering was needed to set the remainder of my life in a direction that would lead to my salvation, or He knew I was ready to suffer on behalf of others, as His Son did. Probably some combination of both. If I could be a worthy steward of suffering, perhaps to the point of accepting even death, maybe it will help bring blessings to those I love...I cannot know the full plan, or even my exact role in it, and in this life I

never will. But surely each of us can catch a glimpse of the reality that our lives are part of a masterful and breathtakingly beautiful tapestry. Even the tapestry of suffering can weave something beautiful, especially when accepted and offered to God on behalf of others....suffering can be redemptive, it can perfect our human nature, rather than just be a punishment or a senseless riddle. I see the Christian view of suffering as its crowning glory. Now I have a real opportunity to see if I can live that truth, not just believe it intellectually. I am honored to have been chosen!"

That was written before the treatment, and it was all nice theory. Can our best religious or spiritual intentions hold up under the weight of real and constant pain?

In a word, yes. Not only can they hold up, but our faith can actually flourish and solidify in the crucible of suffering.

I recall, as if it was yesterday, a particular, culminating experience when I was about half way through my treatment...

Massive radiation to the neck literally burns away the skin inside your throat. The problem is that we must swallow about 900 times a day, and for me every swallow brought stabbing pain so intense I had to hit my thigh to handle it, picking different areas as sections of my leg became back and blue. Eating was almost unthinkable. Swallowing even soft food like yogurt felt like I was swallowing razor-sharp, dry stones that tore away the tender skin that was left in my throat.

In addition, I was having bouts of nausea that brought on violent vomiting. This was the worst, as the stomach contains acids strong enough to break down almost any substance, and having such acid forced up into my lacerated throat was beyond horrible.

At that one time I remember so well, I was vomiting with such violence that I was thrown on all fours like a rag doll, as if possessed by a demon. My stomach seemed determined to roll up and exit my throat with such violence that my breath was cut off and I panicked that I would actually suffocate.

Up to that point I had been handling pain in a way I think we all understand. We try to avoid facing it head on, and instead try to look past it, thinking ahead to when it will be gone, if we can just hold on. We think the best we can do is to be stoic and tough it out. At our very best, we tell ourselves God allowed this for some mysterious reason, and we resign ourselves to enduring it as best we can.

But at that moment I embraced something radically different...

I saw that this pain, while not what God originally planned, was undeniably part of the world we inhabit, and He allows it for some reason, and ultimately He could use it for our good or the good of those we love. So if He allows it, and it cannot be avoided, I will it also. I embrace this nightmare. I do not fear the next horrid wretching, I embrace it. I choose it. "Bring it on!" I cried inwardly. Incredibly, it was not a cry of stoic endurance, but of ecstatic joy.

The pain was just as excruciating, but it was one of the most liberating moments of my entire life. I had been the slave of suffering before, but was now, at least for that moment, its

master. I had transcended the worst that the material world could throw at me. I was truly free, truly alive. I had exercised my freedom in such a radical way that I was more fully human than perhaps at any other moment.

I hope you do not have to endure a physical trial like that. But in every occasion of pain and suffering that comes our way, humans have a very profound and powerful weapon. Free Will.

We tend to take free will for granted. But in a universe of only material forces (the atheist view), our thoughts and actions would only be the result of physical forces acting upon us, meaning we could not have true free will, and thus we could not be moral agents. If we are not moral agents, there is no good or evil, and there also is no ability to love, as love requires free will. Robots cannot love, only persons can. If there is no spiritual element to the universe, our pain and our death would be without meaning, as they are mere physical occurrences in an empty universe - and we would have no right to complain.

But we do complain. We know by our own lived experience that the universe is not empty. We know there is good and evil, and we intuit that death is an interruption, a tragedy. And we correctly perceive that we have, at least to some extent, free will.

Even animals and plants, while sharing with us the mysterious life-force, do not seem to have the gift of free will as we do. Humans appear to be quite unique in the cosmos, sharing free will with angelic spirits (which almost all spiritual systems believe exist) and with the Creator of all that is.

Interestingly, this free will, a power shared only with angels and the Creator, is the only plausible explanation for the suffering and evil we see around us. All men and women throughout history intuit there is a higher standard to which we are called, but somehow the consequences of our own choices has led humanity down a very dark path, and here we are. So free will is a very powerful weapon - a power that brings us close to the angels, but, when misused, leads us to act like demons.

Why would the Creator give us such a weapon? Because without freedom, there can be no love, and love is the essence of the Divine as well as the highest calling for each one of us. Our destiny is to love and be loved, and that is what brings lasting human happiness. So free will, love, and happiness are intertwined - you cannot remove one without destroying the others. Think about that.

We are not the Creator, and clearly not living in an ideal world. What we see and experience is only a tiny chapter in creation, in a grand story about which we do not know the exact details of the beginning or the end. But what we do actually experience reveals the reality of suffering and pain, as well as the reality of goodness, kindness, and love.

The Creator of All That Is appears to know that this dark phase of the human experience is necessary, but he does give us the power to overcome suffering and pain - not by making it disappear, but by learning from it, redeeming it, and turning it to good effect.

My experience with cancer brought me into a world of pain I could not have imagined beforehand. Pain was a daily companion, a kind of silent and nearly constant partner to my

existence. Yet it taught valuable lessons. It helped me to confront my own mortality, to look past the drive to indulge bodily pleasures, and to be more compassionate to others who were in pain. Chronic pain is impossible to really explain to someone else, so in that sense it is a very lonely experience, and this will tend to encourage communication with God, who is always with us, and who, as the Creator of All, must understand what I was going through.

I would never choose such pain, and I can argue at God for allowing it, but I cannot deny the good that came from it. Greater compassion for others and a deeper prayer life are two of the greatest fulfillments of the human person. They are key components to true happiness. And they grew in me because of pain.

The most liberating value to pain and suffering is that we can use it to help those we love. While many people said they were praying for me, I believed that I could be of more value praying for friends and family, as I could offer not just casual words and good intentions, but my very body and the suffering I would endure. In an atheistic universe there is no transcendent connection between one collection of atoms and another, but if we are in fact a spiritual family, connected in mysterious but real ways, then we can use our free will to ask the Creator of All to accept our sacrifices as a gift of love.

I asked each person who said they would pray for me to instead give me a specific intention for which I could pray during my illness. Everyone is happy to have you pray for them or someone they love. I felt wonderfully useful, even empowered! Eventually I made a stack of index cards with these prayers, and would put it on my chest each time my head was bolted into the frame on the radiation table, and each time I faced the agony of eating. It did not remove the physical trauma, but it did elevate my soul, and which is more important?

I recall for a time I thought months of my life had been “lost” as I had been bed-ridden and couldn’t work, but then it dawned on me that I had been in touch with more people, had more visitors in my house, and prayed for more people than ever in my life. Out of the ashes of suffering, something beautiful had been created.

But God had even bigger plans in my life for suffering. Soon after my own recovery, I had a third intimate encounter with cancer — and by far the most traumatic.

My 19-year-old son Aaron had been deteriorating before my very eyes, and no one seemed to know why. I was working every day with him on a renovation project, but with each passing day he had less energy, then began to have trouble sitting or walking comfortably. Because he was young and had always been healthy, we shrugged off the symptoms, and put off going to a doctor. But one day as I looked at his haggard face while he courageously worked beside me, I had the thought “whatever this is, it will kill him if we do not do something.” Finally, a CAT scan revealed cancer in his bones, spleen, hip, lungs, under the arms, and in his chest. I assumed he would not live another year.

This brought on another astonishing revelation. My anguish over my son vastly outweighed the anguish over my own illness. How could this be? For myself I had cried a few times, but with my son I was barely able to function. I would need time to be alone, sometimes several times a day, just to release the cries, the roars, and the tears that gushed out, almost out of control. The experience was an emotional tsunami it is impossible to describe unless you

have been through it. If, my friend, something of this magnitude has entered your life, we understand each other.

My first counsel is to be patient with yourself. Facing the prospect of sudden and unexpected death of someone very close to you is a severe emotional trauma, with effects we can neither predict nor control. Do not even try to pretend you are in control. Let the tears flow as often and as long as they need. Do not expect anyone to understand or comprehend what you are going through, except someone who has also faced the sudden loss a child.

Also remember it is OK to be angry and bewildered with God. He has allowed suffering to remain on this earth, as it is the consequence of our misuse of free will, and somehow we are meant to work through this dark and hopefully brief period of the human experience. But it is fitting that we are upset at pain and suffering, as it was not part of our original destiny, nor is it part of our eternal destiny, so God surely understands our outrage. He does not demand passivity or calm acceptance, he wants sincere dialogue and ultimately our love. But you can argue like hell along the way. I sure did.

But as was the case with my own illness, how could something so traumatic be viewed as something beautiful, as I now would say those days of suffering for my son were among the most meaningful of my life? Because of love. Because I came out of myself completely and threw myself at the Mercy of almighty God. Because I was not just mumbling prayers to an abstract Deity, I was screaming at God, negotiating, offering my life over and over and over in exchange for my son, hating what was happening but using that precious gift of free will, to say, through the tears, that I accepted whatever was to come, that I would lose my precious son if that was part of the divine plan. The searing pain tore open my heart, and out of it gushed a love that was pure and true.

True love is seeing the eternal good in another person, and willing their good above your own. If you **live** that truth, to the point where you truly surrender your life for the one you love, then you are living human life at its absolute peak, and that is why suffering so intensely on behalf of someone else could be called a blessing.

And we were made to love not just other humans, but our Creator as well. When you work to be humble enough to accept the mysterious Will of the Creator of All, and engage in a personal, ongoing, intimate conversation with Him, life gains a new dimension, a divine dimension. Living with that divine dimension is what all humans were destined to enjoy, and it is another foundation of lasting human happiness.

When all is well with us, we can tend to live for the moment, for pleasures, entertainment, and comfort, almost as if we were just another animal. After all, animals enjoy all five senses, they eat, and mate, and move about, they even live in community and communicate with each other. But humans have another dimension, we are a mysterious blend of spiritual and physical properties, and we cannot find lasting happiness in the physical ease that might appease an animal. Happiness means realizing our true nature, and our nature includes the spiritual realities of love, both with one another and with our Creator. Alas, in our fallen state we tend to default to a rather animal existence, and sometimes it is only suffering that can seem to bring us to our higher senses. In an odd way then, our greatest fear - suffering - is the means to our greatest advancement - living a fully human life, coming out of ourselves, growing in compassion, and turning to our Creator for help.

Dealing with cancer just might be the terrible tragedy that helps you find this transcendent “happiness.” What we most fear and dread can be transformed into something beautiful, into love and divine dialogue. It is then that you are truly human, alive to the fullest.

The exact reason you, or I, or my son was chosen to endure cancer will not be known in this phase of life. And it is only human that we would cry out in bewilderment “Why me?” And surely we have all wondered why God so often does not seem to answer our prayers. I think we have to remember that we did not write the story of creation, and we are able to perceive only a tiny sliver of it. Consider that every thought and action of every human influences, to some degree, every other thought and action, and each ripple has been impacted by thoughts and actions that extend far back in time and also forward into the future, all the way to the end of creation. To really know if a particular prayer was in our or a loved one’s best interest, we would basically have to be omniscient. Is it really so surprising that the answer to our prayer might be “no” or “not now,” or that something better will happen instead?

Is it reasonable that we demand to be omniscient, or insist that God make the universe entirely comprehensible to our very finite and imperfect minds and hearts? And if we accept we are not gods, then how can we demand to know the full reason behind everything that happens, or presume we should know how to judge it?

We do our best with what we know. We ask for guidance and strength. We blossom in the relationship with the One who made us, regardless of the result of this or that prayer. We trust that the One who IS omniscient will do what is best.

Thanks be to God my son and I survived our first encounter with cancer. Some will not be so fortunate, but death will come to us all, whether sooner or later. I find it a great comfort that human history, regardless of the time, the culture, or the religion, seems to attest to the reality of life beyond the grave. Even many pagan philosophies have reached the same conclusion. And apart from the testimony of the human race, we need only look deep into our own heart, our own experience, our own intuition, and see that this belief in the permanence of the spirit remains. This phase of life is neither the beginning, nor the end. Death is a door, with life on both sides.

If you are facing cancer now, you have the freedom to use your free will to decide how you will handle each new challenge. At every moment, because of the potent gift of free will, you have the power and the freedom to spiral down into despair or rise to become a better person than you were before.

We can transform the experiences we most fear - suffering and even death - into something beautiful. We can choose to embrace what is most noble in the human spirit and lay down our lives for Love.