



A TREK WITHIN

Embracing Unexpected Truths

ROB RYAN SULLIVAN

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BY ROB RYAN SULLIVAN

A TREK WITHIN: Embracing Unexpected Truths

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This book is dedicated to the countless angels in my life.

Whenever I take time to reflect on the vast number of people who have knowingly or unknowingly changed the trajectory of my life, I am inevitably awestruck. On the one hand, I am humbled by the nameless angels who show up and provide seemingly endless opportunities to practice patience and compassion. Given my penchant for screwing up the lessons, it comes as no surprise that these angels are more likely to have horns than halos. They are angels nevertheless.

I am equally grateful to the angels who give me so many reasons to smile. In addition to my amazing parents, who have always been my most loyal cheerleaders, I am grateful to those who have had the biggest impact professionally and who I am blessed to consider friends: Ted Simon, Judi Carpenter, Tom Cutler, Kari Lehman, Jennifer Schlott-Rouzan, Ross Parr, John Drake, Norm Goldring, Aspasia Apostolakis Miller, and Asa Baber.

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I love and thank you all.

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NOTE TO READERS



They said:

*I should learn to speak a little bit of English
Don't be scared of the suit and tie
Learn to walk in the dreams of the foreigner
I am a third world child*

-- from the song "**Third World Child**"

Written by Johnny Clegg

© 1986. Scatterlings Pty Ltd.

Johnny Clegg, the late songwriter/musician/anthropologist from South Africa once said, *"If you truly want to understand someone, you need to start by learning that person's language."*

This is important because, as a reader of this book, you will benefit from the perspectives of people around the world who shared their very personal stories and experiences. In many cases, English is not their native language. To preserve the integrity of what they have written, I intentionally left alternative spellings (sceptic/skeptic) and unique phrasings intact rather than "Americanize" the book.

As much as I like consistency, I feel more strongly about accepting and embracing our cultural and linguistic differences.

Rob

FOREWORD



I am – by definition – a sceptic. At least a great part of me is. This is likely due to my upbringing and less a product of my conscious decision-making and thought process. I would love to consider myself a very open-minded, curious, and spontaneous, always-willing-to-try-out-new-things person. Still, many books I have read so far, which claim to be able to help you, improve your skills, broaden your mind and soul, break with your undesired habits, overcome your fears, achieve nothing less than optimizing yourself as a human being, bring this suspicious and cynical sentiment forward. I am aware that this is a very generalizing statement. There are (for sure) books that do a divine job in helping people who feel trapped in their daily routine, who are seeking for motivation, answers, an alternative path to the one they are on. However, there are many that claim to have THE solution. THE answer to most if not all of your problems and questions. Very often, they claim, the key to success is simply believing in yourself. Believing in the equation of luck and happiness, the author provides you with. A simple list of bullet points, which, if you rigorously tick them off every day, you will be a happy, peaceful, successful, and wealthy person. I don't know... is it because I am a sceptic, or do you also get this scrunching thought that if life would really be that simple, we would – as a society – not be where we are right now?

When Rob asked me to read his book and give him feedback, I was indeed a bit nervous. Not at all due to the number of pages in front of me. I always love reading and listening to Rob's stories. There are only a handful of people who can tell their stories in such a vivid, engaging, and funny way as Rob does. But rather because I had a vague idea what it was about, since Rob continued to share his thoughts and we had several conversations on many different chapters of this book. Knowing Rob for almost a decade, I knew many of his experiences in life and all the challenges he had to tackle on his way. I knew he is not only a warm, extremely empathetic, strong, open-minded, and adventurous man. He is also someone who will never give up on others or on himself. Therefore, it wasn't a surprise to me, when he – after being diagnosed with cancer – didn't stop looking for alternative and additional healing methods. But even before that, he always seemed to be able to surprise me with a new experience he had, a new healing method, a new discovery on how human connection works, what we can learn from our dreams, and how synchronicity can be explained. I don't know why I ever doubted that this book would be any different to himself and his way of telling me about his experiences in person. Why was I afraid that he might also claim to have the answer, the solution? Truthfully, I am ashamed that this thought even crossed my mind.

This book does not claim anything. It holds no promise to change your life or to make things easier. It does not pledge to improve your daily routines, your way of thinking or performance.

And yet, it changed me.

And quite frankly, it did improve my way of thinking, facilitate my daily routines, gave answers to many (un)conscious questions I had been carrying around with me for some time. All of this without forcing you to believe in anything to make it happen.

There is no shortcut to happiness or self-fulfilment. And yet, this book helped me to at least circumvent some mistakes. To skip some diversions. To feel understood, connect to several stories, be moved and cry but also laugh throughout so many chapters in this book. By reading these pages, I may not have found all answers to my questions, but I started thinking about several new questions that might be even more important to solve – to look at new or alternative ways to solve my problems or behave in different situations.

By having the courage to share his stories, to open up about his struggles in life, I was able to learn from many of his mistakes without having to tap into them myself. Of course, I did already have an idea of what was important for myself, what I wanted (and didn't want) in life. In Rob's words, I had an inner compass that I was following already. However, reading this book, I simply discovered new paths, a new grid that helped me make decisions or at least be aware of different ways to approach my challenges. Moreover, I felt less alone. As if the navigation of my inner compass received an extra validation. And that is worth more than I could ever explain in words.

— Josseline Ross

INTRODUCTION



This is not the book I expected to write — it’s better. Let me explain. What started out as a driving desire to share the experiences that changed the way I view energy, spirituality, and our relationship to ourselves and each other, felt strangely unfinished after four years writing, editing, and restructuring. That changed on February 18, 2015, my 48th birthday, with the most unusual, and most soul-expandingly powerful gift I have ever received — malignant tumors in my chest and neck.

But I’m getting a little ahead of myself.

The seeds of this book first began to sprout on January 7, 2009, when Mike Falcone, a friend from college, and I had an email exchange on Facebook about our mutual interest in acupuncture. We met working at WCHC-FM, the alternative radio station at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA, where Mike, who went by “Francis” at the time, and I spent several years as Music Director and Assistant Station Manager, respectively. Had you asked at the time what role I thought needles might play in Mike’s future career, I would have chosen tattoo artist long before acupuncturist. Nevertheless, there we were, 20 years later, exchanging emails about alternative medicine and his decision to pursue a career as an acupuncturist.

I remember the night vividly. When Mike asked what sparked my interest in acupuncture, I started to type a reply when I suddenly remembered a lengthy article I had written seven years prior describing my experiences working with various alternative healers including acupuncturists, Chinese herbalists, Reiki Masters, medical intuitives, and hands-on healers. I had originally written the article as a submission for the inaugural issue of magazine focused on alternative medicine.

I'm honestly not sure what happened after I submitted the article. Either the magazine never got off the ground or the editors decided they had a better chance of success without my input. What I do recall is saving the article and consciously moving the file with each new computer knowing I'd someday find a use for it.

On that cold January evening in 2009, rather than rewriting the story I'd written so long ago, I searched through my files, found the article, and posted it as my first-ever Facebook note. At the time, I had about 300 Facebook friends and the newsfeed wasn't the tractor-beam-like feature it is now with the heaviest users checking status updates multiple times per day. Within a day, 16 people posted comments and many more contacted me privately. Almost immediately, I began receiving friend requests from friends of friends who heard about my story and wanted to read it. The response surprised me because nothing I had written professionally touched people the way my experience with alternative medicine did. Having written a job search book a few years before, I knew that my professional missteps and other business experiences helped people, but I never expected my

personal experiences would someday have an even greater emotional impact.

The comment I remember most came from my friend, Carolyn, who said, “Just a heartfelt WOW! I am one of those skeptics and hearing a story like this from someone I actually know makes me think.”

Carolyn’s comment got me thinking as well and inspired me to share more of the experiences that have changed the way I view the world. Shortly after that first Facebook note, I started collecting ideas and other stories in an app on my phone I’d someday use to create other chapters. Like most of the writing I’ve done, it took some time for the information to process internally before I was ready to sit down and write. I’m also a practiced and proficient procrastinator. So, between the processing and procrastination, it took another two years before I did any substantive writing.

Even after much of the book was written, I developed a sense that it wasn’t finished because I hadn’t yet lived some of the experiences that were supposed to be included. What I struggled with most was my strong feeling that this book, while autobiographical in nature, was never meant to be an autobiography. The experiences happened to me, but it isn’t about me. That’s why we later decided to incorporate similar stories from other people so it is clear none of this was a fluke.

Around the time I was experiencing that unfinished feeling, it occurred to me that there might be a life experience I hadn’t yet had that might tie all of the stories in the book together. Of course, my hopeful side had visions of something aspirational and life-changing like meeting

the perfect woman or a huge, unexpected inheritance. So naturally I found myself feeling impatient. Had I known the gift I awaited was lymphoma rather than love I might not have been in such a hurry.

At this point, you might be thinking, “So, what on earth is the book about and how could lymphoma possibly have been helpful in the process?”

Only when I made it far enough along the path was I able to turn around, appreciate, and fully understand the experiences along the way. It was as if every experience, every lesson, every teacher, and every moment had somehow conspired to give me access to the perspective and positivity that enabled me to get through 30 days of inpatient chemotherapy over a four-month period with relative ease and without the need for a blood transfusion. While I am proud of the strength I was able to demonstrate physically in handling and recovering from over 545 hours of chemotherapy treatment, I was genuinely surprised at the exponential spiritual growth triggered by the tumors. I would never have expected such a serious diagnosis to result in such profound, authentic feelings of happiness and connectedness.

It’s been even more gratifying to see the impact this journey has had on others. It would take an entire chapter or three to share the heartfelt comments, private messages, and stories people have shared in a staggering display of love and support. When I first opened up about the tumors, it felt incredibly weak and vulnerable to admit that I needed treatment and was facing something I couldn’t deal with on my own. Nothing about the situation felt strong or masculine.

Nevertheless, I knew I had to be open because I didn't want people to think I was dying. Moreover, reaching out to people made me feel alive and connected to the world outside of the hospital. It was a two-way road, a mutual path of appreciating what we have right now.

I never expected so many people to use words like strong, graceful, insightful, and inspirational to describe my approach to the diagnosis and treatment. From the beginning, people encouraged me to continue sharing. More people than I can count, including a few professional writers, urged me to turn my lengthy Facebook notes into a book. That didn't take too much convincing because I realized almost immediately that this journey was the missing chapter that tied everything together. This was reinforced by the many beautiful comments I received like this one from my college classmate, Elizabeth Greabe Antony:

"After my own journey back to health, I really thought I'd learned every lesson about life, love, appreciation of friendship/God/family. I really thought that my faith in people had been strengthened to a point it couldn't grow any more. Ha! What do I know?! Thank you for sharing here. My guess is that I'm not the only one who has grown from reading your posts and contemplating your shared perspectives. You sharing your journey has reinforced my own healing. Reinforced good things in my life. Thank you."

One of my other favorite comments came from Annette, one of the nurses at the hospital. She posted a picture on Facebook with the teams from the two units who took care of me and a note that read:

“Rob has gotten through chemo with the most positive attitude anyone has witnessed...Because of him, good vibes and good music brightened up our units.”

Shortly after my last treatment, my dear friend, Amy Harris, saw me at the gym, smiled, and said: “No one does cancer like you do.”

I love that.

But it wasn't the treatment experience or the tumors that made this part of my journey the missing chapter. After all, millions of people have experienced tumors and treatments. What made this experience a unifying thread is the way it incorporated Western and Eastern medicine, prayer, meditation, visualization, and spirituality, as well as the contributions and insights of intuitives. For the first time, it finally made sense how my previous experiences and shifts in perspective had prepared me to handle adversity in a way that surprised everyone, myself included.

In my case, the tumors were a gift that came with multiple lessons. In reading the following pages, my hope is that you find opportunities in your own life to learn and grow from adversity and emerge a more positive and powerful version of yourself. I am also clear, however, that my experience is my experience. We are all on our own journeys with different lessons to learn based on our unique experiences and histories. It isn't always easy, or even possible, to see the gift in certain types of adversity. I get that. For this reason, my goal isn't to convince you of anything or to change your beliefs. Instead, my goal is to encourage you to see if any of the insights that brought me health,

happiness, and sense of love and connection beyond anything I have ever experienced might have value for you. If, like the many people who have already heard some of these stories, you gain insight and perspective that helps you in your own life, that would be fantastic, and this book will have been well worth the effort — for both of us.

CHAPTER 13:



Laughing in the Face of Danger



*One of the best lessons you can learn in life
is to master how to remain calm.*

– Catherine Pulsifier

One of my fondest memories of the entire tumor experience occurred in response to the second of eleven journal entries I posted online. Suzie Eckard, a friend from high school, wrote:

“Love that you are able to impart your wisdom with morsels of humor! I have been reading this while Jim is sitting here saying, ‘Uh, aren't you reading about cancer? What is so funny?’ Then I read him what you have written and he understands.”

I made a number of important choices in terms of how I thought about, spoke about, and handled the tumors, but one of the most vital turned out to be the decision not to lose my sense of humor. As a kid, I remember feeling sorry for myself and refusing to smile during situations that had other people close to hysterics. I'm not sure exactly when or why the turning point occurred, but eventually I decided to take life less seriously. I am glad I did because it probably saved my life.

Perhaps it was part of the Universe's plan all along, but there were more than a few legitimately funny moments that began the afternoon Dr. Stephen Becker called with the CT scan results to tell me there was an eight by five by seven-centimeter tumor in my chest just above my heart. It was February 18th, my 48th birthday, and I scheduled the scan at 6:30 A.M. so I could take the rest of the day off and enjoy myself.

For whatever reason, the possibility that the lump in my neck would turn out to be a tumor had never entered my mind – the swirl of feelings that followed included surprise, confusion, concern, and fear, but not anger or denial. I accepted what Dr. Becker said because I knew in my heart it was true. Even though the doctors did not know exactly what type of tumors we were dealing with, I took some comfort in Dr. Becker's certainty that they could be treated. I was also relieved that he had already called my dad to let him know what was happening. I didn't want to have to make that phone call.

From my initial place of acceptance emerged a powerful desire to remain positive and optimistic. A big part of this came from the responsibility I felt to manage expectations. More specifically, from an energetic perspective, I knew it would be important to keep friends and family focused on health and healing rather than the possibility of me checking out early.

Thankfully, more than a few funny moments started within minutes of that life-altering diagnosis. The first came in the form of a Facebook birthday greeting from Sue Spalt Davis, one of my best friends and someone I have known for over 25 years. She wrote simply, "Happy Birthday, Buddy! Hope there is a surprise somewhere in your day."

Having already received the preliminary diagnosis, I laughed out loud. A few weeks later, when I knew more about the prognosis and treatment plan, Sue laughed when I teased her and said, “Next year, I need you to be more specific.” It felt great to share a laugh, if only to assure her that nothing changed.

Lymphomania and a Visit to the Sperm Bank

Strangely, the initial visit to Dr. Leo Gordon, the oncologist, also led to a few funny moments. First, I loved the fact that Dr. Gordon, an understated guy and one of the foremost experts on lymphoma, is referred to by his colleagues as a “lymphomaniac”. It is such an odd way to describe someone who spends his days interacting with people who are experiencing tumors. Despite, or perhaps because of the fear and negativity that abound in that environment, Dr. Gordon maintains a calm, peaceful demeanor that could give anyone hope.

I vividly remember my first visit, when Dr. Gordon matter-of-factly asked if I planned to have children. Being still single I replied, “I’m not sure. That’s a team sport.”

“In that case,” he said, “we’ll get someone up here from urology to talk to you about freezing your sperm.”

Moments later, Valerie, an attractive woman who appeared to be in her mid-20s, walked into the exam room, quickly introduced herself and excitedly started talking about reproduction, sperm counts, and frozen storage. I loved her energy and enthusiasm from the start and found myself smiling when she paused to check in with me, “So, what are you thinking right now?”

When I said, “Well, I think you’ve got a really interesting job,” she laughed and said, “I know, right? I get to talk about sperm and ejaculations all day.”

With a slightly more serious tone, she asked sincerely, “So, how are you feeling right now about all of this?”

I replied, “I think it’s funny.”

Clearly confused, Valerie asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” I said, “I spent my entire life teaching them to swim backwards and now you’re telling me I have to pay for their storage.”

Valerie burst out laughing and said with a smile, “Great. So you are not somebody I’m going to have to worry about. Some people have a really hard time with this.”

When I shared that story in an early Facebook post, friends teased me about my subsequent visit to the sperm bank. My brother, Bill, described it as “uniquely awkward” which is absolutely perfect. It also made me laugh when my friends Penney and Ilanit wondered why I didn’t just show up with “a few hot European couchsurfers” to make the process more enjoyable.

When I decided to share the diagnosis publicly, it felt pretty emasculating to do so. It was like raising my hand and saying, “I’m sick, I need help, and I can’t do this by myself.” Instead, I was shocked when people used words like “grace” and “strength” to describe my approach. Nevertheless, it did not feel that way at first.

At the time, my biggest fear was that people would suddenly treat me differently, look at me with sad, pathetic eyes, and feel sorry for me. My friend, Paul Wiltberger, put all of those fears to rest in an instant in response to the post in which I first shared the diagnosis:

"I'm just going straight to the important question, do you wanna give me any concert tickets you can't attend? I'll still bring the date you have for the evening also!"

Sharing the News

Well aware that the mere mention of words like tumor, lymphoma, and chemo can send shockwaves of terror through people (myself included), I gave considerable thought to the people I needed to tell personally, either face-to-face or via telephone.

Right near the top of the list was my little friend, Steele, who was 10 at the time. Steele is the son of my friend, Penney. He and I met when he was three months old and have had a special connection ever since.

It has got to be some sort of horrific record that none of my five siblings started having grandchildren until my parents had been married for 48 ½ years. So, for a while, Steele – who calls me Uncle Robby – was the closest thing my parents had to a grandchild. When I called Penney to share the diagnosis, we talked about the pros and cons of telling Steele. Even though he and I do not see each other as often as we did when he was a baby, I knew in my heart it was not something I could hide. Knowing how incredibly compassionate and sensitive he has always been, I planned my words carefully.

That Sunday, Steele and I had plans to go to the Grand Opening of Mondo Meatball, a restaurant opened by my friend, Dean Casagrande, and where my brother John was the executive chef. As we sat across the table from each other, Steele told me he was getting bullied at school. It was heartbreaking to hear, but I was glad to know the right people were aware of the issue. I told him my own story of having been bullied in grade school and we spent quite a bit of time talking about different ways to think about the situation.

Once the bullying conversation came to its natural conclusion, I took a deep breath and started to tell Steele about the tumors. I do not remember exactly what I said, but I kept everything factual, low-key, and prefaced my story saying I would be fine so he would know there was no need to worry. Leading up to the conversation, I had visions of tears, hugs, and me doing my best to comfort Steele, but I must say he took it exceptionally well. So well that a little part of me laughed when I thought, “Aren’t you going to cry even a little?” Instead, he flashed his bright smile, walked back to the makeshift buffet, and helped himself to another serving of the cookies that came with his gelato. Mission accomplished.

Laughing from the First Admission

In a most welcome surprise, my friend Ross Parr came to the hospital and hung out for a few hours right before my first admission. His timing was perfect because it set the tone for the entire stay. Within minutes of our arrival in 1548, Ross and I were laughing and having fun with Annette, my primary nurse. Annette had the thankless task of performing some necessary, but rather inelegant tests, which led to a

few hilarious moments in the room that were a bit too graphic to recount when I posted my next Facebook update. Ross, however, had the following brilliant response to my efforts to be discrete:

“Rob mentioned she had to perform an ‘inelegant task.’ I’ve been sworn to secrecy but, in my world, I would have called it a ‘rockin Saturday night with a wild nurse,’ but that’s just me.”

Rockin, inelegant, or however you choose to describe it, I decided in that moment to show up for my second admission with candles and mood music to set the stage for the next hospital-directed invasion of my privacy.

Unfortunately, Annette was not on duty the day I arrived for my second treatment, but she laughed when she saw the candles the following day. Instead, Corrine (pronounced kahr-in) had the joy of welcoming me to unit for the second treatment. One of her first tasks was to walk through an intake questionnaire that asked a wide range of questions clearly designed to assess a rapidly deteriorating mental state and a massive degree of hopelessness. Hopelessness was so far from what I was feeling that I had a hard time taking the survey seriously.

Toward the end of the survey, Corrine asked, “Do you utilize a visiting nurse, special services, assistance, or care at home?” I looked at her with a completely straight face and said, “No. But I’m thinking about getting an au pair. Or two.”

In that moment, Corrine perked up and asked, “Oh, do you have kids?” I replied, “No. That would just be for me.”

Corrine never took her eyes off the computer, but I would love to know what was going through her mind in the few awkward seconds that followed.

My Hairless Life

Considering that hair loss was a side effect of three of the six chemotherapy drugs I was on, I knew there would be no escaping it. I also knew I did not want to watch the hair on my head thin and fall out. I'm strong. But I'm not that strong.

Knowing I would never quite be ready, I chose the Sunday after my first treatment as the night I would shave my head. The day before, I had searched the cabinet below my bathroom sink on a whim and was surprised to find a hair trimmer I did not recall purchasing. Although I could not find a charger, the trimmer worked for almost an hour while I stood freezing on my back porch watching clumps of my hair blow across the deck. When my fingers could not take it anymore, I went upstairs, jumped in the shower, and almost finished the job with a razor. I say "almost" because I truly believed I shaved it all even though I was not using mirror. That was not exactly the case though.

When I stepped out of the shower and saw myself in the mirror, I burst out laughing. There were patches of relatively long hair on the top and back of my head I had somehow missed. I thought about taking pictures but knew this was not something I could unsee or easily forget. I do, however, regret that I completely forgot to stop and give myself a Mohawk on my 90-minute journey to baldness.

Knowing that she always makes me laugh, I decided to send one of my first hairless selfies to Amy Karasick. That proved to be a good choice because it was only a matter of moments before I started getting texts with hairy emoticons. If you have not seen a hairy, yellow smiley face, trust me, it is a strong argument for baldness.

For the first few weeks, it was a somewhat out-of-body experience to walk past a mirror and not recognize myself. It was also fascinating to see that not all of the hair on my body was impacted by the treatment. Within a few weeks of chemo, I no longer had to shave my face. In addition, most of the hair on my head stopped growing – except my eyebrows and eyelashes.

Strangely, the hair on my arms and legs also remained intact, even though it had fallen off everywhere else. One morning, I was drying myself off after a shower and thought, “Hey, I don’t remember shaving my armpits.” This was a particularly odd thought given that I have never once shaved my armpits. That is when I realized it fell out on its own. In case you have lost track, that left me with the head and torso of a prepubescent 12-year-old and the arms and legs of a missing evolutionary link. I looked hilarious.

Fun on the Unit

During the second hospitalization, the white board with treatment notes that hung in my hospital room inspired my brother Bill to start a trend by writing in his own irreverent comments. The board has categories for basic information the day, date, room number, the name of the nurse, doctor, and Patient Care Technician (PCT) on duty. It also

captures patient specific information like height, weight, diet, today's goals, mobility plan, and pain plan. Here are a few of my favorite "Today's Goals" from Bill:

- **Day:** Today (Let's try to be in the moment. Namaste.)
- **Date:** Whenever you are free.
- **Planned Activities:** Walking. Irritating Annette.
- **Pain Plan:** Safe Word = "That tickles."
- **Today's Goals:** Fret over my inadequacy less.

The safe word was my favorite, by far. It is so not very Christian Gray. The following treatment, I decided to get a little more aggressive with Today's Goals:

1. World Peace
2. Inspire Annette to exceptional levels of patient care.
3. Patience (see #2)

I also used it to lobby my favorite nurses for a group sponge bath, whether I needed one or not. With each subsequent hospitalization, I found an increasing number of friendly and familiar faces greeting me with an enthusiastic, "Nice to see you again." In some ways, it felt strange, but it was certainly better than checking out to, "Come back soon."

After getting used to seeing the same nurses, I was surprised to discover I would be doing my last treatments on the 14th floor instead

of the 15th. The constant, however, remained countless friends who brightened my days with funny and heartfelt messages on my Facebook wall. One of my favorite messages came from my college classmate, John Forsythe, in response to the update I posted on at the start of my fifth treatment:

Status Update:

"Uh oh. After four treatments on the 15th floor of Prentice, they put me on 14. A whole new team of nurses to torment...um, I mean charm."

John's Response:

"Rob, all good to hear and I am sure they will all be charmed. Also, while you're going through this, please don't start another Facebook post with 'Uh oh'. Thanks." [smile]

Unexpected Uncertainty

Even the unexpected uncertainty following the ending of treatment led to a few funny moments. The three weeks or so between my last PET scan and the robotic surgery to remove and biopsy the small mass (that was still lighting up the scan the way a tumor might) were legitimately scary. After all, if the mass proved to be an active tumor, the next step would not be more chemo, but a bone marrow transplant.

It was mind-blowing to consider that technology has advanced to the point that robotic chest surgery is considered minimally invasive. I always thought the only operation more maximally invasive than chest

surgery was brain surgery. No doubt I would have found the procedure even more interesting and inspiring had it been done to someone else.

The morning of the procedure, I headed to the gym early and bumped into my friend, Nikki Grieco. As we talked about the procedure, she encouraged me to call the next day if I needed any help. I casually replied, “Oh, I’ll be fine. I’m actually planning to go hear Heather Horton play at Underground Wonder Bar on Saturday night.”

Nikki, looking somewhat concerned, said, “I think you should stay in.”

Not able to suppress my smirk, I replied, “Thanks, Mom.” Doing my best to reassure her, I continued: “Actually, my understanding is that the procedure would be outpatient, except that it’s chest surgery.”

Nikki looked at me incredulously and exclaimed: “Say it again! CHEST. SURGERY.” I wish I had her reaction on video. I’m still laughing.

Though these are far from all the funny moments that happened during the six months of treatment, this is enough of an illustration to see what a blessing it was to find reasons to smile and laugh throughout. There is no question in my mind that this positive attitude had a huge, vitally important impact on the course of my treatment and my body’s ability to recover.

My challenge to myself and to everyone else is to look for reasons to smile in the face of adversity. If you can laugh when others would cry or recoil in fear, you will get through difficult experiences more quickly and easily. If you make the choice to wallow in self-pity, whatever you are dealing with will seem to last forever.

Putting It into Practice

The temptation during periods of stress and sadness is to adopt an air of solemnity and sorrow that may be understandable, but misses the opportunity to lighten the moment and take ourselves less seriously. The experiences I described above are directly attributable to my decision to view the tumors as a gift. Without that positive foundation, it's very likely that I would have missed out on the months of laughter and fun that happened as a result.

Some events are so tragic and horrific that they don't lend themselves to humor. I get that. Fortunately, those aren't every day occurrences for most of us. The more common, day-to-day challenges are the ones where humor can be found.

For example, Kristen Murray Endre, whose story appears in the Epilogue, shares a wonderful example about how she passed this attitude to her son, Brendan, in dealing with his older brother, Conor, who has special needs:

"In the early years, Brendan's playdates were consciously/unconsciously limited to friends with siblings with special needs, or the like. At some point we both got brave and invited over someone outside that circle. Sensing Brendan's concerns about the 'what ifs', we talked. It was like a team meeting before a big game: 'B, this is like any other playdate, we've got this. I will explain why our house looks different (we still had child gates and infant toys), and your most important job is to have fun.'

Conor was practicing some newly found skills at the time, and B was worried that Conor might do something embarrassing. I promised nothing would happen, but if it did, just don't make fun of Conor or make a fuss. Just ignore it and I'll be there to fix it.

Sure enough, I left Conor out of eyesight when I heard the younger boys come running down the stairs. I got to the living room just in time to see that Conor had removed his clothing, and to hear this - Friend: "Um, Brendan, your brother...." Brendan: "Don't worry, he's just wearing his invisible pants."

Hearing examples of people who find humor in the face of difficulty is particularly inspiring because it serves as a reminder that we truly do have a choice in how we respond. If you have a great example of your own, please share it on www.atrekwithin.com



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