

I have now passed the sixth anniversary of my diagnosis of advanced colorectal cancer. In this journey I have had two surgeries (in 2002 with 40 days in the hospital; in 2007 with 87 days in the hospital). I have been on some type of chemotherapy four and a half of the six years. My cancer is considered incurable; I am currently receiving chemotherapy.

This journey has involved fear, gratitude and hope in dimensions that I had never known in my pre-cancer life.

I am reasonably certain that almost no one wants to die (I realize that many persons in their last days of suffering from a disease or accident might wish to die). My mother liked to say: "Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die to get there." The fear of death is real, and when one has incurable cancer, then thinking about facing death is an almost daily reality. The "terror" of fear has overwhelmed me on some occasions; it is crippling. But, then I realize that I am alive, that I do not want to have a "pity party" and, in the context of my faith I believe that the fear of death has been overcome in Christ's resurrection.

I have a greatly increased sense of gratitude for all of the joys of my pre-cancer life – and all of the joys I continue to experience. It is wonderful to recall wonderful experiences of the past and to talk about them with my wife, my children and with friends. But, I do not think that I live in the past. I relish every good and positive task that I am able to do and have the deepest gratitude for my friends and their care. My wife Jeannette (we are getting close to our 48th anniversary) has been, as always, my best companion, lover and caregiver. I could not have done as well as I have the last six years without her. We continue to do so many things together that bring us joy, from playing Scrabble to going on cruises, attending concerts, antiquing, spending time with family and friends and so much more.

I have learned, for the most part, to accept my limits. Thus, I have reordered some priorities and have reduced many of my commitments. I have found it valuable to continue working, which has been encouraged by my gracious employer and colleagues. I love my work and my students; it is energizing to remain involved as long as I am able. It is also important to find ways to serve and encourage others, so I do not focus unduly on myself.



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## Reflections On Fear, Gratitude And Hope

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I am so much more attentive now than I ever was in my pre-cancer life of the reality of life lived one day at a time. We all know that we are mortals, but being an incurable cancer patient has made me very grateful for each day of my life. I enjoy life and do not want to die. My deep faith in God and belief in eternal life and resurrection are a hope and anchor as I look ahead.

Hope is a precious human capacity. Hope springs, for me, from several sources. My faith commitments are the deepest ground of hope. The knowledge and encouragement of my medical personnel have often provided hope in days of despair and in more normal days. The reality of actual productivity gives hope. Even the

smallest achievements bring the rays of hope. More significant accomplishments bring a veritable flood of hope. Hope, even in the midst of difficulties, suffering and the facing of death, is an uplifting balm. There are times of discouragement, discomfort, pain and fear; but they must be put in the perspective that this is a reality for so many people in our world. In fact, thousands and thousands of people suffer far more than I will ever know. I have learned not to ask "Why me?" but rather to accept my realities within the contexts of family, friends and God.

In talking about the importance of family and friends, the issues of boundaries arise. I have certainly needed time alone. There are times when I am simply exhausted by trying to respond to everyone's questions about how I am doing and the like. Learning to set boundaries is difficult, but necessary. Yet, for me, there is a danger in undue isolation. "People need people," as it has been said. We are social beings, for whom interactions are important for good mental and spiritual health.

In responding to the statements and queries of others, I have often had to face comments that, for me, trivialize my realities (e.g., "do not worry, we all are going to die;" or "I know exactly how you feel"). Some people do not understand, and I have over time learned to smile and be gracious rather than to try to clarify matters. I make a judgment as to whether the person in question is one with whom I want to have a long and serious conversation or not. I am not obligated to explain myself to everyone, but I am not afraid either to talk about my realities, both for the healing it gives me and the possible help it is to others. There are many people who do understand, especially fellow cancer patients or others with serious, life-threatening illnesses. But, even here, we all need to recognize that each person's inner struggle is their struggle; we can walk and talk with them and perhaps understand much with them, but it is arrogant to assert that we "know just how they feel."

Whenever I am asked to share my reflections, I worry quite a bit about the fact that I could appear to be self-centered or pompous. Yet, I want to do what I can to help all of us on our journeys. Thank you for reading, and may you know the blessings of gratitude and hope to confront and to alleviate fear.