

I Woke Up This Morning

A cloudy day is no match for a sunny disposition.

~William Arthur Ward

One of the few benefits of receiving weekly chemotherapy is free valet parking. As I got out of my car awaiting my twenty-fifth treatment, I gave my keys to a man who seemed old enough for Medicare. “Have a good day, my man,” I said.

He grasped my hand and replied, “Son, I’m having a good day. I woke up this morning.”

I thought about this man and his greeting for the next four hours, waiting for the last drop of the Abraxane drug to enter my bloodstream. Yes, I woke up this morning, and today is a good day! I woke up this morning next to my beautiful and faithful wife—the one who refused to believe that I was going to die, even though the doctors told us that I had inoperable stage IV pancreatic cancer.

At the time, my prognosis was measured in months—not years. After I learned that I had terminal cancer, I visited many medical centers, doctors and specialists. Quickly, I found that I did not qualify for surgery—the only cure for pancreatic cancer—or any clinical trial. Ironically, I received the best advice from a podiatrist, who told me, “Don’t dwell on your illness. When you do that, you are only hurting the people you love. Stay positive.” He was right, demonstrating that he knew as much about people’s heads and hearts as he did about their feet.

I could tell by the expression on their faces when we talked about my illness. They were feeling the pain more than I was.

“I woke up this morning.” I did, and I’m grateful for my family has always sustained me. My wife laughs at my bad jokes and rubs my feet when my toes are numb from the chemo and radiation. I am surrounded by my grown children who have become wonderful parents to the grandchildren I love and cherish. My son sends me articles about the latest medical research while my daughter makes me “secret salsa” and shares the latest cancer-fighting recipes. My granddaughter lovingly pats my bald head while my grandson tells me, “Pop, you live fearless. Do you still have cancer?”

I woke up this morning and thought about how I’m healthy enough to continue working, with few side effects from my treatment. I teach talented students who have dreams that inspire me. I have friends who support me and cheer me on. One special friend calls me every Sunday night at seven just to check in. Initially, I told him that he didn’t need to call so often. But he insisted, and now I look forward to those conversations every week. I am more than a little superstitious that these calls are bringing me good luck!

I woke up this morning, living *with* this cancer. I am not “battling” cancer, for to do so would be a fight with myself. I am learning what it means to love deeply without conditions. And how to receive the love of family and friends in a way I had never experienced before. Thinking about imminent death has shown me that I am living the life I am meant to live. And that death is not about me but the people I’ll leave behind. What can I give them that will live on? It cannot be found in things or treasures. It is, quite simply, love—a love that they can hold on to and treasure and pass on to others.

I woke up this morning knowing that each day is a good day no matter the challenge or unknown future. Each day is a gift. The question is how we can use this precious time to help others—the way that the elderly valet-parking attendant helped me that day with his simple and sincere words.

I woke up this morning, thankful that I am receiving the best possible treatment at a world-class cancer center. After my fifty-fifth chemotherapy treatment more than two years ago, my cancer is stable. Less than one percent of patients with stage IV cancer survive after five years. My doctors have no medical explanation for my good fortune. In fact, my oncologist asked me recently, “What do you tell people when they ask you how you are doing?”

I tell them simply, “I feel great, and I am grateful for each day.”

I have been able to stretch my initial prognosis of five months to five years. As I write this, I am planning the ninth vacation trip with my children and grandchildren since my diagnosis.

I woke up this morning, excited, because each day is a miracle in the making.

—Frederick Loomis—

