**Unexpected Blessings: A Spiritual Perspective of the Cancer Experience**

“You have cancer…” are turn-life-upside down words that no one ever wants to hear. The shock, disbelief, fear, sadness, and anger that often come in the moments and days following the news of a cancer diagnosis are devastating. Many patients and their families describe that moment in their life as “the B.C. and A.D. moment” in their life delineating life before cancer (B.C.) and life after diagnosis (A.D.). In other words, their life has forever changed.

One important conversation the chaplain has with patients and families early in their cancer journey offers an invitation to explore and to keep oneself aware of the “spiritual” experience of their cancer journey. When the cancer diagnosis comes, everyone reacts differently, and often, it is one’s spirituality that becomes an important player in trying to make sense of it all. Strangely, unexpected blessings appear and become life-lines of hope, of strength, and of peace necessary to face the challenges that cancer brings. It is the experience of having cancer that can open the soul and the mind to look at one’s life differently. The following are some of those “unexpected blessings”:

***Perspective and Priorities:*** “My perspective on what is important in life has changed!” When faced with one’s vulnerability and mortality, one often begins to think about what is most important in life. Many realize that what was once thought of as important in their life becomes not as important. Individuals and families experiencing cancer realize the necessity of rearranging priorities, which may encourage them to spend more time with family, to better manage life/work balance, to follow a passion or a dream, to not “sweat the small stuff,” to make self-care a priority, or to say “no” as needed. A cancer diagnosis strangely gives permission to embrace these life-giving, life-strengthening, and life-celebrating experiences.

***Rediscovery or Deepening of Faith and Spirituality:*** For many, their spirituality becomes an important piece of the healing puzzle that is being put together to help cope with the reality of cancer. Spirituality is unique to everyone, but for many, their faith in God is deepened as they seek to understand the “whys?” and to find ways to be strengthened as they face the journey. Whether God has been a part of someone’s life experience or not, many often find themselves returning to a more intentional search for God in their lives, which often brings them a “peace that surpasses understanding.” Prayer, meditation, ritual, Sacraments, and worship become integral coping tools. The prayerful support of others also brings incredible strength and comfort.

For some, there is an initial “wrestling with God” as to how cancer can be happening to them. It is even in the wrestling, in the crying out, in the doubt, or in the anger, that individuals find that as they search to understand, they often experience their relationship with God to be more personal and authentic.

For those who many not have a belief in God, they, too, find there can be a spiritual awakening to deeper beliefs and life experiences through a heightened appreciation and awe for the beauty in living, in loving, and in being authentic and true to oneself.

Building Community: Experiencing the Love and Care of Others: “I never fully realized or appreciated how much love and support I have in my life until now.” Sometimes it is difficult to accept help from others; however, the blessing of community is probably the most obvious as individuals with cancer and their families find overwhelming support and care. One’s health team, family members, friends, and community groups who show up with expertise, support, assistance, and encouragement become rich sources of love and hope.

One community that forms is with other patients and families who are met along the way in waiting rooms, treatment rooms, or in support groups. A strong bond can develop as co-journers meet and share their familiar stories and experiences with one another. Many find that these new friendships which develop along the way are some of the greatest blessings of all.

***Testimony of Hope to Others:*** Being able to share about one’s experience with cancer provides opportunities to give hope to others who many need encouragement or understanding. There is a sense of purpose which can be found during the cancer journey that motivates one to become an inspiration to others who may be starting their own cancer experience. No matter where the journey leads, many realize the importance of sharing their story to proclaim that their cancer experience has not negated the meaning and the purpose of their life as they give testimony to all that has carried them.

While cancer is never a welcomed guest, surprisingly, unexpected blessings of strength, hope, faith, love, and healing can come to the one whose life has been forever changed into that “B.C./A.D. moment.”

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