

Another 'Taste of Lemonade'

Ten months ago on this page, I recounted my experience of being diagnosed with renal cancer. After recovering from my operation in which my right kidney and adrenal gland were removed, I became more appreciative and reflective toward the world around me. At the Medical College of Ohio School of Medicine Convocation some months later, I shared lemonade and cookies with new medical students.

Later, in my formal talk to the students, I advised them to balance the scientific with the humanistic. Students, like many of us, are caught up in the pressures of daily life and do not take time to savor the present. I told them that they must devote time to be with family and friends and to enjoy a Beethoven symphony or a good novel or a fine dinner.

Recently I learned that I have metastasis to both lungs and a positive bone scan. As a cancer survivor, I have spent the last two years with the threat of this possibility. The reality is not easy to accept. There is denial, anger, and a sense of great loss.

However, I have come to realize that the observations I wrote on this page are still true:

1. Good health is often taken for granted; however, it is the most precious commodity one possesses.
2. One's spouse, children, family, and friends are the essential ingredients that allow one to endure an experience such as a serious and unexpected illness.
3. When faced with death, one realizes the importance of God and one's relationship to God.
4. The things one does throughout one's life that seem so urgent are, most of the time, not so important.

Those observations have become a way of life for me.

In my previous essay, I quoted American writers Thornton Wilder and Henry David Thoreau, who both noted that most men and women lead frantic and desperate lives, seldom pausing to reflect on their activities. I am glad that the initial diagnosis of cancer prepared me for the most feared of its complications, metastatic disease. However, I am most happy that the initial diagnosis made me think anew about life and therefore consider the contemplative philosophies of both Wilder and Thoreau. One activity that brought me peace after the initial diagnosis was quiet times where I just enjoyed being alone surrounded by nature, similar to, I imagine, Thoreau contemplating Walden Pond.

The day that my metastasis was confirmed was, of course, very traumatic: the shock of the findings and an initial flurry about what should be done and how soon. Finally, I politely called a halt to all activity for the day. I told my staff and friends at work that I was simply going home to be with my family and to sit and look at the river.

Which is what I did.

Our house sits on a rather steep bluff and the Maumee River curves around a very wide bend below it. Our yard slopes gently to the edge of the bluff, then descends through grasses and wildflowers and bushes to the edge of the river. Birds and squirrels and chipmunks populate this slope of land. If you stand above the slope on a quiet day gazing out at the river, you can hear the rustling of the animals in the grasses. Occasionally, a bird sings sweetly.

It was a perfect October day, sunny, 70 degrees, with a soft breeze. The wide, blue river sparkled when stirred by the wind. On both sides of the river trees grew down to the edge. They were still mostly green, with only a hint of autumn reds and yellows.

The river's course flows in such a way that at this time of year the sun seems to set exactly into the water. A great fire being extinguished by the cool water.

I sat on a lawn chair, my suit coat and tie on the green grass beside me. At that moment, time stopped. My life—past, present, and future—was compressed into the second of time.

Thoreau went to Walden Pond to search for his soul. There, in communion with nature, he found serenity and fulfillment. He recognized and recorded for us a state where one can come closest to the unity between nature and creation.

Thornton Wilder, nearly one hundred years later in his play *Our Town*, emphasized that most of us are blind to the everyday wonders of our world. He dramatized that life can end quickly and without warning. The theme of his play is simple: Life is short; be certain to take the time to smell the roses. Over time, the seemingly trivial things do become more important. Wilder stated that at one moment you get married, and before you know it that white-haired lady by your side is 70 and has eaten 50,000 meals with you.

Time slipped past, and I looked up and saw my wife standing next to my chair with a glass of lemonade for me. Our daughter had just made a pitcher. I tasted the sweetness of the drink. The wind suddenly stirred the grass. A bird chirped. Far down the river a small boat made its way upstream.

I took my wife's hand, and we stayed there a moment looking at life passing in front of us.

Life has been good to me.

Roger C. Bone, MD
Toledo, Ohio