

Reflections on an Illness

by

Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

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It happened a year ago today. Vivid memories still return every now and then by accident or with deliberate recollection. The operation was intended to be simple - the removal of cysts that had grown before. But when the doctor returned later in the day, it was obvious he wanted to tell me something. And he did. A sentence or two prefaced the core of the message and the one word penetrated my hearing - cancer.

A lengthy explanation followed which included that it would take a week or so to be absolutely sure with additional tests at special laboratories. But all indications seem to point to the fact that the original diagnosis was correct. Comforting words of hope were also addressed because the cancer had been discovered early, but they would not be sure until another operation took place in a couple of weeks. The reassuring words to rest and to take it easy indicated that the brief conversation was concluding. And the doctor left, and I was alone.

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The powerful message really didn't penetrate until later. It seemed as if all the stages of death and dying described by Dr. Kobler Ross were telescoped to a fifteen minute time segment. Like the drowning man, however, there was one slim thread of hope on which to hold - the doctors weren't absolutely sure. I would know in a week.

The week seemed to go by simultaenously quicker and slower than any week I had ever lived. The thin thread of hope that the results of the further testing would not show a malignancy dominated my thoughts. With families and friends who knew about the situation, I tried to minimize the seriousness of what was happening and kept most of my thoughts and feelings to myself. After all, everything was going to be alright.

Finally, the day of the doctor's appointment arrived. No time was wasted in telling me the candid truth. I had cancer. I would need an operation involving a removal of a section from my back and concomitant skin graft. No guarantees were offered except that the doctors would try to do their best. A million questions rushed through my mind, but none were asked. I returned home and began to look at people, places and things in an entirely new way. I was going back to the hospital in 10 days for major surgery which could involve the basic realities of life and death. The first person I met when I returned home asked how everything had progressed. And my response was a simple request I would ask of many others in the days ahead, "Please, pray for me!"

It was strange to make that request. Others had always asked me to do this for them. After all, I am a priest. I had grown accustomed to visiting parishioners and friends in hospitals and seemed to always have the right words to say. I would offer or respond positively to the request to pray for those who were sick, But suddenly, I found myself in the position of seeking help instead of offering it, of requesting prayers instead of being asked for prayers, of beginning to realize I had cancer instead of communicating this fact to another at the request of family or friends.

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However, despite the reality of the situation, I began to bargain. Or, at least, I tried to do so. The key bargaining element was time. Would it be alright to go to the hospital for the operation in 15 days instead of ten? Would I be able to keep a commitment I had made six weeks from now, or should I cancel it? These and a thousand other questions were merely the camouflage to try to discover how serious the operation would be. But no sure answers were given and I suddenly realized that a certain amount of time now belonged to me, and there was much to be done.

I became very conscious of the people who were important in my life. I made sure I sought them out by visiting them or calling them. Most of the encounters in person or by phone consisted of expressing my gratitude for their friendship and to repeat once again the request I had grown accustomed to asking, "Please, pray for me!" I began to clear my desk and to make sure that everything in my room and office was in order. And finally, one afternoon I sat down to write out instructions for my death and burial.

The hospital date approached much quicker than I expected. A sense of resignation began to be the dominant feeling. After all, if this what God wants of me now, then my response should be in accord with His will. But I happen to be male, a priest, over 40, and the recipient of a strong Irish heritage. As a male, there is a certain unique fear of hospitals; as a priest, there is a strong independent streak coupled with pride; as a person over 40, the benefit of good health up to this point should not have prevented a realistic appraisal of chronological reality; and as a possessor of Irish heritage, it was quite common to grow up with a fear of hospitals and to think that an aspirin and a "hot toddy" cured everything.

More than any other factor, however, was the full realization of how much life meant to me. I did not want to die, at least not yet. I knew intellectually through the theology that has been part of my life that my faith tells me

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otherwise, but it was difficult to relate what I always said I believed to the present situation.

Somehow or other, while all this was happening, another reality was also occurring in my life. Celebrating the Eucharist took on new meaning for me. I became very conscious of the elements of bread and wine which are blessed and broken which become the body and blood of the Lord. The challenge to become like those elements grew stronger. The scripture readings and psalms in the Prayer of the Hours provided insights I had never realized before. Late summer red skies, trees bursting forth with one last gasp for growth, the faces of children and elderly people - all these dimensions of life taken so often for granted began to be looked at with a different vision. Those minute cells multiplying slowly within me became a new lens through which all of life took on a new vision.

The date to report to the hospital finally arrived. The strongest feeling was one of trust and hope. So much support through letters, phone calls, conversations made me realize how fortunate a person I was. Anxiety began to creep in again as the normal tests for blood, EKG, blood pressure and others were given to me. They seemed to be done in such a mechanical fashion. Didn't these people know what was happening to me? Didn't they know how serious an operation was scheduled for tomorrow?

Later that night, it was difficult to sleep. Promises began to be formulated in my mind. I began to bargain with God. "Dear God, if everything goes well tomorrow, then I promise..." I went slowly to sleep thinking of the events and people that had been part of my life - and I prayed.

The morning began before the sun rose. A friend brought me the the gift of the Eucharist and celebrated the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. I had received the Sacrament of Reconciliation earlier. The power of these rituals and their significance seemed to be overwhelming. But then, the nurses came. The memory of the stainless steel and the antiseptic aroma ~~of the~~

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of the operating room still haunt me to this day. The anesthesiologist began his work and before I realized it, I became conscious again in the recovery room. Eight hours had passed.

A numbness seemed to penetrate the section of my back where the cancer had been located. A dull pain surrounded the area on my thigh where a skin graft had been taken. And a feeling of joy began to sink slowly to the depths of my being. They had said that they would not perform a skin graft if there was not much hope; they would not go through this part of the planned operation if the cancer had spread further than what was expected. And so, the dull pain in the thigh felt very good. As I was wheeled into my room, my sister told me that the doctors believed they had excised all the cancer and the operation was a success.

Even now, it is difficult to reconstruct those first few days after the operation. I still remember, however, those who sent cards, or plants, or who called and left messages. What a joy it is to know people! What a tremendous feeling to realize one's dependence! What an incredible realization to discover the countless people, friends, relatives and even strangers, who told you that they were praying for you.

Each day passed more quickly as strength returned and the skin graft began to take. The miracle of the human body was truly incredible. And finally the day came when the doctor said I was able to go home.

It has been a year. There have been visits back to the doctor's office, each with their own climate of tension and anxiety. But all has gone well. I go back and look at the remnants of that experience of a year ago. I read the instructions for death and burial. I read and re-read the journal I kept with the promises made to God if everything went alright. Some of the promises have been kept; others have been forgotten or neglected.

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What have I learned in the past year? I think I have learned to pray. The celebration of the Eucharist, the time for meditation and reflection, and the countless other prayer forms within the Roman Catholic faith tradition have assumed a new significance and meaning for me. I think I have a new insight into the meaning of illness and this gives me the opportunity to resonate with those in similar circumstances, even though more might well be and is asked of them. But because of my own experience, I have some sense of what they are feeling. I have come to appreciate life more than I ever thought I would. I feel like a Polaroid camera trying to take in as much as I am^{able} with enough time left to look at evrything^e and everyone longer.

Positive results are not the only benefit of such an experience. I know I have become more impatient. The realization of the value of time prompts me to become far more candid than I have been in the past, but those who are the object of this candor are sometime hurt. I only hope that time will remain for explanations and even apologies.

A year has passed. A sudden pain or the slightest growth which might appear for a brief period of time become a source of great concern. But the prevailing awareness is the consciousness of the gift of time and life - the minutes, the hours, the days, the weeks.

I have had a serious illness. I know it could happen again. And yet, I am really grateful for the ability to reflect upon it. I know this experience will help when God might well ask more of me at another time. Reflections on the past year have helped me be a better human being, a better Christian, and a better priest - or, at least, I hope so. That makes everything that happened and might still happen very worthwhile.