



## What's Next

Today it is easy to imagine I am not dying. In fact, I feel so positively alive as to wonder why someone somewhere told me I have stage IV lung cancer. This morning, I went on my routine power walk, pulled weeds out of the side yard perennial beds, and made a list of tasks for the afternoon. Later today, I'm planning to go out to meet friends for pasta and return home to read a few more of Emma Donoghue's newest short stories before calling it a day.

Perhaps I feel so positively alive because I am just that—still alive. On Sunday I learned that the last of the three friends of friends diagnosed with terminal lung cancer within days of my own diagnosis had died. Like me, all three of these now deceased people never smoked. Two of the three were women. Two of the three were younger than I am; the last to die was a 45-year-old avid cyclist and father of two young children. Unlike me, all three had chemotherapy and/or surgery and radiation. But there is no comfort in any of our differences. The statistical odds for long-time survival once metastatic adenocarcinoma is diagnosed are sobering regardless of one's age, sex, or treatment choices.

Maybe I feel so alive today because I am already dead and exist in a newly attained state of afterlife. If dreams represent the real world, as some cultures believe, then about six weeks ago I made the journey out of this life and into another. I dreamed I was lying inside a crematorium. As I observed myself from the edge of the blaze, my physical presence dissolved slowly but surely, turning into a pile of gray dust. Near the end

of my dreamed burning time, when all that remained was the steel tray covered with molten ash and one white curved cranial bone, I suddenly realized I had surrendered myself for cremation one day earlier than was scheduled. And in my dream I recognized how true to my life death had become. In life I am forever ahead of time wherever I am headed. It seemed only fitting that I arrive too early to my own funeral as well.

While still dreaming, I had to decide what was next. Should I call a halt to the fire in order to enjoy one more day, even if all that remained of me was a pile of ash and one small head bone? Or should I accept my mistake and finish up what I had started, concluding that losing one day wouldn't be all that significant as I already had had so many wonderful past days? In the end, I let the fire burn on. After waking up from the dream, I lay in bed for a long time absorbing how it felt to be dead, secure that all was as it should be.

At my fourth month cancer check-up, once again my blood work came back looking normal. My kidney function, blood pressure, liver and pulse all suggest I have a good amount of health inside. "Are you really sure I have a terminal disease?" I asked my oncologist as I stood up to leave.

Without a pause he said, "That is the one thing we are certain of."

"How often do you think about dying?" a friend asked recently.

"Thoughts of dying are the bookends to my days," I replied. And it is true. Not one day since diagnosis have I woken up or fallen asleep without remembering I am on death row. After a good check-up report, I simply figure I am not yet at the front of the line for execution. And with no available appeal process to distract me, I get plenty of reminders of dying during the daytime as well.

Last week I ran out of check blanks and had to choose to get one box, two boxes, or four boxes of replacements. My newspaper subscription expires soon, and they want to know if I'll take the one-year or two-year deal being offered. Early in the spring, I admired the new varieties of iris but opted to plant snapdragons instead. Yesterday, I accidentally broke the stand off my alarm clock, and today I'm wondering whether to buy a new

clock or go down into the basement in search of duct tape, a cursory implement of hope even in the best of times.

And there are plenty of larger questions about what's next. What is the best use of my time now that I know it is to be shorter rather than longer? Are there contributions I should be making to society or my local neighborhood beyond "Do no harm." Does having terminal cancer mean I have a new mission or calling I'd not had before?

In the past, whenever I thought ahead to the possibilities of my later years, I'd be spurred on in my fantasies by thinking of Mother Jones union organizing in her 50s; May Sarton writing her most influential book, *Journal of Solitude*, in her 60s; and Lillian Carter, former President Jimmy Carter's mother, at age 70 working with lepers at Godrej Colony in India. Writer Brenda Ueland trained for Pikes Peak annual uphill trek in her 80s. My friend's mother-in-law with two knee replacements at age 92 took herself to Paris, and then, because she was having so much fun, on to Prague—all against her cardiologist son's advice, for sure. At age 58 I am surrounded by countless women who, once their children were raised and their careers finished, went on to reinvent themselves over and over again throughout their aging years. But since being diagnosed with terminal cancer, all that has changed. Suddenly, my own wide open prairie of a future has been reduced to the size of a sandbox.

Once diagnosed with lung cancer, I finished the last two weeks in the school term before locking the door behind me. There are many jobs ill-suited to being sick, but I believe teaching rates right next to impossible. Being a mediocre college teacher, due to unpredictable missed days or compromised health, is the last way I want to spend my final days on this planet.

I had a good teaching career and loved my work, but as Charlie King sings, "Our jobs are not our work, and our work is not our lives." That my job and work often seemed to be one and the same was one of the gifts of teaching courses like "Women in American Culture" and "Women in a Global Perspective." "Introduction to Africa" and "Essay/Research Writing" courses were the cream cheese on the bagel.

And now more than ever, I am grateful that my college teaching career was not my life. In addition to teaching I have parented, had plenty of travel and adventures, had time to draw and create collages, and possessed the stamina to fill more than 80 black bound journals with thoughts about books, art, and life in general. I also have a drawer full of file folders holding various stages of essays about women authors, time spent in distant cultures, growing up in rural Minnesota, my father's death from Alzheimer's, and more ethereal topics like beauty, human responsibility, and love. Last week I added to the drawer a new file folder labeled *Cancer Essays*.

*Cancer Essays* is not the book I was planning to write. But writing these essays may just be the duct tape I need for my own questions of what's next. As I write one essay after another, I keep hoping they are like travel writing—that there is an unending need for new stories about traveling even in the most familiar of lands. Thousands of authors pass through Paris, and no two ever see the same city. Thousands write about dying, but once inside its city gates no two walk the same path.

The time for imagining my magical crone years as Mother Teresa Minor or Virginia Woolf Jr. is over. But as long as I feel so positively alive, I can go on describing my own meandering through the streets of cancer sickness, love, and loss. I don't need to remind others that, regardless of whom we travel with, in the end we all travel alone. But I can always hope that these essays send the message to others to make the most of their journeys, no matter where they are headed.