



Cancer Lunches

*There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been:
A people busy and powerful, knowledgeable, ambivalent, important, fearful,
and self-aware; a people who scheme, promote, deceive and conquer;
who pray for their loved ones, and long to flee misery and skip death.*

— Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*

If economic efficiency is getting the best possible return for an investment, then it goes against reason for human beings to spend more, not less, time with other human beings who have terminal diseases. Logic says that the more efficient use of human emotional energy would be to move away from the dying in search of healthier and hailier specimens who can deliver bigger payoffs far into the future. After all, one certifiably dying friend equals one less ally against one's own misery and inevitable death.

But economic efficiency seems to hold little sway when it comes to emotional ties among family and friends. And while the human heart's rationalization may be foreign and unquantifiable to the statistician, it is lucky for us chickens that it holds firm in its resolve to accompany our loved ones to the end.

When my grandfather, Patrick Devine, was diagnosed with terminal cancer at age 94 and told he had only days to live, I witnessed something I had never seen before. I grew up going to all sorts of wakes and funerals for deceased members of the family and surrounding farm community. But this was a wake with the soon to be buried person still alive and talking.

My grandfather, in a bright blue hospital gown, held his folded hands over his chest for three days straight as family and friends streamed to his side like bears to a honey pot. Mikey Nash, Ben and Maggie Casey, the Sullivans, Ryans, O’Herns and Devines all took turns saying their goodbyes to a man some of them had known for nearly a century.

I kept to the hospital room’s corner beige vinyl chair with my legs folded out of people’s way and my ears open to learn what I could about a man whom I knew best as a grandfather. Horsetrading stories, farm tales, family jokes, and plenty of tears rolled into Irish blessings poured out over a man I now know was well loved and respected by so many. When I told my grandfather at the end of the third day that he looked like a flower in his blue gown, he turned his head towards me and said, “Well, that would be right because I’ve been a thistle all my life.”

When I was diagnosed with terminal cancer five months ago, I knew my own living wake had begun. Friends and family began wanting to spend more time with me and, while my friends and I had a long tradition of lunching together, these post-diagnosis noonday meals took on an entirely new flavor.

It took just one lunch to demonstrate that breaking the news I have stage IV adenocarcinoma while seated with a friend at a restaurant table was a terrible waste of good food and money. So I started telling friends about my disease over the telephone well in advance of our scheduled meal. By the time our lunch date rolled around, I ordered my bowl of soup confident that my hardest job was behind me. My friends could digest their sandwiches because they had begun to move past the initial shock of my prognosis.

The first round of cancer lunches was therapeutic for both my friends and me for sure, but these lunches were sometimes hard to get through. I remember years ago a woman from Rosebud Reservation told me how her grandmother would walk far out into the prairie to be alone in her grief, but that the sound of her wailing could still be heard back at the house. These early lunches, for anyone eavesdropping, had all the sounds of a muzzled wail. Friends cried quietly over tuna salad sandwiches. I

choked down my dessert while reminding my friends that Henny Penny had been wrong about the sky falling down.

None of us can know in advance how we will react when a loved one gets a death sentence. But early on in these cancer lunches, I saw certain patterns to my friends' responses to my sudden turn of fate. Some grew fearful for their own health. Others found themselves painfully plunged back into memories of dying parents and siblings. A few were gripped with worry that they themselves might not be strong enough to see me through what lay ahead.

I had friends with little or no experience with dying and those who had seen more than their share of death. Friends from certain family systems were insistent that I spare no expense to find a cure. Several good friends grew withdrawn and depressed. One long time friend said, "It makes me so sad to imagine my life without you." And I thought, but didn't say, "And it makes me so sad to imagine me without life." "Everything has become illuminated," another close friend declared over hamburgers and fries. For her, like me, my having cancer had changed everything, and life would never go back to how it once was.

And so many friends were amazingly clear about what they had to offer. "I'll scrub your kitchen floors or wash your car," "I'll get your groceries anytime you need some," "Please call on me to mow your lawn or shovel your snow" were among the many practical and generous responses to my disease. A few friends surprised me by knowing exactly what they wanted from me. One friend came to lunch prepared with, "What I want is: one, for you to spend more time with me; two, make me part of your dying; and three, take me along one more time to your cabin in the woods."

That I survived to have a second round of cancer lunches became reason to celebrate. Some of my friends insisted that we start going to the more expensive restaurants around town and treat ourselves to upscale cuisines. Instead of my driving to meet friends at restaurants, friends came to my house and picked me up. Presents of books, teas, soaps, and candles started to show up at the lunch table. And rather than wanting to see me

less, people asked to see me more. My lunch calendar began looking like columbine in full bloom. Out-of-town friends just had to squeeze their way in.

Round three of the cancer lunches is in progress now. Tomorrow is my 59th birthday, and friends are calling once again to get on my lunch calendar. And more and more I see how everything has changed. Practice is making us all better at being together as though it might be our last time. My friends and I laugh more, cry easier, and no longer part ways without saying we love each other. And we share our mutual efforts at making each day count. Since my diagnosis, one friend has stopped buying “that cheap ice cream” and now buys herself the best. Another friend decided there was no reason to put off traveling any longer and just returned from a grand trip to Europe. Everything has become illuminated and, in many ways, for the better. Among my friends, my dying has produced a flurry of living.

One of my friends recently reminded me of this story from my past as we chewed our way through organic Nicoise salads. For my high school graduation, I was chosen to play the grand entrance organ march. I knew I wasn't the best organ player in my music program, so I asked Sister Prudentia why me when other players were much better. “We know you are not the best player,” my organ teacher assured me, “but we can count on you to play through your mistakes.”

“It's the perfect metaphor for your life!” my friend said. Maybe it is an even better metaphor for my cancer lunches with friends. I may not be the best at the job of dying, but I am determined to keep track of the beat and my whereabouts in the piece of music being played every time I sit across from a loved one. It is true “there is no one here but us chickens.” And, while it would be nice to “flee misery and skip death,” it should be possible to play on, mistakes and all, in the interests of having a grand final march.

My friends are learning with me that rather than giving ourselves over to panic and fear, together we are able to celebrate life as we know it at this moment. I have always been keenly aware that we are dying as we live.

What these cancer lunches are bringing home to me is just how alive we can still be while dying.

I will not fold my hands over my chest like my grandfather as long as I am able to reach out and return the embrace of all the people I have loved over all these years. None of the people I care about are deciding yet to look for a better deal down the street. And that is enough evidence for me to prove that the heart has its own logic, that the intangible force of love has its own system of rewards, even in the face of the inevitable loss of a loved one.