



Miracles

Perhaps cancer clinics should post the following message for new cancer patients to read as they exit:

Beyond this door exist innumerable scientifically unexplainable and unproven remedies and cures, for while only the few are called to be oncologists, many still believe in miracles.

I personally hadn't given miracles much thought since grade school. Lured by the drama of ancient battles between good and evil and the childhood desire to avoid my farm chores, I frequented the St. Wenceslaus Catholic School library. There the shelves were filled with volumes of books recounting in graphic detail female and male martyrdom and the miracles accompanying them. I still remember the story of St. George, persecuted for speaking in defense of Christians in 303 A.D. First he was poisoned, then crushed between two spiked wheels, and later boiled in a cauldron of molten lead. Each time, his life was saved by miraculous intervention.

The Virgin Mary appeared to St. Catherine Laboure in the form of a picture turning itself around to reveal the design for what Catholics in 1500 called the miraculous medal, curing a 12-year-old crippled child at St. Catherine's gravesite. Miraculous appearances of The Blessed Mary to St. Bernadette at Lourdes, St. Blaise of Sebastea's healing of the sick, and countless miracles following the burning death of St. Barbara filled my imagination as I put off for as long as possible the dreaded chores of washing the milking machines and cleaning out the henhouse.

Since my diagnosis, stories of miracles have made a major comeback in my life. In fact, I am rather surprised that almost everyone I know has seen firsthand or heard about a cancer miracle. These stories have a common enough theme: the oncologist gives the patient four weeks, four months, four years to live, and by some unexplainable intervention, the patient outwits all statistical and scientific odds for survival. One of my favorite cancer miracle stories came via a friend reading a birding book by Frances Wood. An elderly woman was diagnosed with cancer and told by her doctor she had only a few months to live. Being a life list birder, she immediately set off traveling the world in hope of checking off all the list's classified feathered specimens. Fifteen years later and over 8,400 species cited, the woman died—not from cancer, but in a car crash in Madagascar.

And who with cancer wouldn't want a miracle? St. George must have been mightily pleased to be mysteriously rescued as the two spiked wheels began to roll together across his chest. When the boiling cauldron turned into a bathtub, George must have become absolutely ecstatic from his good fortune. I'd be ecstatic if my lung cancer suddenly changed from scalding adenocarcinoma to the tepid fever of a common cold.

But I am not a believer in divine intervention. Instead, I read studies on statistical average survival rates and see how one person's miracle gift of more time must be subtracted from someone else's time. For every story I hear about mysterious cures, I know there are thousands of stories about sadly shortened lives that are carefully kept from cancer patients. And I know that, while as a child I was quite fascinated by the lives of saints whose very existence seemed to spawn unexplainable and unproven cures, the world I know as an adult is far less extravagant in its blessings.

And yet I am starting to like these cancer miracle stories that keep coming my way. Perhaps it is because first and foremost, tales of unexplainable cures are gifts of hope and comfort, easily passed on to someone with cancer. That one man with a rare form of bone cancer outlived all statistical projections proves that doctors don't carry crystal balls inside their lab coats. That a woman with colon cancer defied all the

odds to go on to be a mother and then grandmother serves as a reminder that nothing is more unpredictable than the date of death itself.

The last time someone told me a cancer miracle story I began to wonder how and when all these many stories got their start. During a recent visit to my oncologist, he asked me, “Are your friends surprised you are doing so well?”

I told him I don’t think my friends know what to expect and so I wasn’t sure if they are surprised or not.

“Are you surprised at how well I’m doing?” I asked him.

My no nonsense doctor replied, “Yes.”

Is this how miracle stories begin? Is a cancer miracle story sparked by the onset of events that somehow veer away from the worst possible turn?

As I was growing up, my mother frequently sought miraculous remedies from her arsenal of favorite saints. St. Anthony got called into duty whenever a shoe or hen went missing. St. Christopher, represented by a plastic statue glued to the pick-up dashboard, rocked back and forth along the rough gravel roads to town and back again protecting us from an accident. A framed picture of St. Cecilia hung dead center over the piano, perhaps because my frugal mother was hoping against hope that the patron saint of musicians would keep the family egg money from being wasted on music lessons for a daughter more inclined to invent her own tunes than practice the major and minor scales.

The saint my mother relied on the most, however, was St. Jude, patron saint of the hopeless. Because of her certainty that many circumstances in our lives required drastic intervention, that our problems whether physical or mental were indeed hopeless, she frequently bypassed all the other saints and went straight to St. Jude. When we needed rain for the hay crop and the clouds stayed closed like tightfisted misers, my mother wouldn’t waste valuable time posturing before the more specialized saints; it was St. Jude she counted on for an immediate response.

My mother is now praying daily to St. Jude to cure my cancer, and she is not the only one seeking nonmedical remedies on my behalf.

Immediately after word of my diagnosis got out, I landed on a Norwegian Lutheran prayer chain, a Catholic rural town prayer chain, a Methodist Monday women's group prayer chain, and a Unitarian Universalist prayer chain, my Universalist friend qualifying her group's prayer with "but I'm not sure it will work."

People have sent me religious books on cancer and Dr. Lorraine Day's tape *I'm Not Afraid of Cancer Anymore* advising me to seek God as one of the ten ingredients needed for curing my own cancer. A friend in California has a friend of hers come over every Thursday to help meditate and send healing vibes my way. Another friend in Helsinki is seeking a Finnish shaman's cure on my behalf. One college colleague drove to my house and dropped off Christian Science literature complete with weekly workbooks. A woman from Bogota I'd met once years ago stopped me on the street the other day and offered to lay her curing hands on me. While in a small Wisconsin town last month, I agreed to let a recently ordained liberal Catholic priest anoint my forehead with sacred oils and beseech the Lord to heal me. When he finished his ritual, he crossed his arms over his chest and said humbly, "Well, it can't hurt to try."

I feel a bit like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* who, after the tornado passed, found herself deposited in a foreign land. I have not said a prayer of any kind since leaving the Catholic Church at age 18. Forty years and a diagnosis of cancer later I find myself, a non-believer, swept up in a chorus of other people's prayers and hopes for healing miracles. And I am surprisingly touched by this outpouring of faith directed towards my illness. Perhaps, like the fictional Dorothy, I think philosophical differences are no reason to turn down help while looking for the way back home.

George Santayana's definition of miracles gives nonbelievers an easy way to think about miracles: "Miracles are propitious accidents, the natural causes of which are too complicated to be readily understood." Doctors don't have all the answers, the patterns of death and healing are too illogical, and cancer is far too complex to be fully understood. And it is true that every day any one of us experiences "propitious accidents" which could, if we wished, be labeled miracles. That my doctor is surprised

I am doing so well is certainly a favorable turn of events. That I have a doctor is the result of a fortuitous accident of the time and location of my birth. Had I been born in the late 1940s in rural Benin, I probably wouldn't have the good fortune today of being able to hand over my health insurance card every time I check in at the local cancer center.

Everywhere I look I see favorable and unexplainable circumstances. Outside my window, a red maple tree grows where I was told it would never take. In the nearby park, an oak tree has recovered completely from the searing blaze of last year's lightning strike. Several houses away, a child whose birth was anything but promising runs through the yard. Are any or all of these miracles? To people of faith, perhaps they are. For me they confirm what Santayana's definition suggests: we humans aren't in control of very much, but every once in awhile we reap the benefits of what we can't begin to explain or understand.

A farmer in rural Wisconsin (another favorite cancer miracle story) refused all medical treatment for his cancer and went back to his farm to put in his spring crop. Five years later, someone from the cancer clinic saw the farmer and was surprised he was not only alive but still healthy. The farmer explained it this way. For years he had respectfully listened to the visiting agricultural extension experts tell him that his soil was best suited for this and that crop and that sections of his land were unsuitable for other crops. One corner of his fields was deemed by these experts as particularly ill-suited for the planting of potatoes. After the experts drove away, the farmer returned to planting his potato eyes in the same ill-suited corner of the field where he had planted potatoes for years. It wasn't that he didn't believe the experts. It was just that he never thought he needed the maximum yield the experts promised was possible if he followed their advice and planted something else in that spot. What he wanted was simply enough potatoes to get through the next winter; and year after year after year, his potato plantings did just that. His decision to not seek the latest in cancer treatment has gotten him through many winters as well.

I'll never know for sure if the Wisconsin farmer cancer story is true, but I think about the story often, as I swallow my daily dose of a newly

approved cancer fighting drug, lie on the acupuncturist's table, take immune boosters, and chew up another heaping pile of raw beets, squash and carrots. I also remember that two people in California are meditating on my behalf, someone in Helsinki is consulting the stars, and in a local Lutheran church a small group of generous women is bowing down in prayer for all the many people in need of divine intervention. And my own mother continues her prayers to St. Jude, still hoping against hope for a miracle. I'm not yet inclined to expect a miracle of any kind, but I can't help but feel loved by those who seek one on my behalf.

At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy clicked together the heels of her ruby red slippers and miraculously returned to Kansas. I see no signs of magic slippers appearing at my house, but I do trust that I'll continue to hear cancer miracle stories. I like being reminded time and time again how many fortuitous accidents are out there keeping people with cancer alive. And I know these same stories offer something irreplaceable to those telling the stories. Cancer miracle stories offer hope to those who want to believe in the possibility that they can keep their loved ones with them forever.