

BREAST CANCER WELLNESS

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SURVIVING BREAST CANCER & THE LAS VEGAS MASSACRE

*What Comes
After the Fear*

SHE SAID, HE SAID

**MY FIRST TWO
DECISIONS**
AFTER DIAGNOSIS

SHEILA MCGLOWN

ENDING DISPARITY

When There Are No

Magic Words

BY REVEREND PATRICK RIECKE

In October, I attended a professional football game with two of my teenage sons. The team highlighted cancer awareness and a group of people with cancer were brought onto the field during halftime. The stadium announcer asked us to cheer so we could make the people on the field feel our “strength and encouragement.”

I felt it was a nice gesture.

Until. Over the stadium speakers they began to play the Journey song *Don't Stop Believin'*.

Immediately I flashed back to a friend of ours who died from breast cancer years ago. She confided that carrying the weight of other people's undying faith that she would beat cancer was actually crushing her.

She knew she was going to die. And she felt like she was letting everyone down.

But how do you tell your fanbase that you are dying when they have begged God for a miracle, claimed your victory, and cheered for you constantly? How do you pop the bubble of people who have hoped you feel their [*insert booming stadium voice echoing through a half-billion cubic feet*] strength and encouragement?

Let's be honest. We kind of stink at helping people who are dying.

But there are five things a (probably) dying person needs to hear.

1. “I'm here, now.”

When you are with a person who's dying, they need you to be present. Facing death erases the past and the future. The only thing left is the present.

However, if you love a dying person, the present can feel like an unsafe place. For example, I remember visiting the hospital room of a very young patient. In treatment, she had shaved her head just moments before I walked in the door. Her usual quick wit was stuck in low gear that day. And so was our conversation.

What she needed from her family, from me, from her friends, was just to know that we were there. Right then. Right there.

If I could not have been trusted to be there then—wading through her dark locks on the wood laminate floor of a hospital room on the second floor—I could not have been trusted to be there later. Whenever and wherever later happened to be.

Be. Here. Now. Don't think too much about the future. Don't get tied up in what may be—whether you think it will be positive ... or positively terrifying.

Let that (probably) dying person know. I am here, now.

2. “Beating breast cancer isn't your only way to win.”

Before you get a cancer diagnosis, you have complicated goals.

You want to make money.

You want to make a difference.

You want to make it to the weekend.

You want to go on vacation.

You want your favorite team to have a winning season.

You want a new car.

You want to change the world.

You want to eat Lucky Charms for breakfast and Oreos for lunch and maintain a perfect weight.

But sometimes, when people get sick, we act like they should only want one thing.

They should want to... (say it with me): GET BETTER.

In fact, we bring cards and balloons with that singular message plastered on them, “Feel Better.”

“Get Well—SOON!”

It's a command. Spoken with a smile.

I'm going to customize a balloon that says “Visit Spain”, and take it to someone who has cancer, just so they know that they can do something besides “get better” and I'll still cheer them on.

If the person with cancer is trying to get better, you'd damn well better cheer them on. But if they are trying really hard to get a degree, or to get more Twitter followers, or to get closer to finding meaning in this crazy thing called life, you'd better cheer them on for that too.

3. “Yes, I will.”

When I was twenty-eight years old I made a hospital visit. I was a youth pastor, and I had an intern who was a senior in high school. A really wonderful kid. My intern’s mother was the person I visited in the hospital that day. I knew something was wrong when I walked in the door.

A friend was visiting at her bedside. Her friend was stuffing tissues into the pocket of her green winter coat when I walked in. She turned to look at me over the edge of her thin-rimmed glasses before excusing herself and leaving.

Once I was alone with my intern’s mom, she gave me the news. Cancer.

And she wasn’t going to do much in the way of treatment. She knew she was facing the end of her life.

“I’m not sure if I will make it to Brian’s graduation.”

Her words shook my soul as my intern’s fresh face became vivid in my mind. This was not in the plan for his internship experience. His mother might die?

“Please make sure he’s okay. Will you do that for me?” She wasn’t crying, and I was storing some tears for later.

“Yes. I will.” I heard my voice say.

He’s a wonderful adult now, but when she died on Mother’s Day, just before Brian’s graduation, I did my best to fulfill the commitment I made in the hospital room months earlier.

But, what if I had said, “Oh, don’t talk like that. You’re going to beat this! You need to stay positive, you need to feel my strength and encouragement...? Don’t stop believin’?”

She probably would have thrown me out. Since I said, “Yes, I will,” she relaxed for the moment. She smiled. And she said, “Thank you.”

4. “You are still you.”

I often get a weird question. Maybe I only think it’s weird because I work with sick and dying and grieving people all the time. The question is, “How should I treat my friend with cancer?”

“Well, how did you treat her before?”

I ask. “If you treated her poorly, then stop it. If you treated her like a human being, it’s best to keep that up.”

Obviously, they are prepared to do the new things for their friend with cancer—pray more, bring meals, check in on how treatments are going. But sometimes it’s as though the person is no longer a person, but a patient.

When one of my co-workers was off for months with cancer, and we didn’t know if he would ever come back, do you know what?

He still liked coffee, he still wanted to see the people he always wanted to see, and he wanted to feel a part of things. Sure, he had some new needs and we paid attention to those.

But I promised him early on that I would not treat him any different. I would treat him like he was still himself. Because he was. And he is.

5. “What do you want to do?”

In my first book, *How to Talk with Sick, Dying, and Grieving People*, I tell the story of Bethany. Bethany is a young mother with ovarian cancer. She fought hard, endured surgery and multiple rounds of treatment.

But, in the end, over coffee with a friend she admitted, “I know I am going to die. I know Brad will be a widower before he reaches middle age, Haley and Micah will lose their mom before they graduate high school, and my baby, Emma, will barely remember me at all.”

The coffee-friend wanted to argue.

“Be strong, don’t talk about dying.” She thought.

But instead, she leaned in and wiped her eyes. Then she asked this question: “What do you want to do?”

Bethany, relieved by not having to act strong, sipped a hot drink, inhaled and held her breath for a moment.

“I like to write.” She exhaled slowly. “I think I need to write some letters.”

Then she asked her coffee-friend, “Will you hold on to them for me until...”

That question, “What do you want to do?” is a magic pill.

It gives the dying person power.

It gives them choices.

It gives them respect.

It gives them opportunity.

It helps them find meaning.

When someone we love is (probably) dying, we don’t have to get stuck in the mode of just cheerleading for them to get better.

We can also let them know that we are here, now.

We can affirm their wide variety of desires and goals—beyond just getting better.

We can say, “Yes, I will” when they ask us for special, maybe excruciating, favors.

We can affirm them as still being people of value, not just ‘cancer patients’.

We can ask them what they want to do and give them respect, choices, and power.

Don’t stop believing, but believe in them. Not just a hoped-for recovery.

Then they will really feel strength and encouragement.



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