

**Saturday, 4:30 p.m. September 24, 2011,
First Unitarian Society of Madison**

Title: *“Getting Cancer a Second Time: What a Blessing! – A Personal Quest”*

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The September theme is quest. Every quest is important. How many of you have seen the fascinating movie *Synecdoche, New York* starring Philip Seymour Hoffman? It bombed in the box office, yet like many movie bombs there is beauty within it if you search hard. In the movie, the concept of **synecdoche** happens where a part of something represents the whole, and vice versa, is explored to its extreme. In the movie, the struggling actor played by Hoffman wins a MacArthur Genius Fellowship Award, and can do anything he wants. His response is to use his grant to explore “honest realism.”

He employs actors to respond to events he has faced in his life. These are handed out on an index card, and include situations both wonderful and tragic:

- Card 1: You won a MacArthur Award – Respond!
- Card 2: Your parents divorce – Respond!
- Card 3: You have a baby – Respond!
- Card 4: You weren’t watching and your toddler ran into the road and was hit by a car – Respond!

Life is a series of events and responses.

In early July 2011, less than 3 months ago, I turned over a card and it read: You have cancer, again. Today I will share one person’s quest during the past 3 months, namely getting cancer a second time after being sure that once was enough.

The second coming of cancer, or for that matter, the first, or any moment in your own life, can trigger a marvelous journey of discovery on the path to Ithaca. Or it can be hell five times over. It depends on your response and that of the Bodhisattvas along your way to Ithaca. The response can create a sense of heaven or hell. The choice is ours.

I've decided heaven would be better than hell, providing an opportunity to developmentally grow.

What have I learned the second time around? Nine themes:

First, doctors are among the noblest people on earth ... they know a lot that can help you, and obviously don't know everything!

Second: Keep everything in perspective.

Third: Humor is an essential ingredient.

Fourth: Communicate what's inside you.

Fifth: You can't communicate enough.

Sixth: We create our own heaven on earth.

Seventh: We are all business ethicists.

Eighth: We will all, inevitably, die.

Ninth: Experience joy in the moment.

First, doctors are among the noblest people on earth ... they know a lot that can help you, and obviously don't know everything!

I am a miracle, a survivor of terminal cancer back in 1996, at the age of 40. God bless the doctors.

So first, a caveat that may color the words and perspectives I share. *I have no fears.* No fear of death, heartache, tragedy, or anything. That's because I did survive terminal cancer and during

the chemo I had a wild out-of-body dream that convinced me the next transition is a very nice place to be.

I am also in some physical trouble. Today is my 54th day of chemo. I had been in remission from May 1996 through July 2011. It's been a fabulous trip – an extra 15 years or 5,390 days. During these 15 years I did as I promised this congregation in sermons back in 1999 and 2007. I lived my bonus days. We all have bonus days.

We've all had near death events, many of which we simply are not aware of, or plain lucky, as a lot of life involves happenstance. My favorite death story is involving a guy fulfilling his life-long dream of having a cup of coffee at a Paris café. He did it! He arrived and sat down; at the same exact second a man jumped from the hotel roof and landed on top of our coffee drinker. Killed him instantly. Imagine that timing. Total joy. Inhale. Life over. True story.

Each day we have the opportunity of something going wrong such as some bad illness, or a sudden end to our lives by having a cup of coffee. We all could have died, and didn't, so we are all living our bonus days. Congratulations.

I made the most of my bonus days after May 1996 by humbly trying to do my small part to help the world progress or stumble on its way toward a socially just world. Then, in early November 2010, Tom, my oncologist, gave me a hug and said, "I am so happy to tell you that after 15 years we can declare you cured of cancer. Usually we do that after five years of no cancer, but in your case we did 15. We don't know why you got Hodgkins Lymphoma, and we're still not sure why it went away when it did. I made you come back every year for a checkup. I can now safely say from the latest results, you are cancer free."

We embraced. "*I don't ever* want to see you again," my oncologist jokingly confirmed. "Nothing personal."

Three weeks later, a day prior to Thanksgiving 2010, I woke up to find my left hand swollen like a bowling ball. "I haven't the faintest idea," one doctor noted. "It looks like Lymphedema, but you're a guy and guys don't get Lymphedema in their hands. A small percentage of breast cancer

survivors get it in their hands, it's a side effect of too much radiation in the neck area to beat cancer."

"Hmm, looks like Lymphedema to me," I surmise. "I have it in both my feet, been that way for 20 years, so why not just move up my body into my left hand."

"Doesn't work that way," the doctors insisted.

We check for blood clots and other likely causes. Nope. Just Lymphedema. There is no cure so I need to wear a compression glove and sleeve half a day to keep it under control. Bad luck.

Yet on this quest for a cause, doctors found two abnormal lymph glands in my neck, unrelated to my swollen hand. Geez. And on that journey we found out that the lymph glands were cancerous, Hodgkin's lymphoma, the same cancer my oncologist said seven months earlier I would never have again in my life. Oh well, doctors don't know everything.

So only one percent of cancers are Hodgkin's lymphoma. And only one percent of Hodgkins lymphoma come back a second time. I'm almost ready to bet on the lottery.

Second: Keep everything in perspective.

Raise your hand if, with good health, you would like to live forever? I'm curious for the UU answer.

So I had two abnormal sized lymph nodes. Big deal. Except it usually means health trouble, and in this situation it meant cancer. Ugh. However, I felt good. "Cancer is a bad cold that causes my nose to freeze and drip. That's it," I told myself and that's been my attitude. So I'm overcoming a bad cold with drugs and humor on this planet where 98% of all solid material is air, the earth spins 1,000 miles on its axis while travelling around the sun at 66,000 miles an hour, and I think I'm standing still on solid ground. Did you catch all that?

- 98% of all solid material is air
- We're all spinning 1,000 miles an hour on an axis
- We're all travelling 66,000 miles an hour around the sun
- And we think we're standing still on solid ground
- That's perspective

Similarly, life is 98% attitude. Psychologically, I prefer thinking that I'm battling a cold. And I am!

I love those timelines that puts the entire 4.5 billion years of existence into one calendar year, with day 1 as January 1, 12:01 a.m. You relate the whole history of humans into one year. Based on our historical calendar year, there are 12 million years in a day, and 140 years in a second. Using this time measure, primitive man showed up 8 hours ago before New Years' Eve reached midnight, and Jesus appears on December 31, 11:59:46 p.m., about 14 seconds ago. Damn, just missed him. My nasty cold will go away in an even shorter period of time.

Third: Humor is an essential ingredient.

Life is humorous. It has to be. Let's talk about those dinosaurs. What were they doing? Eating plants and each other. They were hanging out on spaceship earth 140 million years ago, which is December 19 on the all life is experienced in one year calendar.

I'm a theist – how many here are theists? Most of us or few? Theists believe in a god, but what God is and how God operates is up for grabs.

As a theist, what was God thinking about during the age of the dinosaurs? New pets? Lost in thought? Really, what was that about? What was God thinking! Inquiring minds want to know. So if God does exist, and I think that's a no-brainer as I watch parts of my body fall apart, God has an amazing sense of humor, more than we can ever comprehend.

I don't mean to be disrespectful of people who are suffering. I'm suffering big time. I have to rest after walking up a flight of stairs because I'm exhausted at the top, and I can't taste any food except sweet stuff.

I feel comfort most when I can laugh at the unlaughable. Monty Python is another God inspiration. When my daughter's FUS Religious Education class visited a Buddhist temple a few years ago we heard a very solemn talk about suffering. Half way through, one child asked me

“why does the monk keep pointing to his stomach and saying “everybody is stuffed?” I’m hungry. He has a big belly, that’s why he’s stuffed. Mine is little.”

“Jim,” I replied, “the word was “suffering,” not “stuffed,” “suffering. Everyone is suffering, not stuffed.”

I’m a theist. How can all the self-described beauty and harmony in the world be accidental, along with the search for love and peace? I find the counterarguments are curious, but not compelling on my quest. We all want love, peace, and goodness, and just disagree on what it means and how to achieve them. That comes from somewhere beyond a war-of-all-against-all species shaped by survival of the fittest. People do have a conscience and the conscience usually rules.

In my life, humor has been a great vehicle for reflecting God to others. People want to laugh. People want to have joy and love. So, I figure, go with the flow, and pursue your quest with humor. Despite our often inability to accept the obvious, Aristotle is correct that the purpose of life is happiness and joy. We just get confused along the quest, particularly when short-term joys generate long-term agonies. For Aristotle, happiness is the product of four integrated factors – health, wealth, intellectual virtue, and moral virtue, with the latter the most joy generating. The secret of life, as James Taylor sings, is enjoying the passage of time.

On the other side of the continuum, you have bad health, poverty, illiteracy, and immoral sludge. That’s the pits. Yet, according to Aristotle, all you need to turn this around is to do some moral deeds, such as love your spouse, children, strangers, and community.

Try to prove Aristotle wrong. It’s hard.

Fourth: Communicate what’s inside you.

So, I’ve been through cancer before. Like everything else, it’s easier the second time around. Others may think terrible things or wonder what they would do if they got cancer once, no less twice, but when it’s equivalent to a bad cold you should let people know that. So break that myth surrounding cancer by communicating.

Yes, cancer and chemo hurt and changes lives. I'm not sure when I wake up if my body is going to feel like cherry jello or dried cement. Oddly, cancer cells are the only cells that do not die. Which should forewarn us about wanting to live eternally; only cancer does.

I wanted to communicate what cancer is really like to my friends. I came across a passage that best describes this experience from *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* by Siddhartha Mukherjee, who won a Pulitzer Prize for the book in 2010. He quotes someone who says that cancer is like "being on an airplane with a bunch of similar people and then you get pushed out, after given a parachute by doctors, some of whom remember to wave. Then you're in no-man's land."

How do you know when you're in no-person's land? For me, it's walking around with a thermometer in my shirt pocket with my oncologist's phone number, just in case, is a sign. It's walking around with three "air sickness" bags in my brief case, just in case.

Next, I had trouble drawing distinctions between various degrees of friends and acquaintances. What mattered to me is whether I had a relationship to the person, ideally a good one. So my list of friends to inform about how one person is managing cancer grew from five to more than 300 people, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and students.

I want them to laugh at cancer and chemo. Yet I want it to be an informed laugh, not a phony television sound track. There is much humor to be had. Losing hair kills the ego – you have to laugh eventually at how you look. Prior to cancer, no one mentioned to me that they thought Yul Brenner is handsome. Now many feel inclined to tell me.

And there is communication humor from literal language issues. My wife flushes the PIC Catheter in my right arm every morning. So one morning, there I am, finishing up cleaning out my digestive system in the first floor bathroom, when my wife calls from the second floor: "Don't forget about flushing."

"What? I did flush," I reply, thinking to myself, what the heck? She wants me to flush again?

Now she's confused. "We did not!"

"We??? ... what are you talking about?"

"Your PIC line, we have to flush it before I leave for work," she reminds me. Oh.

Each moment, as Thich Nhat Hahn says, can be a wonderful moment. You decide whether to define a moment as good or bad, and hopefully it is wonderful.

Fifth: You can't communicate enough.

I'm now communicating through email reveries and giving this sermon at a point where I'm still in chemo with outcomes wished for, yet unknown.

I've written about my previous cancer experience as part of a memoir for the years 1995-1998 when I had the remarkable fortune of being diagnosed with cancer, undergoing 8 months of chemo, fighting a losing tenure battle under highly suspicious conditions, running a whistle-blowing campaign on UW campus, and acting out a write-in candidacy for Madison mayor, for goodness sake. Then undergoing a deep depression, and various spirituality quests, including a series of 40 day liquid fasts.

The timing is much better for this round of cancer – it's an opportunity for a „do-over.“ My wife and I didn't do so well the first time.

The first time, my son Seth was 5, and my daughter Anna was 2. My wife was a stay-at-home mom. We split the duties – she took care of the kids while I took care of the cancer. We had no family support network here. Our families lived in New Jersey and Maryland, and both wondered why we were living in Wisconsin. Friends, neighbors, and acquaintances promised to help out, but, understandably, rarely got around to doing so beyond an occasional pat on the back. We were in no-person's land.

This strategic division of labor drove a dagger between us. We needed to be integrated, and we weren't. We needed to heal each other, and we couldn't.

I kept a journal during my first round of cancer; a memoir of the experience, and the experiences that followed. I asked my wife Dianne to read the entire 300 page journal, and she did. We took the time to figure out how to do it a lot better the second time around.

Communicating honestly what I'm going through has made this much easier. Allow me a direct quote from my wife during one of our let's figure this one out conversations: "I don't know where the edge is until I've gone over it."

We are going through this as friends, with me telling her as much as I can, and she doing likewise. We are helping each other. Our kids are nearly adults, and we've been honest with them as well. If all fails, this will be our final journey to Ithaca, and we want it to be a pleasurable one.

Sixth: We create our own heaven on earth.

As mentioned earlier, spaceship earth goes round and round. What we do on the merry go round does matter. To me, Earth is a huge purgatory. At every moment we exercise our free will to determine good or bad, to do something that brings joy or sadness to ourselves, others, and the world.

We all have our Ithacas, journeys only we can take. We're all dealt different cards. The key is not who's going where or how, but whether we support each other on the way.

We have a lot of assistance. Every great movie and piece of literature provides us with heavenly advice. The authors speak with a rather consistent voice. Do kind, do well, in the end the good folks prevail. When reading novels and watching media, our hearts cry for the good people, not the bad.

Most of all, we need to grow our hearts on the path to Ithaca. Following your heart expands it, even when the path ends up being wrong. We are born with equal hearts and then one by one some index cards land nicely in your lap. Some cards slap you in the face. The index card situation can grow your heart, or contribute to your heart's collapse.

The same card that can collapse your heart – such as “You have cancer” – “oh my god, how can this be, I must retreat into my own little hell;” can instead expand your heart – “Oh, I must reach out and connect with others while I can.”

So what to do? That's where curiosity and individuality fit in. My best is not your best. It takes a community of bests to raise an FUS member. We need each other.

Seventh: We are all business ethicists.

Everyone works, even if unemployed or retired. There is always work to do. We spend more time working than anything else in life.

Most of us work 40 hours a week, some more, some less. Everything at work has an ethical dimension. How are you during those 40 hours, loving and kind, or selfish and cruel? How do you treat colleagues, subordinates, and bosses? Are work conditions healthy? Are you paid what you deserve? Are your products worthy? Do all of your work activities make the world a better place for all?

This matters because it's been proven over and over that ethical organizations can be very profitable. So to choose the unethical path to profits is a “choice”, not forced upon anyone. The most ethical companies attract ethical employees, customers, and suppliers, that is a fact, and they are all very loyal.

I have my father to thank for my career in business ethics. He worked for the Con Edison electric company in New York City for 40 years. He mostly worked swing shift. He was a kind man and his goal in life, in the 1970s, was to make sure all three of his children went to college, an opportunity he never had. He did this working 7 days 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 3 days off, 7 days

3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., 3 days off, then 7 days 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m., then 3 days off. ... for most of 40 years.

I was confused. He made enough to put us all through college. God bless him. But I didn't know him. I wasn't sure if he was waking up to go to work or going to sleep. He operated in a different time zone. He'd deferred joy for retirement. That was his generation's mission. I had to understand that.

All of those decisions impacted my life. Bless him for making money, but I didn't know him. As noted earlier, everyone's work is saturated in ethics. We have daily opportunities to seek the good and deal with the bad. The schedule my dad got assigned significantly affected my family. Did his managers or union even consider this?

Yet my father fulfilled his goal in life and claimed satisfaction. Then, upon retirement after 40 years of swing shift, he lost his eyesight to macular degeneration. His world became one big blur. No driving, no observing a Grand Canyon sunset, and no playing with his grandkids. His delayed retirement dreams were dashed. He'd already given up drinking to save his job and liver, and had given up smoking to save his lungs. He had asbestosis from splicing underground cables, thus trouble breathing. He mostly listened to television and radio, and slept.

Eighth: We will all, inevitably, die.

In October 2006, my mother called from New Jersey to report my father, age 84, was dying. I immediately hopped on a plane and arrived home to tears. My dad only weighed 90 pounds, skin and bones. My two sisters living nearby took loving care of him and my mother, then aged 80. Hospice helped out, but he could barely breathe. I had to change his diapers, and was honored to do so.

All he could do was moan. Couldn't breathe, talk, read, or watch TV. He just lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. I sat next to him, massaging the sides of his head and other parts of his body. We had come full circle, a few times over. I planned on being away from home for a week. Six days after arriving, he was still hanging in there and seemed like he could do so forever.

We were raised Catholic and I had to ask. “Dad, do you still believe in God? I know you can’t talk, just nod your head „yes“ or „no.“ He nodded ... Yes.

“Okay, do you still believe in a heaven and hell?” He nodded Yes.

“And did you live a generally good life?” He looked me in the eyes and nodded ... Yes.

“So dad, you are helpless right now, and you won’t get better. You lived a good life. You’ll end up in heaven, so maybe you should just stop breathing.” It hurt to say it, but it had to be said.

“Dad, if you lived a good life there is nothing to fear about death. Trust me on this. You’ll end up with people just like yourself.”

He continued breathing, I flew home to Madison the next day, and he stopped breathing.

Ninth: In conclusion, experience joy in the moment.

Joy is meant to be shared. It can be a small joke with strangers at a traffic light. The other day a young girl sat on her bicycle and pressed the traffic signal button ten times, and then looked up at her dad, clearly annoyed.

I intervened. “Sorry, but you have to push the button 21 times for the light to change.” She did. No change. “You have to do it twice, 21 times, two different times.” And sure enough, the light changed. She was amazed.

These small gems make life so fascinating. Who can you educate with a smile? How can you educate with your smile? When the smile forms, that is where God lives most, between the smiles of people in relationship with one another. And as you know, most frowns turn into smiles, it just takes a longer time.

Relationships are a life line. All of a sudden, my relationships have kept me going. More people want to speak with me, more people want to laugh with me, strangers become acquaintances, and acquaintances become friends. Old college friends from 34 years ago reappear to share good

tidings and review different journeys. New friends made yesterday become very meaningful. We truly are all brothers and sisters.

This is my latest path on my journey to Ithaca. I still have at least another week of chemo to go, followed by three weeks of radiation. It should be a fascinating time, and humor in each moment just waiting to be recognized.

After two bouts with cancer I'm better equipped. It's time for me to take out another deck of cards and settle in Green Fields, and Golden Sands, as Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) so longingly sings about.

Yusuf Islam, "Green Fields, Golden Sands" from *An Other Cup*

Green Fields and Golden Sands
Are all I need; are all I want
Let the wind blow hard, I don't mind

One day we'll all realize, I'm not the only one
Just raise your eyes up and you'll be gone,
To those

Green Fields and Golden Sands
That's all I need; that's all I want
That's all I need; That's all I really want