

Some of you may have caught the recently televised Farrah Fawcett documentary chronicling her battle with cancer. It is a very moving and insightful piece. For me, it was a transparent reminder of what an unforgiving and horrendous disease this is, and of the role courage plays within the realm of it. The documentary hit close to home, to say the least, and prompted this writing. You see, cancer killed my sister. It killed my beloved father too. His, a story for another time. Hers is the story I write about today. A story of courage worthy of a book not an essay, but the gist of it will suffice here.

To say that my sister was a delicate person is an understatement. A drown in a glass of water type person. Which is why the day I heard the news I thought to myself, “Oh no, how’s she gonna deal with this?”

I was at work the afternoon I got the dreaded call from her: “It’s me,” her voice cracking with emotion, “I have a brain tumor.” It was the diagnosis I so feared and had tried not to think about during the two weeks of her medical tests. She had, from one day to the next, begun to invert numbers and forget names. Yes, just like that, from one day to the next. Such is life, darn it! Anyway, I swallowed that bitter news with the same difficulty one would swallow a mouthful of nails, and left my office en route to my mother’s house with the tough undertaking of dressing up bad news. Except mothers have a sixth sense. I have not since seen that look on my mother’s face. A look like no other that only a mother could exhibit at the piercing sound of such words.

That night at my sister’s house I sat on her bed while she nervously packed her bag to leave to the hospital where surgery awaited her, and I sensed in her the disbelief of it all, the uncertainty of it all. I couldn’t believe it myself actually. But my biggest preoccupation was not with the problem at hand but with how and if she would be able to cope with it. That’s how uncourageous I thought my sister to be. Tisk, tisk…she sure showed *me.*

The surgery confirmed our biggest fear — a malignant grade four tumor — and accomplished nothing more than a slight reduction of its size and swelling around it. Its location meant

quality vs. quantity of life. Prognosis: A sucky one. It would take nothing short of a miracle for her to live another six months. The fact she surpassed those odds five times over was precisely that miracle. What transpired in the following two years and nine months was a roller coaster ride powered by sheer courage.

Now, the dictionary defines courage as "the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear." *Without* fear?I think its definition needs to be revised. I think is should state *"despite"* fear." Because my sister experienced fear, I can tell you that for certain. I saw it. But somehow she looked at fear in the face and said "you're on." And I believe *that* somehow was the grace of God. It helped her cope with the pain, the setbacks and the grueling treatments, without giving up, throwing in the towel, or curling up in bed. She was bald and tired, and on a hot day would still put on her makeup, toss away her wig, and leave her house head naked. Despite the fear. Drown in a glass of water? Not!

Fast forward two and a half years after diagnosis. Numerous treatments, a second brain surgery, much pain and some laughs later. The defining moments are many, but some heart-wrenching scenes in particular often play in my head unsolicited like some sad dramatic movie one has watched too many times.

- Scene 1: She's standing in her kitchen one moment, falling over the next, not able to walk on her own again after that.

Afterward, her sight started to fail a little every week. Her appetite by then disappearing, but not before her ability to swallow did; she felt hungry but could not eat. And that's when things took a rapid turn for the worse. Not much more could be done at that point to slow down the runaway freight train her cancer was on. And it was at this point that I heard her complain for the very first time.

- Scene 2: Already residing at the hospital, my mother and I try to lift her from the reclining chair to help her with her daily physical therapy, but the touch of our hands had become too painful for her sore body to bear. She flops back on the chair and

with tears in her eyes says, “I can no more.”

The one and only time. She never again was able to stand up after that. A couple of days later she stopped talking, her words eluded her, although she remained awake and alert for weeks. Eventually, the freight train slowed down to what seemed like a slow motion pace. This evil that was devouring her health now wanted to make its point. And the waiting game began.

In the midst of it all, I had to undergo surgery of my own to remove some breast cysts. Can you say perspective? I let myself be scared for all of ten seconds. At any other time in my life this would have consumed me, but at the time that inconvenient scare fell to the bottom of my totem pole. Not because I wanted it to, but because I felt unworthy of complaining. I even kept the surgery from my mother and showed up to the hospital the next night concealing a very swollen and bruised breast.

Meanwhile, my husband was running out of things with which to entertain our kids at home while I spent the nights at the hospital. I have a picture he took of them exactly a month before my sister died, wearing pots on their heads. Later I pinned that picture up in my work area and a co-worker said to me, “Hey, I didn’t know your kids were potheads.” Ha! I still have that picture up, and that still cracks me up. My sister adored my kids and had seen them last right before she took that downhill turn.

- Scene 3: I’m standing by her bed holding a small poster my kids had made for her with pictures of them on it. She hadn’t been very responsive in some days, and we had begun to think she couldn’t see much of anything anymore. I hold up the poster in front of her face, she gasps and cries.

It killed me. For the longest time I felt bad because I thought that had caused her pain. I don’t pretend for a minute to know what went through her mind. I wish I did. I still do. But I’m better off believing that those were tears of happiness because she longed to see them so and she got a glimpse of them one last time. Yes, I’m better off believing that.

Soon after, she was on oxygen and morphine 24/7, and pretty much out of it. Oh, the sound of that oxygen machine! To this day I cringe every time I walk by our fish tank. I detest that sound. By this time she needed to be suctioned often. Something not many could stomach or muster witnessing.

- Scene 4: I'm standing by her bed holding her hand while the nurse performs the agonizing task of inserting a hose down her nose, and I watch her tears roll down her face. Even then, morphined to the max, her pain evidently present.

Yes, life can be rough and tough, and sometimes it may seem like there is no God. But people like my sister and countless others who bravely battle this disease are proof that God is alive and well, watching over us, and living inside each of us. Because how else can one endure something like that?I never heard her say a negative thing about God or ask why her, nor did I ever see her faith waver. On the contrary. And I'm convinced it was that resignation and utter faith what fueled her courage.

Well, the excruciating and challenging episodes are many. And in the end my sister, like my father, succumbed to cancer at a very young age. Her deterioration, like his, a prolonged nightmare.

- Scene 5: A frail and pale body lies in front of me, a peculiar odor emanating from under her nails…her living body decomposing right before my eyes.

The night before she died, while I tried to get some sleep in that haunting reclining chair, as I dozed off and on, I saw her sitting up in bed, something she had not been able to do for some time, since she was transferred over to the hospice unit. I blinked and cleared my eyes and saw her laying back down again. Days later my mother told me she saw that same night a Virgin-looking image, as she described it, in the room, disappearing behind the curtains. My strong faith leads me to believe that my sister's soul was taken hours before her body gave out.

We had been on standby for days since the doctors told us she could go at any moment. But

she wouldn't. So as usual, that day I went home to see my children and husband late in the afternoon before returning to the hospital to spend the night. She waited until I left, and died. You're kidding me, right? I was so mad, almost disappointed. For days I had prayed to God to end it, to spare her from further suffering, but to let me be by her side when the time came. I was alone in the hospital room with my father the night he took his last breath, and my sister knew how hard that had been for me. I believe it was *me* she thought needed to be spared. Although I was home at the time, I sensed her death seconds before the phone even rang. I had felt her spirit around me. Engulfing me and filling me with her courage for those days to come.

My sister was a beautiful person, inside and out. She was loved beyond measure by many. And her testament of courage is a lesson to all who knew her. I miss her shy smile, her obsessive neatness, her relentless thoughtfulness, our countless conversations throughout the day, her solid advice, her unfailing call always the first on my birthday, the way she loved my kids…. Innumerable wonderful scenes etched in my mind forever.

"There are stars whose light only reaches the Earth long after they have fallen apart. There are people whose remembrance gives light in this world, long after they have passed away. This light shines in our darkest nights on the road we must follow."
~ The Talmud

"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."
~ Anais Nin

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