

Bound to Arise: Coping with Life-Altering Change

Troubled soul, thou are not bound to feel but thou art bound to arise ... George MacDonald

After weeks of uncertainty the diagnosis was made: Acute Myelogenous Leukemia. Within 24 hours tubes were surgically implanted into my chest, and a box attached that would steadily pump cancer-arresting chemicals into my body. At week's end I succumbed to chemo's damaging effects: violent convulsions put me in the hospital, the first of what was to be many times over the next five years.

Leukemia changed my life. My world was instantly transformed into one filled with surgeries, chemotherapy, hospitals, doctors, nausea, fatigue and hiccups. Life was now about survival, and had only two goals: survive bone marrow transplant, and endure the lengthy recovery period that would follow.

Change is an important dimension of the leader's life. As a leader, I have often thrived on change. But what happens when your tsunami arrives, mortality stands before you, and your theodicy (defense of God's goodness in the face of evil) is severely tested?

When life falters, what do you do?

New Realities

Bob Lupton summed up my circumstance: "You got sick at a time you were shifting from being a young man to an old man. Also, during your illness, your community changed (via gentrification and Latin migration). You're like Rip Van Winkle: you fell asleep a few years, then woke up and discovered everything had changed."

Profound change. While many called me a walking miracle, to others I was a source of pain and even scorn. The year following transplant, reports circulated that I was dead. A staff member's sudden discomfort around me led me to believe she might have been better prepared for my absence. My presence disturbed many as it agitated the lingering pain of loved ones lost. A friend and theologian relayed a question posed to him: Why did God take our beloved pastor and not Ted?

I also discovered a newfound solidarity with those who suffer. One Sunday morning prior to church, I was engaged in a delightful conversation with a wheelchair-bound parishioner who had spent years in dialysis. There aren't many people I know who have experienced multiple biopsies, so we were having a great time sharing our stories. Suddenly a cry came from the rehearsing musicians: "Ted! Matthew! Stop it! That sounds awful! We don't want to hear it!" We looked at each other, smiled, lowered our voices and continued our conversation.

God's Love

People ask, "Did you get close to God while going through transplant?" I did, but in unexpected ways. Bone marrow transplant – the process of destroying and replacing blood cells – brings you close to death. It put me in a zombie-like state: I could not think, write, read, or even pray. Yet in the midst of it all I found myself saying it's ok. "*Be still and know that I am God*" (Psalm 46:10). Hundreds of letters and emails revealed I had become the subject of people's prayers all around the world. Virtually incapacitated, I could do nothing to deserve or reciprocate; yet in a profound way God's love firmly enveloped me.

Finest Hour

In the fall of 1997 Clyde McDowell, then president of Denver Theological Seminary, recruited me to serve as a seminary trustee. He developed a brain tumor around the same time I contracted leukemia. A special bond formed between us as we, along with our spouses, travelled cancer's perilous journey. We talked much about death, leadership and God's grace.

He wrote a letter I keep posted at my desk. It says in part:

Yes, "with God all things are possible". But the "possibilities" & "things" are possibly very different than what we thought ...

Over the years, you have demonstrated faithfulness, tenacity, perseverance and much more, by His grace. Your perseverance and leadership are respected by many locally and nationally. This hour is your finest hour and your greatest test. Individually and as a couple, your response will mark your family, your ministry and the organization you lead.

"This is your finest hour." By March of 1999, I was well enough to go see Clyde just days before he passed into eternity. He was near comatose; he barely moved and could not speak. Gazing on in disbelief, I struggled to find words. Yet at the mention of God's grace Clyde, in vintage fashion, slowly raised his fist and smiled. That "Amen" filled the room, deafening in its clarity and grandeur, a moment I will never forget.

When life falters, what do you do? When hospitalized, I remember the impression that came from II Corinthians 5:9: "*So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.*" I called it a "shop 'till you drop" mindset. No affliction, not even cancer, excuses us from undaunted obedience and faithfulness.

Today I see more. I have grown to appreciate David and the other psalmists' take on history. They often recounted past afflictions and God's interventions. "*I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done*"

Psalm 143:5. Jesus constantly challenged his disciples to discern truth from what they experienced: “*How many loaves...? Beware the leaven of the Pharisees ...*”

For Christians, life is school. We are witnesses and pointers to the love of God for the sake of the world, and the context in which God’s love is experienced is life. I have experienced more suffering than I ever dreamed I would, but have equally learned more about God and life than I ever thought I could. Life is about growing in grace: experiencing the grace of God through life’s circumstances, and becoming increasingly gracious in the process. We are, no matter what, bound to arise.

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