

“I Couldn’t Do That”

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Many times over the years have I heard the words, “I couldn’t do that,” – spoken by someone expressing a kind of awe as they observed a friend or acquaintance or family member living with all outward signs of courage and grace in the midst of cancer or another life-threatening illness or some terrible life trial.

“I couldn’t do that.”

Perhaps you’ve had that thought yourself.

Maybe you had that thought as many of us observed Donna Mayberry Greenberg a couple of years ago in her very public position as president of our parish, having volunteered for the position after her own cancer had returned, and having completed her term during a year which included aggressive treatments, completed the year with her sense of humor and life-affirming spirit intact. And then she died just a month later.

“I couldn’t do that,” we might well have said to ourselves or said out loud to someone else.

And you know what?

We *couldn’t* do *that*. Why not? Because none of us are Donna.

We also have many others among us who are cancer survivors or who are in the midst of cancer treatments right now. And as I think of each one of you, though you are in less public roles here at Old Ship than was Donna... about each of you I am sure others think to themselves or say out loud, “I couldn’t do that.”

And you know what?

We couldn’t.

Why not? Because, as Win Hodges (who will be leading our forum later on) reminded me in an e-mail this week, “The most important thing in coping with cancer is to be yourself and not somebody’s ideal of a patient who has a positive attitude and is ready to do battle.”

This means that though we can surely learn from the way in which we observe others’ coping with, struggling with, sometimes transcending, sometimes overcoming, cancer or another life-threatening illness or a terrible tragedy... when we find ourselves in a similar situation, we will draw on our own resources in our own ways.

And I have over the years come to realize that each of us apparently ordinary human beings is more often than not extraordinary when it comes to living with and

how to live through the toughest of times without having to be taught – we know it simply because we are human beings, and this is part of who we are and what we know; it is woven into our bones.

Yet though we *are* each unique and will be unique as we face life's most daunting challenges, there are also common threads in how we cope.

In conversations with some of you just during the past week or so as I've been pondering all of this, I've heard some of these common threads, threads that I've also observed over many years.

First, just about none of us do it alone. Whether our circle of family and friends is small or large, almost all of us have someone else, and often many, pulling for us, helping us in ways practical and spiritual. There with a casserole, there with a word or a prayer or candle, or simply there, present.

Next in the list of how we do it: I've been told by many who have been through plenty indeed, that a good part of the time you simply don't think about your situation. And most people turn back as soon as they can to their daily work or routines – or at least to as much of this as they can. Back to the office. Or back to a project. Or back to household chores. Art or poetry. Music. For we know intuitively that we can and must *live* as long as we are alive.

In this regard, more than one person has told me that denial is often underrated as a coping ingredient. Yes, you have to be realistic enough to undergo this or that treatment, make this or that plan for how to manage; but then you turn back to life in some measure as if you will live forever.

Next – for many, perhaps most, hope is also an essential part of meeting the challenge of serious illness. And why not? Almost to the end – or to the new beginning – we don't and can't know how things will go. Individual human beings are not statistics; and hope is wired into us too.

So... how *do* we ordinary human beings cope, manage, survive the toughest challenges in extraordinary ways? With the help of friends and family; returning to as much of our lives and projects as we can; a little denial; lots of hope... and also plain old perseverance, one step at a time, doing what needs to be done each day – a treatment, perhaps new healthy habits of exercise or diet.

And for some all of this is also leavened with prayer or meditation, yoga or t'ai chi - some way to stay spiritually and emotionally grounded, mindful, open to the gift of the moment.

And each of these responses, strategies, ways of moving through, of transcending, of managing – varied as they may seem – are manifestations of the elemental life-force inside each of us. God-given, evolved, however you want to understand it got there, it is there, wired in.

example of living with cancer with courage and grace, had her really, really bad times too, as many of you know. But they were mostly in private, her dark nights of despair, and the physical suffering of some of the treatments and the disease itself.

Which is true of just about everyone in similar circumstances. They are all human. These courageous and graceful souls are also sometimes frightened souls, who have times of depression or flashes of anger. They have downs as well as ups... because they... are us... because they... are human: ordinary extraordinary human beings.

Here is a little bit of the story of one ordinary extraordinary human being I knew very well indeed, to illustrate some of what I've been saying.

My father kept a journal during what turned out to be the last two years of his life, from the time of his cancer diagnosis until his death in 1987. His journal is a window into his own experience living with cancer, this daily reminder of his mortality. Re-reading his journal this week was also a reminder for me that we (his family and close friends) were in a way all also living with cancer during those two years; we all were learning how to cope. Most of you know precisely what I mean from your own experience.

Indeed, at one point in his journal Dad commented that he thought this journey was harder in some ways for the rest of us than it was for him.

Well, hard in different ways in any case – again, as most of us know or will know firsthand.

When he was given the test results, confirming that he had cancer (this was several years after his retirement as a surgeon) my father wrote: “Even though I expected this it ain't easy to hear. And I know now where I only sensed before, what my patients have gone through. ‘Join the human race...’”

Then, as for so many in similar situations, Dad experienced that wash of good will and good wishes and love from family and friends – visits, cards, calls...

And then, as for so many in similar situations, he reflected on all the things he still wished to do, realizing he might not be able to do them all. (Of course who of us can?) So he set priorities and he turned back to his activities and projects as soon as he could.

As he wrote, “A malignant disease focuses your mind on life.”

And though he also wrote that most of the time he forgot about his “problem” (there's appropriate denial for you) – he then went on to describe the fears and worries and profound uncertainties which sometimes emerged like demons as he lay awake in bed.

Yet for all the really hard times, he also affirmed in his own way what Beth earlier called the “gift” of cancer:

“Having cancer certainly is a sort of perverse ‘blessing’ in that it makes all the colors brighten, everything more worthwhile...”

Well, this brings me back to an idea at the heart of how I believe we ordinary human beings “can do it” – and it is an idea also at the heart of the great spiritual traditions, including at the heart message of the Islamic mystic, the Sufi poet Rumi. It is the realization that grief and love, love and grief, are intertwined. Rumi says that we human beings are like plaintive reed flutes, reed flutes which sing of love and grief because they recall their source, the reed bed from which they had been uprooted. And so they – we – long to be reconnected. The plaintive sound of the reed flute, the plaintive song of our hearts, is our love and grief eternally interwoven.

Cancer and other life-threatening situations, grief itself – remind us poignantly of who and what we love, and of who loves us. Indeed, as my father did, and as so many do, we may feel our love heightened and deepened through the foreknowledge of grief which comes with serious illness, the reminder that someday, it may or may not be soon, it may be tomorrow or years and years hence, but soon or late, we will be separated.

But – remember and hold fast to this – this reminder of grief *is* at its core a reminder of the *love* which is at the heart of our lives... And this is perhaps as good an explanation as any of how we *can* “do that.”

Why persevere? Why hang in there? Why go through the suffering?

Love. It *is* who we are. It *is* how we get through. It is the most profound manifestation of that “wired in” elemental life force.

Love.

Remember this too:

Neither my father nor Donna Mayberry Greenberg nor others we see today moving through cancer with grace and courage are any more or less extraordinary than any of us. They *are* extraordinary though. And so are we all.

You don’t think you could “do that”? Cope, manage, sometimes even thrive, maybe learn and grow along the way, even in the midst of fear and suffering and uncertainty? Perhaps even make a difference in the lives of others along the way too? You don’t think you could do that?

I’m here to tell you that you are almost certainly wrong.

We are more than we may think ourselves to be.

Blessings.