

Living Alive!

Cancer freed my friend Pat to be herself. Seemingly overnight, she blossomed into a bursting expression of bright-eyed aliveness. Before being diagnosed, Pat merely existed. She endured life—it wasn't savored. Her days were strewn with countless compromises and neglected desires. Instead of warmly accepting herself—enjoying her uniqueness—Pat spent most of her days hunkered down, feeling inferior, seemingly ashamed of who she was. Fearful of others' negative opinions, she was careful about what she said and did. Submerging her true essence, she presented everyone with a watered-down version of herself. Pat's dammed-up existence resulted in a drab life. Day-to-day living passed by to the steady beat of ho-hum.

Sadly, many of us fear the reactions of others if we dare to venture outside norms and expectations. We hide our true selves behind a screen of acceptability, doing everything and being everything that will ward off judging glances and whispered comments. We're bent on pleasing others more than ourselves. Fear rules us.

But cancer propelled Pat above her fears. What others thought of her no longer mattered. What began to matter was living her life joyously every day.

"Being approved of and being liked has taken a back seat for me," she said. "Freedom within is most important. I'm freer than ever now!"

I asked Pat how she overcame her phobia.

"Dying is a time of cleansing," she said. "You want to be your truer self—not a put-on self. Through the process of dying, I'm learning about living! Knowing you're going to die helps you learn to live, instead of just exist. You don't turn down opportunities, and you open your eyes to what really matters!"

Family gatherings, especially those she hosted, were suddenly, deeply gratifying.

"We don't understand the deeper meaning of giving," she said. "When you're dying, giving to people becomes your priority. And giving entails providing memories of warm connections between people."

She described the ripening bond with her husband: "Our ideas about love are expanding. It's about giving and it's about receiving. Those daily moments of doing things for each other—the little things—are all acts of love. When my husband gets something for me because I can't, or when I make sure he gets an extra hour's sleep, that's love. Love is giving to each other. When adversity hit, the question was, 'Do I see it as a challenge or as the world attacking me?'" A victim stance keeps us paralyzed and despairing.

I am reminded of an incident at a medical center where Pat was undergoing treatment. A technician, amazed at her ability to remain positive, asked her: "How can you do it?"

She responded simply: "Because I choose to be happy. If I'm not happy, I've lost a whole day! Why ruin it by being anything other than happy?"

Pat enveloped herself in optimism. It seems odd to use the word "optimism" in describing a person with a terminal illness—until we look a little deeper. Optimism, of course, is having a positive outlook.

Pat, for example, didn't require hope for the future in order to be happy. Her joy was derived from living fully in the now. Wisdom from Toni Morrison's book, *Beloved*, comes to mind: "Today is always here. Tomorrow, never."

Think about a butterfly. It lives only briefly. But if it lives joyously, doesn't that far exceed a life lived a hundred years in staleness and compromise? Some people call that playing it safe. But is a stale life worth protecting?

For the most part, many of us live out our lives caught up in the mindlessness of daily routines and self-imposed restrictions. Isn't the brief time of experiencing the fresh air of a free mind and spirit far more appealing than living a hundred years of confinement? Doesn't quality far exceed quantity in this regard?

Pat would answer those questions affirmatively.

I recall her saying, "For me, having cancer represented either an end to my life or a challenge." She wasn't referring to an end to her physical existence; rather she was alluding to the challenge of not letting her spirit die.

Instead of feeling sad for Pat, we should be envious. After all, few of us ever find the secret to meaningful living, even when given the luxury of longevity.

In the end, Pat didn't beat cancer, but she did beat the slow-marching death of her spirit.

And so cancer didn't define Pat, and it didn't kill her. She died of elation because she discovered how to live.

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