

Adversities Do Not Lead to Sorrow and Pain, They Lead to a New Beginning

Dear Cancer,

“Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men.”- John F. Kennedy. This quote is what you, Cancer, have made me aspire to; to become stronger than you. You may have changed my life perspective drastically in the last three years and this is due to the life-changing experiences you have given me. However, those experiences have changed my personality, shaped my character, and influenced my future.

In April of 2010, you gave my dad severe pain in his lumbar region and on the 28th he received a CT abdomen scan which brought alarming news. You thought you could hide, but the doctors were aware of your evil gimmick. They found a small calcification on his liver and lymph nodes that were three to four centimeters in size. On the 4th of May, my dad went through a CT retroperitoneal lymph node biopsy and two days after, they finally found you. Surprisingly, you were interpreted as a form of metastatic carcinoma of urothelial origin. Twenty-four days later my dad went through the operation that would determine his faith. The surgeons performed a bypass surgery, removing his stomach and connecting his esophagus to his small intestine.

I was only fourteen at the time, a young only child who shared the love of his mother and father in a small two room apartment. But of course you didn't care about that, now did you? After my father was returned to a regular hospital room I was scared when I saw that he had plastic tubes coming out from his nose, needles inserted into his hand, and a devastated, awful countenance. You really caused a lot of damage to me and my parents. At first he didn't make any movements when my mom and I entered the room. I guess he realized someone was present because he tried moving his fingers and opening his eyes. When I reached to hold his hand I felt a lot of body heat and sweat as he tried to clutch my fingers. He was making an effort to stay

with me even though you were slowly permeating the organs of his body. I didn't know what to do but to look at him and wonder if he was going to recover from the surgery. My mom told me not to cry in front of him because that would only hurt him more. You made me hold in tears, but you didn't make me weak, you constructed bravery in me.

The nurse informed us that he would still be asleep for a while because the anesthetics were still wearing off. From the very moment I looked at him I knew that I had to be his caregiver. I had to dedicate my time to taking care of my dad at all times. I wasn't going to let you take him away from me. Whenever he needed assistance I would be there to attend to him. I would feed him, brush his teeth, rinse his mouth, clean his sweat, and hear his talks about the dreams he had. I had to massage the places where you made his body ached, I had to change his bed position because you made him uncomfortable and I also had to walk him everywhere he needed to go because you were making him weaker as the days passed. This went on for about two weeks, and at that time I didn't know it, but my dad was spending his last few days on Earth by my side.

Taking care of my dad at the hospital was one of the things I thought I would never do, at least during my early teenage years. I didn't hate you; I just wondered why this adversity was happening to me. I had to watch my dad slowly leave my world and enter into the next world. He would dream such eccentric dreams. He told me that in his dreams we would go to Disneyland, Universal Studios and the public park with the disabled patients he cared for at his job. Day by day he was becoming more delusional. I remember pressing the button that would release morphine into his body because he could no longer take the excruciating pain you caused him. The last days with him were the most painful because I saw that he wasn't getting any better and I was afraid that you could end his life at any second of any minute of any hour of any day.

I used to tell my mom and myself that when he recovered from this disease I would tell him of the weird dreams he told me. Unfortunately, that day never came. Apparently the doctors couldn't do a curative surgery, but they did do a palliative surgery. My mom told me that a palliative surgery was done when the tumor is too widespread to be completely removed. So the only thing the surgeons could do was to remove part of the tumor in order to temporarily relieve symptoms and prevent further complications. You were still invading my dad's body!

On June 10, 2010, at the age of 45, my dad died from pancreatic cancer. My father's death left me uncertain of my future, despite all the lessons he taught me. You, Cancer, made me experience the saddest days of my life. Ever since I started school in California, after emigrating from Peru in 2004, he made me stay after school to get help with my homework during most of my elementary and middle school years, and every summer break he would enroll me in summer school. His big dream was to see me graduate from high school and go off to a university. The day he died, all I could think of was that I was never going to talk to him ever again or have him present to teach me about what I didn't know and help me improve on what I did know. I was completely lost.

Without my dad my world became meaningless. I now had to live with the fact that every morning, I would no longer see my dad come into my room and tell me "Good morning son, it's time to go to school." As the days passed, I kept thinking about what I could have done to prevent my dad from getting infected by you, what I could have done to help him get better, what I could have done to save him from you. My mom constantly reminded me to pray for my dad's soul to go to Heaven and that being brave as well as strong for my dad was the only thing left for me to do.

I began to realize that my life wasn't the one that ended. My dad was still alive through me, his only child, and I had to finish the work that he started. All those nights he helped me understand the material I learned at school, all those days that he taught me English, all the assignments he gave me to do on my own time just so I could perform better at school, and all that preparation wasn't going to be in vain.

My mom now had to be both parents. We had a lot of family and friends' support, but just enough to cover the rent and the daily expenses. Then, as we were getting back on our feet, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer just two months after my father's passing. Of course, as the caring mother she was, she didn't tell me about it until the day before her surgery. I couldn't believe it; you were back and this time you wanted to take the life of my other beloved parent! I was completely devastated when I heard that you were infiltrating my mom's body. I felt like my whole life was about to end and the only question on my mind was if she would be able to recover from the abominable disease that you are. She had two surgeries, the first a biopsy, to find out how severe you were. The second was when the doctors discovered that you had spread throughout her right breast damaging eight lymph nodes, and they decided to surgically remove her right breast. The surgery was a success, but the worst parts were the treatments that she received. She was scheduled to receive eight chemotherapies and thirty-three sessions of radiotherapy.

Being an only child, I had to rely on my instincts and knowledge to find strength within myself to help my mom obtain the necessary assistance she needed. I had to be with her all day and night, relieving her of her pain, comforting her emotions and battling the cancer alongside her. I would accompany her to every single chemotherapy appointment. During the last ones, she came out of the hospital in a wheelchair and was awfully weak due to all the strong drugs

that were injected into her poor, small body. In the days after her chemotherapy sessions she felt pain, fatigue, and nausea. She couldn't walk correctly, and felt horrible tingling sensations in her rural region and slowly started to lose all of her hair. You had my mom going through the most miserable days of her life just to make sure that you were completely gone from her body. Her life depended on me. It was my responsibility to care for my mother just as I would have cared for my father. I only had one parent left, and my job in life as a son was to make sure she was healthy once again and that she was well cared for. I couldn't bear it if she were no longer in this world.

Because of the illness in my family, and the duties I needed to assume, I found strength I didn't know I possessed. It was inevitable for me to become the man of the house and by doing so I've mastered a great deal of independence and leadership. Losing a parent at a young age must be the most devastating event ever to happen to someone, yet the lessons I've learned will help me become the person my parents wanted me to be.

I may not be the one that had cancer but I've learned to live a life with you, if not I wouldn't be here writing to you. You made me mature really fast. You made me stronger than I ever was before and because of you, I learned how to manage and overcome any obstacle that appears before me. You broke me at first, but I wasn't going to please you by letting you keep me like that. I had to change for the better. I now look at my dad with admiration and as someone I strive to be, and he continues to give me courage and willpower to move on in life. I also thank my mom for all the effort she put in to stay with me. Furthermore, I pray that you never return, and if you ever do, I'll be ready, I can promise you that.

Sincerely,

Diego Villegas