

Are Cancer Patients Really Brave?

As a cancer survivor, or as I prefer to say thriver, I often used to cringe when people would look at me and say, “Boy, you’re really brave to be going through all this”. I’d stand there, with no hair or a lop-sided wig, have dark circles under my eyes the size of plums, be feeling generally lousy, and would look at them in astonishment. “How can I be brave when all I’m doing is what I have to do to stay alive? If I don’t do this I’ll die. That’s not bravery, that’s a no-brainer! ”

It wasn’t until recently, however, that I heard a line in a film, which changed my mind forever. It wasn’t even a gloriously thought provoking film, just some easy going romantic comedy. But it hit me like a bullet.

“Bravery is knowing what’s ahead of you and doing it anyway”.

Its knowing what’s ahead and going through with it anyway? Wow! As a cancer patient, I know what’s ahead. If its chemotherapy, its hair loss, extreme fatigue, perhaps vomiting and diarrhea, loss of feeling in hands and feet, stiffness, joint pain, lack of appetite..... Radiation patients don’t get away with it easily either, neither do those who just wait and watch their cancer, or decide to do nothing and make peace with the end of their life. We all know what’s to come, and yet do we give in? No. We make a decision to do what we have to do.

Its not just those in treatment who are brave either. Those surviving cancer also know what’s ahead: every day waking up and thinking “is my cancer going to come back today”, “will I see my children grow up”, “is that twinge in my back/neck/arm/leg, you name it, just a pain or a sign that my cancer is back”. We all know this, and yet do we stay in bed, hiding under the covers? No. Most of us realize that this is our new life and we better make the most of it. We know that we can’t live our life in the past. We have to live it in the present and make every day count.

Sure we all have bad days, when we just want to hide in the closet and cry. But we get it out of our system, dust ourselves off, and start living the day again. When I have one of those days I always read the words of Tim McGraw’s song, framed in my hallway, “Live Like Your Dying”. The words speak volumes, not just for cancer survivors. It’s a message for us all.

So I realize now that I have been selling myself and my co-thrivers short, by saying in the past “I’m not brave”. So are those with cancer brave? You bet they are, and next time someone tells me I am, I’ll say “You just made my day!”.