

What Good is a Toothache?

GUEST COLUMN

Wednesday, 13th January 2010



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To be honest I haven't been looking forward to writing this column. New Year should be a time of celebration, new beginnings, resolutions and joy. So you're expecting a lecture on inspiration, hope, the beauty of life, right? Wrong.

Truth is, I hate New Year. I know bad stuff can happen at any time, but for me it always seems to happen around New Year. Fact is, I'm not even doing New Years this time. I'm skipping straight through to February. So that's it for this month. Bye.

What? You want to know why? Oh OK I suppose so, but this can't take long I've got to go hide.

It started just with the usual anticlimax feeling every year. You have such great expectations that New Year is going to be fun: parties to go to, friends to see, the exciting 10 second count down and flowing champagne. Uh, not exactly. It's more like who can keep their eyes open long enough in front of the TV to give that cursory "Happy New Year" and then collapse into bed.

Then about six years ago bad stuff starting happening. In 2004 my cat died on New Year's Eve. In 2005, just after New Year, my husband was diagnosed with cancer. In 2006, we tried to celebrate New Years with a mini-vacation in Albuquerque and ended up spending 3 days, but mostly long nights, in a hotel room with two toddlers with stomach flu. In 2007, I spent New Year throwing up after my first bad chemo reaction. In 2008, my tumor marker shot up (undoubtedly leading to sleepless nights and panic.) and was later confirmed as a recurrence. Finally at the start of 2009, one of the girls came down with a mystery virus and the doctors were throwing all sorts of possible syndromes at me. Fortunately after a two week fever, it turned out to be just another anonymous virus.

So what about this year? Well it started 3 weeks ago. A gum infection turned into a tooth extraction which turned into a VERY excruciating dry socket. After putting a damper on the holidays, I really wasn't in the mood for New Year.

So that's why I've been dreading writing. It's hard to be inspirational when you have tooth ache. I know you want to hear "Live Love Laugh." "Every day is a new day." "There's always hope." But boy, when it feels like someone is constantly driving a drill into your face, it's hard to do anything but grump.

Is there a moral to this dampening tale? Well, I hope so, or else this column really sucks! What it made me realize is that people can easily give up hope when they're in constant pain from cancer, or any other illness. Yes, stories of people who've beat a particular disease, and now climb mountains, or shout about statistics being just that are great, but when you're the one suffering, when you're the one with the disease that can't be stabilized, it doesn't make you feel any better. I know the pain from a dry socket is nothing like the pain from advanced stage cancer, but for a time there I could relate to someone in that place.

So when someone comes along and says "Oh yeah, I had a dry socket, it'll clear in a few weeks" you just want to shake them up and down and say "just because yours cleared in a couple of weeks doesn't mean mine will!" In the same way, whilst it's wonderful for the people with miraculous recoveries, for someone who is constantly fighting and struggling with pain, all the well meaning stories in the world won't make them feel better.

So here's another of those 'What Not to Say to Cancer Patients' things (Boy, I feel a book coming on!). If you meet someone whose disease can't be stabilized, telling them about some woman who had 3 months to live and was miraculously cured, doesn't help.

So what do you say? Maybe you don't have to say anything. Maybe your mission is to bring some joy into that person's life which will, for however short, make them forget the pain. Making someone, who's close to giving up hope, smile or laugh or find some kind of inner peace may be the greatest gift you could ever give.

One of the first coherent sentences I uttered, after being given my prognosis, was "at least I'll die knowing I was loved." It sounds stupid now, but in the turmoil of emotional pain, it was comforting to know that that pain could be eased by all the support that was around me. It's true for physical pain too.

Of course none of us want to go; of course we should all cling to hope. But sometimes hope isn't a lecture about how beautiful life can be, it's about how much we're loved today. Sometimes pain can't be taken away, but the best painkiller around may just be the people who love us. So go give a full measure of yourself to someone.

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