

Life, Decisions and Happiness

GUEST COLUMN

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Life Decisions and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Decisions, decisions, decisions. As a cancer survivor I hate making them. As a survivor of cancer as a chronic disease, I hate them even more. Think about it. If you have one of those horrible cancers that are likely to recur, and very difficult to treat, odds are you know the statistics. For example, I know that the average life expectancy for ovarian cancer patients is around 8 years. For other cancers it's worse. Of course, statistics are just that, data that physicians use to make clinical decisions. But, when the odds say your life is not going to be as long as you had hoped, making decisions becomes even more important. For one, you need to get it right first time, because there's no time to experiment; and secondly, this is the rest of your life we're talking about, and it may only be a couple of years. So you definitely want to make sure that they'll be the happiest you've ever had.

So what am I talking about? Well, I'm talking about the kind of decisions that shape your life; not shall I wear red or blue today, shall I eat that huge muffin or be miserable with a banana? I'm talking about those things that are the fundamental basis of our happiness: relationships with loved ones; who you choose as friends; whether you work or home-make or volunteer; your surroundings. These are the things that make your life what it is. Sometimes life just rolls along and everything is stable. But sometimes we're forced to make decisions about exactly these kinds of things. And oh boy, then the pressure is on to get it right.

So call me selfish, but shouldn't my decisions be determined by what will make the time I have left the happiest? Even if it's at the expense of something or someone else? Of course, I would feel incredibly guilty, even if no one was saying it, but don't I have a right to do that? But then why should my needs come above the needs of the people around me? They matter too, especially if they are the most important people in my life. But wouldn't they want me to make the rest of my life as happy as it could be? Or do their needs come first?

So when a decision comes along, what do you do? Do you compromise, put others first and bite the bullet? Or do you throw a tantrum and say “this is what I want and two hoots to you if you don’t like it.”

Not a survivor? Can’t relate? Well just think back to a major decision you’ve made, whether it’s which college you went to, who you married, or where you decided to settle. Think of all the things that would have been different if you’d made another choice. Look back and think “well, if I hadn’t felt like I was immortal at the time, would I have chosen a different path?” The consequences are mind boggling.

So, as a cancer survivor, what do you do? Well I guess, unfortunately, that’s a decision only you can make. It’s a heavy burden and one you can’t escape. Those who know me, will know I’m not a selfish type, and would rather make other people happy than put myself first. But sometimes, you just have to.

If I could make a decision now I would make it easy for myself. I’d say “I am going to live for more than 8 years if it kills me (oops not sure that was really the right way to put it!); I’m going to be lying on my death bed at 87 not 47; I’ll see my children grow up; I’ll be at my doctor’s retirement party, and I will be around to tell my grandchildren what it was like to grow up without a cell phone/TV/inter-galactic transporter in your pocket.”

Wouldn’t that be easy! But often it’s not that simple. It’s a fight between ‘live like you’re dying’ and ‘life goes on after cancer’. So don’t judge someone for the decisions they make after cancer because, if nothing else, it’s complicated.

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