

## On the Importance of Reflection - Art, Cancer & Connection

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It isn't by getting out of the world that we become enlightened, but by getting into the world...by getting so tuned in that we can ride the waves of our existence and never get tossed because we become the waves.

- Ken Kesey, *Kesey's Garage Sale*

When one thinks of cancer-patient care, grim images tend to come to mind. Most relate to the harsh and often unforgiving side effects associated with chemo and radiation therapy treatments. Although we have come a long way in terms of our ability to target and kill cancer, the drawbacks can still take an overwhelming toll on a patient's body. This undoubtedly leads to higher levels of stress as well as personality and attitude changes, making the ordeal even harder to cope with. During his bout with esophageal cancer, the revered polemicist Christopher Hitchens criticized the idea of patients "battling" cancer, noting that chemotherapy was tantamount to "drowning in powerlessness".

As a graduate student focused on improving the efficacy of radiation therapy, I've spent a lot of time thinking about the disease. Discussions with supervisors, experimentation and hours spent reading literature related to cancer have given me a strictly scientific perspective on how it all works. Although I have never personally suffered from cancer, it is partially responsible for the death of a grandfather I never met and solely to blame for the loss of a grandmother for whom I've only childhood memories.

This past fall I had the opportunity to volunteer as a committee member for the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation's CIBC Run for the Cure. In doing so I realized something simple, yet profound: I'd spent hours *thinking* about cancer from the comfort of a lab bench but I'd never really collided with the disease head-on. I'd never investigated the circumstances surrounding my grandparents' deaths as much as I should have. I never pondered how different life might be had they influenced me more growing up. I'd never *really* surveyed how my life had been affected by cancer. Could I account for the sudden feelings by acknowledging the time that had lapsed between these events and the present revelation? Did my commitment to a career in medicine bring about the thoughts? Was I missing

something? Was I too late? Could there be a benefit in understanding cancer in non-scientific terms? There seemed to be a kind of disconnect between the sense of urgency I felt to make a difference while volunteering and the driving forces behind my desire to get to the lab early and to stay there late. I wanted to fill the void. I wanted to find something . . .

Recently I had a chance to meet with Catherine Moir, the coordinator of the *Art of Living*, a program in Cape Breton that gives cancer patients an opportunity to connect with local professional artists and collaborate on projects. The program allows 'participants' to express the experience of cancer diagnosis and treatment. The program starts with an initial meeting where artists showcase their specialty, while the participants offer some of their own story to the group. From there, participants are matched with the artist they are most interested in working with. The pairs meet weekly or bi-weekly to collaborate on paintings, photography, pottery, music, or poetry. Most of those who take part have not received formal training and yet the projects succeed in capturing the raw emotions associated with treatment, doubt and hope. Participants describe the program as "gentle and intimate", "therapeutic" and note that the experience is unlike any they had encountered previously.

As I sit in Catherine's living room I stare at the plethora of art mapping her walls – the result of over 35 years of professional painting. She explains that the artists in this program are not teaching participants how to paint but instead helping them to connect and get in touch with experience. In fact, she notes how much the artists benefit from being part of a program intertwined with such complex feelings and describes the inspiration that comes with working alongside the engaging participants. Catherine makes a point to emphasize the positive nature of the program and the joy that has been found within many of the relationships that have been formed.

Catherine recalls a number of moving experiences she's had since starting with the program. One story in particular captures me – a participant suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer who pledged to complete several paintings in hopes of conveying the theme of

‘continuation after death.’ Catherine explains that this participant often golfed with three of his good friends. She describes one of his paintings on display at the exhibit – a golf course green displaying just three golf balls. Evoking strong emotion and symbolizing the reality of a terminal diagnosis, the painting served as a means of communication between the participant and his friends and family.

One of the most interesting things about the *Art of Living* is its lack of conformity to conventional exhibits. Catherine notes several differences between the program and a typical exhibit. For one, the *Art of Living* allows for collaboration between professional artists and cancer patients who are often untrained in the discipline. Catherine explains that artists come into the program with a “blank slate” – creative control of the project being left to the participants. She goes on to describe the monthly group sessions the program hosts as being marked by emotion as well as humour and joy – often serving as a chance to discuss and share stories, shed tears and laugh.

Catherine emphasizes the importance of the ‘artistic statements’ – an integral and unique part of the program. Each piece of work being accompanied by a written statement explaining the significance of the metaphors or nuances embedded within. A long upwards journey being depicted by a steep roadway with colorful landscapes on either side, symbolising feelings of hope, courage and beauty. This kind of insight gives the public a deeper understanding of the themes of a specific project, allowing participants to capture certain thoughts on paper and reach a wider audience.

As I learned more about the program, I felt as though I was learning more about myself. After meeting with Catherine and getting a better sense of how things worked, I seemed to be becoming more emotionally in touch with not only the importance of my day job but with the reasons behind my immense attraction to the field of medicine and to the art of healing. I ended up having several long conversations with my mother about her father. I’d learned many of his complications stemmed from the inaccuracies and inefficiencies associated with radiation treatment at the time – a problem I find myself working on nearly 25 years later. I’d learned of how focused he was on living in the present moment while carefully balancing hope and reality. I’d learned of how determined he was to put his family first, all the way to the end. I came to understand that although he was gone, the legacy and the memories

and the strength he left behind were always accessible to me.

As researchers we know we can only do so much. There just isn’t enough time in a *life-time*, let alone a degree, to solve the big problems on one’s own. Having said that, it can be easy to feel lost, I think – not just in work but in life. Sometimes all you need is a little help to see things from a different vantage point. After jumping into a master’s degree, I quickly felt like I was connecting to a whole host of exciting ideas, exciting people, and new vantage points: becoming part of an internationally respected university, joining a successful and prolific research group and corresponding with some notable names in the field of nanomedicine. These things were all great but I knew I was still missing a connection – a more personal one.

Having the opportunity to volunteer in my community, to get in touch with Catherine, to learn about the *Art of Living* and to meet my grandfather through my mother – these experiences have reset the way I approach my work. I was always excited about cancer research and medicine but something was different now. I’d discovered a revitalized sense of purpose and commitment to my projects by reflecting on how cancer has affected the ‘giants’ in my community and my family and indeed, how they have affected me.

### Program Notes

The *Art of Living* is in its 4th year and runs from January to June. The program is funded on a year-by-year basis by several health boards across Cape Breton as well as the Cape Breton Cancer Centre. Catherine wishes to express gratitude to Holley Grant, who works tirelessly to help get the show up and running each year at the Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design as well as Tom McNeil, who originally started the program and helps in its production each year.

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