A Journey of Faith

by Ron Dahlen

"You have prostate cancer. It's aggressive." Although not totally unexpected, hearing those words spoken struck to the core of my being. A night of anguish followed and I prayed for relief from my fear and for the strength to deal with this. Moments later the Twenty-Third Psalm appeared in my head and I knew that I was not alone on this journey. As I contemplated the meaning of each of the words, my fear and anxiety lifted and I was able to concentrate on the things that I needed to do and went to sleep. In the early morning hours, I awoke with the full moon shining through the skylight. After a while, I made my way downstairs to watch the moon slip below the horizon of Burntland Pond. A feeling of total peace enveloped me. I had been confronted with issues of my mortality before, and have come to terms with its eventuality. I have always relied on the Lord to give me the strength to confront my challenges and demons.

In the fall of 2016, I had my annual check-up with Island Family Medicine. A digital exam presented with an abnormal prostate. A PSA (prostate specific androgen) blood test was ordered with the results being quite high and I was referred to a urologist. Three weeks later I met with the urologist and he examined me, did an ultrasound and biopsy. On December fifth**,** my wife Laura and I met with the urologist and received the results of the biopsy. There was a large tumor in the right lobe of the prostate: aggressive and stage three. Treatment options were presented and after research and much thought, surgery seemed like the most expeditious way to quickly expunge the cancer.

Two days before New Year's Eve, a robot-assisted, radical prostatectomy (removal of the prostate, lymph nodes and seminal vesicles) was performed at Eastern Maine Medical Center by my urologist. I was released from the hospital the next day without complications. The pathology report showed that the cancer had started to break through the prostatic wall and spread to one of the lymph nodes. Recovery from surgery was challenging but uneventful. The lasting disabilities of surgery were psychologically difficult to accept. I liken prostate cancer to what a woman must go through with breast cancer. I do not define myself as a cancer survivor. Survivor implies that I am a victim, surely I will never see myself as a victim until they put the last nail in my coffin.

Nine months post-surgery in September 2017, I met with my urologist to go over the results of my latest PSA test. A rising PSA indicated that cancer had redeveloped. Most likely in the area where the prostate was. Further testing was necessary for confirmation. Potential treatment options were discussed. None very appealing. One frustrating thing through this whole process was that it was difficult to find information on what a patient can anticipate as far as side effects go. There was ample medical information available about prostate cancer and its treatments, but potential side effects are just a matter-of-fact, if mentioned at all, and doctors tend to downplay them.

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After receiving my diagnosis that the prostate cancer had returned, I thought that it was now time to complete my bucket list. Laura and I made a six-week trans-continental road trip, something I always intended to do but never made happen. Although I had traveled extensively around the country before it was often by air. Upon our return I had my PSA rechecked and met with my urologist in December 2017. He informed us that my PSA increased over my last test in September. My urologist again discussed treatment options but suggested that at this stage radiation therapy in conjunction with androgen deprivation therapy (pharmaceutically blocking testosterone production) would be the most effective. He said he would set up an appointment for me to see an oncologist. When I asked how long I might live without treatment, my urologist said it could be five years, but if treated successfully it could be ten years or more.

On January 3, 2018 I met with a radiation oncologist at the Lafayette Cancer Center. The doctor examined me, reviewed my records, and interviewed me to qualify me for radiation treatments. He also told me that my CT and bone imaging scans were negative which indicated that the cancer was probably still located in the prostate bed. He gave a very thorough account of where I stood and that radiation treatments (a.k.a. salvage radiation) and six months of concurrent ADT which has a synergistic effect was the standard of care for treating my stage of cancer. He described the radiation process, which begins with a simulation (preparation session), and said radiation treatments would be five days a week for eight weeks with ADT starting six weeks beforehand.

I have no words to adequately describe my reaction and emotions to all this. One year ago I had a radical prostatectomy and now cancer has returned. At best, the probability that these treatments will eradicate my cancer was probably no better than sixty percent, but it is the only chance I have. The fact that I'm currently feeling good makes voluntarily submitting to this particularly difficult. The present and potential side effects are daunting and I considered not having further treatments. After all, did it make sense to spend all these resources on me at my age when younger people could have a greater benefit?

After much thought I decided to go forward with the treatment plan. Since it was winter in Maine and the cancer center was sixty miles away, I had arranged for lodging in the area Monday to Friday. I chose to stay at the Lucerne Inn where the staff treated me wonderfully and I was able to have the peace and solitude I needed.

While under treatment, I attended cancer support group meetings at the cancer center. I was reluctant to go at first having never participated in a support group before. I assumed it would be mostly women dealing with breast cancer. It was more beneficial than I had anticipated. The other patients were equally divided between men and women and dealing with all manner of cancer. I was impressed with how candid, realistic, supportive, and brave they were--and they scared the hell out of me even though I was the only one dealing with prostate cancer. Joe, a much younger man, joined the group a week later, he was dealing with terminal prostate cancer. We quickly became friends. It was a difficult group to attend especially when a member would pass away. I felt close to these people and became very empathic; perhaps something I had not felt in a long time.

Joe and I began attending a men's cancer support group at the Bangor YMCA where all the men were dealing with prostate cancer. I learned a lot there about various treatments and the varied nature of the disease. I was impressed with how open and supportive the men were–not something we usually see. I made several friends and regularly keep in touch.

On my final day of treatment, I met with my oncologist. He thought that I had done well and any of my issues were not beyond the expected. I was to have my PSA tested and meet with him again in October. He said it may be a while for some of the effects of the radiation to fully dissipate and the side effects of the ADT could take up to eight months to dissipate. The facilities and staff at the Lafayette Cancer Center were top notch and I appreciated the personal care my radiation team and my oncologist had given me.

I believe we have a natural life span and I am not afraid of dying. Why? Why me, is a question I never ask. Everyone deals with trials and adversity in life and they test us and build our faith and character. The question I ponder is: Why am I doing this?

It was May 5, 2018 two weeks post-radiation treatments and my seventy-second birthday. It's good to be back home again, but I've actually been feeling worse since the treatments ended. Most bothersome is the fatigue and hot flashes. The myriad of side effects while annoying individually, collectively they make life difficult. Springtime has arrived and the weather has been nice which allows me to be outside and active gain. This is a real boost to my state of mind and the activity should aid in my recovery. What I feared more than death was being a cancer patient; the long and difficult ordeal of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, and their side effects.

2019, it had been three years since my prostate cancer was discovered and although this ordeal has had serious physical and psychological consequences, on the positive side, I am still alive and feeling well. I had taken this time to become a resource of sorts for men recently diagnosed with or dealing with prostate cancer. Officially one in nine men will be affected by prostate cancer–the most prevalent cancer in older men. It behooves men over fifty to be checked regularly. Last year I had a piece published by the Prostate Cancer Network. I also joined the Maine Coalition to Fight Prostate Cancer and became a confidential outreach resource for men who are in need of information or support.

In the fall of 2020 my PSA had risen again to the point that it became evident that the cancer had returned. I knew what the standard of care would be and was reluctant to go there. Speaking with my medical oncologist she thought that I would be a good candidate to participate in a study of 500 men with recurring prostate cancer. They were testing three chemotherapy drugs to see which protocol might be most effective in either delaying progression or bringing about remission. I agreed to participate given that it could be beneficial to other men. I was randomly selected to participate in the most aggressive treatment group. Along with monthly infusions of ADT, I was on three additional medications along with supplements and medications to ease their side effects. I was taking twenty- two pills a day on four different schedules. A significant challenge given the drug's side effects. I am now in the post-dosing follow-up stage of the study where I get my blood tested monthly.

When I mentioned to a friend that I was probably terminal he reminded me that we are all terminal. I have come to believe that my prostate cancer is a blessing, albeit in a perverse way: it has opened my eyes to the pain and suffering others deal with; made me a more empathetic person; and motivated me to become an advocate for people's understanding of this disease. It has also reinforced my faith and provided me with another adventure in life's journey. I have always looked at life as an adventure and have been open to new experiences. Taking risks outside of my comfort zone has provided me with a full and rewarding life. The following was written anonymously by a gentleman dealing with prostate cancer and he succinctly sums up my thoughts as well:

> **"*We are the same men, but different: we are fundamentally, emotionally and spiritually moved by our experiences. We are making a journey that was not our choice, but on a path that we have chosen for ourselves, and we have a perspective unique to us as individual men.*"**

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