

Cancer - Chapter 1:

“Let Me Love You”

July 1, 2010

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." ~Reinhold Niebuhr I was officially diagnosed with Stage 4 oral/pharyngeal cancer on March 16, 2010. The simple name is tongue cancer. I had a pretty good idea before I got the "official" diagnosis.

In January, I was working on a federal grant submission when I noticed a bump on my neck. I thought my glands were swollen being winter with the typical cold and flu season. The bump didn't go away after a few weeks so I went to the doctor. I was prescribed an antibiotic to take care of any infection that was causing the gland to swell. After 3 more weeks, there was no reduction in the bump. Again, I went to see Dr. Guanco. He is my PCP (Primary Care Physician) and he is a cross between Mr. Miyagi and Yoda. A gentle kind healer, he touched my neck and I could see the concern in his eyes. He immediately x-rayed my chest to see if there were any lesions (there were none) and then referred me to an oncology surgeon. The game just went to the next level. And quickly. During all this time, I was working on the grant. So I have come to the conclusion that working on federal grants causes cancer. The feds need to put a warning label on all RFPs.

I went to the surgeon, a crusty old guy who I really liked. He set up a biopsy and stuck a long needle in my neck, squirted the liquid on a slide and says "I gotta stick him again." No anesthesia, not anything. He comes around and sticks me again. Sandy was watching the whole thing. Guess he got it right that time. I was

done, sent home to wait for the results. They came on March 16th.

My first reaction was to take a long drive, talk with God, enjoy the beautiful day, and try to figure out the next right thing to do. Then I had some peace flow into me. I didn't name it as acceptance until another person labeled it for me at a meeting. He said, "You have a lot of acceptance" around this. I thought to myself, "Yeah, I guess I do." That's only from working a program for 22+ years. Being struck with cancer was definitely something I "could not change".

Sandy also knew we would be OK with this (no matter the ultimate outcome). The morning after I was diagnosed, she tried to sneak out of the bedroom early but I was already awake, so I followed her out into the kitchen. She said, "I'm sorry, I was trying to let you sleep". I responded, "Don't worry, I slept like the dead". And she laughed (we share a morbid sense of humor). No elephants in the middle of the room in our house. Sandy describes me like this; "Phil will not only acknowledge the elephant in the room, he will introduce you to it." I think she was relieved that we would talk openly about it. And we have. In some ways this has brought us closer together. In others, it has tested us.

For some reason, early on, I wanted to keep all of this very quiet. Close family, friends and co-workers who absolutely needed to know would be the only ones. I am tough, strong, the epitome of the masculine man. I don't need anyone else's stinkin' help or pity. I stand alone. Then one day while in prayer, God spoke to me clearly. He had a very different idea. For me, His voice comes from within, I hear it and I see it - like a teleprompter on my soul. His message? "Let Me love you through those that are around you". I pushed back because I didn't like what I was hearing. "Why can't you and I just handle it? Why do we need the middle men?" Ignoring my petulance, the message was simply repeated. "Let Me love you through those that are around you". Crap.

Letting others love me is not something I'm good at it. God knows it and I know it. 22+ years ago I had built up a fortress with alcohol and drugs, I was determined that no one was gonna get in. God got in though. Then slowly, but surely, He used the people of AA and the recovery community to nurture me back to health and sanity. It seems clear to me now that He wants to use the same tactic, to let His people love me back to health. Sometimes I need to learn things more than once.

I started with my men's Sunday school class. Hesitantly, I told my story. They asked questions, showed incredible concern, several of them with tears in their eyes. I knew what was coming next and I wasn't looking forward to it, yet I was resigned to it. Someone finally made the brilliant suggestion of sitting me in a chair in the middle of the room so they could lay their hands on me and pray. More than 20 men prayed for me. I prefer to be the one doing the praying, not the other way around. And this is where God began nudging me to another idea. Along with all the healing I was reluctantly receiving, these men were also receiving a blessing by praying for me and loving me. It all ties in to recovery - an age-old adage of recovery is that in order to keep it, you have to give it away. The "it", in my opinion, is love, and more specifically God's love.

I also have recently realized that I have only one major fear left. I am not afraid of dying any more, yet I am very afraid of how much God loves me. Why? I guess it's because God's love is the most powerful force I have ever come across, seen or experienced. One brush stroke brings me to tears. Sometimes, to my hands and knees...

My plan is to write about this cancer journey in detail in random postings over the next few months. I have learned a lot about God, His people and letting people love me. I'd like to share those experiences with you. Blessings.