

A cancer journey changes you forever

by MARK PAVILONS

It's been said when you experience two things love and grief it changes you and you are never the same.

I would add cancer to that list. Cancer changes you forever, mentally and physically.

It's like you're constantly running away from danger and always looking over your shoulder for something that could harm you.

It's like you're being stalked by a mysterious shadow that's stuck to you like glue and you just can't shake it. But there's really nothing mysterious about it. It's yours.

It's dark and part of you. But it's something you'd rather not acknowledge.

Like a stickiness of sadness, it's tacky and something only you can feel.

And I know something about sadness, suffering from depression for many years. So, you can imagine my despair during my emotional, gut-churning roller coaster ride.

I never shared the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre or his existential friends about the futility of life. But life is somewhat fatalistic since we grow old, get sick and die.

I never thought I would get cancer. A heart attack, sure, given my high blood pressure, poor diet and lack of regular exercise. But cancer? Not me, that's for other people.

Well, the other people are us, in ever growing numbers. And during my visits to Princess Margaret I wasn't filled with hope, but with profound sadness at the countless souls being tested and treated.

I remember being told that at least prostate cancer was treatable and wasn't a big deal. Oh, really? Any cancer is a big deal, no matter its severity.

For the longest time over the past year, I defined myself as a sick person, even though I had no visible symptoms or changes in my appearance. At times I still doubted the diagnosis.

I didn't feel sick and continued on my regular routine as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Weird, huh?

I got used to it. I became accustomed to, even comfortable with, the regular hospital visits, blood work, medication refills, drive to the Vaughan station and subway rides to and from the Queen's Park station.

I almost miss it now. What I don't miss are the pre-dawn drives and cost of parking.

There's was never enough time to take in the sights and sounds of the city, street food vendors or even quaint coffee shops.

In all my visits to the Big Smoke, I never saw that proverbial, disheveled man holding the end is near sign. And yet I actually expected it. Weird, huh?

It was always a quick turnaround, getting things done and then back home to Bolton, to comfort and normalcy. And yet there was no normal anymore because I was still that sick person.

?Listen to your doctors,? I was told by other sick people and those in the know.

I found that more often than not, my actions were robotic, routine, cold and mechanical.

I saw almost everything as meaningless or at least less meaningful ? chores, paying bills, buying groceries, filling up the car. Many things seemed mundane, trivial, silly and even ridiculous. I did lose my patience for time-wasting discussions and became frustrated more often than I?should have.

My GUNS trial involved a series of medication combos and I?was thankful that I did not undergo chemo.

I cried late at night but it never made me feel any better. In the throes of things, there was no ?better,? at least not in the short-term. The culmination ??adical prostate surgery ? was a solution, a reprieve.

I?had my surgery August 4 which I'm told went well. The timing was awful ? August 5 was our wedding anniversary and our daughter's 18th birthday.

But is my surgery a ?cure?? Those who've experienced cancer avoid that word.

There are treatments, therapies and surgeries that stave off the disease, even put it at bay and into remission.

The first few days at home were rough, feeling like a soccer goalie, taking penalty shots to the mid-section. I quickly began feeling ?normal? with a typical routine, even getting back to work on my computer at home.

I?am still working away because the King Weekly?Sentinel is my passion and I'm damned if I'm gonna let a little thing like cancer stand in my way.

But what's it all mean? I fear there are no hard and fast answers when it comes to cancer.

But what of future recurrences? Once inflicted, there is a very real risk of recurrence in some form. Maybe not now or in a couple of years from now, but down the road, who knows?

And so, my journey is not over. It's just at a new juncture, a fork in the road. I'm nudged to take one of the forks, but won't know for sure where it will lead.

Maybe I should make sure my cell phone is always charged and my GPS is working!

Every doctor's visit, blood test and PSA test from here will come with trepidation, anxiety, fear and uncertainty.

I hope it hasn't permanently scarred my sense of joy and frivolity. But I?can see it blanketing me with that threatening dark green shade of nasty storm clouds.

My wife mentioned part of the ?old Mark??returned after surgery. Being in a constant state of apprehension was not a good look, I was told.

I?am by no means, alone in this. The more people I?mentioned it to, the more stories of other men suffering from prostate cancer emerged. Encouraging??Perhaps, but sad all the same.

The fact prostate cancer is affecting more men, at a younger age, is disheartening.

The fact is, I've been given a reprieve and will enjoy it as long as it lasts ? hopefully well into my 70s.

But I?will not trade in my sense of humour, smile and demeanor for anything in the world.

Be prepared, faithful readers. I will be my annoying, sarcastic, fun-loving self. You will just have to put up with it!