

Giving Care to Love

Life with Cancer

February 2012

“In sickness and in health.” We all say it, as part of our marriage vows, but do any of us really think about what it means? What that promise might hold in store for us? We might have some vague distant notion that, if our spouse got sick, we would jump to the rescue like some cape crusading superhero, with heart shaped care kit in hand, and make the world right again. But what would we do? How would we cope?

For most of us, the reality is just nursing a loved one through the flu. But what happens when its cancer, or some other chronic disease. A magic Band-Aid just won't cut it.

Having been both, care-giver and patient, I'm often asked which is easier and, without hesitation, I shout “patient!” After all, I know where my pain is, I know what I want, whether it's a good cup of tea or to go throw up in the bathroom. My caregiver doesn't, especially since most of us don't have a clue about how to communicate what we really need. Being a caregiver is being asked to be a mind reader, and the result is often a disaster. Get it wrong, and you incur the wrath that only is a sick person, who isn't getting what they want, can give. Scary!

So, while faced with their anger and impatience, what about your own? It's not uncommon for caregivers to have a hidden resentment towards their charge. After all, they got sick in the first place. They're the ones forcing this role on you? Why would they put me through this horrible nightmare, a nightmare in which I not only have to see them in pain but, worse, could potentially lose them? The result? You're both secretly, or not so secretly, incensed with each other, whilst trying to get through a highly stressful situation.

But you not supposed to show that anger. You, as the caregiver, are supposed to give of yourself without limits, put your own world on hold, and soldier on without complaint, without worry. So put an IV in my arm and give me some nausea pills any day, because I'd much rather do chemo than be a caregiver!

But after 3 bouts of cancer, these days, I'm really the one who's the patient. I try to be emphatic, because I know what it's like to be in those other shoes. And so does my husband.



We are both cancer survivors. But I only had to do it once; he is on his third time and counting. Imagine that. Not only does he have to work a full time job, but he has to completely take over as Mom, still be a Dad, cook, grocery shopper, bill payer, dog walker and chief spokesperson, and take care of me, who is pretty much pathetic and of little use around the house. Now who's the one with the guilt for burdening the family?

Truth is, like most, our 18 year marriage has gone through some ups and downs, but the stress of tackling cancer 4 times is more than most would bear. Luckily for me, though, not only did I marry someone who made me laugh, was my shoulder to cry on, and truly was my best friend, I married the most committed, most determined, most selfless of caregivers on the planet. I fight my cancer every day because he gives me the strength to do it: to eat when I don't want to, to get out of bed and be with my family, when every muscle and bone in my body is sore, and the will to fight this cancer with all my might, even when I'm sick to my stomach.

So when you're thinking of your Valentines this year, don't forget the care-givers. They give their love and everything of themselves for the person they love. That should not be forgotten.

And as for my own, well his cape billows powerfully in the storm clouds that cancer is, and that's all I need, because at the end of the day, in sickness and in health, he's the wind beneath my wings.

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