

“Nevertheless” or “What I Learned on My Cancer Sabbatical”  
 Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
 May 13, 2012

*Kinship*

As I sit quietly here in my chair,  
 Sewing or reading or braiding my hair –  
 Human and simple my lot and my share –  
     I am aware of the systems that swing  
     Through the aisles of creation on heavenly wing,  
     I am aware of a marvelous thing,  
 Trail of the comets in furious flight  
 Thunders of beauty that shatter the night,  
     Terrible triumph of pageants that march  
     To the trumpet of time of Eternity’s arch.  
 I am aware of the splendour that ties  
     All the things of the earth with the things of the skies  
     Here in my body the heavenly heat,  
     Here in my flesh the melodious beat  
     Of the planets that circle Divinity’s feet.  
 As I silently sit here in my chair,  
     I am aware.

Angela Morgan (excerpt)

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On March 11<sup>th</sup>, the last time I stood in this pulpit, I shared that I would be having some minor surgery – to emphasize the point: *same day* surgery – that I assured you would likely turn out just fine. There had been several pre-op tests the results of which gave us reason to believe, and I repeat, that everything would likely turn out just fine.

It did turn out just fine, but as it turned out, I should have packed my toothbrush.

For the sneaky tumor was more troublesome than it had let on. Instead, I had a complete hysterectomy. (“Are you less hysterical now that you’ve had a hysterectomy?” one Soul joked.) And so here we are: I have ovarian cancer that was caught miraculously early. Miraculous. For five weeks I was engaged in the hard work of allowing my body to heal as well as integrating this new reality.

Tomorrow I begin chemotherapy. Six treatments strung out over the glorious summer concluding on August 27<sup>th</sup>. We’re calling it “Chemo Summer!” at our house. Just another adventure at 187 Lower Boulevard.

And 19 Jay Street.

For now, let's reel back a bit.

Through a surreal fog of shock and exhaustion, I came to understand the task that was before me: integration. I stood on a threshold that defined what was now past. It was up to me to prepare for the future. The wise man said that "Some turning points in life may cast a dark shade on your future ... When you get seriously sick your illness is not just physical. It forces you to see yourself and your world in a different way. It too is a rite of passage." Thomas Moore

I'd never considered serious illness as a rite of passage, but I do now. Of course, not everyone passes through the threshold of this particular rite but those whose do are changed by it which is the mark of a rite of passage. A wise Soul who has been down this cancer road assured me that some people are even better for the experience.

I hope that I will be one of those people. But it's the kind of truth that's annoying, right? Really, must it be so hard? I received a few cards that offered up this sentiment and it always made me laugh.

- Yes. I have been changed in ways that will continue to evolve. For now, I'll share briefly.
- I know that I am not drawing from the same well of confidence. A different vulnerability has taken up residence in my soul. That's new.
- And no small thing, on the eve of chemotherapy, I'm confronting my vanity.
- To heal I needed to draw from a deep well of patience guided by my body's wisdom. The poet said,

*Here in my body the heavenly heat  
Here in my flesh the melodious beat  
Of the planets that circle Divinity's feet.* Angela Morgan

I never felt betrayed by my body, rather my body healed slowly and steadily, intuitively knowing the proper course. At first, my mind and heart kept pace and then surpassed the pace of the physical healing. And still, I felt blessed and never betrayed by my body.

- Now I know what it is to be quite literally taken apart and the fragile tendons that hold us together emotionally. I know now that hope comes more easily when one is feeling less fragile physically.

Still in early stages, I'm not prepared to say much more about the ways that I've been reconstituted. But I'd like to share a few things that remain the same for the energy that carried me to this point was fueled by a powerful constancy.

My faith was constant. At no point did I lose faith in God – which is the way that I describe the mystery in which we live and the love that sustains us. My faith does not lie in a personal God – one who is so often blamed for serious illness –

and a whole host of other things. Instead, I felt the mystery and abiding love holding me up. I felt closer to God in my healing.

Similarly, never did I utter the question, “Why me?” “Why me?” begs questions any progressive religious Soul would ask in response: “Why anyone?” So, I didn’t have to waste any time unpacking that one.

In the words of the beautiful African American spiritual: “It is well, it is well with my soul.” Even though I now find myself walking through the dark night of said soul ... it is well. How can I keep from singing?

Indeed, while still in the hospital, Kit and the choir called me and left that hymn on my voicemail. “How Can I Keep From Singing” became my anthem: “Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing. It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?” Even now. Especially now.

That is what was constant and remains the same.

And now I offer you these observations and assurances.

Because clergy are walking and breathing projection screens, the image I bring to you now is one of the dark night of the soul. That’s a tough movie to watch. Even though the underlying message most often preached from this pulpit has been, “Life is hard. Life is suffering. And still, life is beautiful.” that sermon had been previously preached (we thought) by a healthy minister. But that minister has died in the way that we each and all of us die a few times over the course of a lifetime. A piece of who we once were dies so that the person who we must become may be birthed. We live the resurrection story over and over and over again. And every resurrection story begins with death. So it is.

We thought that minister was healthy. Look at me! I look healthy – untouched by disease. But that’s because the unmistakable mark that I carry runs the length of my abdomen therefore hidden from view. And that’s the way we prefer that our sorrow, open wounds and scars - and those of others - remain. Hidden.

But in six weeks time my disease will no longer be hidden because nothing says, “cancer” like chemotherapy. And as I will be wearing my suffering on my brightly wrapped head, the projection that I hope you will see is the one that says loud and clear “Life is worth the fight.” And the projection that serves as a reminder that perspective is a good thing.

There is a justice perspective in my story for the story is as good as it is because I am one of the too few. Connecticut College, by whom my partner Kate is employed, provides great health insurance. As importantly to my family, CT College honors all families in doing so. (Luckily, we don’t live in North Carolina.) *As importantly*, I was able to silently sit in my chair and heal without the added anxiety of losing my job or wages. In the wealthiest nation in the world, my story should be the norm and not the exception.

And yes. Mine IS a good story. Perspective is relative, after all. A friend touched in with me via text message. This exchange is dated April 4<sup>th</sup>:

*Jan: Word for the day?*

*Me: You know, I wrote “nevertheless” today and considered how much I love that word. So let’s call it the word of the day! Cancer: nevertheless feeling better. Cancer: nevertheless grateful. Cancer: nevertheless it’s going to be okay.*

*Love you for asking for the word of the day.*

*Jan: Nevertheless. Not a word I have used often but one that holds real power. Love you, girl.*

And that’s the best medicine, after all: Love. Laughter. And perspective, too.

My friend Amy sent me the Complete Six Season Set of *Sex and the City* claiming that IT would be the best medicine.

I told her that I’d let my oncologist know.

There’s so much more. But let’s end with a dance!

Just a day or two after that text exchange something very interesting happened. I rediscovered that old, great song by Aretha Franklin, “Until You Come Back to Me.” (*Recording begins.*) Originally released when I was 13 years old, it brought me right back in time. There I was in my kitchen – middle-aged, sick - but the person who emerged was neither of those. She was me at 13. Through all the tumult and the strife I heard the music ringing ... it sounded an echo through my soul. But there was a spark of fear that kindled in the back of my mind. Could my belly hold up without me holding it in place? Thirteen year-old me sure didn’t care. That girl I was and ever shall be brought me liberation. I was strong. And I was, yes, dancing.

Thank you memory. Thank you, Aretha. Thank you, God. (*Recording fades*)

How powerful is gratitude, Friends. And I must express it here and now.

I am grateful for the caregivers who tended to me through this crisis foremost my doctor, Tricia Jacobsen. Tenacious and smart she dug her heals in and because she did, I’ll be around longer than I might have otherwise. From March 13 to March 25 there was but one entry in my journal (unusual for me). I wrote, “I just told my doctor that I love her. And I do.” The nurses on 3.6 at L&M: angels. Each and every one of their faces passes before my memory when I express gratitude for my recovery.

The whole All Souls staff was stellar. However, I must thank Arlene Gundlach most especially. Arlene who with grace and dignity holds together the universe

at All Souls. As many of you know, Arlene was away in Florida for the first two months of the year. Quite a few times Kate said to me, “Thank goodness this didn’t happen in February.”

I shared what was coming down the pike with All Souls’ Board president, George Dowker and vice president, Lynn Tavormina early in January. Through it all, I knew that my well-being was their greatest priority despite the fact that we had been in the thick of several projects that required tremendous attention from all of us. When I dropped out of the race, both of them simply ran faster and beautifully. The rest of the Board of Trustees followed suit.

Carol Thompson – steady, confident, compassionate, reassuring. Her tender leadership ensured that All Souls’ worship life remained meaningful and rich. And the rest of the Worship team followed suit.

And thanks goes to Souls and staff who stepped up to the pulpit in the clutch: Nate Pawelek, Erik Wingrove Haugland, and Becky Noreen. I heard that one night at choir practice folks were standing around in the kitchen contemplating which of the services were favorites in my absence. Music to my ears.

Betsey Fox – her assured coordination of care for me and my family brought embodied love to our door. She consistently turns out that same care to the congregation entire. My appreciation for her skills and compassion reached new heights in this time when I could not be with and minister to you.

And you - the congregation entire. Your cards, emails, text messages, poems, prayers, healing thoughts ... you are the meaning and embodiment of Beloved Community. You showed up on Sunday morning and reminding yourselves what it’s all about. Upon my return, one Soul told me that things went so smoothly that she could hardly tell that I wasn’t here! More music to my ears.

Finally a public word of thanks to my beloved family. Kate, Lily Jun ... after all these words how could it be that there are none? I’ll say only this: your strength and love is *the only* medicine.

Life is hard. Life is suffering. Life is beautiful.

Even now.

Especially now.

My love and thanks to you all.

Blessed may you be.

Amen.