

Full of hope

Last Friday, I had a rather unique experience.

Accompanying a loved one to her first chemotherapy as she fights Hodgkin's Disease, I sat and talked with other cancer patients who had spent weeks, months, and years in combating their particular cancer.

I found a different attitude than I expected to find. There were no stunned people screaming "why me." There were no downcast patients, no stunned silence, no people making out last wills and testaments.

In short, although I'm sure each of these people had gone through their trials, agonies, and troubles, every one of them was upbeat, positive, and full of hope.

Some people speak of cancer patients as being victims -- and yet I learned from these courageous cancer patients that we are victims only when we **classify ourselves** as such.

To tell you the truth, it made me feel ashamed.

You see, like you, I try to look at life through a positive filter -- I try and see the good in life. It's not always easy; it's not always convenient -- and sometimes things just get in your way and turn your life into frustration.

Just this evening, I have been struggling with a balky computer that doesn't want to perform in the way I want it to work. Spend a few hours with it, and you know why early computer scientists created terms like "cursor." "Cursing" is all I've been able to do to it. After a while of dealing with the dratted problem -- a video server that doesn't want to serve video -- I started to feel as if I was being victimized.

Sometimes, things go wrong in life -- and for many of us, those problems can become debilitating. Yet for most of us, I doubt our daily struggles would come close to those of the people I was talking with on Friday.

The way I figure it, these people are positive because, despite what they're going through, they have hope for the future and a commitment to live every day as it comes.

Twenty-five years ago, I was writing a newspaper story about a student attending a local college. This young woman was deaf, and had been deaf for most of her

life. Although she could read lips, I communicated with her through an interpreter. "Is it difficult to deal with your handicap?" I blindly asked.

Furiously, she signed back, and the interpreter started to tell me what she said. "I am not handicapped," she said. "I have a disability, but so do most people. There are some things I can't do, but there are many things I can."

Despite her disability, this courageous young woman took life as it came -- she refused to be considered a victim, even when society wished to label her as such. She had a knowledge that while she may be different from people without a hearing problem, she was still not "flawed," just different.

Some months ago, my wife sent me to the laundromat to wash a comforter (they have those large washers, you know). Going to the laundry has never been on my list of the most exciting things to do in life. I loaded the washer, put in the soap, added the coins, and found a place to sit down. I was reading an excellent book by Brian Tracy, and was just getting interested in it when a young woman sat down across the table from me.

"How are you doing?" I inquired.

"It's hot," she said.

"Well, at least it's not that hot in here," I replied.

"Well, I work outside," she answered.

"Oh. What sort of work do you do?" I asked.

"I work on the street," she said.

Suddenly, I realized that she didn't work on the road crew. No, this woman was a member of the world's oldest profession.

"Have you thought about going into a different line of work?" I asked.

As she talked with me, never looking me in the eyes, looking more like a caged animal than a human being, I learned that despite the high death rate in her chosen profession, she had no intent of changing. She had become a prostitute largely because she identified herself as a victim, and as a victim, she had lost all hope of a better life. She had no cancer, no apparent disabilities. She had moved to the mainland from Hawaii -- certainly one of the most beautiful places on earth. She had chosen to cast herself in the victim's role. With a whole world of opportunity around her, she had intentionally chosen the life of the victim. She had intentionally decided to abandon all hope.

Dante wrote that at the gates of Hades, a prominent sign proclaimed "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

So it's only natural that those who lose hope are in Hell.

This is the great difference that I saw in that chemotherapy room last Friday -- the hope in the faces of the men and women I spoke with. Their road ahead may be a challenging one, but as long as they can continue to move down that road, they are likely to keep hope alive.

I figured a chemo room would look somewhat like a hospital -- beds and monitors; this room had motivational posters on the wall. The nurses were upbeat and funny; the room was bright and airy. La-z-boy recliners greeted the patients; many patients were reading biographies, adventure novels, and romance books.

Recent studies have shown that cancer patients who keep positive outlooks have a much higher recovery rate than those who look at their situation negatively.

I think I can see why.

If we were to rewrite Dante's sign, the sign to heaven should then say: "Take heart, be believing, and be hopeful, all ye who pass through these gates."

So it's only natural that the people who live heavenly lives are those whose lives are full of hope.

Even in a chemo unit.

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