

Alan Dragoo: Recovery

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Preached August 31, 2003

Seekers Church

Recovery

Reasons for Preaching

As many of you may be aware, I do not customarily preach.

Age is among the reasons that I felt compelled to break my silence today. Two days ago, I reached my 65th birthday. I am now a "senior citizen," according to Medicare, the Metro and other such official arbiters of age and the rights of senior citizens. Having become a senior citizen, I feel entitled now to speak my mind.

Until recently, I have been successful in ignoring any inner promptings to preach, but when Sandra Miller announced four weeks ago that someone was needed to preach this Sunday, a voice inside my head said, "why not do it now?" I thought that I could sidestep the matter by replying, "I'll think about it." A short time later, in the liturgy we chanted

*In our living,
And our dying,
You are bringing us to birth.*

I knew then that I needed to bring you the word today.

My memory had leapt back to a day in Boston, two years ago, when I learned that my brain tumor was not benign, but malignant and I knew then that I was only one stage away from death. Then, like a clarion call, words from Deuteronomy

intruded into my thoughts with new meaning: *Therefore, chose life.*

Earlier in July, of that year, many of you were present to celebrate the loss of my hair prior to my operation in Boston. I want to place this package of my hair on the altar now.

My sermon is a word of "Thanks" to the many of you who drove me to my radiation therapy, who prayed for me, and you who sent me cards that meant so much during the early days of recovery when it was easy to fall into despair. I am also grateful for those who visited me during the months of chemotherapy, when it was easy to believe that my life was sliding backward.

When I completed radiation therapy, I experienced one of the lighter moments of the journey when the radiation technicians gave me a "graduation certificate." I would like to share it with you now.

Two people who deserve mention, Emily Gilbert and Mid Allen. Behind every successful logistics operation, there needs to be someone to organize it. Emily was that person and graciously coordinated my radiation rides.

Mid and Ward Allen were active in C. of S. when we started coming in 1971. Thanks to Jackie McMakin's continued contact with Mid; Mid generously provided us with a free apartment in her house in Cambridge during our three weeks there.

I want to say a special "thank you" to Mary Carol who was my constant support and encourager during the days and weeks of my cancer.

Thank you, Thank you all.

Theme

Last year, during the month of August, I shared my poem,

“Recovery,” with you. In this sermon, I want to expand on that theme. Later I will tie my reflections on my recovery to our lectionary scripture in James.

Today, I want to celebrate my recovery from a brain cancer with you. Although I have been cancer-free for a year and a half, I know that I am not free from the possibility of its return. Jane Kenyon wrote in the closing lines of her poem, “Otherwise,” in which she celebrated her own brief remission from cancer: *But one day, I know/it will be otherwise.*

Cancer is like the next performer who stands off-stage in the wings waiting to be announced while I do my act. Each day is a gift.

Recently, the reality of cancer was brought home to me when I received word that a dear friend had died unexpectedly from a very virulent cancer. I want to pause for a moment here to remember Kathy Depro. I am going to place a picture that Kathy painted for me on the altar.

Poetry, an Unexpected Gift of My Cancer

I want to divert here to comment on my own use of poetry during my recovery. My brain cancer took away any consideration of teaching or doing research in a rigorous analytical physical science, but it has given me time for writing poetry – a long-time love of mine. My recovery also has given Mary Carol and me, months, if not years, in which to renew and deepen our relationship.

The Haven of Hope Retreat and Poetry Workshop

Last weekend, I attended the Haven of Hope Retreat for Cancer Patients, a setting in which cancer patients could open the door of their loneliness to one another. Illness, as Rachel Naomi Remen observed, can be a “profoundly alienating

experience.” This, indeed, is the case with cancer.

The retreat in itself was a deeply inspiring and healing experience for many of us, and the chasms of our alienation were bridged. Although our cancers were very different, our therapeutic and emotional experiences had many similarities, so we felt that someone could really hear our experiences and empathize with them.

We were women and men, Afro-American, Caucasian, and Asian; we were patients and health-care professionals. Our cancers ranged from breast cancer to my brain cancer. Some of us had been fortunate to have emotionally supportive families, spouses, co-workers, or bosses, but some of us had not.

On Saturday afternoon, Mary Carol and I, in conjunction with a healing poet, Linda Karlin, facilitated a poetry workshop. We hoped to enable cancer patients to use writing and especially poetry to express some of some of the anxieties and hurts associated with their cancer, and perhaps to help them unlock their psychological and spiritual energy, that can be invaluable in contending with the disease. Ever since I have been blessed with being cancer-free, I have wanted to give something to others who were engaged in the struggle. Being asked to take a major role in this workshop was the opportunity that I had been looking for.

The Workshop

Mary Carol leaving a copy of my poem, “Recovery” on the desk of our Washington Cancer Institute social worker, Mimi Ratner, precipitated our giving the workshop. Synergistically, at this time, Patient Support Services was looking for an art project to help patients in their struggles with cancer. Mimi was very enthusiastic about my poem and invited us to work with the staff to develop a poetry project. The retreat turned out to be the first part; we hope a second part will be the opportunity to continue with longer workshops this fall.

Since early July, Mary Carol and I have met with Linda to plan the workshop. Our sessions were often long and intense. I was often grateful for Mary Carol's moderating skills, her providing a third and neutral voice, her often-quicker perceptions and comments.

Saturday, a week ago, we led two sessions of the workshop at the retreat, little realizing the impact that we would have on at least one person.

Unexpected Appreciation

One of our assignments was a writing exercise in which we asked participants to visualize a time of healing, to describe it using their five senses and to write about it.

A young Afro-American woman of French-Lebanese parentage wrote a long paragraph in French to her mother, who had died from cancer a few years before. After reading the paragraph in French, she translated it into English. She obviously was deeply moved by what she had written, and so was I.

Only later did I begin to understand the full import of her composition. My new friend's own feelings of anger and abandonment by her mother during her own recent, very painful bone cancer had overflowed when she began to write, and she had found both resolution of her feelings and reconciliation with her mother through her writing.

I did not realize the healing that had occurred in that moment until Sunday when she thanked me publicly for participating in the retreat and for my role in the workshop. Only as I reflected, did I begin to understand that we had witnessed a moment of grace, right before our eyes. I knew then that regardless of any mistakes I had made, or how ineffectively I had done something, or what things that I had omitted, for one person our efforts had been worthwhile. In that moment, I felt keenly blessed. Cancer has taken some of my capabilities, but

it has given me an unexpected gift in return. Each day, the closing lines of "Recovery" take on new meaning: Each bird-blessed morning, I am fed by grace/.../coming with human hands and a human face. I want to close now with a thought about James' admonition about being doers of the word and not merely hearers of it.

A Closing Comment on James

I struggled over the letter of James until the early hours of Monday morning. No, I was not working late nights on it. However, as I was sleeping, memories of the recent cancer retreat and the poetry workshop and my musings on the passage mingled in my brain and a fresh insight into the passage emerged.

So often in the past, I have heard this passage interpreted into a heavy statement about ethics and social responsibility, often expressed in a litany of "oughts" that drained all the lifeblood of love out of James' message. I saw that my response in gratitude and love for my recovery from brain cancer multiplied more than I expected and, indeed, gave back to me. In closing, I would add to James' admonition, "Be doers of the word, but be doers in Love and you may be surprised at what happens."

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Recovery

Time has turned a full year round
and the receding night
lies in long shadows on the lawn,
this anniversary now
after seasons of healing
prompts my recall of first days
in a year's slow passing.

The way was longer and harder
than we had supposed last year, confident and bound
for Boston, past sailboats bobbing on the Sound.
Only my head shaved and blessed,
Turned our words to our trip's intent – surgery
to cure a blight of brain.
We thought it benign
and imagined a rapid recovery.
We did not speak of cancer then.

Post surgery, ICU –
Why am I afraid to meet your eye?
My left side has run away to hide
Where my words are stored.
My voice is like an old man's, weak with age.
I can no longer I say, "I,"
I do not know who I am.
I use my finger to guide my eyes across the page.

Like a meager rain
In a season of drought,
A lone tear at night
Brings hope that healing has begun.
Each night, a mysterious hand within,
weaves my brain's silken strands again.
Creation's intricate web silently is spun.
Each bird-blessed morning, I am fed by grace
coming to my bedside –
coming with human hands and a human face.

"Recovery," was published in Faith @ Work, Vol. 115, Number 4,
Winter 2002.

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