

# On courage and cancer – Scope

I almost died last year.

It wasn't pretty. It wasn't even inspiring. It was terrifying. And it was the hardest thing I've ever done.

I had beaten cancer rather handily back in 2010. There were side effects from the chemo that took forever to overcome – chemo brain, neuropathy, fatigue. But I was lucky; the cancer had been caught very early.

People like to talk about cancer survivors having a new lease on life, a new or renewed sense of purpose. That didn't happen to me. All I felt was guilt and grief and loss.

I pushed myself to get better, to return to my life. Instead, I ended up wanting to kill myself. I had just survived cancer, but felt I had nothing to live for. Not my wife, my siblings, my friends, my work – nothing.

I knew I had to change my thinking or I wasn't going to make it, so I started practicing mindfulness meditation. I learned to look at things differently, to be kind to myself, and by extension, kinder to others, to appreciate being alive, even if just for a few brief moments at a time. Eventually, those few moments grew into hours, and then days, and then months, and finally, years. I found a rhythm and returned to the world.

Then, after six years, I suddenly had cancer again. Still ovarian cancer, only this time there were three inoperable tumors, growing very rapidly.

I think the shock of it disconnected me from the gravity of the situation. I didn't reconnect when the preferred course of chemo sent me into anaphylactic shock, twice. Or when my doctor said we had to try different chemo. Or when the new

chemo caused immediate, permanent hearing damage. Or when I could no longer eat anything because everything I put in my mouth tasted like garbage. Or when they put a port in my arm to feed me the chemicals because my veins were too burned from the treatment. Or when I ended up in the hospital a second time because my immune system had disappeared. This time they put me on a cancer ward in a quarantine room with an alarm on the bed that went off when I tried to get up. Wait, what?! What am I doing on the cancer ward? That's for... people who are really sick... with cancer.

I often hear people say that they won't let their cancer define them. But how can it not? I would wake up every morning, and for just a brief moment, I'd forget. But there was something bothering me, something hovering out here, and then I'd remember, and I'd have to say it out loud so it would stick, "Oh, yeah, I have cancer. Again!"

My condition deteriorated with every round of chemo. My life had shrunk so much, even as the tumors had not shrunk enough.

My doctor told me I could expect this pattern to repeat itself going forward. Recurrence, treatment, remission.

I will admit to being devastated. I went through so much, and worked so hard to beat it. It had never occurred to me that I wasn't done.

Obituaries often state that the person died "after a courageous battle with cancer." I never understood that. People would tell me how strong and brave I was, but I just couldn't connect to that description; I was weak as a kitten and frightened as hell. Then one day my therapist told me the word courage comes from the Old French word for "heart." And then I got it; courage means "strength of heart." And I realized that I needed to find it in my heart to go on. Though my body might win or lose, my heart could not give up.

So here I am, once again, fighting for my life. I still have

stress, and money problems, and aggravations, and frustrations, but I can tell you without hesitation, that these are beautiful problems to have because I am alive to have them.

*This piece, originally in [longer form](#), is part of an ongoing collaboration with Months to Years, a nonprofit quarterly publication that showcases nonfiction, poetry and art exploring mortality and terminal illness.*

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Photo by [Cathal Mac an Bheatha](#)