

## wp OPINIONS

### After my cancer diagnosis, seeing mortality in the near distance

By [Michael Gerson](#)

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In my mid-20s, I had a new bride, a plum job on Capitol Hill and, apparently, the beginnings of a cancerous tumor on my right kidney. For 20 or 25 years — the best estimate of my doctors — it accompanied me at birthdays and on holidays and at the delivery of my children. It was quiet and kept to itself. Undiscovered, it would have donned camouflage and killed me in the end.

A cancer diagnosis is the experience of about [13 million Americans](#). Mine came early enough for surgery to make a difference. There were weeks of testing, waiting and attempting to focus on other things. At the hospital, cheerful young nurses ask you to pull down your pants at odd moments — which is not nearly as pleasant as it sounds. Then six hours on the table, the haze of narcotics, the clockwork routine of poking and prodding, the welcome visits of family and friends. Then a growing desire to escape the pervasive, repulsive smell of cleanliness and to go home.

As an instinctual Calvinist, I'm not prone to ask "why me?" — as though mortality were carrying out some kind of personal vendetta. But my first impression was the apparent arbitrariness of it all. I have no family history of kidney cancer. I've never smoked. I haven't worked in a uranium mine. Any philosophy of life must take into account that random, witless developments — a tumor, an aneurism, a drunken driver — can be highly consequential. At some point, many of us will feel "[as flies to wanton boys](#)."

In my case, this realization of the radical contingency of events gave way to more constructive thoughts. They are not observations I can universalize. They don't apply to those in constant pain, or address the incomprehensible suffering of children with cancer. My experience left me less able to understand such horrors.

I was fortunate to see mortality in the near distance. Stepping outside that experience, as writers tend to do, it had elements of a physics experiment. As I awaited to learn my fate, I noticed an effect on matter — an odd intensification of physical experience. Things around you offer more friction and hold your attention longer. Commonplace things like the bumps on tree bark. The light filtering through floating dust. The wetness of water. A contrast knob is turned, revealing the vivid pleasures of merely existing.

This heightened awareness applies to strangers in the street, who suddenly have faces. An unsolicited smile, the obvious creases of worry or pain, engage your emotions. There is nothing more democratic than mortality. Even if we are insects, we are insects (said [Dickens](#)) on the same leaf.

All of this is a function of a shifting perception of time. When the days seem limited, we more fully inhabit them. The arrow of time makes decay inevitable — and each moment unrecoverable. So we gain in appreciation for things as they are when we realize they will eventually be otherwise.

I'm sorry to report these effects are temporary. Perhaps they fade when you stop taking the Percocet. But I don't think the impressions are illusions. The healthy (rather than morbid) recognition of our mortality is realism. Cancer is a horror, but it is also a metaphor. Each of us is conceived with a seed of mortality that can't be surgically removed. It grows until it kills us, hopefully after a long life that honors the incredible, temporary privilege of living. We are, as W.B. Yeats harshly put it, "[fastened to a dying animal](#)."

That, but not only that. At every stage, even in the manner of their dying, people can demonstrate they are something more. I recall my Italian, New Yorker grandmother — full of years and full of cancer (the result of a lifelong smoking habit) — telling me through some of her last, gasping breaths: "You have made me so very happy." Such are the gifts human beings can give each other, even when there is nothing else to give.

It was not my time, thank God, to demonstrate such generosity. I'm left, for the moment, to experience some additional moments and to hope there is a plot behind random and witless events. But I've gained — along with many given a cancer diagnosis — a greater appreciation for the familiar words of the psalmist: "[Teach us to number our days](#)."

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