



Boxing with cancer

Round won, but the match isn't over

By Denis Collins

For the State Journal

About one year ago I learned there was a pretty good chance I would die from cancer during the summer of 1996.

I had studied death and dying while attending graduate school and felt prepared for the inevitable. I would miss my wife and friends, and for my two beautiful children I would make a video of paternal advice that they would receive on their 21st birthdays to help them with entering adulthood (i.e., don't have kids until you're 30!).

Then a miracle happened. After boxing with cancer for three years, and chemotherapy for nine months, I was cancer-free.

But, to my amazement, I wasn't happy. Instead, I found myself boxing with post-cancer survival.

This did not make sense to me. Many friends attributed it to unexpected twists and turns in my professional life. All I know is that during the summer of 1996 I was exhausted and felt short-changed for not being dead. Instead of being like Rocky, running through the streets of Madison with my arms upraised, I was totally exhausted, sitting on a lawn chair, contemplating suicide. It was a not uncommon reaction to near-death illnesses and recovery — I was seriously depressed.

The situation worsened when a friend at work, Dagny Nelson, who was cancer free when I received my death sentence, died shortly after going to a doctor for a checkup, only to find that her cancer had returned in the form of King Kong.

In July, I was happy because I thought that some of my cancer symptoms had returned. In a dream, my oncologist informed me about the more deadly second coming of the cancer. I was sad the following day when the CAT-scan results showed that I was still cancer-free.

Come August, when I should have died from cancer and chemotherapy, I was seriously considering stepping in front of a bus to fulfill a dream about how I was to die.

Then several breakthroughs occurred. With the urging of friends, family and doctors, I gave in and began taking an anti-depressant. It worked. Phew, what a relief.

And, on a lovely fall day, after finishing my daily morning walk along the railroad tracks from the corner of Regent and Monroe streets to behind the UW generator building's coal piles, I made my usual left turn up Mills Street and met a man handing out Gideon Bibles.

I informed him that this was a terrible corner for soliciting potential customers and suggested he move up to Johnson Street.

"Well," he said, "there must have been some reason why I chose this location. I guess I was meant to meet you."

With that, I accepted his offer of the green pocket Bible.

It had been 15 years since I last read the Bible cover to cover. Instead of immediately turning on my computer when arriving in my office, I started to read sections of the New Testament. I sandwiched every day with 12 minutes of Bible reading first thing in the morning, and 12 minutes of Buddhist reading last thing at night.

Buddhism insisted that I appreciate every moment of the day. The New Testament insisted that I go forward and sin no more. I conducted a three-day fast to cleanse my body and create a "new" me. Every morning I made a commitment to sin no more, and at the end of the day I repented for that day's sins

of commission and omission.

I rededicated myself to doing what I could to create peace on Earth, no matter how silly that may sound coming from a 40-year-old, well-educated business school professor. Since I should be dead, and am alive, these are my "bonus" days.

Then more bad news. Brenda Pfahler, the second person in my three-member cancer support group, died. Back in January I was expecting to die; Brenda and Dagny were the ones who were expecting to survive.

Upon hearing the news about Brenda, I reached with shaking hands into my filing cabinet, and took out a copy of the article I wrote for the Wisconsin State Journal back on Feb. 12 titled "Boxing with Cancer."

I was struck by my hopefulness at a time of great tribulation, and by the audacity I had to challenge those expecting to die of cancer to perform one political act on behalf of some injustice in the world. "We can all get together and talk about it during our after-life," I wrote.

I now wish to share my hope-filled reawakening with other cancer survivors, cancer patients, their friends and families, as well

as those who have recently had other near-death experiences.

There are many of us in Madison. There is no need to wait until death for us to embrace each other's efforts.

Instead, come join me on Feb. 8 in the Spotlight Room at the Madison Civic Center from 7 to 10 p.m. Entertainment will be provided by whoever wants to entertain. Snacks will be provided. And the dessert will be our conversations about actions taken, or actions people may want to take, on behalf of some injustice in the world.

If you are boxing with cancer, or post-cancer survival, please come. If nobody else shows up, you and I can have a wonderful chat and then go see a movie.

Denis Collins is six months cancer-free and counting. Call 258-8854 if you wish to participate in the planning of this event.