

Boxing with cancer: A matter of life and death

By Denis Collins
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For many people, one of the last major battles they have in life is fighting cancer. Indeed, it is a multiple set of battles being fought simultaneously, like a three-dimensional chess game.

The most important battle is the mind vs. the body. The two essential preliminary battles are between cancer and the body, and between cancer and chemotherapy.

This year, it is expected that 1.2 million Americans will be new cancer patients, 25,300 from Wisconsin. In fact, 8 million Americans currently have cancer. And, of these, 540,000 will die this year — about 1,500 a day.

During July 1995, while attending a conference in Vienna and Prague, I managed to come down with pneumonia, bronchitis, sinusitis, insomnia and a very painful stomach. Upon arriving back in Madison, I finally permitted my body to collapse from all this — the health care facilities in the Czech Republic were rumored to be unappealing — and entered the hospital.

A few days later I learned that I had Stage 3 Hodgkin's disease (Stage 1 is introductory, Stage 4 is advanced placement). Nobody really knows why you get Hodgkin's disease. The leading theory is that getting Hodgkin's is simply a genetic mistake — and, for some reason, I am among the unlucky randomly selected winners, as only 1 percent of cancers are of the Hodgkin's variety.

This was the beginning of a new main event in my life. Every day I wake up, and go to sleep, knowing that I have cancer. It is those hours between waking up and sleeping that the main event — the mind vs. the body — is fought. Will the body defeat the cancer? If not, will the mind defeat the cancer?

For six months, I've been engaged in more than 180 of these three-dimensional battles. In the preliminary bout between the body vs. the cancer, I've had 159 victories and only 21 days of hospitalization. During two semesters of teaching, I only missed one day of class. Not bad.

Naturally, some of those 159 victories

were nip and tuck, while others were, indeed, absolute victories.

More importantly, I would like to think that my mind has been victorious all 180 days, even the day before my 40th birthday when, six months into the chemotherapy treatment, I learned that the odds of the cancer winning its battle over the body had increased, rather than decreased.

How are these victories of the mind, by the mind, and for the mind occurring? Such a personal confession requires a nonboxing metaphor.

Alarm clocks play an important function in life, telling you when to wake up. Cancer, or whatever disease is the final alarm clock, initiates you into an after-life. It wakes you up into a higher state of awareness and consciousness.

So when the daily alarm clock rings, wake up! Fully! Love and serve others! As John Lennon suggested, in the end the love that you leave and take is equal to the love you make.

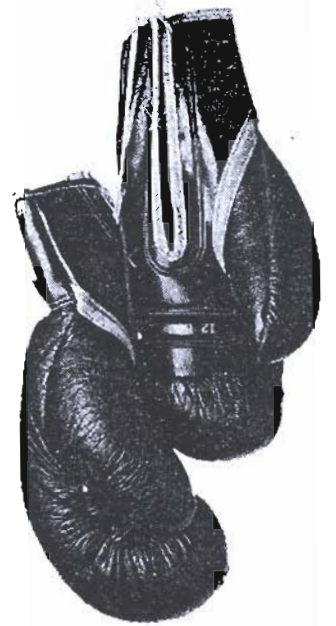
By doing so, you can continue to enjoy the ride from one stage of existence — the life between birth and death — to another, an after-life. Or, as Winnie the Pooh reasoned, the more you share with others, the more they'll share with you.

Twenty years ago I had a vivid dream of being run over by a bus and dying. So I'm convinced that is what will kill me, not the cancer. I've convinced myself that bus will run me over when I'm 120 and very senile. Or, it could happen tomorrow.

Indeed, during the past 20 years, it's almost happened twice. You never know when it could happen, so there's no benefit in thinking about it other than trying to look both ways prior to crossing a busy street!



Denis Collins is a professor of business ethics at the UW-Madison School of Business. He has written articles and books on social philosophy issues.



Practically, how can such mind victories be achieved? Loving and serving others can be done in a variety of ways. I recommend peacefully, nonviolently and publicly doing the most political act that you dare to do. There are so many injustices in this world, simply pick any one and add to its eradication. Make a scene, express your voice. People will listen.

You don't have to pick a political act from my own particular agenda, but I do want to recommend a particular political philosophy: As a general rule, do for others, particularly those in a worse-off economic, physical or mental condition, what you wish others would do for you.

For every person, that particular political act must be self-determined. Listen to the sounds of the street, in your mind and in your heart. And act! Become fully genuine. Allow your mind, through your body, and despite the cancer, to make a few more major knockout punches for the benefit of humanity.

If our bodies beat the cancer, we can talk about what you did during our physical lives. Otherwise, we can all get together and talk about it during our after-life.

For the time being, it's great being alive, deepening friendships, making new friendships, serving others, teaching students, being with family and kids, and making some bold political acts.