

Twelve Years as a Cancer Survivor: Six Guiding Principles for the Bonus Days

**Professor Denis Collins,
Edgewood College**

Delivered June 24, 2007, at the First Unitarian Society, 9:00 and 11:00 Sunday Service

Everyone lives his or her life according to a set of principles, whether intentional or not. What principles would guide your life after you survived a medical death sentence against all odds? Learn about one person's journey in answering that question.

Today's **opening reading** is from Jack Kornfield's classic meditation book *A Path With Heart*. Kornfield writes about "the everyday bodhisattva," someone like you and me, who can share enlightenment with others.

"There is no predetermined story for a bodhisattva to follow. To live as a bodhisattva is to touch the spirit of the Buddha within us and to allow that to shine through our own individual life. Buddhist history is filled with a thousand different accounts of how the bodhisattva spirit can manifest in the world. There are bodhisattvas everywhere. One of my teachers lived in a cave for many years, silently radiating compassion to the world. Another was a very wealthy businessman who also taught mediation retreats to tens of thousands of students worldwide. His master was a high-ranking cabinet minister in Burma who got the government officials in his offices to meditate at the start of each day.

One of the greatest modern Buddhist yogis and masters was a woman who lived a simple householder life in Calcutta with her

daughter and grandchildren. She taught in her one-room apartment and gave amazing blessings to all who visited her. Another was a nurse who worked with the dying. Another a teacher of young children. Some were stern, some were humorous. Some lived out in the forests, others in monasteries and ashrams, others in the middle of great cities with ordinary jobs and ordinary families.

In all of them a spirit of wisdom and compassion ran through their actions. They acted from their Buddha nature, which connected them with all beings. They did not grasp their own personal stories but lived connected to the whole.

Recently some red-robed Tibetan lamas visited New Mexico. A student offered them all hot-air balloon rides. But they arrived in the morning to find that there was room for but one monk to fly. A reporter covering the event asked the others if they were disappointed. 'No.' They smiled and continued, 'He's going for all of us.'

Sermon

The sermon I'm about to share with you is about my own hot-air balloon ride, before and after cancer. You need not take the same trip I did. I don't wish that any of you get cancer, or go through 9 months of chemotherapy. Though if you have or had cancer, I hope you get to live at least another 12 years.

Instead, I wish to share some principles that helped get me through chemo and that have guided me since.

How many of you have had a near death experience? Raise your hand ...

Everyone please raise your hand. We have them every day.

How many of you have sat down to have a cup of coffee? You see, you probably have had a near death experience.

Several years ago I read a fascinating story in the newspaper about some guy who was fulfilling his lifelong dream of having a cup of coffee at an outdoor Paris café. He sat down, opened the newspaper, and sipped his coffee. Then a guy in the hotel adjacent to the café decided to commit suicide. He jumped from the building, landed on the café awning, bounced, landed on top of the guy having his cup of coffee, killed him, survived, and was found guilty of murder, and is spending the rest of his days in jail. There are many ironies in that story. My only point is simply that sitting down and having a cup of coffee is a near death experience.

How many of you have had cancer? Congratulations, give them a hand. How many of you know someone who died of cancer?

Once you've had cancer, you always have cancer. Physically, I've been cancer free for 11 years. Psychologically, I'm not cancer free. Every stomach ache reminds me of the cancer I had in my stomach.

Principle 1: Life is Fragile.

In late May, just four weeks ago, I woke up one morning and my left hand looked like a balloon. I assumed the swelling was from a spider bite during the night. It wasn't. We took some blood tests, the numbers looked a little suspicious, and the next thing I know I'm doing a CAT-SCAN, and those results suggested the need for a PET-SCAN.

On Friday, just two days ago, my doctor calls.

“So,” I ask, is it cancer again?”

“No, we don't think so,” he says.

“Great, I'm doing a sermon on Sunday about being cancer free for 12 years!”

“Well, not so fast,” he pauses. “We want to cut you open and do a surgical biopsy of your lymph nodes. Given your medical history, we just want to make sure.”

“Does this mean I have cancer again?” I ask.

“No.”

“Then I'm not going!”

“That wouldn't be wise, wise-guy,” my doctor wisely noted. “I look forward to seeing you biopsy results.”

This is the fifth time I've been tested with expensive medical technology just to verify that some unrelated illness, that, after tests, begins looking a bit like cancer, is not a cancer reoccurrence.

Life is fragile. Let's roll back the camera 12 years.

In June of 1995, I was participating in Business Ethics conferences in Vienna and Prague and became very sick. I had sinusitis, bronchitis, pneumonia, insomnia, and a few other illnesses. People told me the medical facilities in the Czech Republic were less than desirable, it was just 6 years since the collapse of communism, so I struggled to make it through the week. Upon arriving back in Madison, I collapsed from exhaustion. Two days later the doctors gave me the shocking news ... I had cancer.

Worse yet, it was Stage Three cancer. Cancer comes in four stages. The first stage is introductory while the fourth stage is advanced placement! I had Hodgkins Disease.

One percent of all cancers are of the Hodkin's variety. Nobody knows why you get it, but it is very curable, if detected right away. Apparently, I had it for several years without knowing it ... academics, the life of the mind, not the body!

Actually, I was an outlier. Typically, you get Hodgkins Disease below the age of 25 or over the age of 55, and you get it in your neck. I was 39 and had it in my stomach.

My initial odds of survival were 50/50, which I didn't tell anyone except my wife. After five months of chemo, the cancer got worse instead of better. On January 11, 1996, the day prior to my 40th birthday, the doctors told me to prepare for a possible death in August 1996.

One month later we did a CAT-Scan to see how much damage the chemo was causing my heart and ... lo and behold ... the heart was taking a beating but there wasn't any cancer left. It's now 11 years since my last chemo treatment and I'm in perfect health, well almost.

It was during the cancer episode that I began reflecting on the types of principles that were most meaningful to me, past, present, and future. By principles, I mean the phrases we keep repeating to ourselves as we interact with outside stimuli. Imagine that we each have a tape recorder in our brains playing several messages over and over again on never-ending loops. These are the messages on my tape recorder.

My first principle is "Life is Fragile." This is particularly true in the field of business ethics. A company can be doing many great things; it only takes one bad employee, one scandal, to destroy a century of reputation building.

As for my second principle ...

Principle 2: We are all miracles of creation.

My first month of chemo I thought a lot about God, particularly as one part of my body after another failed to work well. The doctors were dumping 7 different types of poisons into my bloodstream and the drugs were playing havoc on my organs. They ripped the lining off my esophagus and the only thing I could swallow for several days were ice cubes.

I'll never forget a long distance telephone conversation with my Italian mother in New Jersey as I laid in a fetal position on my hospital bed in Madison.

"What are the doctor's feeding you?" my anxious mother asked from her home.

"Nothing, I can't eat," I told her.

"What kind of doctors are they? Tell them to feed you spaghetti," she insisted.

"But I can't swallow anything, it hurts too much. All I can do is munch on some ice cubes."

"That's crazy," my other insisted. "Eat some spaghetti. The noodles are nice and soft. They'll just slide down your throat."

"That won't work mom. I'll only throw up."

“Good. Eat some smooth spaghetti and throw it up. Then eat some more. This way your body knows you’re serious. Sooner or later it’ll give up and let you eat the spaghetti.”

The chemotherapy knocked the wind out of me that summer and soon I could barely walk a block or two from home without collapsing from exhaustion. It had damaged my heart and lungs. The more my body failed, the more amazed I was at how our bodies are constructed. Everything is interconnected and running on automatic pilot. Are you aware that you take about 18,000 breaths a day? You do.

Our bodies are marvelous creations. As each organ worsened, I became more convinced that there must be a God who designed them. It’s the result of something a lot more than just some big bang. God’s existence became very real to me during these traumatic months and I became very grateful for each day of survival.

We are all miracles of creation.

So my belief in God deepened, though I still had not idea what God was thinking about at the time of the Dinosaurs. I mean, really.

God is not religion. God is a metaphysical equalizer, whereas religion is institutional hierarchy. You can’t get any more democratic than God, the great equalizer. We all have free will, we are not robots. We have the freedom to determine who we are and what we want to become. If you have children, you know that there is nothing more democratic than to give them freedom.

Speaking of a democratic God, a leveler, not a hierarchy builder ... that leads into Principle #3:

Principle 3: Question Authority.

As a business ethics counselor, I can’t tell you the number of times I have been saddened by people who know that their organizations are doing something unethical but they say that they are helpless to do anything about it. These people are lying to themselves.

Others say that the noble thing is to watch the unethical activities from the sidelines, and not get involved. What bad advice. This prevents us from being all that we can be, and it prevents us from experiencing God because God, as embodied in our own conscience, is all about questioning authority.

I learned about God growing up in St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in East Rutherford, New Jersey. I was actually born in the South Bronx, but my parents escaped to the Jersey working class suburbs in 1958.

The Catholic Church, in its attempt to get me to be loyal to the priest, unintentionally taught me to question authority as soon as I made my first holy communion, in the second grade.

My mother made my older sister and me go to confession every Saturday. Back then you confessed your sins to a priest on Saturday afternoon so you would have a pure heart to receive holy communion on Sunday.

I’m not a big fan of repeats, and caught on early about Communion. God wanted me to be holy, not sinful. So one week I tried extra hard not to sin and couldn’t wait to tell the priest about my success in the confessional.

How many of you here are Catholics? For you non-Catholics, you go to confession to repent for the sins you committed, so you may be pure to receive communion the next

day, where you were given a host and tiny bit of wine that represented the body and blood of Jesus.

I was 7 years old and in second grade. My sister was a mature 10 years old. She made me go into the confessional first. I pushed back the dark velvet curtain and kneeled down. You can't see the priest, he is hidden behind a dark plastic sheet with holes in it. You wait until you hear the door behind the plastic slide open.

"Bless me father for I have sinned, it's been a week since my last confession and I have no sins."

I thought the priest would be happy. He wasn't.

"Everyone sins," he reminded me.

"I know, but I didn't this week," I proudly reported.

He got mad. "Don't lie to me. I'm a priest."

"But I'm not lying."

"Didn't you lie this week to your parents?"

"Nope," I reported. "I was really good."

"Did you beat up on your sister?" the priest angrily asked.

"Nope, I did that two weeks ago and confessed that last week."

"How about cursing," the priest shouted at me. "Did you take the lord's name in vain when playing with your friends?"

"No, not much happened this week."

"Stop lying to me! Now go up to the altar and do your penance -- say 50 Hail Mary's and 50 Our Fathers, and don't lie to me again!"

Usually, you only have to do 3 Hail Marys and 3 Our Fathers.

I was shocked. The priest represents God. Here I had been so good and the priest falsely accused me of lying. I left the confessional with tears in my eyes. My sister, waiting in line to go next, was laughing, teasing that she was going to tell my mother about how I lied to the priest.

I did what I was told to do and said my 50 Hail Marys and my 50 Our Fathers. The following week I tried really hard to live another sinless week and all went well until I went to confession.

"Bless me father for I have sinned. It's been a week since my last confession and I have 3 sins. I lied to my parents, I beat up my sister, and I cursed with my friends," I lied.

The priest was somber, but happy, and told me to say 3 Hail Marys and 3 Our Fathers.

I was very confused. If I was sinless all week, the only way that I could receive communion was by lying to the priest every Saturday, which meant I wasn't sinless anymore and couldn't receive communion.

Conclusion – the priest was not God. I didn't need the priest. I only needed to connect with my conscience. We all have a conscience, and that is where God's voice resides.

And it is my conscience that is continuously questions authority. Do not trust the leaders in the church, corporations, government, or academia! Instead, trust your instincts, the

strong internal voice within, and the sounds on the street. There is more truth at the bottom of the hierarchy, any hierarchy, than at the top.

And what is that strong internal voice telling me? Principle #4.

Principle 4: There is Nothing to Fear.

So many people are employed in organizations where employees fear telling the truth to their boss, colleagues, or direct reports. How sad. There is nothing to fear.

This is the strong internal voice I heard shortly after the doctors told me I might die from cancer: There was nothing for me to fear. I can even tell you where I was when I heard that voice – walking past the Civil War arch by Camp Randall Stadium on my way to Grainger Hall to teach some students about business ethics.

I didn't believe what the voice told me at first – Not fear death?

I had a two year old daughter named Anna, now 14 years old, and a five year old son named Seth, now 17 years old. I'd miss them growing up. How could they grow up without me?

Since there really is nothing to fear, allow me to put myself on a limb right this very moment – I had an out of body experience while going through chemo-therapy.

Absolutely true, but if it makes it easier for you to listen to me, tell yourself it was just a dream.

It happened during my first hospitalization from chemo. My chemo regimen was seven different poisons. The poisons do not differentiate the good cells from evil

cancerous cells, it is Sherman's march to the ocean and they destroy everything in their path.

My white blood cell count, which is normally 4,000-8,000, had dipped below 300. I was a sitting duck for infections and those opportunistic viruses found my body to be a willing host. My temperature soared to 103 degrees and higher. I collapsed in my UW office, was driven over to Meriter, and told the obvious – “You're in terrible shape!”

I spent a lot of time moaning, rolled up in the fetal position, which was the most comfortable position I could find.

My second night in the hospital I turned the lights out in hopes of having a long well-deserved sleep. As was my habit in the hospital, I turned on Wisconsin Public Radio to hear their late Sunday night jazz show. I thought it'd be a nice transition to sleep. They were doing some New Age space music, which I like in small dosages. As I laid in darkness, staring up at the ceiling, I found my mind wandering into outer space.

Suddenly, my body joined my mind. My spirit left my body. Whoosh. My spirit headed upward through a tunnel. I looked back and saw my body lying on the hospital bed, with an IV stuck in my arm.

“Don't look back,” a spiritual guide suggested. We floated through dark space for quite some time until we reached thousands of people wearing orange robes gathered in several concentric circles. I found myself in the middle of them, as if miraculously appearing on the 50-year line at Camp Randall Stadium during the Fifth Quarter. They were ecstatic.

I arrived and a bright, warm light flowed throughout my body. I was where I was meant to be, surrounded by endless waves of compassionate love.

A beautiful woman with long brown hair, deep penetrating eyes, and a radiant smile stepped forward out of the crowd to welcome me to spirit world. The entire crowd moved closer in unison. The closer she came the more warmth and love I felt. Finally, a few inches away, she raised her arms to embrace me.

“Stop!” I shouted.

Everyone stopped, including the leader.

“If you touch me I’ll die,” I told her. “I don’t want to die yet. There are a few things I still need to do on earth. You are all wonderful people, and I’d love to be here, but the time isn’t right yet. Can I go back to my body and come back here later?”

Blissfully, she nodded “yes” and I forced myself back into earthly consciousness.

My body was drenched in sweat. I had no idea where I was. I looked out the window and saw the State Capital building. “What am I doing in Washington, D.C.?” I thought. The room was pitch dark. It reminded me of a low-income housing project in Boston where I had once worked. “Aha, I must be in Boston,” I thought. But what’s with the Capital building?

“Oh, I must be in Philadelphia,” I concluded. “I’m in a low-income housing project. I better get into a lighted area before something bad happens.”

So I stepped out of bed, pulling the IV pole attached to my left arm to the ground, causing a huge crashing sound.

“What’s this?” I wondered while rubbing a bandage holding a needle in my arm. Then I felt the urge for a bowel movement. I stumbled to the bathroom, pulling the IV pole with me.

Footsteps rushed my way as I moaned loudly while sitting on the toilet bowl. Oh, oh, trouble. The bathroom door swung open. I expected someone with a gun demanding money. Instead, a woman wearing a nurse’s outfit appeared with a frightened look on her face.

“Oh, that’s right. I’m in the hospital,” I gratefully told her.

“Of course you are! Are you okay?” she asked. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure?” she repeated.

“Yeah. Why?”

“We weren’t sure if you were going to make it through the night. You weren’t looking good when I stopped in earlier.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“And you’re having a bowel movement, that’s great!”

“Nah, I’m still constipated.”

She helped me off the toilet bowl and back to bed. I pulled the chord that turned on the overhead light, raised the bed into a sitting position, and reread the previous day’s newspaper. No way was I going back to sleep, even if it was only two o’clock in the morning. I knew that if I fell asleep I would die.

They were wonderful people in spirit world, and we all shared a similar level of heart, but I didn't want to join them yet.

However, the experience was very comforting, and I knew that there is nothing to fear, particularly because of Principle #5:

Principle 5: These are my Bonus Days.

I should have died. But I didn't. I'm alive. As mentioned earlier, the day prior to my 40th birthday the doctors told me the chemo wasn't working and I should prepare myself for a probable death in August of 1996. My chances of survival had declined dramatically and the doctors started dumping huge amounts of poisons into my blood system because we had nothing to lose. And it worked.

Ever since then I've become very aware that these are my bonus days. These are your bonus days too ... you could have been killed in a car accident or while sitting down in a café having a cup of coffee.

Shortly after this new understanding, I read the following quote from Buckminster Fuller: *What is it on this planet that needs doing, that I know something about, and that probably will not get done unless I take responsibility for it.*

Meditate on that for a minute. Really. I'll time you for one minute. Sit up straight, close your eyes, breath deep, and ask your internal mind and heart to answer the following: *What is it on this planet that needs doing, that I know something about, and that probably will not get done unless I take responsibility for it.*

My answer is related to my sixth and final principle:

Principle 6: The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand, Parts I, II & III

What should I do with my bonus days? Separate the meaningful from the background noise in life. I now judge all my actions according to two standards:

Standard #1: Experience heaven on earth.

Standard #2: Build heaven on earth.

At this very moment, I feel as if I'm doing both, experiencing and building heaven on earth.

I don't mean to turn people off with this "Heaven on Earth" stuff. So let me back up a tiny bit.

After that out of body experience it dawned on me that the common attribute of everyone who greeted me in spirit world was our level of heart. We shared common moral sentiments about ourselves and other people, similar to how Unitarians share similar moral sentiments.

This got me thinking. It is often said that everyone is created equal. What does this mean? We certainly aren't born with equal levels of skills and intelligence. Nor with equal opportunities or equal rights, though we aspire to these.

Indeed, if you were born in the United States, you won the lottery prior to birth. And if you born to educated white parents, you were among the final power balls.

So in what sense are we equal? I finally had my answer. Everyone is born with the same heart. By heart I mean the metaphysical heart, not the physical one. We are born with an equal capacity to give and receive love.

It doesn't matter if you are born in the United States, Africa, or Asia; in the Bronx, Madison, or San Francisco; in the eastside, northside, westside, or southside of Madison; in 2007, 1956, 1492, or 2,000 B.C. One thing everyone born on earth shares with everyone else born on earth is ... the same level of heart.

Then things happen to us, and we respond. Our parents either love us unconditionally, conditionally, or not at all. Our brothers and sisters support us or hate us. We gravitate toward good or bad people. We grow up in certain neighborhoods and attend certain schools. All of these things impact us, and we respond to them.

As time goes by, the hearts we were born with either grow, remain the same, or contract. Then we die, and end up with people who have similar levels of heart.

This phenomenon reminds me of a talk I heard Timothy Leary give back in the 1970s at Montclair State College. At the time, Timothy Leary was selling tickets for spaceships. Timothy promised to make sure that you ended up on a space ship with people exactly like yourself. If you didn't like the ship you were on, then you had to change. Do a few more good deeds and Timothy would transfer you to a ship with people who do more good deeds. Do a few more evil deeds and Timothy would transfer you to a ship with people who do more evil deeds. The choice was always yours.

In this sense, the earth is one huge purgatory. There are a lot of people who do good and bad things. There are some people who always seem to be doing bad things. There are others who always seem to be doing good things. And there are a lot of

people between the two extremes. Every moment of every day you decide whether to do good or bad.

My conclusion from all this is that I should be spending my time growing my heart by either experiencing heaven on earth, or building heaven on earth. Anything else is simply a distraction.

What is this heaven and earth stuff? It has three parts.

The **“Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand Part I”** is “a state of mind.”

One Saturday during my undergraduate college days in the 1970s, I was having a very bad day: everyone around me seemed to be an idiot. I decided to do something about it. I hopped into my canary yellow Dodge Colt to get away. When I arrived at my destination, everyone seemed to be wonderful. What was the difference? I smoked a funny weed.

The stimulant changed my attitude. The Kingdom of Heaven is a state of mind. I'm not suggesting you smoke dope. Instead, you could meditate, take a walk in the woods, or whatever makes you naturally blissful.

So I must have the right attitude.

The **“Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand Part II”** is “institutional.”

What good is it if I'm feeling great while surrounded by tragedies? I must help create ethical institutions, be they educational institutions – such as UW or Edgewood College – religious institutions – such as FUS – social institutions, or my own family.

So the Kingdom of Heaven at Hand means I need to point out the problems of Enron and

show managers how easy it is to follow that wrong path; I need to shine the spotlight on some good business practices in Madison Magazine essays published quarterly; I need to help Edgewood College achieve “Green Tier” status as an environmentally friendly institution, including an Eco-Olympics between residence halls; and I need to stay connected with my wife and kids as we evolve through the 1990s and early 2000s.

Lastly, I do want to take the phrase literally. The “**Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand Part III**” is “literal.” It means that the kingdom of heaven is at my fingertips. Everyone I touch is a potential heavenly experience. Every morning I touch my wife and kids, they are closest to me. But every day I also touch my students, members of FUS, and people on the street. I touch many people during a day.

Each person I physically touch provides a unique opportunity to experience goodness. The Kingdom of Heaven is at my fingertips, and it is up to me to realize it.

So the six guiding principles of this particular cancer survivor are:

- One – Life is fragile
- Two – We are all miracles of creation
- Three – Question authority
- Four – There is nothing to fear
- Five – These are my bonus days
- Six – The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, attitudinally, institutionally, and among those you touch

Lastly, all six of these principles are a joy, not a burden. They are liberating, not oppressive.

Philosophically, I’m an Aristotelian, and according to Aristotle the purpose of life is happiness, and he’s right.

Happiness is a function of four variables – health, wealth, intellectual virtue, and moral virtue. There are always exceptions to the rule, but for the most part ...

Healthy people are happier than those who find out that they have cancer. If you are feeling unhappy, then jog or change your diet.

Wealthy people are happier than those who live in poverty. If you’re feeling unhappy, ask for a raise or work harder to deserve one.

Highly educated people are happier than uneducated people. If you are feeling unhappy, read a good book! If you don’t have one handy, you can borrow my copy of *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, which I finished reading yesterday in the hospital emergency room.

Fourth, and most importantly to Aristotle, who was right, moral people are happier than immoral people. If you are feeling unhappy, go out and do a good deed. Aristotle’s conception of morality included family and neighbors; extend love to your spouse and kids or help your neighbor trim the lawn.

Well, that’s my hot-air balloon ride!

By the way, during the sermon I happened to notice that the University of Wisconsin life support helicopter almost crashed into the building on its way to UW Hospital. That means we all just had a near death experience.

So what do you want to do with your bonus days?

Music played an important part of my trip. When I was struggling with chemo, I told me kids that the last song I wanted to hear was “A Wonderful Life,” our opening song, and at my funeral I wanted Grover Washington Jr.’s rendition of “Soulful Strut.” There was one other song that went through my mind a lot during chemo – Bill Evans’ “Catch the Wind,” which we will be able to enjoy during the offertory.

We each have our own paths to travel down. May we all end up in a very heavenly destination, however you like to conceptualize it.