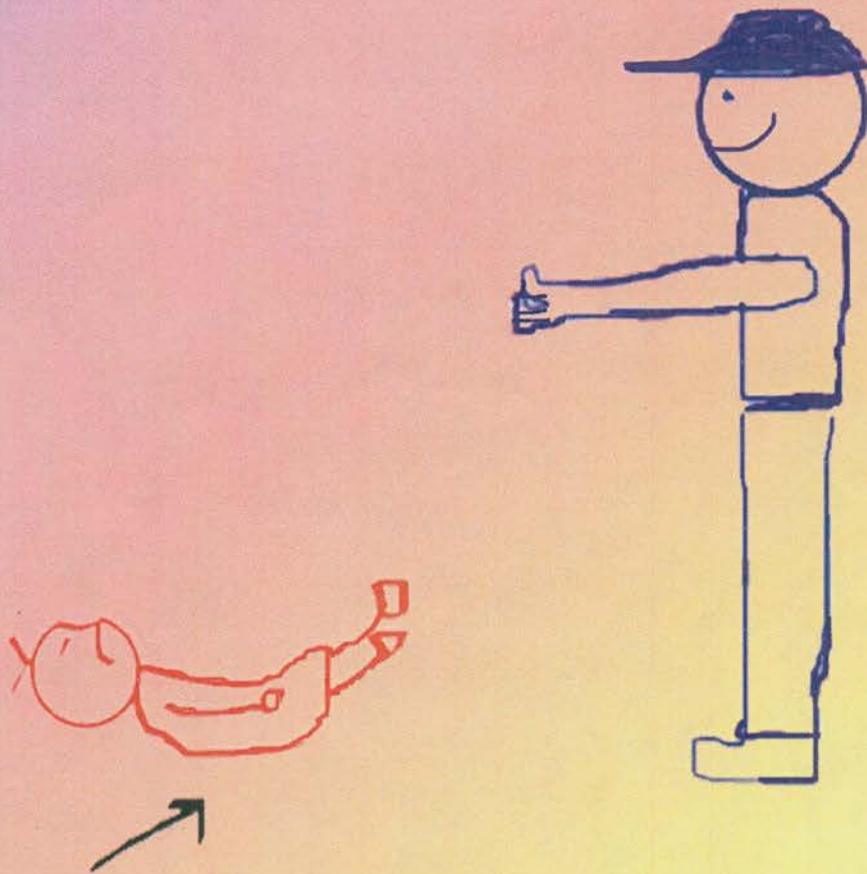


The Cancer Cartoon Book

by

Alison Snow Jones



Dead Tumor Cell

Introduction and Dedication

In August, 2002, I was running Class III whitewater in my kayak and carrying 50 pounds of boat and gear 10 yards up nearly vertical paths without breaking stride or a sweat. By mid-September, I had developed a pain in my left flank and back. A CT scan revealed an enlarged spleen. Blood tests showed mildly elevated blood markers for lymphoma. I had no enlarged lymph nodes. By December, I was incapacitated with pain. A spleen biopsy on Dec 31, 2002, was inconclusive. A bone marrow biopsy on Jan 2, 2003, was negative. Still no enlarged lymph nodes. The consensus was lymphoma, but there was no sure diagnosis.

I sought a second opinion. On my birthday, I was informed I had cancer. A PET scan showed one slightly enlarged lymph node in an inconvenient location. One surgeon was willing to go after it. Surgery was in early March, 2003, lasted 5 hours, and confirmed the diagnosis. Chemotherapy was scheduled for 3 weeks later.

By the time I was admitted for chemo, I was too weak to walk more than 20 feet unassisted and looked like I had recently sojourned in a concentration camp. I was unable to eat because the tumor had impinged on my stomach.

During the first treatment, I nearly died from an allergic reaction to the monoclonal antibody that was used in conjunction with the chemotherapeutic drugs. I also had a psychotic reaction to the prednisone during which I had interesting conversations with my dead mother. At that point, I pretty much didn't care if I lived or died.

Two things kept me fighting for the first two cycles of chemo: my husband and my father. Knowing how my death would affect them both kept me willing to fight even when death seemed not so bad.

By the third chemo cycle, I was clear of disease and gaining weight thanks to my husband's excellent cooking. Chemo continued to be so unpleasant that it was psychologically debilitating for days in advance and afterwards. Also, debilitating were repeated trips to hospitals and cancer centers and the shadow of death that hovered always just out of reach. Clearly, I had to do something to make what might be my final days semi-tolerable.

Taking a page from Bernie Siegel, I aggressively sought humor and life. I bought a blue baseball cap that said *Prana* on it to cover my bald head. Someone told me that *prana* is a Hindu word meaning "life force." It became my talisman. Someone counseled me to try visualization. I tried it, but my attention would wander, I would become bored, I would start thinking about other things. That's when I decided to start drawing cartoons. I'm the one in the blue baseball cap in all the cartoons.

My early cartoons focused on depicting tumor cells in their death throes or in their graves. My later cartoons depicted the truly bizarre conversations I found myself having with well-intentioned physicians, friends and acquaintances. The cartoons made me laugh and gave me perspective. They helped me recover some of my old self...the self we all feel like we lose the minute we learn we have a life threatening illness. They made cancer a little smaller and a little less powerful, because I could laugh at it and about it even while it might be killing me.

In addition to humor, I had the world's largest prayer circle. I was on more prayer lists than I could count. I had fundamentalist Christians, evangelical Christians, liberal Christians, Jewish congregations, Muslims, and Unitarians praying for me. Novenas were said for me. My atheist and agnostic friends were sending me good vibes and good thoughts. I want to thank all those people publicly here and now. When my faith wavered, yours was steadfast and it bolstered mine. Bless you all.

Finally, I want to dedicate this book to three people who had what I had and didn't make it. My cousin, Dan Jones, who I know is cracking jokes in heaven and making the angels laugh; Harry Hamet, who I never knew, but whose wife I met as a pre-op nurse and who befriended me and stood by me in spite of her own pain; and Hazel Kennedy, the relative of a relative, who fought the good fight against bad odds. This book is for you three and everyone who fights this disease, win or lose.

Cancer Center Waiting Room

**Fear, love and courage congregate,
Impersonally waiting their turn.
Perfect hair that can only be a wig,
Heads tonsured by chemicals instead of a blade
And a cacophony of hats to hide the devastation.**

**A quiet voice softly calls names.
As we all wait, joined by a common bond
And a new compassion;
Born of a common disease
And an uncommon fate.**

**Each of us offered God's grace, God's love, and God's comfort
In the sympathetic glance and the whispered "Good Luck"
As angelic strangers reach out, touch, and move on.**

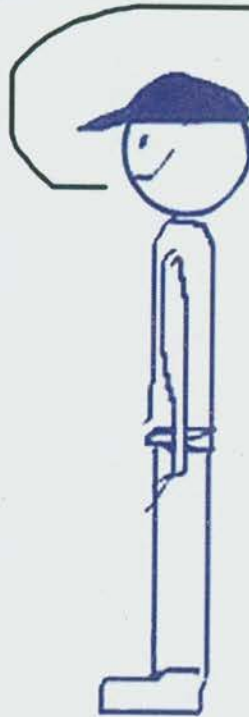
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The Doctor of Doom & Gloom meets the Goddess of Applied Econometrics...

I'm sorry, but based on population average survival curves from about 8 under-powered or badly designed studies, your probability of survival is...

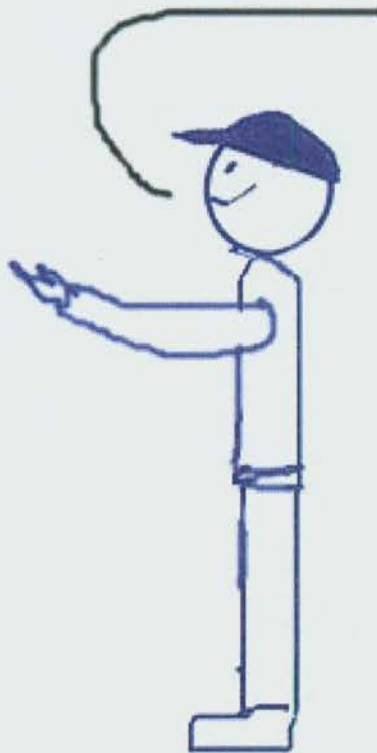


Gosh, It seems unethical and an abuse of statistics to suggest to someone that a population average survival curve tells them anything about their *individual* probability of survival. I mean, the population average survival curve tells you how many individuals in a given population will survive a given interval. It doesn't tell you which individuals will actually survive.



My *individual* probability of survival is either zero or one. I happen to believe it's one!

"Never tell me the odds!"
----Han Solo



I've thought a long time, Lord...
trying to think of some reason
why you should allow me to live. I
couldn't find one. There are millions
of people more worthy than I.
People who have actually made
contributions to this world you
created. People who have
devoted their lives to you
and to the people of this world.

There's no reason why you
should allow me to live.

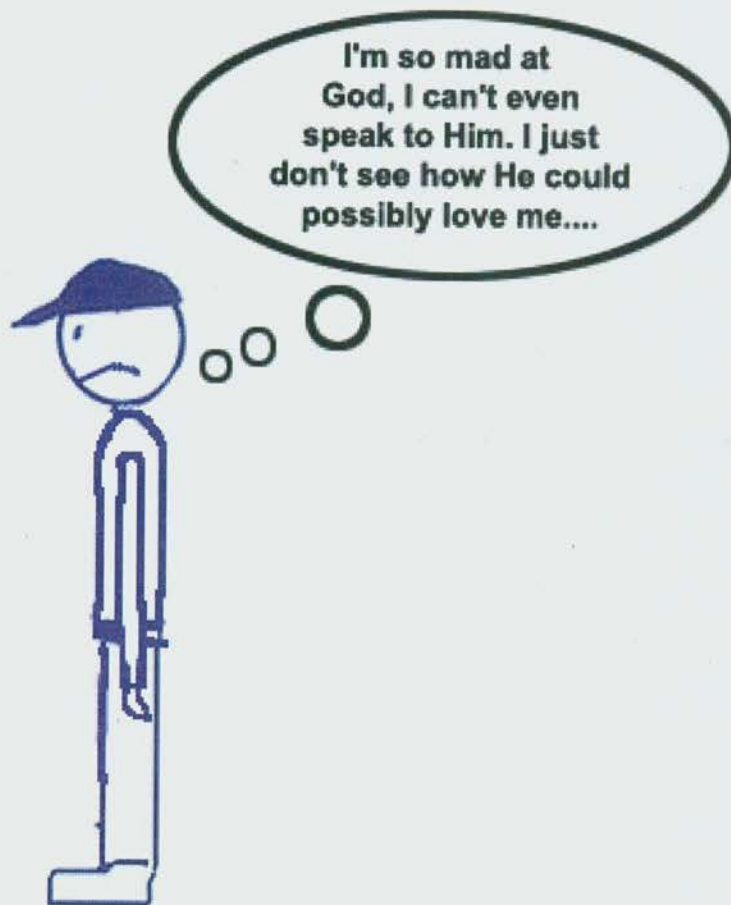
The lilies of field toil not
neither do they sow.

I am a lily of the field.

I promise you gratitude, Lord.
Whether I live or die, I promise
you gratitude. I will sit in the Sun
or the Rain every day and simply
offer You quiet, open,
worshipful gratitude for all
the wonders of your
creation.

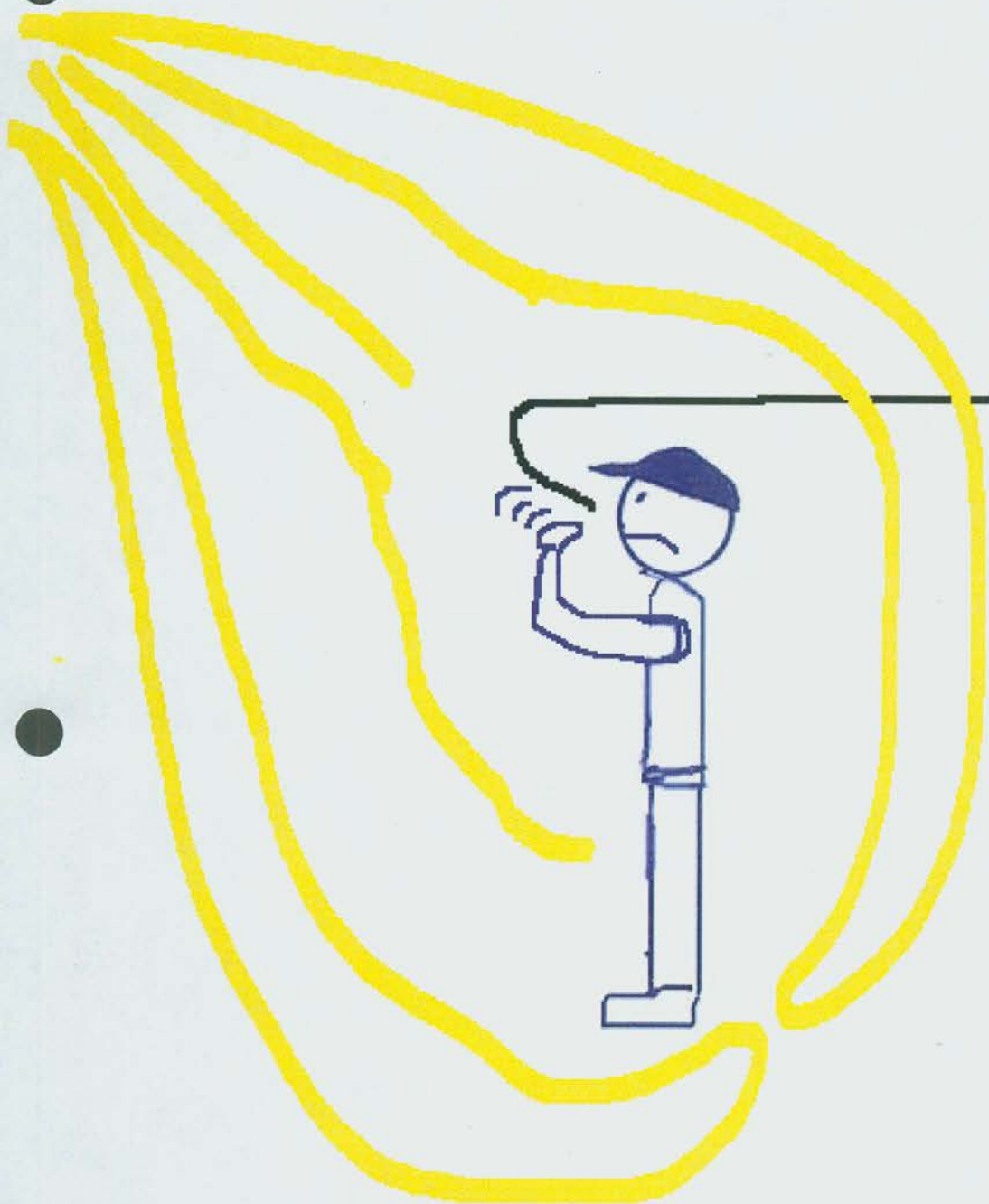
Bargaining with God doesn't work.

But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try it. Just don't forget to be angry, too.
Very angry. God can take it and you've got to put it somewhere.



I'm so mad at
God, I can't even
speak to Him. I just
don't see how He could
possibly love me....

**He does still love you, but it feels a lot like He doesn't sometimes.
That's why it's a good idea to have all your friends and relatives
praying for you. I always figured that when I lost faith, their faith
would carry me through....**



Godammit! How the hell can You let this happen to anybody?

**I'm not talking about me...
I'm talking about anybody!**

NO ONE should EVER have to have this f---ing disease or this f---ing treatment!

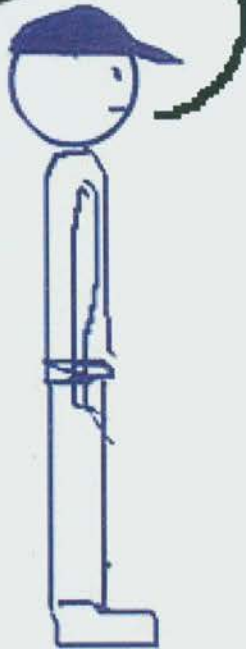
You bastard! How can You do this to anyone?!?

**Yeah. I know. You're not supposed to swear or get mad at God.
But, guess what? He can take it. He understands. He loves you anyway.
So take your anger to Him and give it to Him. He can take it. He will hold you.
And you need to do this.**

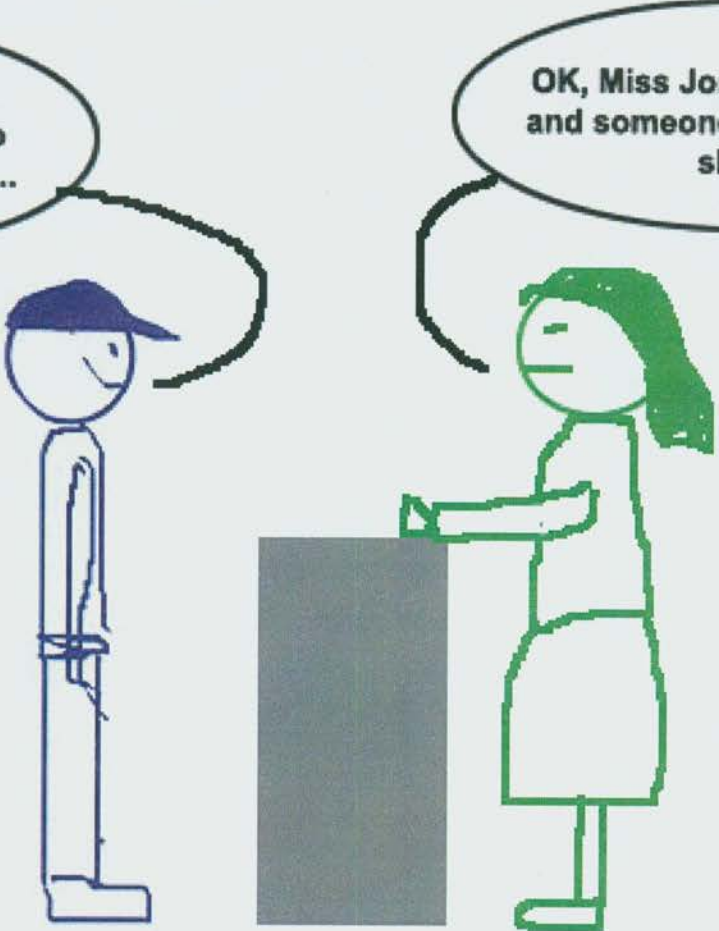
I don't get it...
The survivors got to live.
Why do they get a celebration
when the ones who died don't?

Do they think the one's who
died fought any less valiently?

Do they think they are less
worthy?



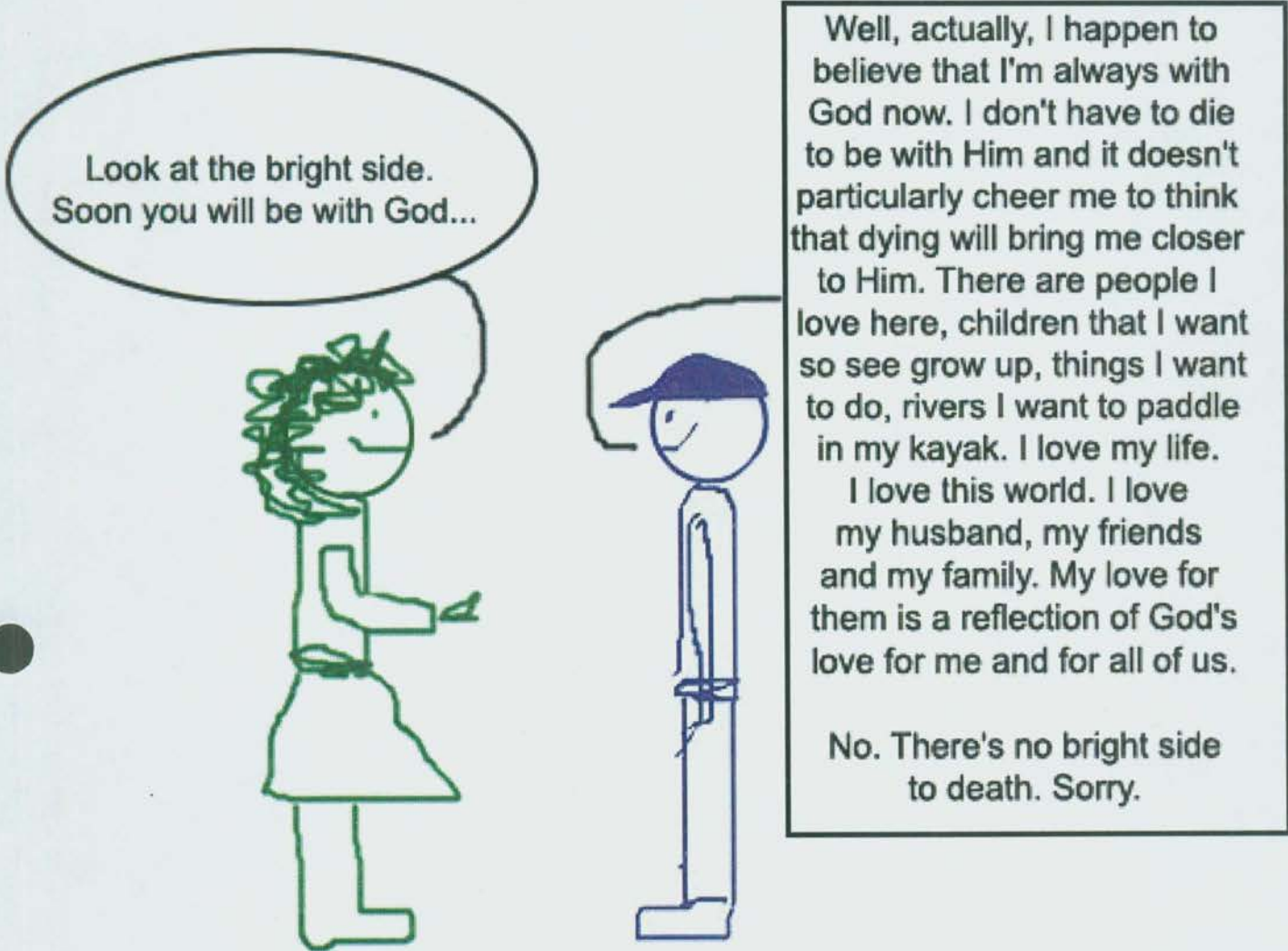
**Let's celebrate everyone who has lived with this disease,
whether they survive or not. Even with all the scientific
advances, survival is still pretty much a crap shoot.**



Hi. I'm Dr. Snow Jones.
I have an appointment to
have my blood checked....

OK, Miss Jones. Have a seat
and someone will be with you
shortly.

**Is it too much to expect to be addressed correctly? Sure I'm a Ph.D., not an M.D.
I worked hard for that degree. It's how I'm addressed in my professional life.
If I want to be addressed this way in what might be the final days of my life,
is this too much to ask?**



Look at the bright side.
Soon you will be with God...

Well, actually, I happen to believe that I'm always with God now. I don't have to die to be with Him and it doesn't particularly cheer me to think that dying will bring me closer to Him. There are people I love here, children that I want so see grow up, things I want to do, rivers I want to paddle in my kayak. I love my life.

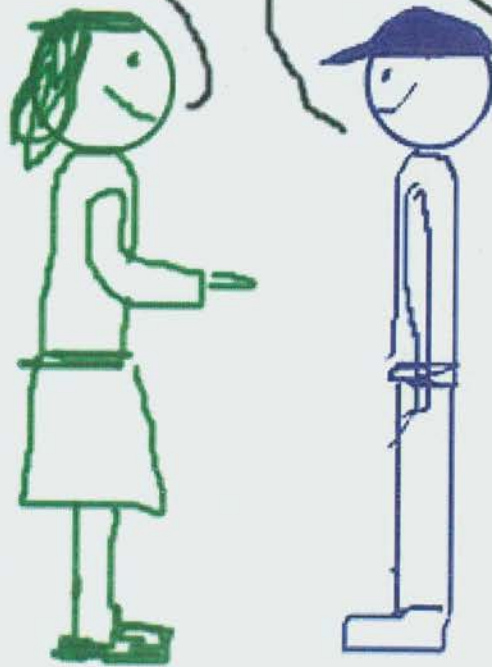
I love this world. I love my husband, my friends and my family. My love for them is a reflection of God's love for me and for all of us.

No. There's no bright side to death. Sorry.

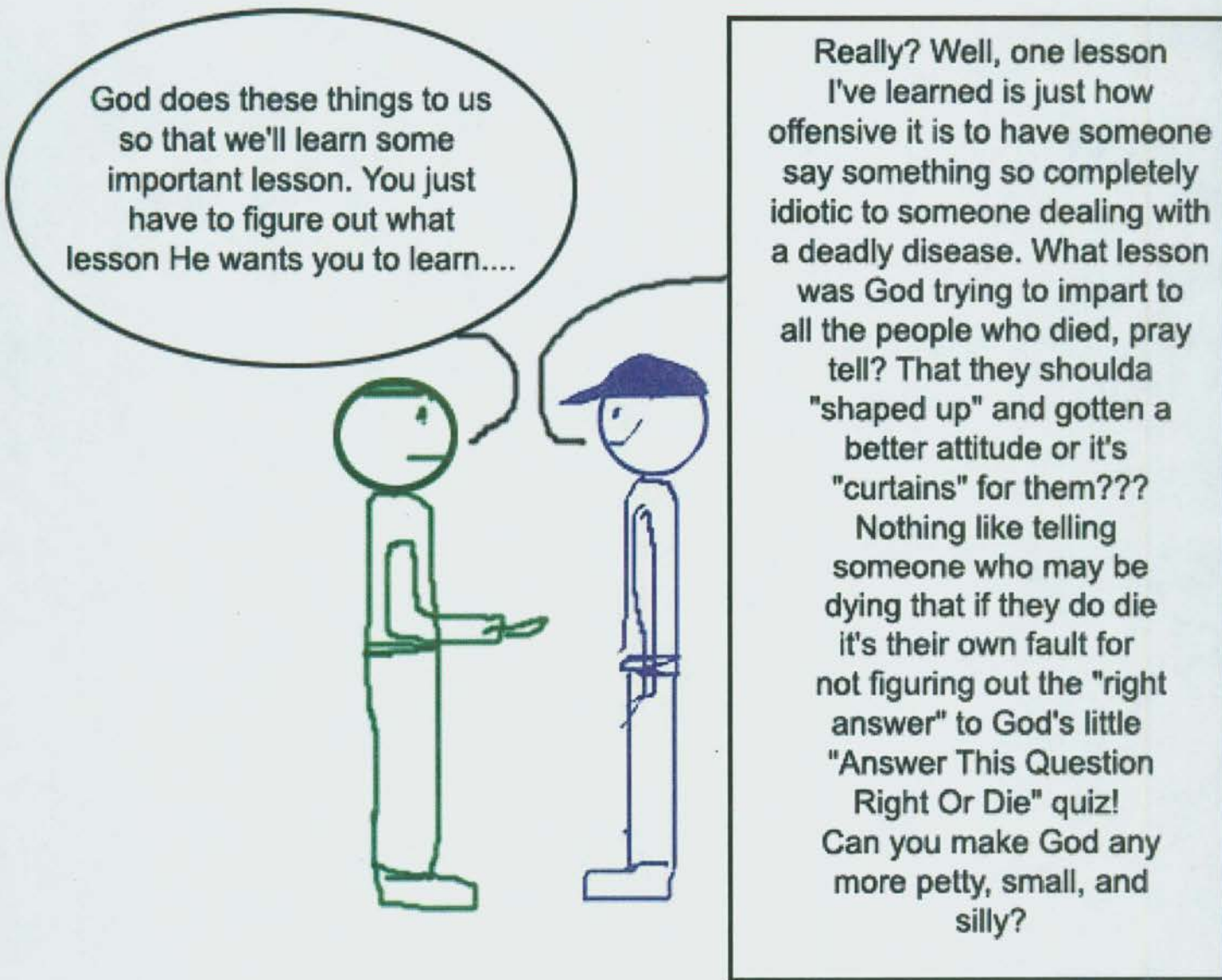
Well-meaning people will feel compelled to try to help you reconcile to an early demise.
It's just really poor form to try to find a bright side to someone else's demise.
Trust me on this...

As long as you have your sense of humor, you'll be in great shape!

I'll be cracking jokes on my death bed. That doesn't mean I enjoy being there or that I'm in great shape. It just means I'm not dead 'til they plant me!



Nothing like a good platitude to make you feel like maybe death won't be so bad after all....

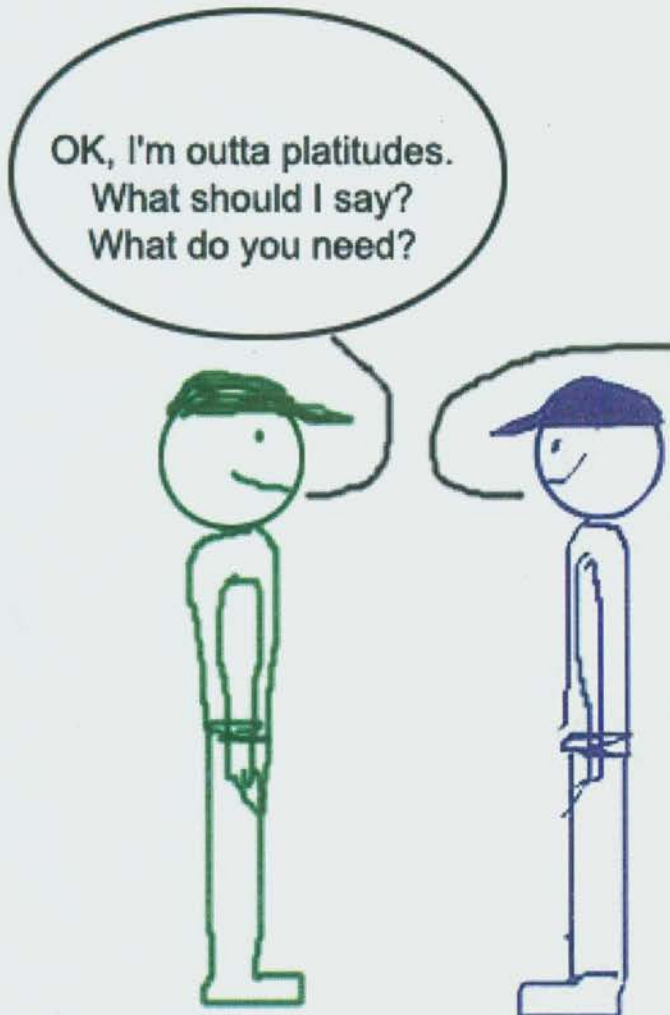


God does these things to us so that we'll learn some important lesson. You just have to figure out what lesson He wants you to learn....

Really? Well, one lesson I've learned is just how offensive it is to have someone say something so completely idiotic to someone dealing with a deadly disease. What lesson was God trying to impart to all the people who died, pray tell? That they shoulda "shaped up" and gotten a better attitude or it's "curtains" for them???

Nothing like telling someone who may be dying that if they do die it's their own fault for not figuring out the "right answer" to God's little "Answer This Question Right Or Die" quiz! Can you make God any more petty, small, and silly?

Beware of well-intentioned, but doltish advice from your friends who still labor under the illusion that "Things Happen For A Reason" and "If Only You Can Figure Out the Reason, Everything Will Be OK."



OK, I'm outta platitudes.
What should I say?
What do you need?

Gee, thanks for asking.
First, I'll take a hug!
Then, just look me in the eye and tell me how this really sucks and how sorry you are that I'm going through this. Say a prayer or two for me and my family.
Don't treat me like I'm already dead.
Don't be afraid to ask how I am.
Don't get hung up on the fact that I may die. It sucks. It pisses me off. It saddens me. It's like having to leave a good party early. Get pissed off with me. Weep with me. Laugh with me. I plan to raise hell in heaven (whenever I get there). We can start now!

We're all gonna die. No matter what we do. Even if we do everything "right."
Don't avoid your friends with cancer because they remind you of this fact.
It's good to be reminded. It's called "perspective."



**It's hard for them to stand with us. They don't know what to say.
Fear they'll say the wrong thing. Worry that if it can happen to
us, it can happen to them. Treasure the ones who can endure
the uncertainty and fear...the one's who can journey with us
in this dark place. Let them ALL support and love you in their own way.
Forgive the ones who can't.**

Tumor Cell Cemetery

Here lie the bodies of every tumor cell that was in my body. None lived to tell the story of the Battle of the Big Spleen.



The Cancer Center Waiting Room Two Years Later

I walk boldly, strongly, across the entrance lobby where once I was pushed in a wheel chair. At the registration desk, I wait standing, instead of sitting, as I have done ever since I became strong enough to do this. It's partly that I don't want to take a chair from someone who needs it, but mostly it's defiance.

This time, for the first time, my hair is thick and curly, my body is strong and muscular from hiking and whitewater kayaking, my cheeks glow with health. I find myself trying to suppress it, this healthiness that suffuses me, but it blasts forth against my will like a physical force that will not be subdued.

I feel awkward, out of place here, as though my presence is an affront to those who struggle to stand, who wretch, who wait to learn if the chemo is working. I descend into emotional chaos as I repeatedly pass courage, fear, strength, hope, and despair in the marble-floored hallways and cushioned waiting room. Tears well up from hidden springs of compassion and helpless rage. I struggle to suppress them. If they see me crying, they'll think I've had bad news or that I've just learned I've relapsed. They need to see hope, the possibility of life and health.

Guilt. I feel guilt for looking and feeling so healthy in this place. To counter it, I tell myself that I could learn today that I have relapsed, but a more knowing part of me that does not rely on CT scans or people in white coats is already celebrating my continued good health.

Most of all, I feel anger, impotent anger, at the God who stands by us, loves us, and allows us to die young or in pain from a disease that is so horrible in its mechanism and effect. The refrain my visits has become a question that I had never asked God for myself: Why, God? Why?

I want to hug them all. I want to hold them close and give them my energy, my support, my compassion. It isn't nearly enough. They are all survivors, all heroes...whether they live or die. They deserve so much more...for the fights they fight, for the battles they win and the battles they lose.

We all deserve more, whether we have a life-threatening disease or not, because in the final analysis, we all have a life-threatening disease.

I suppose it is one of life's not so little ironies that for some of us, it is in dying that we finally learn how to live and to love. Unfortunately, wandering in that shadowy country has not immunized me from petty annoyances, bad hair days, or pique at my fellow man's folly, ignorance or avarice. But I come through these mundane moments and arrive at gratitude and tolerance much more quickly than I used to.

I just wish I could cure everyone who fights this or any disease. Better yet, prevent it in the first place.

Or maybe it's enough just to figure out how to live fully, like I'm dying, even when I don't seem to be.