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## The Courage of Friends

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A curmudgeon draws on an inexhaustible amount of AA power



I have been sober for twenty-three years. It is often voiced in AA meetings that God will find you a parking spot, "right in front of the meeting" and that nothing bad can happen to you once you're sober. When I came into AA, I believed this too. Now, I do not think God is at all interested in my daily existence. I believe there is some Higher Power, because I cannot otherwise explain why I haven't had a drink. But God is not some loving power or guiding force in my life. God makes decisions and I live with them. Last July I was diagnosed with colon/rectal cancer. I had been suffering with a chronic illness for some time before this and He wasn't very helpful. I prayed, but God did not cure me of this malady, nor did he send doctors to help me, although God knows I saw enough of them. Nor did he supply me with the kind of courage I needed to face my dilemma. My friends are a different story.

I have wonderful friends in AA, but I had no idea how wonderful. After I found out about the cancer, the first phone call I made was to my friends Vic. Vic had cancer the year before and he immediately invited me to stay with him for my first couple of weeks out of the hospital, knowing I wouldn't be able to take care of myself. This was only the beginning. I had friends call who I had not heard from in years, people I didn't know called every day and others volunteered to do anything I might need. I was quite surprised at the response to my illness. I had always seen myself as a bit of a curmudgeon and thought that people tolerated me more than appreciated me. I was learning otherwise. It is very difficult for me to accept help. It is easy to give help because in some ways that doesn't really involve me. But accepting help in a gracious way from people who are offering it graciously is a much more difficult task.

When I began to take the cure--an operation, chemo, and radiation therapy--I was told it would be a six-to-eight-month process. I was not looking forward to the "journey."

At this time, I had a young, healthy girlfriend named Anne-Margaret. We had been together for two years, and it was the best time I had ever had. She was lovely and full of life and wanted to do everything. Her mother called it flying around. "Anne-Margaret's out flying around," she would say. Anne Margaret kept me from taking myself too seriously and, along with my AA friends, made my life bearable--almost enjoyable.

When I was ready to go home, my sister came to look after me for a week. People from AA called and left messages and sent e-mails every day to find out if I was all right and if there was something they could do. They brought over sandwiches, books, magazines, and videotapes. When they found out I didn't have a DVD player, they brought one and then brought me DVDs. One AA friend from the city where I sobered up flew down to clean my apartment and another offered to help pay my phone bill.

During this time, I had to go to the dentist for root canal work. Then, after I returned home, my knee went out and I had to undergo arthroscopic surgery six weeks after the cancer surgery. I was limping with a cane and I couldn't lift my hands above my head because of the pain in my stomach from the cancer surgery. I tried to delay the knee surgery, but the chemotherapy had to start within a given period after the cancer surgery in order to have the most impact.

Chemotherapy was given to me in a place called the 'Chemo Co-op.' I would go into the hospital on Monday at noon and they would hook me up to an IV, and I would take fifty hours of chemo. Then they would send me home on Wednesday afternoon. The chemo forced me to stay in bed from the Wednesday they released me to the following Monday or Tuesday. I was then allowed to recover and repeat the process the following week. At the Co-op, Anne-Margaret and AA friends came every day. And they came in droves. They brought books and magazines, food and incomparable warmth and companionship. Tom B. came every day with the papers and stayed most of the day. We would sit at the end of a row of chairs, four or five or more of us at a time. We called it the "talking and fooling around" section. Cancer areas can be very bleak.

"Who are all those guys?" asked my doctor, an oncologist for many years, during my weekly appointment. "When I met you, I said I was in AA. They are mostly from AA," I said. "Not Anne-Margaret?" he guessed. "No, not Anne-Margaret, but most of

"No, not Anne-Margaret, but most of the rest." He said it was remarkable because often when people get cancer their friends don't know how to behave. "These guys don't know how to behave." I said. He said that wasn't what he meant, that often cancer patients' friends just disappeared. He said that the loyalty of my friends impressed him.

This course of chemo lasted for eight weeks, and I was given three weeks off before the chemo/radiation started. I was amazed at how quickly my strength returned. This was the beginning of November.

On November 24, 2004, Anne-Margaret developed meningitis, and she died December 4. Because of a set of very strange circumstances, and the tenacity of her disease, by the time I reached her she was already in a coma. They wouldn't allow me to hold her or kiss her good-bye. I was devastated. She had been so wonderful to me in every way. She had been calm through my tirades and patient during my tantrums. Everything seemed doable as long as I knew she was there. Now things were upside down.

My AA friends rallied again. They offered rides to the hospital in New Jersey so I could sit with her, then rides to the wake and the funeral. No one said "no" or "why," they just did it without my asking. They helped me through a set of impossibilities that I could not have gone through alone. I did not drink and I have not died, yet.

I am about halfway through my cancer treatments and the treatment from my AA friends continues. I miss Anne-Margaret constantly. I could never replace such a unique girl and the fact that she loved me surprises me still. But, of course, none of this would have happened without AA.

Shortly after being diagnosed with cancer, I was put in touch with a guy in AA who had experienced a similar situation. I asked him now that he had recovered, if it had changed him at all. "Oh, absolutely. Physically, morally, spiritually, definitely." "Really," I said. "Oh yes. It took me almost six months to become the same selfish, self-centered bastard I'd always been." I wonder if the changes that have occurred in me will stick--more patience, more trust, less animosity, less suspicion--or will they fade away like my scar, leaving just a very faint trace.

I do not believe there is a loving God working in my life. I think the job has become too much for him. But I cannot live without some kind of spiritual life, so I pray to Anne-Margaret for help, and I have an inexhaustible amount of AA power to draw from for which I will be eternally grateful.

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