

# CLARITY

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by Joe Smerkers

The call came at about 7:45 am on Thursday, October 31, 1996. It was from my family physician. He said "he had gotten the results of my chest x-rays and that we needed to talk. I should come in."

I started to go back to work but couldn't. So I got in my car and drove over to his office. He invited me in as soon as he saw me - they had discovered a "mass" on my left lung. He assured me that this was not a "death sentence" and that the prayers of him and his wife were with Maggie and me. His kindness was very much appreciated.

He stated that I seemed to be taking the results very well. I informed him that I believed in fate and destiny, and that this was God's will for me.

His office arranged for a chest CT for later that day, and also arranged for an appointment with a cardiothoracic surgeon for Tuesday, November 5.

The next five days were to say the least interesting. For some unknown reason I wasn't scared. Maybe it hadn't really hit me yet. How could I have IT. I'm young, in good health, and have never smoked. Nor did my family have a history of IT. A "mass" could be anything.

Maybe I truly believed what I had told the doctor about fate and destiny. Maybe I was hoping that on Tuesday it all would go away.

The news, the threat, the unknown drew Maggie and I closer together. For as long as I have known her the chance to help others, the chance to give of herself to others has always brought out the best in her. Whether she needed to do it, or I needed to receive it, is really irrelevant. The time for holding, the time for caring, the time for loving that had been gradually diminished by daily obligations and responsibilities of life was now magically rediscovered.

We were as one. At peace with our circumstances, our lives. Confident that our love would see us through this, as it has through other challenges. The madness of family life was gone. The boys seemed to behave better. Was it them? Or was it us?

On Tuesday Maggie and I arrived at the surgeon's office at the appointed time. We were immediately impressed, and gained confidence, by the professionalism of the receptionist. I seemed to be more 'in touch' with what was happening around me now.

A resident did a few tests and withdrew from our examination room to review the x-rays and CT with the surgeon. When they returned the surgeon said that the mass on my lung was 'suspicious' and he wanted to do a biopsy the next day. Things seemed to be moving very quickly now.

We arrived at the hospital at 6:30 am the next day. Drugs are great. I got a shot after changing into one of those funny looking gowns and remember very little after that except waking up in recovery and hearing a nurse say, "the results were negative." I was too out-of-it to really grasp the meaning.

After I was taken to a room on the sixth floor, Maggie and a close friend came to visit. When I became alert enough to talk Maggie confirmed that the results of the biopsy of the lymph nodes was negative and they had scheduled lung surgery for Thursday, November 14th to remove the primary tumor.

During the afternoon the radiology department did routine rule-out tests. Maggie and I were confident that the worse was over. I was going home the next morning.

Maggie came early. That's when the surgeon's physician assistant, David, entered my room and gave the results of the prior days tests. They had discovered some 'suspicious' secondary sites on the brain and wanted to investigate further.

We agreed and MRI tests were conducted later that day. Afterwards Maggie left to take care of the boys. She returned again early the next morning, Friday, to drive me home.

As if on cue David entered the room to once again give us the results of the prior days tests. He gave us more.

The results of the biopsy reported on Wednesday were preliminary. The final results were positive, showing that the cancer had metastasized and infected the lymph glands. The MRI showed two relatively newly formed brain lesions. A brain surgeon thought that the larger one could be removed fairly easily and safely, and radiation would take care of the other. David asked us to stay awhile longer to talk with two Oncologists, one for radiation and one for chemotherapy. We did.

He returned later with the cardiothoracic surgeon. We were told that surgery was not recommended and that the prescribed treatment would be radiation and chemo. Surgery would depend on remission of the cancer in the lymph glands.

Clarity had arrived. I had stage four, non-small cell lung cancer. The median survival is one year.

Maggie and I did what we could on the ride home to keep ourselves together. To offer each other hope. To remember that the median is a statistic. That I am an individual. And that somewhere at end of that statistical curve there are survivors.

I have known for some time now that a 'severe test' was forthcoming before I could achieve my destiny. But whoa I never dreamed it was going to be THIS big a test.

*What you still need to know is this: before a dream is realized, the Soul of the World tests everything that was learned along the way. It does this not because it is evil, but so that we can, in addition to realizing our dreams, master the lessons we've learned as we've moved toward that dream. That's the point at which most people give up. It's the point at which, as we say in the language of the desert, one 'dies of thirst just when the palm trees*

*have appeared on the horizon.' Every search begins with beginner's luck. And every search ends with the victor's being severely tested."*

*[Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist.]*

In spite of my circumstances I consider myself a lucky person. Because of my work with Leaders Anonymous, because of the love we have as a family, because of the friends that I have been given, because of the faith that I have found I am today at a place of peace and calm. A place I call Sobriety of the Spirit.

I have been given a special opportunity to understand more than most the meaning of what a friend said at lunch today. "Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow is HIS. Today is all we have."

I pray, and I ask for your prayers, not for recovery. For that is not mine, nor yours, to request. It is for HIM to give. I ask only for the strength - mental, physical and spiritual - to maintain the clarity and sobriety that I have been given.

A few weeks ago on a beautiful late October afternoon I was walking our dog Freckles up and down our driveway. It's a chance, I have discovered, to reflect. To get in touch with what Coelho aptly calls, The Soul of the World.

I found myself removed from the world around me. But still part of it. Whatever circumstances that day held were gone. I was one with the universe. Anything and everything was possible. I was free. For a brief few moments I experienced a clarity I had never experienced before. Then it was gone.

Last Friday I found it again. As Maggie and I returned home from the hospital I got out of the car and felt the wind on my face. It felt strangely different than it had ever felt before. It was warm and soothing. Oh how many times had I taken the wind for granted. Oh how many times had I complained about the wind. And now, oh how great it felt.

As Maggie has suggested maybe we are the fortunate ones who have gotten the message. Pay attention to what's really important. For yesterday is gone; tomorrow is HIS; today is all we have.

I am not the first - nor the last - to feel the wind, to find clarity, to attain sobriety. I suppose for some that is enough. And maybe I should settle for it. But my destiny I believe is still to be written. And whether it unfolds in a few short months or over future decades is not important. For I have felt the wind. And the wind will guide me.

*Santiago reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles. [Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist.]*

I am excited and full of hope for our future. I still believe in Camelot and windmills and dreams, and making the world a better place to live and work.

Come join me. And feel the wind.