

Chapter 4 – On My Knees

I generally don't start my Christmas shopping until a couple weeks before Christmas. As the years have gone by though, I have done less and less actual shopping. Thanks to technology, we can pretty much shop from home on our computers or other devices. As for me, I have tended to go with gift cards lately. They are easy to buy and it allows people to get what they want, alleviating the need to go to the store to return unwanted gifts. Sure, it may be a bit impersonal, but it's a lot more practical. Furthermore, as we get older we prefer experiences over things, so I have been giving gift cards for restaurants instead of retail stores. I am now in the camp that prefers experiences over things! In addition, due to being unemployed and wanting to save money, for Christmas 2013 I created my own Christmas card with an original Christmas poem. I would share it, but since I am thinking about actually trying to make a little money writing greeting and holiday cards, I'll keep it secret for now. Maybe you'll see it in the store some day!

I had just finished creating my Christmas cards and completed my gift card buying spree when I received absolutely devastating news. Over the years my friends and I have frequently gotten together to watch sports, play poker and go on sports/gambling related trips. My friend Brian was almost always there. He was one of the mainstays at all of our gatherings. On December 19, 2013, I received an email from him saying that he had gone to the emergency room for stomach pain. After the doctors ran some tests, he was told he had colon cancer. I was just mortified, stunned and in utter disbelief...and very sad. I was diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) many years ago, and I remember one night when we were playing cards Brian mentioned he was having stomach problems. The symptoms sounded a lot like mine, so I told him he probably had IBS. Who could have ever imagined that not only was it worse than IBS, but he had a tumor growing in his colon at the time. By the time he was diagnosed, the tumor was the size of a grapefruit. My God.

So all of my joy and excitement for Christmas 2013 was dashed in an instant. I would still see my family, eat great food, have good conversations, exchange gifts, see my nieces and nephews and hug them and play with them, listen to wonderful Christmas music and go to church for the Christmas mass. But all of this was done with a very heavy heart. After Brian told us about his cancer, I went online to do a little research. I found a website that described the different stages of cancer. After reading about the symptoms, I came to the conclusion that he was at stage three, maybe stage four. When I saw that the survival rate was about 6%, tears began cascading down my cheeks. We all were very confident that he would get through this, but that 6% survival rate just sliced through me like a knife. Was I going to lose one of my best friends? I mean, was I *really* going to lose one of my best friends? All of the lyrics of the Christmas songs and all of the scriptures of the masses during the holiday season suddenly had a lot more meaning and significance. There was no way I could be happy this Christmas season. It would not be the most wonderful time of the year.

While I was thinking about what I was going to do for New Year's Eve, my friend Brian was preparing to start chemo therapy after the New Year. While I was thinking of New Year's resolutions, he was preparing for a whole lot of pain and suffering. While I was wondering what my next job might be like, since I still had not found one, he was starting to think about what heaven might be like. Through all of this, I started to reminisce. I started to think back about all the great times we had together, all of the crazy times in college, all of the road trips, all of the Vegas trips, all of the sporting events, all of the late

night poker games, all of the weddings, all of the joy and laughter we had shared. Then, the lyrics to one of my songs spoke to me:

There are only so many times in your life, when you realize what you've got is good.

I was starting to realize that what I had in Brian was a damn good friend. Always laughing, always jovial, always smiling. We called him Guy Smiley because he smiled so much. He was just a really nice, fun guy to hang out with. Sure we all give each other crap once in a while, that's just what guys do. But he never had anything bad to say about anyone personally, just good old fashioned ribbing. In addition, since most of my friends had moved further away, his centrally located house was where we usually got together as the years went by. I am sure his wife just dreaded the days when Brian said "Honey, I'm having the guys over for poker tonight!" When we got together, we were often loud, crazy and messy. Pizza boxes, beer bottles and bottle caps strewn all over the place...yeah, a real treat for a wife! But we had fun. Boy, did we have fun!

Even after Brian's diagnosis, we still had fun. He had us over for poker and sports a few weeks after his diagnosis. Needless to say, it was a bit awkward at first. You want to ask questions, but you know it's probably best just to go about the normal routine and let him talk about the situation if he wishes. Are you in a lot of pain? Did they give you a time frame? How long will chemo last? How much will it cost? Will you need surgery? Can you eat normally? What are you thinking about spiritually? Soooo...many...questions. Instead, we just sat down and started watching the game and chatting like normal. But that was after the hard part, which was entering the house and hugging his wife. That was really tough. She seemed to be doing well and taking things in stride, but we both started to cry anyway. I tried to be strong and hold it back, but it didn't work. After that I walked slowly down the stairs, not knowing what I was going to see or what shape Brian would be in or, quite honestly, what emotional shape I would be in when I got down to that last step and turned the corner to face him. All went well though, and eventually he started to talk about his cancer, but only for a brief time. The rest of the time we just focused on watching the game and enjoying each other's company.

Brian's chemo seemed to be going fairly well, all things considered. But a couple months later the doctors decided that things had gotten worse and he needed surgery. His colon was shrinking and becoming partly obstructed. The secret, though, was that the chemo therapy was not being used to destroy the tumor, it was being used to *shrink* the tumor. Apparently, the tumor was too big to remove it with surgery initially, so they had to shrink it first, but since things were getting worse they decided to perform the surgery sooner than expected. His sister then sent out a message telling us that Brian was going to have half of his stomach and a good portion of his colon removed. My heart was crushed. I had my stomach problems with IBS, but over the years I had pretty much gotten my regular diet back. Not eating for several days in a row because I was so bloated really sucked, but at least I didn't need any of my major organs removed. Everything in my life at this point just didn't seem to matter. I was unemployed, I had lost my former band leader Big Walter Smith, I had been convicted of DWI...none of it mattered one bit. I just could not stop thinking and worrying about my friend.

As if this was not bad enough, my father had been dealing with problems with his legs toward the end of 2013. He had an angiogram and the doctors said they could perform surgery to unclog his arteries. However, they said he would likely need surgery again in five years, so they just told him to live with it until the pain got intolerable, then they would bring him in for surgery. In late February 2014, just about the time Brian told us he was going to have surgery, I got an email from my mother saying that my father needed to go to the doctor as his leg pain was getting too difficult to bear. At the appointment,

the doctor told my father that he needed surgery to save his leg. Suddenly, I had not one, but two, reasons to be on my knees, begging God to bring my friend and my father through their surgeries. My pleas for the Lord to help me find my purpose in life had taken a back seat.

On March 7, 2014, my father went in for surgery to replace the main artery in his leg. They were going to use part of the blood vessel from his upper leg to form a vessel for his lower leg. Although the doctors had done this many times before and expected a good outcome, any time you mess around with main arteries it is cause for serious concern. We brought Dad to the hospital and did our best to keep him in good spirits before the surgery. After they rolled him through the operating room doors, we all turned right around and headed straight for the praying room. We got on our knees and said the rosary, asking the Blessed Virgin to look over our beloved father during his time on the operating table and for a quick recovery. My mother is an incredibly devout Catholic. I am not as devout as she is, but I do go to church and pray almost every night, and so do my sisters. Our faith was going to bring us through this difficult moment, and we leaned on it heavily. I asked the Lord to comfort and protect my father. I was not ready to lose him yet...nor will I ever be.

The surgery ended up being a success, but Dad needed to stay in the hospital for about a week to recover. For someone who loves to be outdoors in the garden, planting trees or working in his woodshop, this was not easy. As a matter of fact, I think the first day after his surgery he was told not to get out of the bed unless he had to go to the bathroom, and that he had to call for assistance to use the bathroom. Sure enough, he got out of the bed and started to walk down the hall! Ugh! He just wanted to get out of there in the worst way! But after a couple days he understood the situation and followed orders better and he seemed to realize he will just have to be patient with things. After a week of recovery, there was a choice to be made. He could either go home, which would put a heavy burden on my mother to take care of him and monitor him constantly, or he could go to a nursing home to recover and get professional care. He obviously wanted to go home, but we thought the best thing for both him and my mother would be for him to go to the nursing home. He did not agree, but we overruled him. For the first time I could remember, my father had been overruled by his family!

About a week after his surgery, we transferred Dad to a nursing home to recover. He was really unhappy about this, but he knew it was probably for the best. Unfortunately, they said he would need to be in the nursing home for about a month. A month?! Why would he have to be there so long? Well, when I saw his foot, I understood. It was twice its normal size! Due to all the blood flowing through his new vein, his foot had swelled up considerably. He said it hurt at first, but over time the pain subsided, even though it looked really painful! I visited Dad several times at the nursing home to keep him company and lift his spirits. Several of his friends stopped by as well. As I walked down the hall to his room to visit him, I looked into the other rooms. What I saw was so incredibly depressing, people just lying there either sleeping or staring at the wall or watching TV or with heads slumped over and mouths open. I was most certainly not looking forward to the day I may have to be in a nursing home. At the same time, it definitely gave me a new sense of appreciation for my health and relative youth and gave me a new zest for life. After I leave this place, I can do anything I want, I thought. They can't. I felt so unbelievably sorry for them.

One visit sticks out in my mind. One Sunday, I went to the nursing home to attend mass and have lunch with Dad. I was a bit late, so when I went to his room he was not there. I asked a nurse where he was, and she said he had probably already wheeled himself to mass down the hallway. So I went to the chapel and looked around, but I could not find him. I went back to the nurse and told him he was not there. She came back to the chapel with me and pointed him out. I still could not see him! She pointed

again, saying “He’s right there, in the wheelchair, in a white T-shirt.” I absolutely could not believe my eyes. Yes, there he was, sitting there in his wheelchair, listening to the priest say mass, and I totally did not recognize my own father! Quite simply, he did not look like my father. He looked like an old man. Well, he was 72, but he never looked older than he did sitting in that wheelchair in shorts and a white T-shirt, with scraggly gray hair and sprouting a bit of a grayish beard. I suddenly realized that time was really flying by, that he was getting old, and that I was getting old too. It was not a happy realization.

Dad was miserable in the nursing home, but he was saddened even further when, about a week after he was admitted, he got the news that his aunt had passed away. Good grief! This is just getting ridiculous, I thought. My friend was about to go in for surgery, my father was recovering from surgery, and now a funeral? Cripes. So it was off to the nursing home to pick up Dad for the funeral. We wheeled him into the church where he got to see all of his relatives. Hmmmm. Interesting. What Dad needed at this point more than anything else was to get out of that nursing home and see family and friends, and his aunt’s funeral provided him that chance. Maybe God had brought Dad’s aunt home at this very moment in time so that Dad could get out and see his relatives. I wondered. Even so, it was more bad news added to the pile that seemed to be growing by the week. I could only imagine what was going through my father’s mind as we brought him back to that depressing nursing home after the funeral. He was cooped up in this awful place and now his aunt was dead. It only increased his urge to get back home as soon as possible.

As my father was recovering from his surgery, the college basketball tournament started. Every year my friends and I travel to Las Vegas for a weekend of watching basketball, betting on sports, gambling, drinking and the whole bit. But this year was different. I had no job, so I was not able to go. My friend Brian could not go either because he was preparing for surgery. So watching the games on TV at home was going to have to suffice. I really needed to get my mind off of all of the health problems, as well as the job search and my data analytics online course I was taking. I planned to watch as many games as possible. I am not exactly a basketball junkie, but come tournament time, I guess that’s an accurate description! So I settled in with a beverage and some lunch and hit the ON button on my remote control. Um, yeah, nothing happened! It would not turn on! I hit it again...nothing. Again and again and again...nothing. What in the hell??!!!

All I wanted to do at this point in the history of the universe was sit down and watch basketball...and I was being robbed!!!! I needed my escape!! I did a little investigating, opened the little control knob door and tried to figure out what was wrong. No dice. So I did the only thing I thought would work...I hit the ON button again!! Each time I did this, the TV would turn on for a brief second, and then it would turn off again. Oh my goodness this was getting furiously frustrating! Finally, after about 50 presses of the ON button, it went on...and *stayed* on!!! A thought suddenly entered my head. If I wanted to watch the basketball tournament, I was going to have to leave the TV on...for the entire weekend!!! That’s exactly what I did. Even when I went to visit Dad at the nursing home, the TV was still on. It wasn’t until the first weekend of games had been completed that I finally called the repairman. He came over and fixed it lickety-split, for a tidy \$250 of course. But I had my TV, and my escape, back. He said I was lucky that he had the part in stock. Yeah, thank God!

A week later, after several trips to the nursing home to visit my father as he recovered from leg surgery and after watching a bazillion basketball games, my friend Brian went in for his stomach surgery on March 31, 2014. As with my father’s surgery, I prayed really hard the night before. It really warmed my heart when I got an email from Brian just hours before his surgery telling me he was sorry to hear about my Dad’s condition. With all Brian was going through, he was still able to think of someone else in their

time of need. Brian's surgery went well, but it was hard to read his sister's email explaining that they took out one third of his stomach and three quarters of his colon and had to reroute his small intestine. She also said his epidural catheter and his nasogastric tube (in his nose) were not placed properly, causing him a lot of pain and discomfort. It made me cry again. I had no idea if this was going to completely change his life in terms of diet or if he would need one of those bags or whatever. But again, I did not want to ask. I just got on my knees again and prayed that he would recover quickly and get back to normal. I wanted to play poker and watch sports with him again.

We got that chance on April 7 as another friend and I went to the hospital to watch the national championship basketball game on a tiny, crappy hospital TV. Even though he was lying in a hospital bed after major surgery, he still had put money on the game! I did too, but winning \$100 betting on Connecticut could not even begin to sooth my soul during such a difficult time. Besides, the whole point of betting on sports, other than winning money, is rooting for your team to win. Being in a hospital and seeing the condition Brian was in prevented me from enjoying the whole rooting experience. After a week of gradually getting better, Brian was out of the hospital and had the guys over to watch our beloved University of Minnesota Golden Gophers men's hockey team play in the national championship game. Although the Gophers got crushed in the title game, it was great to be with Brian and the guys. Heck, he was even eating pizza! I was so relieved and was hopeful that the worst had passed.

A few days after Brian's surgery, my father was scheduled to come home from the nursing home. I say "scheduled" because, wouldn't you know it, the forecast called for a massive snow storm on the day he was supposed to leave the nursing home. After a few calls to my parents it was clear that Dad did not want to wait one more day to get out. He wanted out now! So Mom plowed through all the snow in their long driveway with her car and went and picked up Dad, while the rest of us shoveled and plowed our own driveways. I wanted to be there to help take him home, but the terrible weather kept me home. I got the call from Mom once they were home. Dad was finally free! A couple weeks later we celebrated Easter. Needless to say, we had an awful lot to be thankful for on Easter Sunday.

On June 18, 2014, my friend Brian sent us an email stating that at his checkup the doctor did not find any more cancer to treat, at least none that was detectable on the CT scan. On July 23 he emailed us saying he was done with chemo therapy and was thinking about heading to Vegas in December. My God, my friend was going to live and have a fairly normal life, I thought. He beat cancer! We were all so unbelievably happy. Even though I was unemployed and my bank account was dwindling, I was thinking that if the guys were going to Vegas in December that I would join them. Although he was done with chemo and was pretty much cancer free, there was no telling if it would come back, and there was no telling how much time I had left to spend with my friend. A few months went by and we got together a few times for good old fashioned cards and watching football. He was even drinking beer! Things were pretty much back to normal.

As the holidays approached and I was once again on my gift card buying spree and listening to fabulous Christmas music, I peered outside my window and noticed Whitey gathering some snacks for the winter, and once again getting a little plump. A sense of peace came over me again. My Dad was back home and my friend was cancer free. It seemed like things were finally on the upswing. I was thinking this was going to be a good holiday, as I was so thankful my father and my friend were getting back to health. Unfortunately, I got yet another piece of coal in my Christmas stocking. What's the deal with all of this coal????!!!

Lessons from Chapter 4

Gift cards are easy to buy and the recipient never has to return anything to the store!

You can save money by creating your own Christmas cards.

Mass and Christmas music can be very therapeutic during difficult times.

Lean on your faith during tough times, ask the Lord to get you through. He can provide more than you can possibly imagine!

Take a moment to reflect back on all the good times you had with your friends.

There are only so many times in your life when you realize what you've got is good.

People that don't say bad things about other people are very much liked.

If the guys are coming over for poker, the wife may want to leave the house!

During difficult times like battling cancer, it's probably best to not ask questions and just let the person bring it up if they wish.

If you have a health problem, chances are somebody else has a worse health problem than you.

All of the problems in your life don't matter one bit when you are worried about someone going through a really difficult health problem and you are not sure how much time you have left to spend with them.

If you are in a hospital, always follow the doctor's orders!

You don't fully appreciate your freedom until you lose it.

If you have a loved one or a friend in a hospital or nursing home, definitely go visit them. It really means a lot to them that you take the time out of your day to visit. It shows that you care. That is true love.

You don't fully appreciate your youth and good health until you see others who have lost theirs.

If you look hard enough, you can find a silver lining in bad moments, like when my Dad's aunt died, which gave him the opportunity to get out of the nursing home and see his friends and relatives.

Cherish every moment you have with family and friends. You never know how much time you have left to spend with them.

All bad things eventually pass.