



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## living with cancer: awake and unafraid

**B**uddhist Monk Tich Nat Han has a wonderful saying that goes something like this: “A person with a toothache has a very important piece of knowledge—how wonderful it is NOT to have a toothache.” People with cancer have an entire world of such knowledge.

Being diagnosed with a life threatening disease is a bit like being awakened from a dream: all that you have taken for granted is seen as it truly is—a time-limited gift. This knowledge is a blessing and a curse. It is one of the great paradoxes that most of us only fully appreciate what we have when we are in danger of losing it.

We walk through life taking for granted our own lives and the presence of those around us. We live, as though there will always be a tomorrow, when in fact none of us ever has that assurance. Waking up to the miracle that is life is the blessing of a life threatening diagnosis—a blessing that is shared by all whose lives are touched by the illness. However, this blessing comes at a huge cost—coming face to face with our terror of death.

Facing our own death or the death of a loved one is the hardest thing we humans do—some believe that being able to contemplate our own death is what makes us unique in the animal world. How do we face our mortality? Most of us simply don't deal with it.

Some of us numb ourselves with our drugs of choice—alcohol, narcotics, food, work, exercise—anything done to excess and in the service of avoidance. Some of us blindly accept the promise of an afterlife and avoid searching for our own answers. I believe that the most brave and wise souls among us somehow manage to accept the fear of not knowing and trust that all will be okay.

Living fully in the present can be the gift that comes from accepting the transitory nature of life. Each of us has had moments when we were fully present—words have failed far better writers than I when it comes to describing such moments. At those times we become aware of how full and rich life is. We appreciate both the immense joy and sorrow that is present and that knowledge is poignant. Our hearts are open and the love that surrounds us moves into us and through us. We can laugh and fully appreciate the good and be a little cushioned from the bad because it is transitory.

I think of my friend Nancy who joked after her mastectomy

that she had had breast reduction—going from two to one. I think of Rocco, who at the end of a valiant struggle with brain cancer, said he did not want to die, but that he had had moments of perfect love.

Letting go of attachments is a Buddhist concept that is often misperceived as not caring. In fact for me it is the deepest form of caring. It is love for its own sake—without attachment to outcome, without trying to control and direct. Letting go is what enables us to accept what is and love. Letting go enables us to accept our mortality, live in the present moment for as long as we are able, and then to move on into the next adventure.

Some may believe that to die unaware in our sleep would be a blessing, but unless we have come to grips with our own mortality, we will have missed a challenge that makes us fully human. A better wish I believe is one that Quaker writer John Yungblut prayed and asked all who knew him to pray as he approached the end of his life. He asked that he be awake and unafraid at the time of his death. Those present at his death felt his prayer had been answered. Awake and unafraid—what better way to live and die?

For many, the diagnosis of cancer comes as an unexpected shock, out of the blue. For others the diagnosis is a slow revelation based on accumulation of evidence. For some there has been a quiet knowing that something was wrong and the diagnosis comes as confirmation of that inner knowing.

For the patient, family, and friends, the world shifts a bit on its axis. The paths everyone thought they were following converge and take a different direction. Entirely new medical worlds open with whole new languages. Faced with overwhelming amounts of information and confused by feelings of shock, anger, and fear the family is forced to make life-altering decisions.

The person with the diagnosis is in grave danger of becoming “a patient”—stripped of personal identity, a body to be treated. The most positive physical, emotional and spiritual outcomes are dependent on resisting that pull towards passivity. As in all of life, remembering who we are, maintaining our sense of self, staying centered and aware will enable us to move through the trauma in the best possible way.

Friends, family and spiritual support are vital in this—truly we “get by with a little help from our friends.”

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