

I Outlived My Doctor. Now What?

September 29, 2017

By Sheri Berman

This wasn't supposed to happen. I feel like I was just punched in the stomach. It was his job to make sure I was ok, survived my cancer and lived a long life. He researched all the late effects of my treatments, enrolled me in studies, informed me at every turn what I should watch for and how to be pro-active in my long term care. I never thought I would outlive him.

Recently, I found out that my radiation oncologist who I have known for 28 years passed away. He had metastatic cancer which apparently ravaged his body quickly. It didn't matter how educated he was, who he knew or the fact he had access to the most innovative and state of art treatments in the world. Nothing worked and he is gone. And way to soon.

When I first met him, I have to be honest, I was a bit nervous. He was quirky, often didn't make eye contact and was flipping through all my files seemingly looking for something. He was renowned in the field of Lymphoma and in my case, Hodgkin's disease. Patients came from all over the world to see him.

Shaking his head he told me my situation was serious and the odds he gave were not what I wanted to hear. I kept thinking "How do I break through with this guy, will he ever warm up?" What I didn't know was he would be one of the most compassionate doctors I would ever come across. He was practicing patient centered care decades before it was even a term.

My doctor spent hours getting to know me and even interviewed me in my home for the afternoon when he was writing a book. We ate brownies and drank tea and talked about life. I saw him at the tennis club and years later he was the one who sat with me and my husband when I was diagnosed with breast cancer though we didn't have an appointment . He walked me into a conference room and we talked about what we had been through and our fears for the future. The guy who seemed a bit frosty and unapproachable when we first met was taking time out of his schedule just to talk. He gave me his number so I could page him when my scans (determining the extent of the disease) were over so he could give me my results immediately after the tests (that another doctor ordered) because he knew I would worry. He truly loved and respected his patients.

Throughout the years I have had appointments with him and also seen him in professional settings as I engaged in patient experience work. Last year I was supposed to have an appointment with him and his secretary called to say he was no longer seeing patients though he would be in the hospital continuing his mentoring of residents and continuing his research but just a day or two a week. I assumed he was making time to do other things as he had young children despite his older years. I thought of sending a quick email but got distracted and figured at some point I would just reach back out. I had no idea he was sick. I took time for granted. And now I am sad, so sad. He was my protector and also my friend.

(continued)

We all take things for granted and life moves quickly. I didn't take my own advice and reach out when I was thinking about him. When you have had cancer twice you sometimes feel like you are racing against time which causes an urgency to do things while you can. And I fell into the trap of letting life pass me by. I just wish I could have told him how much his warmth, compassion and friendship meant to me and how he made such a scary time in my life just a little bit easier. He made me feel safe. We should all have a doctor like him.

On the death of a friend, we should consider that the fates through confidence have devolved on us the task of a double living, that we have henceforth to fulfill the promise of our friend's life also, in our own, to the world.

Henry David Thoreau

And so I will. I will never stop talking about his compassionate approach to caregiving and using his story to influence others to do the same.

[In Memoriam: Dr. Peter Mauch](#)