

INTRODUCTION: CANCER IS FUNNY

I unbutton my shirt to expose a chest so smooth it would've been the envy of the pimpled boy who came home from gym class and, after thumbing through his contraband *Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit Edition*, shaved off the dark hair breaking out all over his chest—and other places. He used his mom's pink razor, with a blade so dull it had left a line of rust on the soap tray in the shower. Like that sixth-grader, who suffered the urgency to fit in with the boys whose bodies were not yet outpacing the sex ed syllabus, I long to look and feel normal again.

I mention this irony to S—, my nurse. She smiles.

It's hard to make someone blush who wears rubber gloves for a living, but when you're a clergyman and everyone presumes your occupation makes you officious and tight-sphinctered, it's not so difficult to make them laugh.

I add to S— how my mother had no idea when she gave me a *Sports Illustrated* subscription for Christmas that one day every year, the *Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit Edition* would arrive in the mail like Charlie's golden ticket. "I don't know how many afternoons I spent thumbing through that *Swimsuit Edition* . . . with my left hand," I say, and she snorts a little and laughs, freely, as though if God is in a place of suffering like this, then the surest sign of him or her is our laughter.

I tell her how I'd never confessed to the shaving before (or to the being my own best friend), at least not until I got cancer.

She nods, understanding how, with cancer, every moment feels appropriate for a confession.

I spread my shirt at the collar to give her access to the dual rubber tubes of my chest catheter into which, one week per month, the chemo-poison drips and from which today, like nearly every day, my blood gets drawn. I watch how it comes out like cheap boxed wine, cab-colored and with a slightly foamy ring around it. It splatters against the plunger of the syringe that's twisted onto the end of my catheter, and I think, as I often do, how the tubes in my chest port resemble the nozzles on a life preserver, the kind they stow underneath the seat on airplanes.

What would happen, I wonder, if sitting there in the infusion center among so many elderly patients, I suddenly pretended to panic and blow into the ends of my catheter as though it were a life preserver? How many of them would realize that they were not, in fact, on an airplane and were unlikely to crash-land or drown? I smile at the thought as S— draws the last of my blood and then squirts it into the third of her vials labeled with my name and date of birth, and then I imagine the commotion as confused seniors claw and push each other out of the way, vainly searching out parachutes and oxygen masks before bravely hurling themselves over the counter and through the beveled glass of the nurses' station window. They're not called the Greatest Generation for nothing.

I chuckle at the picture playing out in my head. "What's so funny?" she asks, gathering up the empty syringes, used alcohol wipes, and spent gloves.

"Funny? I was just thinking that next time I unbutton my shirt here, I should sway my hips a little and go Da, Da, Da, Dum." I get an eyebrow from her and a crack about sexual harassment claims on top of my medical claims. "Good point," I concede. "Besides, you wouldn't want to get complaints from all the elderly women here that you'd led them to expect a special screening of *Magic Mike* during their chemo infusions." She snorts again and laughs.

I wouldn't wish such laughter upon my very worst revenge fantasy enemy.

The laughter, coming easily and without a need for explanation, suggests we both know, even without saying it, that being deadly serious here of all places—especially here—is the surest way to feel seriously dead already.

CANCER F@#\$ING SUCKS

I can get away with saying cancer f@#\$ing sucks even though I'm a pastor, because everyone, as I soon learned after my diagnosis, knows cancer f@#\$ing sucks. Every family tree has the C-word carved angrily into some part of it. Now that I have cancer, I notice how I rip the scabs off the wounds everyone seems to carry.

Everyone knows that cancer f@#\$ing sucks.

The only way for doctors to save your life, just as Jesus warned, is to bring you as close as possible to losing your life without actually killing you—though I doubt that poison derived from mustard gas was what he had in mind. No matter how many celebrities wear lapel ribbons, many cancers, such as my own, have no cure, and chemotherapy can provoke all sorts of unpleasant side effects, including—I kid you not—cancer.

If the sentiment expressed by the 753 sympathy cards I now keep in a taupe Sterilite box is any clue, then everyone already knows it: cancer f@#\$ing sucks. It's why no one knows what to say to you when they find out you have cancer. It's why everyone is afraid to ask what it's like to have cancer. And it's why, since no one knows what to say and everyone's afraid to ask, when you find out for the first time you have cancer, all you know is that it's going to suck. And make you throw up.

But here's what I want you to know if you or someone you love has cancer:

Cancer is funny, too. No, wait, it really is funny.

Any ailment that results in pubic-hair wigs being actual

products in the marketplace simply is funny. (They're called merkins. Look it up.)

For example, on my third day of chemo, I gripped my sutured stomach like a running back desperate to hold on to the pigskin, swallowed a mouthful of nausea, and dragged myself and my wheeled chemo pump into the bathroom of my hospital room in order to clean my toilet before the shy Muslim housekeeper could arrive to clean it.

The TV in my hospital room had been running a feeding-frenzy loop of coverage on Islamic terrorism and the fear it engendered in the West and among Christians. Given the violence in the Middle East and the rising specter of fundamentalisms, Christian and Muslim, the least I could do for the cause of peace, ecumenical understanding, and Jesus Christ's kingdom (these were the actual thoughts in mind) was to wipe my own diarrhea stains from the toilet. *There are already enough reasons in the world for hatred and bloodshed between us besides my chemically induced squirt stains all over the toilet*, I thought to myself, as I dragged my traction-socked feet over the bed.

When she found me next to the toilet on the bathroom floor, unable to pick myself back up, and asked what I'd been doing, I told her.

"Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers,'" I said with an almost straight face. She laughed so hard that she had to adjust her hijab.

When I first found out I had stage-serious cancer, I thought my family and I had laughed for the last time. Thank God, I was terribly, totally wrong. Cancer f@#\$ing sucks, sure, but cancer's funny, too.

During the summer, in the middle of my treatment, I joked to a nurse that considering I'd started to wear a straw fedora to protect my baby's-butt bald head, and since their front desk offered lollipops in glass bowls, I should start greeting all the nurses with my best Kojack: "Who loves you, baby?"

She countered that the show had been off the air so long I'd

probably just send the wrong message by calling the nurses “baby.” I’d now be the lecherous priest they had as a patient.

“You know how Telly Savalas died, right?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Cancer.”

She waited a beat before she let the smile begin to crease around her eyes.

Then we both laughed.

WHAT’S SO FUNNY ABOUT CANCER?

Cancer is funny. I don’t mean the ha-ha that only fills awkward silences. Nor do I mean the kind of humor that’s intended to parry conflict, avoid confrontation, or escape the trading of hard truths—habits of humor I’ve been trying to unlearn since I got married.

When I say cancer is funny, I don’t have in mind the sort of funny that allows you to keep wearing your mask and the lies that have grown up to fit it. I’m not referring to the jokes that make it possible to glide over eggshells unbroken, comedy I began practicing soon after my dad showed up to my basketball game with what my friend described as “a funny smell on his breath.” I couldn’t yet make a layup, but I could’ve already lettered in (self-) defense, dissembling and distracting from my shame and pain with humor.

I don’t mean cancer is funny in that way—although, because cancer is scary as hell, there are plenty of laughs like that to hide behind.

No, when I say cancer is funny, I mean that your every pretense falls away, right along with your pubic hair. It makes you absolutely vulnerable to others, both to their fragile, pitying stares and to their sincere gestures of support you would’ve proudly shrugged off before cancer.

Cancer refuses to let you stand at a comfortable adjacency to life.

It announces your mortality—our species’ number one subject

of avoidance—in a style as ugly and obvious as a spray-on tan or title loan sign.

Cancer leaves you with no other choice but to trust the last people you would choose to trust: others. Whether you're throwing up in your friend's car or hearing the checkout clerk doubt aloud that the driver's license photo is really you, once the malignancy is found in you, there's no way to hide, and hiding the ugly bits of ourselves is a human preoccupation. With no way to hide, there's no longer any reason to pretend. Your false self falls away.

The spoonful of sugar that comes with all this medicine is laughter. It's not a kind of laughter to be confused with happiness. I have stage-serious cancer; I'd be crop-circle crazy if I were happy about it. Instead it's a laughter that feels like . . . joy, a laughter that can trace the line between disaster and the farce that we call life, feeling not well or strong but free—genuinely free—to be myself, with others and before God.

Really, that's the biggest joke cancer plays on you.

It renders you no longer resembling yourself. Your blood chemistry merely confirms what you already suspect, that you're only a partial version of your former self, yet simultaneously you're more your true self than you ever were before cancer. I didn't expect to find this kind of laughter in the cancer ward.

People attribute it to Mark Twain, but it was the comedian, Steve Allen, in a *Cosmopolitan* article in the 1950s, who said:

Comedy = Tragedy + Time

What makes laughter possible, according to Allen, is the cushion of time smoothing the rough edges off an unhappy ending. Comedy requires twenty-twenty hindsight. Time—as in “time heals all wounds”—has to dispense its medicine and do its magic before the saltiness of tears can give way to even saltier humor.

Most cancer patients, however, don't have enough time removed from the shock of their diagnosis to laugh at the disease. Indeed, many fear, as I know only too well myself, that they don't

have the remaining time they'd always thought they had, and without time, it's damn near impossible to laugh.

But now that I've had Death sniff me over good, I question whether Allen's theory of comedy should enjoy maxim-like status. Just as it is in space, I've discovered that time is relative in the shadow of the valley of death. When tragedy dings over the Doppler of your family's dreams and your only fear is how much time you have left, you discover that everything about the time you do have gets condensed. Concentrated. Distilled down to the percentage of proof that warms more than it burns.

As it turns out, you don't need the cushion of time to laugh, because stage-serious cancer is like the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There's no kettle drum accompaniment with cancer, but you do feel your entire lifetime being lived every instant, as though the measure of you is being taken at each moment. One side effect of this experience is that you receive each day as a gift no less precious than the sum of them.

CANCER = COMEDY IS RELATIVE TO TRAGEDY

Still, with cancer, the grace of each day doesn't stop you from retracing all your steps leading to today, stopping along the way to rehearse your every delight and your regrets like an actress with butterflies on opening night, examining every episode of your story to see if it yields a meaningful thesis. The tragedy-plus-time formula makes humor seem like simple arithmetic: an unhappy ending plus the safety of distant memory equals comedy. But in the shadow's valley, time is relative. Who you are and who you've been and who you might (not) be are always ever before you, and as crowded as that sounds, it creates room for laughter. For when you don't know if tomorrow will come, there's no need to save face for it.

Thus, cancer can be funny because belly laughs are easier when you're not crouched down in a defensive posture.

They write out my chemo schedule by hand each month, scribbling the names of my drugs on different days in a curly hybrid of print and cursive, before making photocopies and handing one to me. The schedules can prove hard to read, which I pointed out to my oncologist a while back: “What’s this prescribed on my schedule for Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday?”

“Ah, that’s a *d*. It says ‘dex.’ It’s short for dexamethasone.”

“Funny, I thought it looked like a lowercase *s*,” I said, feigning disappointment. “You might have to apologize to my wife. I already showed this to her and said, ‘Doctor’s orders.’”

He pretended not to hear me, staring at my labs on the computer screen, before replying. “Well, if you could pull that off four days in a row after six months of chemo, then I really should get you into a clinical trial. You’re worth studying.”

He looked down at me across the bridge of his long nose, the way he does when checking my chemo-lacerated mouth for sores. I smirked. “You stole my punch line,” I said, and for a moment at least, our mutual laughter muffled the hushed echo of bad news being broken in the adjoining exam room.

LAUGHTER BY SUBTRACTION

A trick that was once popular among comic magicians is called the Disappearing Dove. The performer would cover a supposed dove with a white handkerchief and then “release” the bird into the ether. Only, in this bit, the handkerchief would just fall to the ground and lie there, still, not moving, not flying away, not disappearing, not a dove at all.

Not only do I think Steve Allen was mistaken about the necessity of time for comedy, I believe he erred in seeing tragedy as the only soil in which laughter can be sown. Sometimes what makes something funny, painfully funny, isn’t the punch line but what’s missing—the absence of something we’ve grown to count on and expect, your status no longer being quo.

Obviously, so much of what you experience with stage-serious

cancer is just this sort of absence—an absence of health, obviously, but even more critical, an absence of hope. There’s the vanished libido (kidnapped by chemo) and the missing-child milk carton reflection (“Have You Seen Me?”) in the mirror, gone right along with the innocent, untroubled look in your children’s eyes and your leaky bucket list.

Absence.

Like the showers you used to take with your wife, now replaced by sponge baths and baby wipes, a trade-off that seems to strike at the very heart of the wedding liturgy’s “for better/for worse” yin-yang and strikes you as weightier even than the sudden downturn in your personal futures market. With cancer, you feel no more *you* than a dove that’s not really there; you name that bird your new normal, and—all the predictable rage and sorrow aside—that can turn hilarious.

Comedy, contrary to Allen’s math, doesn’t always have to be the sum of tragedy and time. Sometimes it’s a matter of simple subtraction, of being minus some part of your life, of suffering the difference between what was and what is left. Let’s set up another equation for that:

Comedy = Your Life – _____

Fill in the blank with something or someone you’ve taken for granted.

It goes without saying, but laughter by subtraction is necessarily more personal than time added to tragedy. Like my grandpa, who for years managed my grandma’s fading memory (he used to joke, “What’s the best part of Alzheimer’s? You get to hide your own Easter eggs!”), those who can find the funny in absence are those who feel most acutely what’s missing.

Maybe that’s why it’s surprising to hear cancer can be funny. The laughs must come from those who’ve got it.

Then again, maybe humor isn’t about addition or subtraction. Maybe comedy has a different source than time or tragedy, absences or unhappy endings. Maybe cancer is funny not because

of what you suffer or how you suffer it, but because of who else is there with you as you suffer in the cancer ward.

Ever since I first used Google to search for *mantle cell lymphoma* and discovered I have an exceedingly rare lymphoma that *almost always* affects only men in their old age (as in, not thirty-seven year olds. Dumb luck that caused me to chuckle—after crying like a man-baby), I’ve wondered if the surprise that cancer is funny has less to do with how we conceive of the disease and everything to do with how we understand the nature of the Divine. I’ve wondered because the most common questions I’ve received during my treatment are all about God.

They’re not even veiled questions. Cancer is just the excuse to drill down and inquire about the existential:

- “How has cancer deepened your faith?”
- “Have you grown closer to God in your suffering?”

True, I’m a minister, and my line of work tends to invite such conversation, but talking with other patients, these kinds of questions are par for the cancer course. Even when the question is phrased in the negative, as in “How has struggling with cancer challenged your faith in God?” the premise still connects the experience of suffering with an experience of God. Implicit in such questions is an assumption first asserted by John Chrysostom, a fourth-century Christian clergyman whose oratory netted him the nickname John Goldenmouth.

He wasn’t always the flawless orator.

Proving that a golden mouth does not guarantee a gem of a mind, Chrysostom once preached, “Tears bind us to God, not laughter.” For that sermon’s text, Chrysostom could’ve turned to the Gospels, because the four evangelists do not ever record that Jesus laughed. John tells us that Jesus wept, and Mark depicts a *Fight Club* Jesus going at a fig tree. Matthew and Luke join the other two in reporting Jesus’ temple tantrum, but none of them ever mentions that Jesus laughed. Not once. Not at anything.

Or Chrysostom could've also had in mind Saint Paul, the early church's equivalent of a killjoy chaperone at your junior high dance. Paul, in several places in his letters, admonishes the faithful against silliness, joking, and laughter.

As a pastor, I can attest that you need only walk into any church on a Sunday morning to find Christians earnestly abiding Paul's admonishments, not only in their humorlessness but, more generally, in the way they privilege seriousness over laughter and do not regard humor as a spiritual discipline. After all, grim, penitential introspection, not levity, marks Lent, the most spiritually significant season of the church year. Saint John of the Cross got famous by writing about the dark night of the soul, not the bright, happy daytime.

You might expect to find such esteeming of seriousness and suffering in a religion with a cross at the front of every sanctuary and an execution at the heart of its story, but the Gospels frame their narratives not from the perspective of the crucifixion, but from the hindsight of resurrection's happy surprise. In other words, the laughter of Easter, not the laments of Good Friday, should determine for us how we conceive of God and ourselves as God's creatures.

LAUGHING THROUGH THE CRUCIBLE OF CANCER

Everyone assumes that suffering leads the sufferer to God, and sometimes it does. Suffering can knock down all our other (self-) defenses so that we can finally, wholly, depend upon our maker. But if suffering leads us closer to God, suffering should not leave us mirthless.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French philosopher and priest from the twentieth century, posited as a sort of first principle, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." The first time I heard my youngest son's belly laugh, I marveled over how a celibate like Pierre had understood about God what it took fatherhood to teach me.

Everyone assumes suffering leads you closer to God. And no

one registers surprise to hear how cancer has led someone to a deeper (i.e., more *serious*) faith, but people betray something like shock when you suggest to them that cancer can be funny. If God is Joy, then we can't rightly be said to have grown closer to God, through suffering or any other means, without a marked increase in joy, and with joy comes laughter, mirth, and a levity only the good news of grace makes possible.

Despite the finality with which he expressed it, John Goldenmouth Chrysostom was only partially correct. Tears, and the suffering that provokes them, can in fact bring us closer to God by leaving us no other options but turning to God. But tears and suffering cannot fetter us to God. Only joy can bind us fully to the God who is most infallibly Joy.

Cancer is funny, then, because the suffering occasioned by cancer draws you nearer to God, and the closer you get to God, the louder laughter becomes.

After I was diagnosed with cancer—a cancer that makes my death no more certain than yours, but likely much more proximate—I received dozens of books: cancer books. Many of them offered practical diet and exercise advice that promised to improve my odds of living. Other books announced themselves as spiritual and, in a nutshell, exhorted me to have faith that I was being watched over by a God who knew every hair on my soon-to-be-balding head. The former type of books all lacked the existential wrestling that's as much a part of cancer as nausea, while the latter betrayed none of the gritty emotional honesty that I believe separates faith from kitsch.

None of those books prepared me to anticipate what I found to be true: that cancer is funny.

Not only is this book a no-bullshit take on what it's like to journey through stage-serious cancer and, in turn, struggle with the God who may or may not be doing this to you, I hope this book will help you or someone you love laugh through the crucible of cancer.

After eight cycles of nine chemo drugs, I believe laughter is still the best medicine, but even more so, I've come to believe laughter is the surest sign you're not alone, because joy is the most unmistakable indication of God's presence.

A teacher of mine, Robert Dyktra, once told me that the ancient Jews believed our God-implanted, eternal soul was stitched in our gut, actually located in the liver. I'd wager they believed this because that's the part of us that hurts the most when we laugh.