

RADIATION IN BOSTON: THE TRANSITION OF 2008

By Harry W. Strachan

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Introduction

My transition in the 1989-1993 which began with medical setbacks and culminated with the decision to move back to Costa Rica, organize my work around public service and get divorced was probably the most important and painful. It was not the first transition. It was also not the end of my medical adventures.

In 1997 my right hip finally gave out and had to be replaced. Problems developed with the second hip replacement and in 2004 it had to be redone. While at the Mayo Clinic attending to this, they discovered that I had prostate cancer which led to a robotic assisted radical prostatectomy. Four years later a rising PSA and some scans showed a return of the cancer and the doctors prescribed a four month treatment plan of radiation and surgery. We decided to undertake this at Mass General in Boston so as to take advantage of the time to be near my son and his family.

Each of my medical adventures forced me to stop work for a while, take what I called a “medical sabbatical” and contemplate my mortality and priorities. Though the medical interventions were rarely pleasant and often painful, each period enriched my life. Perhaps the easiest way of describing how is by sharing excerpts from the four letters, one a month, which I wrote for family and close friends during the four month period of hormonal and radiation therapy I wrote.

July 24, 2008

Dear Friends and Family,

I’m sending this email to update you who have asked to be kept abreast of my “Boston medical sabbatical.” The executive summary (for those who just want the headline): **Treatment plan has been modified so I’ll have to be in the States through November. We are being taken care of wonderfully.**

The more complete version, which no one should feel obligated to read. Sandy and I arrived in Boston on Sunday July 20th and have been warmly received by Ken’s family and generously loaned Deirdre’s condo for our stay here. We have a great view off our deck of the Charles River and behind us the Mt. Auburn Cemetery, one of the world’s great arboretums.

The good news is that Dr. William Shipley, one of the leaders in the field has taken on my case at Mass General, thanks to Dr. Bill Wood’s

recommendation. Sandy and I have been inspired with confidence by the time he and his colleagues have invested in our case, their willingness to answer questions and share with us the underlying science. We are also very impressed with MGH, not just with the facilities but the high level of professionalism of everyone we've dealt with.

The not-so-good news is that when Dr. Shipley, with specialists from other parts of the oncology practice reviewed my case, they determined that the appropriate treatment was a combination of hormones (6 months with two prior to radiation) and radiation (8 weeks), this because my case is higher risk than initially thought. When I tried to negotiate just radiation, they pulled a "Bain North" on me – "we do it the right way or you find other doctors." Since the other "best doctors" at MGH and Dana Farber use the same protocols, we figured after much soul searching, recalling Stanley Motta's threat to kill me if I didn't accept treatment, to follow their advice and submit to treatment based on "best evidentiary medicine."

The plan is that I start hormone treatment this coming Monday. We will make Boston our base for August, go out to the West Coast in September for Bain New Partner Training and CALI 3, then return for radiation in the months of October and November.

Sandy and I are hoping to take advantage of this "sabbatical" to be good grandparents, have lunches or dinners with our many Boston friends, and work on our various projects. I'm going to try and make progress on my "Life Stories," and perhaps do some training with summer associates or new consultants of Bain and Bain Capital. We're also looking forward to a Red Sox game or two and as many games of golf as possible. Who knows I may even be able to organize a Boston poker game!

Given the realistic increase in side effects from this new treatment plan, I can use more of your prayers than I asked for before if you are on good terms with the Almighty, and if not, more positive energy sent my way.

A big abrazo, [Harry](#)

August 19, 2008

Dear Friends and Family,

Your prayers and good wishes appear to be working quite well. As we approach the first month milestone, the executive summary is: **Side effects minimal, social life maximal – it's going so well I feel guilty!**

We're now entering the fourth week of the hormonal treatment. The minimal side effects are not interfering with anything I want to do ...

For exercise we are taking advantage of the beautiful summer of Boston, walking through the Mt. Auburn Cemetery and along the Charles River. When it rains there is the Boston Sport Club where Sandy swims her mile and I do the treadmill and weights.

Work consists of emails, some conference calls with Mesoamerica, but mainly a daily attempt to put in a few hours on "Stories From My Life". I've had one fun lunch with the Bain Summer Associates sharing materials from "Managing Your Career" which was well received.

We're out for dinner almost every night with friends from Bain, from our early years at HBS and INCAE, and from Central Americans visiting. Ken and Amanda can no longer automatically count on us for baby-sitting, though we manage to get one or two evenings a week over at their house for time with Liam. I'm trying to resurrect my skills with building blocks, book-reading, diaper changing and bath giving.

I struggle with a sense that I'm a fraud, not sick enough to be so unproductive, undeserving of this extended vacation. An occasional moment of insight, though, comes close to convincing me that perhaps my priority in this time is to learn some other important lessons, not necessarily to be productive.

One of those insights came to me in a dream during the first week of treatment while we were still deeply upset at the turn of events. At the risk of really testing your reading patience, I'm going to copy it as a Postscript.

Sandy and I both thank you for all the small and large signals of support and friendship. When we contrast our situation with so many in the cancer program at MGH, we realize how lucky we are on so many dimensions.

A big hug to all of you, Harry

The Dream.

I am in the open air ruins of a large Catholic Cathedral in Nicaragua. There has been the tragic death of a prominent Nicaraguan, perhaps in the earthquake that destroyed the Church. He is a relative of a good friend.

Throughout the dream, clumps of worshippers navigate the ruins to where we are, avoiding the large fallen boulders and walls, many of them weeping for their losses. They pass us going toward the altar, where they will kneel, light candles and take the Eucharist.

My sister asks that I talk with the authorities of the Church to stop the services. The family of this prominent Nicaraguan and strong supporter of the Church is offended that his tragic death is not being observed with greater respect.

I feel they have a point, there should be more respect, but I am irritated that my sister thinks I should be doing something about it. "This is none of my business," I tell her, "I'm not a Catholic. I'm not going to get involved."

The dream shifts and a young priest of about 30 approaches the group. He walks briskly. He is passionate. I am surprised to see that he look the way I did when young and think "But I'm not and never have been a priest."

I overhear his talk to them in a very eloquent Spanish. It goes something like this.

"We don't stop services in the midst of disasters and tragedies, we actually increase them. They are more necessary and urgent than ever. They are necessary not just for the people you see passing in front of you. They are for you! Instead of coming to mass once a week, I urge you to come every day."

"And we don't move the service from the ruins or avoid the memories. We urge you to walk these ruins, notice them, experience them. See the disaster for what it is. Don't deny your anger and your sorrow. It is right for you to say "God damn it! This is outrageous! This is evil! This is unacceptable! I hate it! I won't accept that any part of this cruelty can be good (overtone of Ivan's rebellion speech in Brother Karamazov which we covered in the last CALI seminar.) Your outrage and anger is an important reaction to the truth. Experience it!"

"But you can't stop there. You must keep walking through these ruins, you must get to the altar. There you will gain some perspective. You must

recognize that you and we and the cathedral are all going to survive and be rebuilt. You must see that all this shit is going to be made into a compost for growth (Sandy's metaphor). You must believe "lo que no mata engorda" -- what doesn't kill, fattens! This may logically be incompatible with the outrage you are feeling, but this too is part of the truth, a truth you need to accept, a truth you need to learn to trust."

"That's why you come to the altar. That why you participate in the Eucharist. That why you take Christ's body and blood into your mouth, swallow it and transform it! You don't need to explain it. You don't need to understand it. You do need to experience it!" (I wish I could remember all the metaphors the young priest uses in this section of his speech – he makes this point far more eloquently than I have.)

Then turning specifically to my friend, he says, "See that old lady in a shawl who is making her way to the front, weeping. Her tragedy is that she has just lost her only son, the one who was taking care of her. See that young man and wife over there, struggling to the front. They have just found out that their two year old has an incurable brain disease that will retarded him, cause him pain, require medical attention they cannot afford. They can't believe it and have no idea what to do."

"Yours isn't the only grief; it isn't even the deepest. Yours isn't the only tragedy; it isn't even the worst. But I want you, to go over to that old woman, put your arm around her and help her get to the front. You will discover an important and paradoxical truth. In carrying the burden of another, your own is lightened. In sharing the grief of another, your own is reduced."

"Get going! Participate in our services. Walk these ruins. Accompany others. We don't shut down our services in the face of loss and tragedy and neither can you let your own life shut down."

October 3, 2008

Dear Family and Friends,

Ex Sum: Starting radiation this week after a month-long busy trip to California and Colorado. Good news re side effects and PSA, golf and poker. Keep up the prayers, they're working!

The letter describes the vacation in Sausalito, the Santa Cruz Annual Pasatiempo Strachan Invitational Golf and Poker Tournament, Bain New Partner Training in

Sonoma, the Aspen Colorado INCAE CALI seminar and finally a weekend of golf. Then it continues:

During the month in California I've been reading a book by a cancer surgeon, Bernie Siegel called Love, Medicine, and Miracles. It was recommended to me by another doctor patient of Dr. Shipley who told me, "Harry, follow Dr. Shipley's recommendation but get this book and help him by visualizing your body healing itself. Doctors don't heal your body, it heals itself with their help."

We returned to Boston last Sunday, 28 September, and started radiation on Monday. My latest PSA test showed an amazing decline to less than .1, a startling result which can be attributed either to the hormonal treatment or the visualizations or Sandy's consistent and persistent TLC, but which I choose to attribute to all three plus your support. We enter these two months of radiation with cautious hope for healing, and greater certainty of positive growth.

Sandy has talked me into joining her in a poetry course while here in Cambridge. I have not written poems since my college years but decide to capture a recent insight in that genre. For the truly resilient it's the reflection I'm going to share below.

A big hug to all of you, Harry

In Mt. Auburn's Cemetery

The second day of radiation
Under a gray sky
I walk among the tombs
Of the famous and forgotten,
Shouldering a backpack of worries.

Will my poor Costa Rica
Catch pneumonia from
America's subprime cold?
Will partisan posturing ensure
Jobs and pensions are lost?

How do I cope with cancer's undressing,
Learn to love myself and others,
The key to healing,

According to surgeon Bernie Siegel
And Smiley, my hunchback gardener?

Suddenly around the bend a small Maple
Brilliantly red, orange and yellow
Every leaf radiantly happy,
Branches thrust triumphantly high,
Oblivious to the dead on her skirt.

Though she carries no name,
Unlike her stately, still green, brothers,
Curran Sugar and Red Japanese Maple,
She casts her reflection into the pond
And free coins of light all around.

“How can you be so happy?” I ask.
Her answer, “I don’t need this gold.
Summer was great, winter will be good.
Come Spring I’ll be bigger and stronger,
With even more to give.”

My walk among the tombs ends,
Though my backpack hasn’t emptied
And my questions are unanswered,
My spirit sings the hymn,
“It is well with my Soul.”

November 17, 2008

Dear Family and Friends,

Ex Sum: Nov 25 we return to C.R., grateful for minimal side effects, hopeful for a permanent cure, thankful for the wonderful hospitality in Boston, your prayers, eager to get back home.

On November 23rd I’ll get my 40th shot of radiation and on November 25th Sandy and I fly back to Costa Rica just ahead of the snow and winter weather.

My central project each day has to do with healing on multiple levels. Each afternoon I drive into MGH for a session of radiation. In the basement

waiting room after I've signed in, I make myself a cup of coffee and read a book until called. The radiation takes place in a big room they darken. I lie on a metal bed that is rolled into a giant machine. Technicians (actually they're called 'therapists') make sure I'm in position using the tattoos the doctors marked on my stomach and sides. When correctly positioned, they roll me under what looks like Cyclops giant eye into the center of the machine and hurry into their leaded bunker from which they run the machine and watch the dials. The giant eye swivels around me, zapping me from five different positions, each for about 30 seconds.

With the therapists I've developed a routine that makes this ominous procedure feel friendly. When called into the radiation room, we say "hi" and we joke about how their life and loves are going. Then I walk over to the big machine and tenderly pat it on its big eye and say to her, "Baby, how are you doing today? Give me a good shot!" They laugh and tell me, "She was misbehaving this morning, but now she's doing good. She's going to give you her best."

For additional healing, additional routines: an hour most days in the gym doing aerobic walking and weights; a morning time to read, meditate, and visualize. I try to figure some concrete way to implement the imperative I've been given: "to learn to love myself and others". So far no blinding insights to share with you, but specific ideas do come and I feel it enriches my day. I've also tried to dedicate some time each day to writing, in a strange way also therapeutic.

This personal work has had to compete for time with many other activities. These have included: ordered-in suppers at Ken and Amanda's, reading to Liam and giving him his bath; lunches and dinners with colleagues and friends; conference calls with partners; reading about the economic crisis, having meetings with fund managers; and the course on poetry.

It's a bit early for evaluations, but I suspect we will look back on this period as an important one. Though much time has been spent thinking about the past and visualizing the future, we have probably lived in a greater state of present awareness than we usually do, present to nature and the people we meet. We've experimented with looking for meaningfulness in everything around us, without a lot of judgment.

I've forced the doctors to give me my poker odds. Statistically there is a 40% chance of a total cure, in which case, like the rest of you, I'll live forever, or until something else gets me. If there isn't a full cure, I'll probably be symptom free for 8 years and then fight a rearguard action against lesions and

tumors for five more years. For someone 67, those aren't bad outcomes. So I've decided to go "all in!" Whatever comes up on the "flop", the "turn", and the "river", (for the ignorant poker terms from Texas Hold 'Em), I hope I can continue to savor life.

Sandy and I can't wait to get home – we're like old nags that see the barn. However, we leave Boston conscious of how comfortable our time here has been, how much we owe to so many of you, both here and away. Thank you for your emails, your calls and notes, and your prayers and good wishes.

A big hug from both of us, Harry

P.S. Our last assignment in the poetry course was a sequence poem. Mine, though neither profound nor very good, did fill me with pleasure.

Old Age

1. Sun Worship

Arms held high,
My rotator cuff screams,
"Put me down!"

Arms stretching down,
My rusty back squeaks,
"Where are those shins?"

2. Zephyr

Through an open tooth he lisps,
"Grampa Harry, listen to my poem:
'I go up, up, up.
I go down, down, down.
Twirling up, twirling down.
The end.'"

His hair is a nest of reddish curls,
His bright hazel eyes seek mine.
"That's wonderful!" I beam,
"I like the twirling, twirling.
Yes, it is up and down."

3. Memories

Down in the marsh between river and sea
I recognize the brown and yellow leaf
Floating above, jarred now and again
By spotted fish seeking a morsel.
I am no longer clear, aged a tannic brown.

Up in my stream home eons ago
I asked about the yellow shells floating by,
Watched for hours on end
Wiggling tadpoles turn into tiny frogs.
Fresh from the spring, I was clear as light.

Between, in the rapids I twirled up as spray,
Twirled down a hidden chute to smash
Into turbines almost too heavy to move,
Developed muscles strong enough to carry
The gray steel barges from mill to city.

Now I am allowed for a short while
To rest still in these marshes
And think about the ocean that will swallow me.
Will I remember the tadpoles, the yellow leaf,
The twirling up and twirling down?