



# The Topic of Cancer

by Jonathan Aitken

**C**ANCER WILL AFFLICT ONE IN THREE OF US, says the conventional wisdom of the 21st century. Medically our doctors are increasingly skillful at helping us cope with the disease. But what about the spiritual dimension of facing up to this illness when it seems to be life threatening? Religious faith can clearly be a comfort to many believers. But does it make the slightest difference to the clinical odds in the kill-or-cure stakes? Is prayer a detour of delusion or a route to recovery? I have been pondering such questions because I have reached an age when an increasing number of my friends and relatives seem to be confirming that one in three statistic. In particular, my mother, my wife, and my son's best school friend have been recent cancer sufferers. Their personal stories and their medical end games were so different that it is not easy to detect a common theme of spirituality in their cases. But as always on the precipice of life and death, when God is prayed to, there are mysteries.

My mother was a lifelong agnostic of the mischievous, if not militant, tendency. When she was diagnosed with advanced cancer of the pancreas she joked "what a frightful bore" it was that the doctors had given her just three months to live. She even encouraged the idea of a sweepstakes on the actual number of days she had left. When I asked what she wanted done for her in her last weeks, the opening of champagne bottles rather than the saying of prayers was her priority.

Sitting up in bed with a glass in her hand, she enjoyed teasing me and everyone else who had faith by insisting that the idea of life after death was

celestial moonshine and that we were wasting our time bothering God on her behalf. One evening after she had aired her views with gusto to the assembled company of valedictory champagne drinkers, we were left on our own together. I gently suggested that mocking God might be taking an unnecessary risk on the eve of eternity. To my surprise, my mother dropped her usually combative stance and said in a quiet voice that she would think about it.

A week or so later, when she was just a few hours from death, our parish priest dropped in to say his farewells. He asked her if she would like to receive the last rites. Yes, she said, and in full command of her faculties she duly received absolution, an anointing with holy oil, and God's blessing. Skeptics would no doubt call this a deathbed conversion, but I believe my mother traveled peacefully from this world to the next with the assurance of divine mercy.

As she passed away in good spiritual shape (just!) and, in John Keats's phrase, "half in love with easeful death" at the ripe old age of 94, there was much to give thanks for about the ending of my mother's life. This was certainly not the situation when my son's best friend Fergus was struck down with leukemia at the age of 14. For two years he battled with the disease. From time to time I chauffeured carloads of his school contemporaries on visits to his hospital, which geographically and medically is more or less the European equivalent of the Mayo Clinic. These boys were of the view that laughter is the best medicine, so much time was spent in the car rehearsing corny jokes to tell the patient. (Sample: What do you call an Arabian dairy farmer?

Answer: a milk sheikh). On the drive home the mood was more somber.

I remember a discussion about whether prayers for Fergus would help him. Although many were said both in the car and later under the direction of the school chaplain, they did not, apparently, make any difference, for this gloriously lovable boy passed away at 16. "So where was God when Fergus needed him?" was one question from a devastated classmate. There were no answers at the time, yet his passing and his deeply moving funeral planted spiritual seeds. It may not be a coincidence that Fergus's sister and at least one of his closest friends are today among the finest young Christians you could hope to meet.

**T**HE CANCER THAT STRUCK MY WIFE Elizabeth last summer was a rare, invasive, and difficult to detect tumor of the lachrymal sack. The watering eye that troubled her on our August vacation was misdiagnosed by various doctors as too much exposure to the sun, a viral infection, and a soft tissue blockage of the tear duct. Minor surgery to remove the blockage found a malignant lump, which a CT scan had failed to identify. Then she was scheduled for major surgery of a large area around the eye, nose, and sinuses after a later CT scan suggested that the cancer had spread upwards.

During this testing time Elizabeth maintained a mood of calm acceptance, saying, "The Lord's will be done." I was far from calm, becoming hyperactive in prayer, asking a small army of friends, pastors, groups, and churches to make special intercessions. After six hours in the operating theatre, it became clear that those prayers had been well answered. Contrary to the medical prognosis, Elizabeth's cancer had not spread beyond the lachrymal sack. In layman's language, the tumor was caught in time.

Exhaustive tests have since confirmed that she is completely clear of the disease. The reconstruction of her face, which was expected to require major plastic surgery, was so delicately done that a magnifying glass is needed to see that anything has changed in her beautiful appearance. The word "miracle" should never be introduced into cases where surgeons have exercised their skills with better than expected outcomes. But I will always believe that prayer played its part in returning my wife to cancer-free good health.

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**W**HAT, IF ANYTHING, do these three cancer stories tell us about faith and serious illness? The wisest general answer I have read recently is to be found in Philip Yancey's latest best-seller, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* The author thinks it does, but is no starry-eyed illusionist about the contradictory evidence on the link between prayer and physical healing. He quotes this sensible comment from the renowned surgeon Dr. Paul Brand:

"Those who pray for the sick and suffering should first praise God for the remarkable agents of healing designed into the body and then ask that God's special grace give the suffering person the ability to use those resources to their fullest advantage. I have seen remarkable instances of physical healing accomplished in this way. The prayers of fellow Christians can offer real tangible help by setting in motion the intrinsic powers of healing controlled by God."

Yancey ends his chapter on Prayer and Physical Healing by quoting another Paul, the great Apostle, in the famous passage on the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). This is the God who helps the terminally ill to die peacefully and comforts their friends and relatives in the dark hour of bereavement. "God offers us a minimum of protection but the maximum of support," is Yancey's wry but realistic conclusion. This thought can be a reassurance to cancer sufferers, cancer families, and cancer prayer givers even when the medical results are not the ones that were first asked for. ✿

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