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Confronting Life or Death at A Young Age

By Ibbly Caputo
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It was in the summer of 2007, a month after I turned 26, that I received a diagnosis of acute myelogenous leukemia, a fast-growing cancer of the blood and bone marrow. Without treatment, the doctors told me, I had six weeks to live. With treatment, I was still going to have a hard fight -- a fight I took on, but not without reservations. Three months into it, after three back-to-back rounds of chemotherapy had failed to put me into remission, a stem cell transplant was my only hope.

The decision to go through with that transplant was a hard one. The numbers were stacked against me: I had only a 10 to 30 percent chance of surviving, and if I did, my future would be different from the one I had imagined for myself.

Not that I had a set plan for life, but I did have set of ideas: travel, journalism, adventure, love, a future rich with experience. I never considered limitations, only possibilities.

It was this spirit that took me to New Orleans in 2003 after graduating from college. I didn't know what to do with myself back then until a blue-eyed debutante who drove around in a light-blue Cadillac told me that in the Big Easy I could ride a bike everywhere (I could not afford a car) and that jazz spilled into the streets. Those reasons were enough for me to pick up and go.

I believed my life would always be like that: free and mobile and unrestricted. But the treatment regimen that my doctors described to me four years later made me wonder if I'd have to live a compromised life. The life of a caged bird.

I thought it might be better to die.

I remember asking a doctor during the first 24-hour, seven-day chemotherapy drip, "Will I be able to go to New Guinea one day?"

He scrunched his face. "Why would you want to go there?"

I didn't want to go there. New Guinea was just the most remote place I could think of. I needed to be reassured that the day would come when I'd travel to faraway places again.

As the odds against me grew greater and the treatment options more extreme, I confronted the issue of children. The full-body radiation that precedes the stem cell transplant would make me infertile. I sat cross-legged in my hospital bed, a mound of tissues piling in my lap, as I mourned the children I would never birth. A friend tried to cheer me up. "Well, the upswing is that you won't have to use a condom anymore," Dave said. I guess that could be considered a silver lining, but I would rather have had my eggs.

I did not have a desperate yearning to have children, but to have the choice radiated out of my body -- to be sterilized -- what kind of woman would that leave me? And menopause: It's a cloud that hangs over every young woman's future, but I'd venture to say that many of us -- myself included -- don't know much about it. Would I dry up and become uninterested in men? Would I be a 56-year-old woman in a 26-year-

old body? Or worse, would I acquire the body and energy of a woman 30 years my senior?

My fears about the future were powerful. But the real reason I considered refusing treatment was that I was exhausted. Fatigue sapped my will to live, to try anything. Yes, my bone marrow was chock-full of leukemia, and I'm sure that played a part. But still, I felt as if I had acquired a lifetime of tiredness and a sense of helplessness against the tide of sorrow around me.

I had received my diagnosis exactly two years after I had fled New Orleans to escape Hurricane Katrina. I was not yet over that heartbreak.

And there is so much suffering in this world. So much war. Anger. Hatred. Hunger -- of all different kinds. For food. Money. Power. Love. I told my best friend, Chelsa, "This could be my way out. No more suffering."

She cried. Held my hand gently in her lap. Then asked, "But will that really make it go away?"

The suffering wouldn't die with me, I knew. But my overwhelming sense was that the only way I would survive was if I could find a compelling enough reason to live.

I do not cling to life as others might, out of fear of death, which I do not have. I'm not married; I don't have children; I don't feel strongly connected to any piece of land; nor do I fight for any specific cause. I could not rely on the strength of an attachment to give me the will to live.

I did -- and do -- have an insatiable curiosity, though, and as I addressed each of my fears, I began to wonder what life would be like if I were to live it. Could my life possibly become *less* caged than before? Less indebted to my insecurities and expectations? My reflections became almost whimsical as I weighed life vs. death. No matter what my decision was, I would be jumping into the unknown where, I realized, I'd been walking all along.

I began to wonder how others would be affected if I gave up because I was angry about restricted travel, or because I would have to love children with different genes, or because suffering sucks.

Of course it does.

And what if I went through the transplant and died anyway? I could choose death; that outcome was certain if I did not continue treatment. But choosing life was the ultimate risk.

My transplant specialist talked with me about my doubts and fears. When we found out after the third round of chemo that 40 percent of my blood was still infected with leukemia, he sat down next to me and asked, "Where do we go when we die?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Isn't that part of the adventure?"

My doctor encouraged me to go through treatment, but he let me know -- even as I signed the consent forms for the transplant -- that it was okay if I decided to back out.

Each day I lived, life would have to be my deliberate choice.

In a situation that feels utterly powerless, when your body betrays you and you need doctors, nurses, blood transfusions, IV nutrition, medicine and the mercy of insurance companies and God to keep you alive, this personal power gave me the will to try.

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