

Living with uncertainty

By [Jason Micheli](#)

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I've come here so often, an average of four days per week for a year, that my phone recognizes the Cancer Specialists Wi-Fi signal. The woman next to me, on the other side of the drywall partition, with the plum purple glasses and weathered gray hair, is sobbing. Gasps that sound like someone drowning. My phone doesn't recognize that but I do.

Her cancer, I can tell from the fresh, pink chest port wound, is a recent discovery. Maybe hers was found like mine, a lump in the shaving mirror. *I'm sure it's nothing, nothing at all.*

Earlier, in the waiting room, she'd been cracking [Murphy's law](#)-type jokes and genuflecting to the power of the positive thinking. I'm not surprised she's the one sobbing now. The beats of my infusion pump ring like a metronome tracking the time of her mournful music. Anything less than an over-written sentence like that preceding one just doesn't capture the unforced melodrama of that place.

Ballykissangel, for some strange reason, is playing on the television on the wall. I used to check out that cloyingly earnest Irish show from the little library near my last church 15 years ago. Now, in closed captioning, I can make out the character's names for the first time. *Padraig, huh.*

I'm here for another monthly maintenance chemo treatment, trying to stave off just how familiar this all feels to me still, trying to ignore as well the admission that what we're maintaining isn't the level of chemo-poison in my blood or the level of MCL in my marrow but my life.

I came here yesterday, too, for the check-up and lab work necessary to green light the fresh chemo-poison. I could tell from the knock on the door—too soft and abrupt—that it wasn't Dr. D___ or C___, his nurse, or J____, the nurse practitioner. That's how often I've been here.

Dr. D_____ was away, she said.

She said. Before launching into: “So, have any signs of your symptoms returned yet?”

Yet?!

She rubbed her hands together and then started searching for tumors along the back of my neck.

“Should I be expecting them to return?” I asked. “Already?”

“Well, what you have is very aggressive. When it comes back, you’ll definitely know it.”

When?! At least your hands are warm because your bedside manner sure as hell is not.

Dr D_____ had told me during my last check up that he didn’t plan to order any of the post-treatment follow up scans typical of other cancer protocols.

“Why not?”

“When, if, it comes back ... frankly, we’ll find it in your blood first or we’ll find it on you. The thing about Mantle Cell,” he said, “is we won’t really know anything about how you’ve responded until about 24 months after your last treatment.”

“But, that’s like Thanksgiving after next,” I said.

He nodded, I noted, pastorally. “For most people, it’s the uncertainty they struggle with, but you seem to be different, handle it better, in stride. I imagine that could be because of what you do, but I’m going to guess it’s really because of who you are.”

Don’t let me fool you. I’m still f#@\$\$%^& scared out of my mind.

I didn’t mention to him how week after next I’m burying a man—an old one—who died of what I nearly did and still yet may. If that’s not a coincidence, then Jesus has a constipating, twisted sense of humor.

I’ve spent enough days here this past year to have reflected upon it ahead of time, whittled out a take-away, prepared a ready-made response. When you emerge against the odds from cancer and rejoin the living, everyone asks what you’ve

learned. They expect some catharsis-generated wisdom, an *Eat, Pray, Love*, (*Get Cancer*) sort of new view of life.

I've got nothing.

Except to say how happy I've been to get back to my life, the one I was living before. Back to my routine and relationships and work. Back to ordinary things like laying on the sofa with my wife, Ali, and watching *Ballykissangel*.

With uncertainty looming over you, I guess, it's best to hold on to the things of which you're certain. And for me at least, though I'm willing to bet for you too, the things of which you're certain are the little ones. The ones you can grasp in your hands or wrap your arms around. Some people take solace in the certainty, as Jesus alleges, that God knows even the hairs on our head. That's too big for me. I prefer the smaller certainties. The smell of my wife's hair. The feel of my youngest son's hand in my mine. The way my oldest son whistles when he thinks, at least for now, that everything is going to be all right.

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