

Stones Along the Road



I wrote this collection of short articles and poems while traveling on a journey of great despair and discovery. Some were written during a time I was unable to speak with much clarity, challenged physically and emotionally. Writing became the avenue to express what I felt, and allowed me to eventually see the goodness of all that had become.

Like stones along a road, these thoughts and feelings were laying there waiting to be touched. In my prior life, I walked past many of these with an occasional glance at a few I stumbled upon, but cast aside nevertheless without much interest.

I've now gathered these together, and they are my gift with the hope that you discover how remarkable He has made our lives, ordinary as they may appear. I believe you have these stones that sparkle and become the foundation of your story as well, treasures along our strange and unique path to destiny.

Enjoy.

Robert Thomas Kinaga
Year of 2008

Stones Along The Road



Something Wonderful Is Coming

Long before I felt a tug in my neck, I felt a tug in my heart.

I sensed a significant change coming into my life during the summer of 2007 - that I was about to embark on a journey with a wonderful outcome. It had started a few years before, as a faint hum in the background of everyday life. More of a general calling rather than anything specific, it was there and growing louder. Serving others would play a key role. I was getting excited with anticipation.

My feelings for God also grew. For several years, I had been seeking a better understanding about my faith. But a stronger desire for something more came with the same rhythm as this calling.

Something else began to occur with more regularity. I had this uncanny sense that the little things in life would take care of themselves.

These three pulses began to beat as one.

No connection was made that summer to any integration or purpose. I just accepted them. Dismissed in the past as whimsical, not much energy was put forth to gain understanding.

But now either something from within me was changing, or from afar coming stronger and louder... probably both.

The search for meaning regarding my faith remained elusive. I poured through books and articles for inspiration and guidance, but was no closer to the truth. Being organized and well-prepared were among my core strengths, so why wasn't this working? There wasn't anything for me to do without knowing what to get ready for. I would, however, do a few things.

At work, I'd always been comfortable with allowing leaders to take on more responsibility. But with greater urgency and a self-imposed end-of-the-year deadline, I was delegating and supporting the development of my leadership team with purpose. It was something I could do in case an opportunity came along; good succession planning.



I began to spend more time researching and reflecting upon religion, synchronicity, and career choices. People asked if this was a mid-life crisis, but I felt this was different.

I also noticed that my usual passion for sports was fading, especially Sunday volleyball. What kept me going to the beach on Sundays were my friends, not so much playing the game, and it showed in poor play and very little success. I was discouraged about my lack of intensity and dwindling skills, and I began to feel sorry for every person who had to play with me; this lasted for months of hardly winning a game. I knew others had been through slumps, but this was depressing.

I also began to let up on the controls. This was a very hard thing to do for someone who thrives on details and successful decision-making. For example, I remember running behind schedule for a meeting. But for some strange reason, I'd arrive to discover that the previous meeting ran over and everything would work out in the end. This happened almost every time. The same was happening with decisions made, that somehow the timing and the choices worked themselves out. This was strange. I was actually becoming less anxious about the results.

Then the tiny tug in my neck.



My Special Year

2008. New Year's Day. I enjoyed the time with family and friends on a day of Japanese traditions and favorite foods specially prepared. It was the one holiday that the entire extended family looked forward to each year. Along with our Japanese American ways, we also watched bowl games, played basketball, tossed a football around like many other people in America were doing that day. I was acting every bit as a twenty-something, rather than fifty-two years old. The only setback was jamming my finger trying to catch the last pass of the day as we headed back to the house for more festivities. I shrugged off the injury, presuming it would get better by itself.

Weeks followed and the finger did not heal. With much prodding from my wife Susan, I reluctantly saw a doctor, and of course the finger was broken. X-rays and outpatient surgery followed, a big deal for someone who had never before broken a bone. I decided to take advantage of the down time to schedule an annual physical, and my first colonoscopy, a necessary rite of passage for those of us in our fifties. Why not get these out of the way since I wouldn't be playing sports anytime soon - all this for a little finger injury. Oh well, postpone that wonderful start to the year and get some things done.

Like many friends, I'd never questioned my health nor thought much about diseases or serious illness. Rarely saw a doctor, and for nothing more than minor inconveniences... I was flying through life with little to complain about. Frankly, I was anxious about seeing doctors and all the possible things they could find. So why did I schedule multiple doctor appointments? I just went for it.

After the finger surgery, I met with a pulmonologist for a breathing problem I'd experienced the previous summer during a swim trial for a 2-mile ocean race. The doctor thought it was sports-induced asthma. Being familiar with my daughter's chronic asthma condition, an inhaler was probably all that would be needed.

Normal life continued. Spring break with Susan was a refreshing change from our typical vacations. Rather than drive we took a train to downtown San Diego, soaking in the breathtaking coastline as we leisurely traveled south in comfort. We had a great time finding things to do, eating at places without the hassles. For a moment in time, we regained the carefree attitudes and lifestyle of our youth as we hopped on trolleys and buses, running and playing in the city - something different.



My son Greg and I took a road trip up the coast to visit San Luis Obispo, enjoying our time together. The smaller college setting was open and welcoming; it felt right. He met with friends, allowing me to explore the surrounding area, discovering parks and trails to take Susan later. I walked the heart of downtown, past friendly shops and smiling faces.

I found myself being drawn to the old Spanish mission in the center of town. There was a museum, where you could imagine the hard life of Spanish settlers and missionaries in the early days. I entered the historic chapel and sat peacefully in the warmth of the light from the colored stained glass and rows of white candles, wondering what was to come next.

By early April, the finger had healed and the surgical pins were removed. I was eager to stretch the muscles, yearning for a hard swim workout, and returning to the beach with volleyball and friends.

That month we also celebrated my mom's 85th birthday. My sisters and I put on a show with an "I Love Lucy" theme. My mom has given me so much all my life, so it was great to do something that made her laugh and smile.

My next appointment was an annual physical, and my primary physician found everything in good order, a few things to watch with normal wear and tear from aging.

Walking out of his office, I mentioned feeling a tiny tug from inside my neck, perhaps a muscle pull? He said it was probably nothing to worry about, but to be safe get an ultrasound to confirm nothing was there. Late April, completed the ultrasound check without any problems. Did notice the technician was a little distant when I asked her about the results, but I went on my way.

In May, determined to keep on schedule for all these appointments, I met with a specialist for ear discomfort and an annoying sinus condition.

Coincidentally, my ultrasound results came back at the same time.

It was surprising.

A large-sized growth measuring in centimeters showed up inside my neck. There were no obvious signs like a lump or physical changes. There was also no need to panic yet, it could be one of those



benign tumors you hear about. I waited to see a few more doctors and run other tests before telling Susan anything; didn't want to alarm her unnecessarily. Life goes on.

Later that month, my sister Patty invited me to participate in the Presidential Town Hall event that she had invested considerable time helping to organize. Last minute I said yes, and joined her for what turned out to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was held in Irvine at the University of California events center, and the opportunity to hear from the leading presidential candidates in a common venue was thrilling. Patty recruited a large team of volunteers, and organized outstanding entertainment that provided high energy blended with the excitement from the national and local political leaders delivering speeches and presentations. She had the confidence to give me some public announcing responsibilities, and I was thinking to myself how ironic this was for someone with a mass growing in his neck. She quietly sensed something was up.

Susan and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary in May. Susan was very suspicious that I insisted on going out for dinner mid-week with both of us working. For all those years, we never celebrated on the actual day. Off we went to a nice restaurant to thank her for our wonderful marriage. By now, she knew I had this tumor but was being very optimistic that it was nothing. I was in great shape, no symptoms other than shortness of breath (probably the growth compressing the trachea). The restaurant was across town in Hollywood, adjacent to the restaurant's café of the same name. The actual restaurant revealed itself as a little door off to one side, and with anticipation we walked through the unmarked entryway to a very special place. The atmosphere was French Mediterranean with a mixture of colors and textures flowing among the quaint dining area that we had to ourselves. The meal was quite delicious with a selection of cuisines from the Riviera region prepared for us. The service was excellent, balancing attentiveness and leaving us alone to enjoy our special date.

I remember reluctantly excusing myself to take a phone call from my physician with anticipation of good news - he hadn't received any. The call took longer than I had planned, so I rushed back to the table to suggest to Susan that we leave. She noticed my unfinished dinner and offered to stay, but I made some excuse and then whisked her to the highlight for the evening, trying not to think about medical things anymore. We drove past the famous Hollywood landmarks, and it wasn't until she noticed the flashing marquee across the street that she jumped for joy at the musical she had wanted to see for quite some time - Wicked. We had a great evening.

That Friday I received the results from my core biopsy.



It was May 23rd, the start of Memorial Day Weekend and we were looking forward to relaxing with the family.

It was the worst possible news - cancer. Just hearing the word seemed surreal. I was in shock. Again, no outward lump, no signs of anything different. I felt normal and healthy. How could this be? Not me!

We first decided to wait and tell the rest of the family after Memorial Day so they could enjoy the long weekend. Then we knew this couldn't wait, and we needed to let the immediate family know. That weekend was one of the toughest in my life. I didn't know how to handle letting everyone know. I was swirling in confusion and fear. Susan said to just tell our families and trust they were strong enough to handle it.

It was tough telling the children. I longed to keep their lives normal. Greg was in his senior year of high school. I told him I would be all right and to keep doing the things he enjoyed, especially in his final year. I was particularly sensitive about Carly who was at Santa Barbara for college. Her high school boyfriend was fighting a particularly aggressive form of testicular cancer, and I didn't want to add to her burden. And Jennifer, my oldest, had just graduated from UC Davis with an interest in medicine. Jennifer grasped the seriousness of my situation and got involved right away.

With my sisters, I could sense their reaction through the phone and felt so bad for them. But they set their emotions aside and switched to the task of overcoming this with me.

And my wife's family has always included me as part of their family, so we needed to tell her father, mother, brother and sisters. I was overwhelmed with their concern and support.

Wow, I have a great family!

My father has always been the strong, intellectual, calming force throughout my life. He was struggling for years with a debilitating disease, but I knew he would be able to deal with this as best under the circumstances.



It was my mom I was most worried about. I can recall telling her with tears in my eyes, seeing her initial reaction of hurt. Then with surprising determination and calm optimism, she said we would get through this and put her arms around me squeezing tight with all her love and hope. I will never forget that moment, and will never again doubt her inner strength and resolve.

As those who have cancer know, finding out is just the beginning. We had to determine what type of cancer I had and what to do about it. I'm saying we, because the decision to tell the family gave me a tremendous emotional support base and an instant army of helpers.

I had more tests and met with more doctors in three months than my entire lifetime before, very overwhelming for someone who didn't like a simple blood test (quickly overcame that fear). The next month was a whirlwind of progressively more complicated and terrifying tests and results.

My primary physician went into stat mode. He was amazing. Susan's friend Paula helped tremendously by navigating us through the myriad of tests and biopsies, expediting results. We learned new terms such as poorly differentiated, squamous cell carcinoma, anaplastic thyroid, unknown primary, metastatic, undefined stages. One thing was becoming clear. This cancer was fast growing and deadly.

Gathering several opinions, not all the doctors agreed with the type of cancer, but they were consistent with doing a radical neck dissection. This involved a risky surgery to cut open my neck, determine where the cancer had spread, take biopsies inside my neck to test for the source, and remove the tumor mass and any damaged organs and functions.

I was most afraid of the unknown. How far had this cancer spread and could it be eliminated in time? It finally dawned on me that this mass was located smack in the middle of the byway between the brain and the rest of the body. It was an area with so many critical functions flowing through, major arteries and veins, spinal cord and nervous system, trachea, esophagus, lymph system. Even with all the tests and scans, it wasn't clear whether some vital functions had been invaded.

My fears peaked with another surprise that a major nerve looked to be embedded in the mass, and not likely saved. With the loss of this nerve, I would lose my left vocal cord, possibly my voice, and could also compromise the ability to swallow. The prognosis was getting worse and worse.



Patty and my brother-in-law Peter took the lead in researching facts and choices, and with incredible speed and their key contacts expedited appointments at the two Southern California nationally-ranked cancer centers.

Patty and Peter helped us analyze the enormous amount of information, sort through unclear choices, and weigh-in on the critical decisions. Patty cleared her busy schedule as an attorney and attended all the major doctor's appointments. She continued to do that throughout the year. She was present to hear firsthand what was said, take notes, and ask questions. This was crucial, especially when Susan and I were caught up in the disturbing possibilities and outcomes. From San Diego, Jennifer helped via phone and emails with her medical references. My friend Matt offered help with biotech leads. My brother-in-law Rod contacted a third cancer center that became crucial to my story. They joined the team and helped validate our final decisions. It was a remarkable time with everyone pitching in, overriding their own concerns for mine. There were late nights Susan had to shut off the computers so I could get to sleep. In a heightened state of urgency, I had little time to dwell on my situation.

I had to make the difficult decision of whether to let people at work know other than my manager. He shared his own experience dealing with brain cancer a few years before working in another area. Another coincidence? His insight helped to alleviate some of my fears of what was to come, and he very graciously offered assistance and complete understanding of my change in priorities. I had kept him involved throughout, but it was getting more noticeable with others when I had to leave suddenly for a test or appointment. I began to let those closest to me know to maintain some semblance of continuity and coverage. When I finally met with the organization and my own leadership team, time was drawing short and my anxiety was beginning to show.

I began to tell my closest friends so they would hear it from me firsthand. I also made a special trip down to the beach to let my volleyball buddies know what was going on, and that I'd be out of action for awhile. I'm not sure how I would have reacted if it had been one of my friends, but like those at work they were very understanding and offered tremendous support.

So much was compressed into that late May and June, at times a blur yet the longest month.



Then I hit the wall.

In an instant, I could feel myself losing it. I called out in desperation to the one person who was the farthest away from me, my other sister Mary. Sensing my dire situation, she jumped on the phone and internet, and contacted every available church and community service in our area. She connected with our pastor who became my primary source of support. Through her calls and emails, she sparked a groundswell of people praying for me in different parts of the country.

It is truly amazing the goodness in others as they reached out to help someone they didn't know.

Mary also took the role of maintaining my calendar for the rest of the year, finding people to help with appointments. I'm not sure they realized she was doing this coordination from Arkansas. And so Mary was alongside all of us, and there for me through the entire journey determined not to let the separation of two time zones get in the way.

By June when we met with the third cancer center team, I already had two good choices. The Head and Neck Cancer community is very specialized, and the doctors from these diverse and competitive centers knew and respected each other. But then we met that third oncology surgeon, and it was different.

With so many things to be thankful for, including 30 years at the company I worked at, I was barely halfway through the year and it had become my worst nightmare.

So much for the wonderful year of 2008.



*The first time it came ever so gently to me, in a dream just before dawn.
I felt its touch deep into my soul, gratitude sweeping me away.
Passion and love woven together into music of the purest sounds,
From a source far greater than I could ever imagine.*

*Overwhelmed with emotion, I awoke to recall just a thread of its essence,
Yet could find no humanely way to capture its sweet vitality.
As a butterfly slipping away in all its beauty,
Never to be caught.*

I was sad yet somehow knew it was not meant to be.

*I wonder how many years ago did that weaving of purest nature,
Strum my heart chords forever.
Knowing so special a gift came from above,
A light into the core of my belief, so strong and bright it became.*

*Upon reflection it was to be the signpost in my journey
For me to choose the road so often missed.
One slight step up a different path that leads to Him for eternity.
What would have been without that predawn kiss of enlightenment?*



Awakening

As I climbed up the mountain trail in search of my ultimate destination, I was stumbling on these rocks. Angrily kicking them aside the bigger they got, I was getting tired every step of the way. Eventually tripping over them and scrapping-up my hands and knees, I was growing discouraged. How would I ever reach the summit?

Then something shoved me right off that mountain. How could this be happening to me? I flailed as I fell into the abyss, in sheer terror of my death approaching.

This was my 2008.

Yet through the worst part, I had this inner sense of calm.

Did you ever have something affect you so deeply that you knew it would fundamentally change you by its very existence? It may have been an experience that seemed so familiar, yet without a rational explanation for why it happened. A sudden spine-tingling sensation shakes you to the core, when realizing the possibility of something far greater than imaginable just touched you.

You try to discuss what happened, desperately wanting to share because it is so different and exciting... and afraid to for fear of looking foolish. But so strong is the urge to let it out.

This is what happened to me many years ago in the stillness of the early morning. I was overwhelmed with the most beautiful music I had ever heard. My first thought after waking was to capture this song so others could experience its bliss. It would universally touch everyone. But it was not meant to be.

How did I know this was something special? Think about your own experiences with music. For many of us, we've listened to hundreds if not thousands of songs during our lifetime. They often trigger memories of the good and bad times, of first dates, break-ups, hardship, successes, national pride, weddings, and tragedies.



Music that elicits a very strong emotion we remember as ours forever. A few songs stand alone as they touch us deep inside just by the very nature of their brilliance. These outstanding works of art have a life of their own.

The music I experienced was different, beyond outstanding. Unspoken, I just knew. I wept with joy when I realized in my dream that I was being touched by the purest form of love and compassion.

Like awakening from a long trance and knowing you are home. It took me several years to figure out how this fit into my life. By the summer of 2007, I had made a connection. I often come back to that day as the start of a different life for me.

It gave me affirmation that God exists.



Taking the Long Way

The goal to gain more clarity with my faith was elusive and discouraging.

I expected, with the touch of His hand that predawn morning, to awaken with all the answers. For many years the harder I tried, the more distant it became. Intellectual pursuit was not getting me anywhere, and yet I stubbornly hung on to the hope of a clairvoyant breakthrough.

One could believe this was a start. In hindsight it really was something I already had, and was always there for me.

In my childhood, I attended church with family and grew up believing in Christianity. It became less important as an adult, and life took over. Susan was seeking her own answers as we began to raise our family. She knew the children needed to be brought up as Christians.

Apprehensive at first due to its small congregation and casual atmosphere, I grew fond of a start-up community church Susan had discovered. The message from Jim, the pastor, was simple and to the point. His wife Sandy's gift of singing was breathtaking. I was very proud of Susan and our children for attending church, especially their baptisms as declarations of acceptance. I never shared that with them. I felt it was just about being a good dad raising a family. However, Sunday morning volleyball became my routine, and I eventually stopped attending church. I wanted to go to church, but didn't they have a Saturday service?

Then the early morning affirmation to God's existence woke me and continued through the summer of 2007. I was still pursuing the meaning of it all, and not getting any closer. Sundays remained volleyball time. I'm stubborn, but coming to the conclusion that I won't get there by myself. Move forward to the start of 2008 with a broken finger, when I begin attending church again

That first Sunday service I knew I had returned. The pureness and comfort of Sandy's voice, the clarity of Jim's message brought it all back to me and I wondered why I left so long ago. Most importantly I saw the joy this brought Susan, to be there for her. I made a decision then that regardless of my finger healing, I was going to commit to Sunday church. My priorities had just changed.



I remember one of the first comments Jim said to me upon returning to church.

He is a very gentle and often funny person to be a man of the cloth. It's probably why I relate to him, for not having to be so intense, yet still holding the truth. He jokingly commented that years before he wished he could've thrown me to the ground and pinned his big knee on my chest, and tell me to get with the program. Visualize a towering 6'5 tall 220-lb minister with a gentle heart throwing a WWF move on a small 5'8 150-lb Asian dude. I couldn't tell whether he was serious, so I laughed with him. It didn't matter, I agreed with his point and still laugh today at how thick-headed I was.

I looked forward to going to church every Sunday, drawn by great worship music and always a good message.

I was making a connection that my future of serving others in some way was related to serving God's purpose as well. Light bulbs were turning on. I was on such a roll for the first 5 months of 2008, then the news of cancer smacks me right in the face. So why did I get thrown off the mountain?



Finding A Way Out

I hit the bottom of the abyss hard.

I didn't know how much of me was broken, but I was still alive. Lying there, I was shocked that life could be so cruel as to shove me off a mountain knowing it would kill me. And confused. How could this be my wonderful life unfolding? I was stuck with no trail to lead me back to the previous one.

I had to get moving or would surely die. So I gathered myself, and began to seek a different way out.

Through the confusion and dark thoughts of June.

June 2008. I was confident about having surgery at either of those two nationally-ranked cancer centers. I decided to follow through and see the third surgeon anyway, more to confirm what I'd heard from the previous places and help with the final decision. I was out of time, and it showed.

He was different. He asked what I was there for, and I told him my story. He calmly questioned why I was in a panic, although he knew the gravity of my situation. He talked about proceeding quickly, but not being in a rush. He focused about quality of life decisions that I would be facing. He pronounced I had to be a willing partner, that he as a doctor could not be successful without my help and positive attitude.

Finally, he said my destiny was already laid out, so who's to know how long I will live. Enjoy the time that I have, however long that would be.

He spoke to my heart, not just my head.

I'm sure the other doctors were well meaning and had my best interests in mind, but this was the first doctor who openly challenged my thinking. I was at ease for the first time since hearing the news.

I felt human again.



He also mentioned his Head and Neck Cancer Support group where I could meet cancer survivors and current patients at various stages of treatment. I initially thought this wasn't going to help, but then decided to find out what support groups do. I also wanted to meet and thank Blair, the person my brother-in-law Rod had connected with to arrange meeting this doctor. Blair and Rod's friendship would also prove to be valuable in the difficult months ahead, meeting me for weekly breakfasts and leading me to others who provided valuable information and encouragement.

I arrived Saturday at the support group with Susan and my mom, joining people sitting around a large waiting area. Surprisingly, the doctor himself was there. Unsure of how the meeting would proceed, we sat quietly while Blair and co-leader Joe made announcements. They then asked everyone to share something. I told myself I could do this, just a brief version.

As I began to hear others tell their stories I realized I wasn't alone, and in some cases not facing as serious a condition as others had gone through. By the time it came for me to speak, I was feeling confident. In my work voice I began with a clinical explanation of my condition and what led me to the meeting; it was like talking about someone else.

Then it became very personal. I never made it very far into my story.

Emotions that had been welling up inside for weeks since finding out about the cancer came rushing out, and I cried. I was embarrassed. A strange thing happened. No one turned away. I could feel their deep compassion reach out for me in that silent room.

A survivor, disfigured in the face from a terrible cancer, stood up and walked over to me. She embraced me, and said somehow I was going to get through this. I believed.

I made a decision to go with this remarkable doctor, this oncology team, this support group.



Follow The Light, Listen To Your Heart

When Susan told Sandy about my situation, Sandy was startled. Then she turned to tell me how sorry she was, that I would get through this and we would be singing together again one day. There was absolutely no doubt in her voice, and her determined smile of encouragement and hope reflected an inner strength that simply astounded me. How could I not believe now.

Jim offered to meet the following week to understand all that I was facing, not just the cancer. This was the first time I had spoken at length to anyone associated with church, but I sensed that Jim would be my guide as much as a pastor.

Friday, June 13th we met and took a hike along the beach. I provided him details about my condition and decisions I would have to make soon. He asked clarifying questions, not pressing for where I was with God in my life. It was like talking with a friend. I decided to tell him the rest of my story, especially how perplexed I was that if something wonderful was supposed to happen, why the cancer? We had a great discussion regarding it all, and the search for deeper connection with Christianity.

On our walk back, the conversation found its way to whether I had accepted Jesus as my savior. By then Jim knew that this was not a question that he had months to guide me through. I shared with him that I thought I did, but wasn't absolutely convinced. We agreed I probably did at an intellectual level, with childhood Sunday schools and the occasional services at Jim's church. I asked how I would know for sure, and he said sometimes people get a very obvious wake-up call. As I met more people in the months ahead struggling with this question, I realized for many it takes years to reach this life changing decision.

Jim then suggested praying with Susan that evening, something we had not done before, to ask for acceptance of Christ if I was ready. At the end of our walk, Jim prayed with me and offered any assistance I would need.

I called Patty, who had offered to pick-up my cancer biopsy slides at one of the cancer centers reviewing my case. I let her know that I wanted to go myself and personally bring them over to the doctor I'd chosen. It was the best decision, for what followed changed my life.



I met with the radiologist who had analyzed my biopsy, and asked if he had time to discuss a few questions. He was very patient and helpful. He explained his conclusions, and let me view the actual cancer cells on his scanning microscope. It was the first time I'd seen the cancer itself.

It was no longer a condition, it was real.

I proceeded across town to drop off the biopsy at the doctor's office. Little did I know that I would be stuck in a traffic jam. I eventually passed the bottleneck as I headed downtown, and the traffic eased. I decided to turn on the radio. This was the first time since the cancer news back in May that I'd listened to music.

Not only was the CD player on and not the radio, but it was queued to a specific CD with a very special song. That alone was interesting because I'd decided to give singing a try again last year after recalling many wonderful experiences with Sandy and her lessons about style and voice. And the one song I was practicing to perform was THIS song. It was another strange coincidence of many for the year.

Traffic again slowed to a crawl, when the song began to play. The lyrics started with *“through the darkness, I can see your light”*.

For a brief moment it rang familiar, then with tears in my heart and a presence of awe the sky opened up around me to infinite broad unspoken meaning of just knowing that He is here for me, always was and always will be. Why was I so blind? From the time of the cancer diagnosis, I kept saying I'm in God's hands now, yet I realized somehow I've always been in his hands. I held a vision of the Lord smiling down from the heavens at me, knowingly. This instantly became so personal to me, about Jesus and my relationship with Him. I had never experienced anything so genuine and real. I was emotionally overwhelmed, completely swept away.

And I knew then I was truly home.

If anyone noticed driving alongside, they would've wondered why this guy was in complete tears saying *“I accept you into my heart”* with total surrender and joy. It is a wonder that I didn't get into an accident, somehow safely arriving. I was still unable to talk, still coming to terms with what had



just happened. My composure had returned by the time I met Patty at the doctor's office, but with an inner peace not felt since I was a child.

I came home that evening and had the most wonderful conversation with Susan. I'd seen her struggle the past few years with horrific brain tremors shaking her entire body, at times lying on the couch with the look of hopelessness in her face. While teaching school, she'd have to lie down on the classroom floor during recess to regain some steadiness before her students returned. She would shake uncontrollably through many sleepless nights. None of the specialists Susan visited understood what was happening and tests were negative for potential diseases. It was nerve-racking to end up with no clear diagnosis and therefore no obvious cure to her condition. I saw her vitality slip away along with her optimism.

Then came a turning point. She became healthier and the symptoms lessened. What she shared with me that evening of June 13th was coming to terms with this unbearable condition by finding peace within God. How Jesus' hands closed around her to provide ultimate protection. How she faced the fear of becoming helpless, and although not wanting to die accepted her mortality with the promise of the glorious future in heaven awaiting her. She was no longer alone in this unknown darkness.

So with her guidance we knelt on our living room floor together as she guided me through the prayer of acceptance. I was able to understand now the calm that surrounded her at this great crisis in her life, and I was able to follow her lead to gain peace by asking for acceptance and receiving the wonderful gift from God.

I was so excited when I got to church that following Sunday. I told Sandy barely holding my emotions as I spoke. With tears in her eyes, she held me and said it was a very special gift indeed. I decided to wait until Jim and I met during the week when I would have more time to explain. But still emotionally overwhelmed, I was barely able to describe what had happened. I ended up writing it down and sending it to him. He understood. From that moment on, whenever I have doubt or need to reach for something deeper, I go back to that day. The moment when my heart and Christ became one.



Readying for battle

*Jesus, His hands surround me as my armor
Knowing I will come through the darkness
Guided by His light*

*The message of my destiny
Is in the midst of this fight
I am truly excited to discover
What will become*

*Yet mixed with fear
That only complete trust in my Lord
With all my heart
Will provide the courage through*

*As a Christian warrior
I must walk calmly into the fray
For only He knows my path
At the end of the day.*



Across the Unknown

I walked as fast as my legs would carry me, following a stream winding through the ravine I was trying to climb out of.

I knew I was running out of time.

The stream eventually emptied into a fast rushing river that had no apparent way to safely cross. I must have hiked several miles down river when I first heard the rumble of a large amount of water falling somewhere. I finally reached the point where the river disappeared over an enormous cliff, falling hundreds of feet into a gorge below.

As I neared the top of the waterfall, I found a possible way to the other side. Large boulders were strewn across the width of the river, some partially submerged. If I could somehow maintain my balance and footing to avoid having the swift running river sweep me over the waterfall, then I could make it across.

The risks were high, but there was no turning back.

By now, I was out of time.

The time had arrived for major surgery.

My surgery date slipped out a week, making me even more nervous.

I had one of the worst experiences prior to surgery. I woke up in the middle of the night in complete dread, convinced I was dying right then and there. Not understanding what was happening, I paced frantically around the house to keep my body alive. I felt completely sick inside, waiting the next seconds and minutes as my last. I didn't know how to shake this feeling, and continued to tremble with fear. It took an hour for me to calm down.



I later described this to my primary physician who prescribed anti-anxiety medicine. Given all that I had been through, he was surprised this hadn't happened more often.

I wrote the prose about Jesus and His hands protecting me. I visualized Him, like in a Beatles' movie walking across a busy New York intersection with the long hair and robe, acknowledging me as He walked by. He became a part of my real world. Jesus became my point man.

Jim gave me a passage from the Bible, Proverbs 3:5-6, and I referred to it often.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.”

At the last minute, the doctor's office moved my surgery forward to be the first operation of the week. I learned later that complicated cases receive higher priority to allow for more time, if needed.

June 23rd and the day for surgery finally arrived.

I'd hardly slept the night before, and woke early to prepare for the 5:30 morning arrival. I was scared of a bad outcome, and of course dying. I realized that my family, pastor and the doctors really didn't have full control of what would happen.

As I was getting prepped for surgery, I turned to thoughts of Jesus walking up a tropical forest trail in front of me taking the point, trusting Him to get me through this. I found an inner peace that carried me through.

The doctors were able to safely detach the cancer mass from most of my vital functions. It had surrounded and compressed my trachea to a sliver but had not invaded it. They also took part of the thyroid, left side parathyroids and multiple lymph nodes. None of my tonsils, tongue, throat, larynx, or oral areas were removed for biopsy. I also did not need a tracheotomy. My hospital stay was expected to be as much as a week; I was able to leave after just one day. I had come through the surgery with the best possible outcome.

I had made it across safely.



Into the Storm

I was elated. I had made it across the river somehow. Still not finding the original trail, I was nevertheless making good time in open country heading toward higher ground... feeling stronger each day as my hiking legs returned.

Then I saw it.

A deeper ravine with a much larger river below. My heart sank with the sight of this insurmountable task. But I steeled myself, reached for my newfound source of hope, and marched ahead not knowing again where it would lead.

The long months of summer.

I recovered from surgery better than expected. Leaving the hospital early probably aided in the speed to get back on my feet. Met with my surgeon for a post operation review and discussion of next steps. He provided several courses of action, including the need for swallowing and speech therapy. My left vocal cord was paralyzed because the nerve embedded in the cancer had to be removed. It presented me with two problems. My voice was weak because the vocal cords could not seal atop the airway all the way, allowing air to escape while I spoke and diminishing volume and tone. The second issue was more important. That same gap provided a way for liquids and food to go down the airway while I ate. Until future reconstructive surgery and re-training, I'd have problems eating and avoiding complications.

I needed to eat to get my strength back and to heal faster. But I also need to gain more weight because of the next gate I had to go through. Biopsy from the tumor mass revealed that the cancer had spread to most of the 25 lymph nodes removed from the neck. There was no way to know how far it had spread from there. And the cause of the cancer was finalized as an unknown primary. I would need radiation and possibly chemotherapy treatment to kill any remaining cancer in my body. I know they shared some of this before the surgery, but it felt like another huge surprise was thrown at me.



I enlisted my family and friends again to decide on treatment options, with similar choices at major cancer centers. All of the options led to high-dosage daily radiation for 7 weeks, standard protocol. I pressed my oncology surgeon for working with a hospital closer to my home, especially with his facilities more than an hour away. He wanted me to stay with his radiation and medical oncology doctors and specialists. We did our research, met with other doctors, and made a tough call to stay with his original team. This was a big commitment of my friends and family because I would need many of them to spend hours every day driving and waiting with me. No one hesitated a bit. I had over a dozen friends and relatives take me to the hospital and appointments when Susan had returned to work, and many more who graciously offered.

It was bothering me that the source of the cancer was unknown, but the more doctors I spoke with the more I understand this was not that uncommon. I had to accept this fact for now, because it was important to get mentally prepared to start treatment.

I met with the radiation oncology doctor. Due to the unusual tumor location in the lower neck and the unknown source of the cancer, he decided with my surgeon to lessen the toxicity and narrow the radiation exposure field by targeting between my lower jaw and upper chest. They also decided not to use chemotherapy. This was a critical tradeoff. A broader radiation field would involve my cheekbone, oral cavity, teeth and other facial areas. And chemotherapy would enhance the effectiveness of the treatment but greatly increase complications and bad side effects. This approach would lessen the toxicity risk and increase my chances of survival.

I was not prepared for the different issues involved with post-surgery treatment. I had a complete checkout and clearance for my teeth and oral cavity, dental work, and special care instructions. I met with a dermatologist for a full body baseline for any skin cancers. They found an unrelated basal cancer in my nose, but agreed to schedule surgery for a later date. I shared this with Susan, thinking how big a deal this alone would have been in the past. Now we just took it all in stride.

I had my vision checked by a friend who is an ophthalmologist. I also selected physical, speech and swallowing therapists to help me work through the impact of radiation on the body, and with eating and talking. Setting up for radiation involved a pre-scan, custom fitting for a target mask, and analytical work by physicists to create a specialized program for highly sophisticated radiation equipment. I was also scheduled to receive a daily radiation-related chemo drug adding another



hour to my long day. The drug helps to offset the possibility of developing chronic dry mouth condition and resulting oral infection.

My radiation treatments began in July. Unlike surgery, this was not over in a day or a week. This was going to be months of progressively worse side effects. Radiation has a cumulative effect--seven weeks of daily radiation, but radiation continues to work months afterwards as if I was still receiving daily treatment and up to two years in overall retention.

I was able to tolerate only ten days of the chemo drug; reacting to the shots they were giving me, and made the decision to stop. I was also beginning to lose weight, both from the radiation and increased difficulty in swallowing. Many of the protein and high calorie drinks available are lactose free but not dairy free as I found out painfully one weekend. Mary was able to find through a friend a protein powder based on brown rice and peas, and bought me a case to get started. Although more expensive, these drinks became the primary source of nutrients and calories for many months. I was determined to avoid getting a feeding tube with its added complications, so consuming enough of these protein drinks became a priority.

Everyday presented different challenges. It was hard to find a consistent rhythm for coping with side effects and feeling better. I would let the day come to me, for I had no control over how things played out. People asked how I was handling all the free time now that I was at home. I didn't have the energy to explain that hours of the day were consumed with treatments, doctor appointments, therapy sessions, and travel time. By the time I returned home each day, I was exhausted. Simple actions like brushing my teeth, flossing, showering, and skin care on the radiated zones occupied even more time.

Eating and sleeping became the biggest challenges. As swallowing became more difficult, it would take more time to complete a meal. I'd plan meals around scheduled appointments and drive times, allowing at least 2 to 3 hours per meal to swallow a couple of glasses of liquid nutrients. Daily weigh-ins checked to make sure I was consuming enough nutrients to repair radiation damage and fight infections; I now understand how this becomes an obsession to people on a weight loss program. At some point this blurred into filling most of the time at home. My day expanded to accommodate longer early and late night feedings, encroaching on my sleep pattern.



Sleep came in short periods of an hour or two, waking fitfully to clear my breathing and my mind. I moved into another room to sleep, allowing me to get up frequently without disturbing Susan. I used the stillness of the night to reach out in prayer, and calm myself with the beautiful music of worship. With most of my hours overcome with necessity, I appreciated each new day.



Deep Blue Calm

I stepped out into the warmth of the Baja air, ocean waves lapping at the shore as the morning sky revealed another perfect day in paradise. A hearty breakfast preceded the gathering of gear and the walk along the beach to our two boats. Soon we were heading out of the bay, with Rancho Buena Vista a tiny speck along the coast. We stopped to load bait fish, then full throttle made our way to one of many unmarked destinations that our skipper navigated in his head. The horizon opened wide as we made distance into the Sea of Cortez.

For the rest of the day, all that surrounded us was the deep blue of the open ocean meeting the lighter shade of sky above.

The sun was warming our souls as much as our bodies.

Conversation turned to thoughts of that moment eclipsed only by much greater retrospect than normal city life would offer. This was the best.

The boats slowed at the first sign of stirrings beneath the waves. Large schools of tuna approaching, or perhaps a pair of dorado skimming below the surface. The experienced eyes of our crew alerted to all possibilities, and then the lines call out with the song of first contact. Everyone rushes to bent poles, excitement rising high as the first approach finds its way to us. We flex strong muscles, gearing for a long haul. Soon a flicker alongside the boat appears and grows larger with each strain of the back and arms to fight this powerful being up to the top of their world. Then another singing out of the line as the fish surprises us, diving down into darkness. The continuous struggle to find the ocean depth conflicts with our desire to bring it to the surface, and the fight continues on as we head toward an hour. Eventually our bodies grow weary and the great fish begins to weaken. One of us will pull the last direction. As a final salute the shimmer flashes brilliance again rounding the boat until the gaff catches it last breath. First catch of the day.

We fish into the heat of mid-day, cooled by a brief cloudburst and the perspiring cerveza's in the cooler, downing homemade beef burritos and snacks. Then an interlude and the lull of a nap, before the next rush of the fish calls once more. Filled with tuna and dorado, the transition to the long lines and the endless search for the big game begins. We scan for telltale signs as far as blue stretches before us.



Is that a shadow, a fin breaking the surface, or seaweed to tease our senses?

Then a jump into the air as the mighty blue follows his bait high into the air and splashes sideways into the water with great force. The boat makes a violent turn to follow the prey and the chase begins. Soon the liquid trail disappears as fast as the grand entrance, and we return to the troll of the water.

The late afternoon arrives and our skipper hoists pennants of our success except the big one that got away, a signal to turn homeward. Hours later the boat pulls alongside the makeshift walkway to empty its catch. The other boat has arrived just before ours, and we greet each other at the veranda. A much needed gathering back at the bar to sit and relax over drinks and share the highlights of our day.

And in this moment, time slows to the natural rhythm of life as we breathe in fully the calmness, gazing out across the same deep azure blue that captured our hearts all day.

... I awaken from my dream and find myself still lost in the vast country in search of safe passage.

Finding sanctuary in good times remembered, yearning for the day I'll return to the sea.

My father-in-law Fenton and his son Rod would often vacation at this rustic fishing ranch as a well deserved rest from slugging it out all year in their hard-earned business. This is the kind of place where you're not concerned with how you look. If you had a shower while you were there, then good for you. The only requirement is that guests wear a shirt for meals. Serving simple food, you can eat as much as you want. It was a place to meet interesting people. Mostly guys sitting at the bar, or around the family-style dining table, telling stories from the day fishing and fun times during the rest of the year. Definitely not popular for women; no amenities they'd be interested in.

So when Fenton offered to take us on a father and son trip recently, we jumped at the chance to see this place he'd spoken of with a gaze in his eyes. Soon we were off, loaded down with fishing gear and a few personal items, to Baja Mexico. The flight was filled with excitement of the adventure to unfold. The car or taxi ride up the coast from the airport was always a new challenge. Our first year we rented a car that turned out to be a tiny compact that the six of us squeezed into along with our belongings sticking out the windows. Fishing on the boats for the two days was great, regardless of



how many fish we caught. And Rod would treat us the last day to ATV riding in the desert, squeezing in one last bit of fun before boarding the plane to return home.

Fenton graciously continued this annual tradition, one that we all looked forward to each year. The deep sea fishing all day and unwinding from the worries back home - a time for guys to do guy things, and just hang out. It never changed in subsequent years for we knew each time would be different.

There was always an enormous amount of fishing gear brought along courtesy of Josh, the ultimate fisherman. He bunked with my son Greg and me, as Fenton, Rod and his son Sam stayed in the room next door. We soon learned Josh was going to take advantage of every minute of our trip to fish. He would fish before dawn until the boats were ready, all day on the boat, then along the shore again all evening. And he got the rest of us hooked, no pun intended.

I enjoyed the calm mornings and evenings as much as the action on the boats. The constantly changing colors of the water and skies.

What Fenton had designed was more than a chance for his son, sons-in-law, and their sons to travel and fish together. This was about getting recharged and ready for life again. Being able to talk out on the boats all day, or sit back over a beer after a day of fishing and have some great discussions about life and our take on things. What's so funny is that we didn't do a lot of that when we were back in the real world. And with these trips, my relatives became close friends as well.

We didn't catch many fish during our last trip in 2007, but I remember it for the conversations with Fenton and Rod (Josh was fishing) in the bar regarding indications for my better future. They shared observations of my strengths, possibilities of interesting careers, and envisioned the dream of good days to come.

That trip was another piece of the puzzle, another stone along my journey that with their help I chose to pick up and examine. It was the last link between 2007 and 2008 sans cancer, a poignant reminder during October when they departed for this year's trip to the Ranch.

It also represented a gift from Fenton that continued to provide joy during the long days of treatment.



In the Darkness Comes Light

Getting through the night was becoming difficult.

I needed my sleep to recover from the daily radiation, but a lot was bothering me. Side effects were building, and reinforced the possibility of potential problems I'd been warned about; I couldn't help but think of what was next.

In my darkest moments, I clung desperately to the light that He held for me.

It burned the brightest when I had my greatest doubts about getting through another day. I thanked Him for giving me the day I was present in, and asked for the hope of another.

I also began to realize that I was no longer the same person that had thrown a football around at the beginning of the year. I wrote the following piece during a particular tough stretch for me, and I believe it best expressed my transformation.

I would wake up full of imminent dread, then connecting to Him find inner peace.

But I know I'm broken inside, things are shaken and not right.

What am I to do but just keep going? If I stop, I face the frightening moment of truths unspeakable.

So each day I move on.

And I saw this broken globe in my mind, not shattered into tiny pieces, but cracked in fragments like a chocolate bunny.

You knew what it was, but just couldn't figure out how to get it back together again.

This is what I am.

Maybe I'm frightened because I cannot see what I will become.



clay pieces

*colors of beige, white, and brown
lay together on the floor
broken into fragments from the past*

*I looked upon them
recognizing the shape they once had
it was never to be the same
nothing needed mending*

*so I go on with hope of finding another
this one not to be returned to me
not lost, just gone forever*

clay pieces of my soul.



The Touch

Traversing the high country I begin to feel the effects of the towering peaks standing before me. The view unencumbered, with wide-open terrain leading to the foot of the steep slope. The air is getting thinner and breathing increasingly labored. I struggle with doubts about my strength to conquer the final ascent, draining vital energy; lack of food and sleep don't help. It's a race against time.

I begin the serious portion of the climb upward. Desperately clinging to the side of the mountain in search of any possible way through, my will to survive pushes me with each painful step. Yet with each section negotiated, I feel no closer. I realize the enormity of the mountain create an illusion of nearness, looking up from the base, now revealing its true magnificence reaching thousands of feet above.

I pause to reflect back on the journey through so many months, getting up after the sheer terror of falling off into the abyss that started it all, injured but walking out of the ravine. With trepidation, taking a huge risk to walk across slippery rocks at the waterfall crest, succeeding only to face a deeper ravine and more treacherous river. After all that, ending up lost in the wilderness searching for the path. Then the realization to look for the summit to guide me, with all signs of a trail gone. A great inner source provides the real sustenance I will need. Everything is more challenging, yet more simple.

Then I begin to climb again, solving each impassable section with care and patience. I measure progress with the distance covered each day. The mountain peak grows larger with each passing day, week and month. I reach the final granite bench carved into the mountain, with only the summit to go.

In August, things became a lot tougher.

I was forewarned about the third and fourth weeks of radiation. Sure enough, fatigue swept in, and I became lethargic. Even the physical therapy exercises had to be postponed during the midpoint. Muscles in the exposure areas stiffened from the radiation, limiting range of upper body motion. I was fortunate with lymphedema; swelling was minimal even with lymph nodes in the left neck removed.



I started sleeping upright on a wedge-shaped cushion to minimize choking, and still ended up waking every couple of hours with coughing and clearing my airway.

External radiation burning resulted in skin deterioration across the exposure area. At its worse, my neck became totally scarred and blackened similar to third-degree burns. I used burn ointments and aloe vera as much as I could tolerate to minimize open infections. Internally, it was scorching my insides making it extremely difficult to swallow and talk. Pain from open wounds in the mouth also limited what I drank; sometimes just rinsing would sting badly. I lost most of my sense of taste. When I went outside, I was careful to avoid sun exposure and more burning. I sat in the rear of the car during my trips to the hospital to avoid the painful sun on my skin. My eyes were getting hypersensitive to the light of day; I squinted in a similar way after you're dilated during an eye exam and stand outside. I also was becoming less coherent and functional. I had to concentrate fully to remember some of the simplest things. Time slowed to a crawl.

As strange as this sounds, I was starting to get into a rhythm of dealing with constant change. I learned to expect the unexpected. The only way I could deal with these physical challenges were to accept them as part of survival.

The weaker I became, the more I relied on God.

I made a note on September 19 to myself during a long night: *"I looked up and Jesus pulled me with both arms up onto another level altogether. It was subdued in a bluish purple glow, nothing to be feared, just not very clear yet. Sensation like being lifted to another ledge, dimension. Most personal and humbling to be touched and pulled by Him. As if to say – it's time Bob to get you up and going with this... still so unsure of everything, but this helps me tremendously"*.

Then we got hit with more.

It felt like someone was piling on in August just to see just how much we could take as a family. It started with my mom driving herself to the emergency room in the middle of the night bleeding. She didn't want to bother us with everything going on. Patty drove all the way from Pasadena to be with her in the middle of the night, and again adjusted her hectic schedule to stay with Mom during the week. It was nerve racking not knowing what was causing the bleeding, but she was eventually able



to leave the hospital. With Patty's help, she would regain her strength. Mary also flew out from Arkansas to help out.

In that same week, Susan's mother went in for a surgery to remove some basil cell carcinoma from her nose, very similar to the one planned for me in September. The surgery went fine, but she ended up with life threatening complications. It was touch and go there for awhile. Rod, Susan and Anne were there for her, and I could tell in their faces and voices how serious this was and how scared they were facing the possibilities.

It gave me a different perspective of my situation. Our mothers were dealing with very serious issues. I told Susan to take care of her mother, as Patty was doing with my mom. I could manage myself for a while.

What a difference changing circumstances makes on your own outlook.

Susan's mother also recovered although it took much longer because her condition was more serious. I was amazed at her strength and determination through it all, and made a comment later in the year at Thanksgiving regarding the courage that both mothers exhibited; a testament to what they had to endure during their lifetimes of war and peace, good times and bad times. Something the rest of us should draw upon when we face major crisis.

I wondered if somehow I'd contributed to my mom's problem. I had been reclusive with my mom, not wanting her to suffer seeing me struggle each day. Maybe she needed to be around me more, but I was concerned with the impact to her health and spirit. After her hospitalization I decided to become more accessible for her. Mom drove me to doctor appointments in the immediate area, and although she did not drive on freeways came along when others drove and when I started driving myself. She treated me often to meals and shopping; I fondly recalled things she did for me in my childhood. I hoped it gave her joy, and realized I could have balanced our time better during the earlier weeks.

Another learning point for me.

The combination of all these things happening at once was overwhelming. I knew everyone was physically exhausted and mentally drained, yet somehow they dug deeper and found a way.



And in spite of all these difficulties, I felt I was making progress. For every new challenge, somehow an answer appeared. Every time things felt hopeless, or uncertainty came back to haunt me, things would work out. And through its worst I began to see a significant pattern emerging that would stay with me.

The realization started with knowing I had so many people pulling for me all those months. My friends really wanted to help. As far back as surgery in June they were reaching out to me and continued throughout the rest of the year. They remembered my birthday in August.

This included those at my work. I kept in contact through my manager, my leadership team and office administrator. I was surprised with the tremendous outpouring of support reflected in the flowers, gifts, phone calls and cards wishing me a safe and full recovery. One group delivered an enormous basket of fresh fruits colorfully displayed like a flower bouquet.

It lifted my spirits and I appreciated even more the true reason why I had worked there for 30 years.

They were gently asking if they could visit during these long months. They were patient and understanding when I did not get back to them with an answer. They were considerate in the times they did visit, knowing I often could barely talk or was not feeling strong. As silly as this sounds, I also didn't want them to see me in the state I was in.

I was deeply touched by their heartfelt expressions of love and support. I knew I needed to explain someday that I longed to hang out with them, but lack of time and feeling lousy prevented me from doing much. They were amazing.

My friend Terry kept in touch often, and created a way to communicate with my volleyball friends. Their response was overwhelming with the many cards and emails; each one seemed to come on a day I was finding difficult or feeling down. A friend sent me a postcard from Colorado where he had recently moved, with a picturesque view of the Rockies that gave me hope of hiking with him someday. Terry created an oversized picture of a volleyball game where I was spiking the ball; it was signed by all my buddies at the beach.

One sent me a picture signed by Eli Manning with a message to get better; he also drove me to the hospital (not Eli). Another volunteered as a driver and spent the day sharing some of his journey fully



recovering from a brain tumor, including the people who helped him. His wife had previously visited with fresh muffins, a postcard she created, and a prayer from her heart that meant a lot to me.

Another friend and his wife came by and cheered me up during the tougher stretch of treatment, I needed that morale boost; she also volunteered to drive me downtown.

Many asked if they could bring a meal over, but with my limited diet had to decline their gracious offers. A friend I grew up with at work offered to take care of any repairs our house would need. Rod gave me his portable air conditioner. I was visiting the library in the late afternoon to cool down and take a break before the next meal, so having AC would help. I asked Terry to cut a piece of wood to help me seal the conditioner into the window frame, and he wound up installing the whole thing.

My friend Matt came by to watch a football game with me, and ended up helping with the installation of cable television. My friends Scott and Gary were continually asking how I was doing via email, offering to help. I joined them for lunch a few times after radiation was completed. Scott also emailed a continuous stream of laughter and joy with things he found humorous and fascinating on line, unusual stunts or stories. I ate them up to keep positive.

Matt and his wife Darlene continued to gently challenge me to do more things. He asked if I'd like to go to a football game in September, but I knew I wasn't ready and was also told to stay out of the sun.

And there were many more of these simple acts of kindness along the way. Things you never forget.

I also realized the gift of a healing touch. My doctors and nursing staff did a great job of keeping me alive and functioning. I had a huge advantage through the healers. My speech and swallowing therapist Melody set the tone. She provided more than just therapy, she taught me to trust my body and faith in order to heal. And she was there to remind me to create my own reality when I got caught up in the downside of things. I remember describing my symptoms and how I was told what would happen, and she questioned why I was assuming it was going to happen to me. Why was I creating an opportunity for a negative consequence to exist? Melody told me to change my reality and I would do much better in the long run. She was so right.



My physical therapist Kimi did the same for me kinetically and made me feel so much better about my body and its ability to heal. She would offer the right application to deal with the onset of issues while listening to me deal with them. She never once felt sorry for me, nor set a goal just to recover. She guided me with a positive attitude of getting me back to being an athlete. In hindsight, I had made a significant choice with seeing them instead of trying to find therapists close to home. They had direct experience with my situation, and it showed in their approach and success.

Patty also was persistent about doing things out of the normal. She gave me a gift certificate to an upscale massage, something I wasn't inclined to do. Aargh. I kept the certificate for the day I would feel normal again. But I was getting receptive to trying alternative approaches if it helped with healing. She took me to try several yoga classes. My first session was the Saturday in June before surgery. She found an excellent yoga instructor Pam and a great studio manager Maggie who became integral to my energy for healing as much as the nutrients provided. This offered me some form of movement even when I could do just a few of the poses during the later months.

Rod joined me. He was my swim workout partner for many years, and being alongside me for this was no different. After all, he was more than just my brother-in-law; he is my very close friend. Rod stayed heavily involved as a regular at yoga, convinced of the beneficial nature this was to my healing.

The mind body connection was powerful. The healing touches that Pam and Melody and Kimi were complementary and synergistic, and supported my reliance and faith. What a difference.

Susan's close friend Louise and her husband Joe brought me to a Christian healer. I recall visiting a local church one evening exhausted but open to what he may be able to do for me. A large gathering of kids from several churches was having a youth night complete with games outside and rock music inside. It strained my already tired body, but I felt compelled to see if this would help. They brought me to a quieter room where this healer and some of the Christian youth gathered around with Joe, Louise and Susan to connect with me. He described things only I knew. We knew he had made a significant difference.

I was still living one day at a time. I was able to find calmness in chaos.



And it was because I made a tremendous leap integrating my faith with this powerful mind and body connection... the synergy from all those supporting me blended with the healing touch and my faith to create an environment, rich in love to thrive and grow stronger.



*At every turn another question arises
At every difficulty my faith is tested
Why?*

*Is it a reminder to stay centered
On the truth that is unyielding, yet so easily forgotten?*

*Mine is especially challenging
Must be I need more constant pokes
Be it impatience for the future
Or drifting from the truth*

*A reminder I'm only human
A child in His destiny
How small and humble that may be
He is there for me*

*I sense it innately with all my heart
Yet the worldly trials consume
Thoughts and actions with a life of their own*

*How silly that is when all comes from Him
Little footsteps plodding up the trail
What destination is not known*

*Surely the mountain peak awaits me
Knowing the other side is waiting
Whether Heaven or more to serve on Earth
It is there for me to follow.*



Turning the Corner

I finished radiation treatments in September, and was reminded to stay on the feeding program, physical exercises, swallowing regimen, and speech therapy because the radiation continues as if I was still receiving daily dosage for at least 3 more months. Then it begins to taper off within one to two years.

They were right. The skin around my neck area went through the most dramatic change. It remained blackened for a few more weeks, then peeled like a bad sunburn. Chunks fell off, and revealed new pinkish skin soft as a baby. I lost my hair closest to the radiation zone, even though above it was intact. I looked like one of the three stooges. My eyes adjusted back to normal. I continued to lose weight, and the side effects increased. Within one day I would steadily lose weight, then regain some the following day. My body was using a lot of fuel to repair overnight. Sleep continued to be a challenge, but my swallowing was getting better.

I also had surgery to remove the basil cancer from my nose. It was a good decision to postpone until September. Plastic surgery was used because the growth was deeper than expected. Probably not something I would have tolerated during mid-August.

Susan also returned to work in September, and many friends volunteered to drive me. It was a sacrifice for them to give up a part or all of a workday to get me to appointments. Some came from far away to help. Peter volunteered and made two roundtrips within 24 hours from Pasadena and downtown. My cousin Bruce drove more than an hour away from Thousand Oaks to take me downtown. We had to insist during one of his volunteer days to at least stay overnight so he wouldn't be spending the entire day driving. They reminded me of pilots on cross-country trips.

I know there were times when I wasn't up to talking very much and they understood, but their companionship made my day. My sister-in-law Karen was doing things for us behind the scenes while dealing with her own parents' health issues a couple of hours away. While driving, she listened to my woes of the day, then talked about everyday life. She helped me stay connected to the real world. Matt and Darlene, Fenton and Marianna, and other friends who drove brought me up to date with what everyone was doing. Darlene also shared what was happening with her parents,



especially her father. I was touched. We had some great conversations regarding life and family that brought us even closer.

I was beginning to turn the corner in October.

My taste was coming back. I began to eat more solid foods. Eventually saltiness and sweetness came back. I also discovered that the nutrient shakes Susan were making me for months had a distinct taste and it wasn't that good. My smell of food also returned, some inducing desires and others turning me off. Things I was unable to tolerate earlier like mustard, sushi, pasta, spices and fruits became more tolerable. And I craved the weirdest things.

My first hamburger and fries, a hot dog, Japanese rice were bliss.

Melody and Kimi continued to strengthen my swallowing, voice and body. They were on a pace to get me in the best shape before my reconstruction surgery in December. This much anticipated surgery involved implanting an insert that would displace my paralyzed vocal cord closer to the midline, allowing the right side chord to move less during speech, and to seal better during eating.

Peter and Patty asked if I was ready for a trip to the Bay area for a UCLA/Cal football game. I decided not to chance the long drive and dealing with my feeding schedule. It was nice to be asked. Peter was always offering help. He found a Chinese rice porridge for me to eat, something to appreciate besides liquid nutrients. My mom made me a Japanese version to eat as well.

Throughout the year Patty had an innate sense of when I needed help.

It started in May with the Presidential Town Hall and continued. One day in June she somehow knew I had a problem at work when I felt really sick and strange, barely making it home; she took off from work and was there to meet me when I got home. Whoa. How did she know? And this would happen more often than not. She and Peter were always looking for ways to get me out and do things. It was her special way of keeping me moving along, knowing when to take it easy and when to give me a boost.

So instead of that longer trip, Susan drove me to San Diego to spend a few days with Jennifer. I thought it would be good for Susan to get away as much as for myself. It seemed so different than



our trip in April. I was happy just being somewhere else, even if it was in a hotel room while the girls did things together.

I could feel my momentum picking up with each subsequent week.

And throughout the entire six months even with the worst side effects I attended church every Sunday I was able to, letting it lift my spiritual energy and hope with music and inspiration.

Sandy always had a smile on her face to greet me. Her cheerfulness was contagious. People offered a kind word to me whether I knew them or not.

And Jim was always there for me. He sent me pictures from a trip with his son made to Montana during the summer. I was in a lot of physical pain that day, but had the biggest smile on my face from envisioning him on that lake fishing. In my mind, I was sitting right beside him breathing the fresh air and taking in the wide-open country.

I had given Jim and Sandy yellow wristbands for head and neck cancer support, along with the rest of my family and some close friends. It was inspiring to see them all wearing the wrist bands knowing they stay connected to me. Sandy placed hers in the car as a symbol of support. Jim made a personal commitment to wear it until I was through my ordeal. He even wore it during pictures at his daughter's wedding. He never took it off. I'd glance at it during church services and it made me feel so good to know he was there for me. How could I not get better with two of the best supporting and praying for me?



*They walk alongside us
Through the tough moments
Facing the fears that we face
Into the unknown territory*

*No one trains them for this
How could they?
Every situation unique
Survival learned along the way*

*With all their might
Wanting to ease our pains
Attend to our most basic needs
Comfort when nothing else can be done*

*Without complaint
They carry on
Love and hope
Sustaining them for the long journey ahead*

*They never asked for this
Their world shaken as well
Take care of these caring souls
Silent heroes one and all*



Those Who Walk Alongside

I was drawn to write something special about those closest to us who silently provide care.

Susan was the inspiration, for I looked at all that she had to endure. I am truly amazed at her faith and strength to keep us going through it all. What made this so remarkable was not just helping me overcome the cancer, but the deepening of our relationship in the fire.

I made an assumption regarding her role as my caregiver. I was wrong. I naively thought I could rely on her for everything, and this was unreasonable let alone unfair for me to assume. This strained us to the point that we almost lost it all. I realized how serious of a mistake I had made. And through His love, I realized that only God has the capacity and unconditional love to fulfill our needs. He is there for us to bear the heaviness of the world so that we can pull through together.

And with another step of this journey, I again received a precious gift in the midst of a great fall.

I also was not prepared to handle the deep emotional trauma the caregiver has and the lack of support they receive. Family members are also caught up in this. I saw others in our support group and realized they were probably going through similar experiences.

So for the National Caregivers Month in November I felt compelled to write the poetry and short article to honor them, and give insight to the people who are there for the patient so they may see the needs of the caregiver as well:

Who Cares for the Caring Souls?

For those of us dealing with cancer or other major health issues, much is written regarding the importance of support from others and how directly the patient's outcome is positively impacted.

My heart goes out to those in the world dealing with treatment and survival all by themselves. I found it tough and frightening enough with very good support of family,



friends and church. I cannot imagine the challenges that people going it alone are facing.

For those of us fortunate to have the help of caregivers, I am constantly amazed at the self-sacrifice to set aside their needs for ours. These efforts are noteworthy especially in today's self-absorbed world. And although I never want to diminish the importance and primary focus of the patient and their courage dealing with the cancer within, I believe we should also acknowledge our key supporters.

So this is about you, the caregivers.

You provide care without much recognition or support. I completely understand if you're embarrassed or even insulted with attention coming your way given the seriousness of those you are helping.

To begin with, just the sheer nature of added responsibilities and unusual conditions of caring for cancer patients is extreme. You're "on call" and serving 24/7 for extended periods of time, sometimes weeks or months – unusually long time to be on your best game.

Who gives you a break when you need it? And you do so without any medical training or instruction manual to use during your day & night shift. You seek answers to deal with expected complications to come. But you also solve problems and are creative out of necessity to work through unforeseen changes unique to our individual cases. You feel responsible to care for us long after we leave the doctors and treatment centers.

How many of you are doing this without any relief from "regular" life, which was often difficult enough prior to cancer. You may have others relying on you - children, spouses, elderly parents. You have the same chores, home repairs, finances, work... but now with this added role as caregiver.

And you have to deal with the emotional side of cancer support – ours... and silently yours. Something most of us never faced before. We find solace in your company – the rock to hold tight when times are tough. You balance encouragement and tough love to



keep us moving. With a positive attitude and a smile, you give us such love and hope. How are you able when you have so much of your own emotional pain? Especially since you've been alongside us to hear the same shocking news, sense our fears, see our doubts, and witness our pains and setbacks. My wife has intimately shared this not too pleasant experience almost as if she had the cancer herself. She's been through the emotional ringer yet has no time or desire to deal with it, all the while providing as much positive support outwardly. That's a lot to ask of anyone. Sometimes I can tell, she is human. I can see it her face, hear a tiny break in her voice, and sense a tear welling deep inside her.

You often also experience a loss if we've been your primary support in the past. You no longer have us, not with the inward battle and limited energy we have. To complicate matters with head and neck cancer patients, we sometimes can't even talk with you. It must get very lonely. Friends and family may not recognize all that you are personally dealing with; they see mostly your caregiver role.

So this is all about you. To be thankful for all that you do with the burdens you carry in your hearts. It is an acknowledgement given during a brief respite in our battles getting through these difficult times. I know you are hesitant but give yourselves a pat on the back from time to time, for so few will do it for you.

Recognize that this is a life-changing event for you as well, so it is OK to thrive as best you can. Just know that your efforts get us through another minute, hour and day of difficulty. You make our lives so much easier. We are grateful beyond words.

Taking care of those who take so special care of us.



Giving Thanks

By November I would enjoy a full Thanksgiving meal with all the trimmings.

There were nineteen of us gathered together for what would be a unique and special occasion. It began with a heartfelt prayer of gratitude to our Lord, followed by the tradition of each family member offering a word of thanks. The children shared appreciation for our family and personal accomplishments, and recognition of what this year meant to them.

Then the adults spoke.

It was the first time I had grasped the significance of what this year had been to everyone. We had overcome so much together. Each of us spoke deeply from the heart.

Karen's words were especially poignant; we came so close to losing so many this year, for us to be able to spend an ordinary moment now as if nothing had happened was truly special.

The following week in December I had reconstruction surgery. In that last month of the year everything came full circle. My oncology surgeon completed all that he had started in June. The reconstruction was a success. My last doctor's appointment of the year was with my primary physician where it all began. I had made it.

And yet everything had changed. I learned more about others, myself and my faith in one year than all previous years.

There were so many who touched my life during this journey. A few of their stories were woven in this writing. Most of their contributions remain personal and unheralded, but significant to me nonetheless.

They reached me through a spectrum of simple acts of well wishes, hope for recovery and prayers that resounded across the nation from places I had never heard of nor visited, yet voluntarily chose to give me their love regardless of whether they knew me.



They are forever in my heart, a bond of friendship and love I will never forget.

I treasured each moment with family and friends during the holidays knowing I had been very blessed. It made the time with them so precious. And I had a new discovery of Christmas, where the message of the birth of Jesus and the traditions became so clear and personal. It was the best present ever.

My spiritual journey, my quest for something wonderful, the sheer coincidences converged to one simple and divine truth of His love. I had changed.

And am forever grateful.



From This Moment On

I stood for the first time atop the mountain I longed for so many months before. I looked back into the faded distant land and saw the original trail I was once walking innocently along; it was clearly the easiest route up to the base of the mountain. Just not mine.

Then the ravine I fell in came into view, with the creek emptying into the river and the waterfall. From this newfound perspective, the crossing was one of many steps taken along the way. I could see how vast and difficult the territory was that I had traversed, however subdued it now appeared. I felt His presence that had guided me through it all come nearer as I reached up to touch the sky.

My friends were there in spirit; they had helped me achieve this summit. This was their victory as well.

Yet I stood alone at the crest, for this journey ultimately was mine to live.

I turned to gaze forward now, with an unobstructed view. The panorama opened wide to reveal more towering peaks in the future, new places waiting to be discovered. And I knew that my destiny was to go on and live my life, with my friends in fellowship and His hand to guide me the rest of the way

from the Rogers & Hammerstein musical Carousel:

When you walk through a storm hold your head up high,
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of a storm is a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark.

Walk on through the wind,
Walk on through the rain,
Tho' your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone,
You'll never walk alone!



*The connectivity of life
As it sometimes unravels to and fro
Is always a constant*

Reaching and intertwining

*The universal glue that binds us
Loosening at times
But never full disconnecting*

That which envelops us all

*Source is He who knows all destinies
Who lets us live and play
Within His master plan*



Stones Along the Road

My passage through this most difficult time became my greatest discovery.

The wonderful outcome I was searching for in 2008 became reality, as I opened my heart to Christ.

My acceptance of God connected all the other things. The feeling of something wonderful coming my way, the natural rhythm of events and people occurring with increasing regularity of purposeful design.

What had eluded me all this time was the most obvious.

I chose to open my gift and let it fill me with life.

My wish is for you to open yours. To touch upon a connection that lifts you in a way that you'll know we are all created from One.

That the stones of my path are made of the same ones that you travel along as well.



Someday I am going to stand along the sand
Stretch my arms wide to catch the air
Feel the ocean licking at my feet
Knowing this moment is to be treasured
So grateful to be alive

Someday I am going to climb a mountain
Free to go wherever the Spirit leads
Freshness filling my senses
Open to new horizons
So happy for another chance

And I am going to sit down
At the end of each day
Hopes anew for the next
Appreciative of the time He has given me
My heartfelt thanks to His gift of life.

