

Cancer – life, death and love

If there is one disease I have feared all my life, it is cancer. I have always regarded it as the worst disease of all. Then I actually got it myself, and now I know that it's a scary disease that causes suffering and pain and that often involves lengthy treatment and an uncertain outcome. But can there be something more?

More and more people are diagnosed with cancer. It is one of the biggest causes of death globally. Approximately 7.4 million people die from it each year, and the number is increasing. Some years ago my cells decided they would start to attack themselves, and I was given a serious cancer diagnosis. I am still fascinated by the resulting physical and mental challenges that must be faced to survive the disease. I want to share my experience of the existential side of this extremely physical illness, and I hope this can help to enhance the understanding of the fact that cancer not only affects the physical body but also extends far into the soul.

Much has been said about cancer. A person with cancer *lives* intensely. Every cliché resonates through the body. All at once nothing is more precious than life, and you love those closest to you fiercely. Suddenly you understand that you love. And are loved. And you become afraid. Terribly, profoundly, insanely afraid. You understand that you can actually die. Death is no longer something that will come sometime or other when you are ancient and grey and pass away in your sleep at a ripe old age. It is something that can happen in the here and now. The contrast between feeling life and feeling death becomes extremely strong.

Love's new role

And love can conquer all – that's your hope. But it is put to the test again and again throughout the process and in ever new ways. Roles change in relationships: suddenly one person is the patient and recipient while the other becomes helper, cook and cleaner, looks after the finances, is responsible for contact with all external parties, is the administrator and organiser – the one who has to keep everything together and who must also have an overview of

what the doctors, nurses and all the others say. The one who must encourage the patient and keep spirits and hope up. In his or her illness the patient is spoilt: it is indeed the sick person who deserves pity, and after all it is the patient who is ill. Love must find new strength and a new direction. Holding hands and talking together in the evening without feeling too nauseous after chemotherapy is suddenly the best thing that could happen.

Here and now

In between come the terrible anger and an intense and deep desperation at the fact that the disease exists. Why me, why us, why anyone at all? What is the point of all this suffering? It is difficult to see this on the days when darkness is like a veil. And your conscience nags every day. You have only enough strength to go to the window now and then, and managing to go to the toilet by yourself is a major victory. The side effects of the treatment have a severe effect on your stomach, head and heart. Inner strength must be found, and crazy thoughts and nightmares must be conquered. You suffer and you live. In a recurrent cycle of intensity. The day is *here*. And *now*. There is no past, and there is no future. Just here. And now. On good days a feeling from childhood may come to the surface. And it lives side by side with your bad conscience about everything you should and ought to have done but that you are no longer able to do.

Change

There is grief about what you must accept is lost. Maybe lost for always and ever, or perhaps you can return to health and be like you were before you became ill. It is extremely difficult to have to cope with the gnawing uncertainty. To begin with it isn't a question of not returning to what you once

were, to that time when everything was different. Then it's only a question of time and when you will start doing everything you did before. Gradually it's a question of.... of whether you can manage what you did before at all. A question of what you can manage. And hope is always present and strong. Hope does not slip away – surely in time things will be as they were before? But when? This is something you wonder about every day. And dwell on every day. Am I a bit better today, or is it the same as before? It's difficult to see your own progress, and perhaps it does not evolve as you want it to.

New meaning

In the days before the next check-up, the fear of falling ill again hangs over you like a dark cloud. And then you come back to life. Suffering, but intensely alive. Afterwards the joy and relief that you are well can be touched and felt. You have been given the gift of life – again.

The vacuum after cancer must be filled with meaning. And a new fight begins. Life must acquire a new context and a new purpose. How can the health service contribute to this existential process?

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