

The Worst Good News

Category: Uncertainty

written by Wendy S. Harpham | August 19, 2020

When my oncologist reassured me “Your exam is normal,” I wasn’t convinced I was okay. Neither was he. Unwilling to wait and see whether my worrisome symptoms improved with time, he handed me a requisition for a scan.

All I could do was hope for good news, a response as reflexive as squinting in blinding light. It never occurred to me to question whether “good news” was the best thing to hope for.

As it turns out, this universal hope that helped others only made me feel more vulnerable and impotent. The scans were going to show what they were going to show, no matter what I thought, felt, said or did. My efforts to envision getting good news triggered an exhausting tussle with the knowledge I might get “not good” news. Meanwhile, friends and family kept insisting I hope for good news, like it was my job—a role that made me feel somewhat responsible for the results.

In search of a better hope, my imagination veered to bad-news scenarios. Obviously, the dreaded words “It’s back” would upset me. Not as much, though, as a false negative that caused me to miss an opportunity for easier treatments or a better outcome. That realization gave me my answer.

Now while undergoing evaluations, I hope for *accurate* news—news that can help me most, even if it hurts when I learn it. That hope gives me a sense of purpose, motivating me to lie still in the scanner. It gives me patience. (“Take your time scrutinizing the findings...I can wait!”)

Embracing the uncertainty instead of fighting it frees energy for productive activity while waiting. By giving a nod to the possibility of unwanted news, hope for accurate news helps prepare me for any news. If the results are good, I celebrate. If what I feared, I start my new journey in a more hopeful stance, having been primed to perceive all test results as useful information. As a bonus, I can more easily dismiss the irrational voice in my head suggesting that I hadn’t hoped right.

In times of uncertainty, hope helps. During evaluations, I still hope for good news. But now I let that hope float in the background while thinking and talking about a more healing hope for this time of heightened uncertainty: Hope for accurate news.

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