

# The Malignant Gardener

Category: Cancer

written by John E. Smith | June 3, 2021

*Keep a green tree in your heart and a singing bird will come.* –Chinese Proverb

Spring folds into summer like origami. My vegetable garden thrives. Potted flowers stretch toward the sun. Wildflowers, I seeded in March, burst forth in a colorful display that attracts bees. The yard hums with activity.

All this appreciation for the beauty of the natural world is tempered by my health. I have a blood cancer, multiple myeloma. The disease environment in which I live comes with complications. Some days I am awkward and self-conscious as an adolescent. My skin mottles in ugly blotches, my GI tract turns somersaults, or worse, freezes solid. My body cannot be trusted. I sulk and just want to be alone.

I receive treatments aimed at reducing the damage caused by this incurable malignancy. Each month a six-hour infusion of a monoclonal antibody and immunoglobulins tamp down the damage. At home, I take low dose oral chemo along with steroids. I am alive and I am healthy... after a fashion.

I've come to accept my illness as part of the overall order. It is not an anomaly, a mistake, or a bad break. It is here to stay. For me, the wonder of being also glows in the murky haunts of my perishability. At times, I am afraid. Yet I am nourished, encouraged even, by my fear. I accept life with dignity similar to that exuded by my garden's bounty. Nature transformed the promise of their seed into splendor. Why, I ask, can't I do the same?

Is my cancer a gift? Hmm... I don't know. I have acquaintances whose illness follows a path full of fear and pain. They might wrinkle their nose at such an assertion. Harsh lessons do not guarantee a positive metamorphosis. Nonetheless, I understand the sentiment, for my illness is not devoid of rewards.

One thing is certain: cancer puts me in contact with an emotional core that focuses my attention on what is important. I

am more forgiving of others and myself. If that helps me mitigate some of cancer's ugliness, then maybe I've learned something, not to mention that gardening is a lot more interesting.

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