

Holding on . . . and . . . letting go

ROBERT MANCUSO

For most of my adult life I believed that not giving up was the key to success. I am sure I inherited this belief from my father who would say things like, “Giving up is easy, and anyone can give up.” So throughout my adult life whenever I was tested by adversity I would remember his words and try to persevere.

“Holding on” is the modern day equivalent. It assumes that you know how to win whatever you are striving to win and, if you can just not give in to the pain or the loneliness or the fear, you will reach your goal. For most of my life believing in the value of “holding on” worked. Success often was one step beyond giving up, one more push forward, and I passed more tests than I failed.

However, when my wife, Harriet, was first diagnosed with pancreatic cancer everything changed. Everything that had preceded that day was thrown overboard. All the strength and stability that I had drawn by believing in her and us was threatened. My wife had been my anchor. Throughout our twenty-seven years of marriage (with a rare interval of disharmony) she was my best friend, my closest advisor, and my partner. We had been blessed in many ways, but finding each other was the greatest blessing.

After the surgery to remove the tumor and after the chemo and radiation, I knew the statistics were poor for her long-term survival. If she made it 2 years that would be wonderful, considering how many others die within 6 months of first diagnosis. Despite those very poor odds, I believed I needed to help her focus on the positive. I would remind her that of all the people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer the same day she was diagnosed, at least one would survive. I would say again and again. “You are the One.” As much as I tried she knew with greater clarity and courage than I that the chances of her surviving were poor. She saw the reality before I did.

“Holding on,” which I had practiced each day, eventually needed to be adjusted. I needed to believe in something stronger and much more powerful than proverbs. Hope became my anchor. As long as I had

hope I could continue fighting. Hope was anything that would take this fear away. I would spend hours searching the internet for information about new treatments: a cure, a new treatment, a new cocktail of pills, an off-label use for a controversial drug. At one point I had considered taking my wife from our home in New York to live in Boston so she could participate in a new trial of an experimental drug. We tried all of these and as long as we were doing something there was hope. When all those things failed, the courage that hope provided passed.

I needed to let go. I needed to prepare myself and our children for the inevitable loss that we faced. Letting go brought so many conflicting feelings. Letting go brought fear: “How will I get by without her?” It brought anxiety: “How can I bring up three young children by myself?” But it also brought peace: “She won’t suffer anymore.”

What’s worse, the fear or the fact? Is living with the anticipation of her passing worse than living after she passed away? In my case, the fear of the possibility of her dying was worse than her passing. I think in my case there was such a relief when it occurred that the relief masked the fear. That relief came from knowing she wasn’t suffering anymore.

As I would meet some of Harriet’s old friends in the months after her passing, they would each ask, “How are you doing?” I never could figure out just what to say or how to answer that question. I’d say something indefinite but accurate like, “I think I’m OK, but I’m not really sure.” As the conversation continued I often would say “Of the many, many things I have learned from this tragedy, it is that it doesn’t pay to worry. Worry accomplishes nothing. It just drains you of your precious energy. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen.”

For me the pushing aside of worry and the focusing on what has to be done, one day at a time, has helped a lot. The more you can focus on the day or the hour or even the moment you have, the better I think you will feel.

It will soon be 10 years since her passing. I am amazed by the passage of time and yet I am not. So

much has happened. The anger I experienced for years, and still feel, has been muted. The grief that lasted for years and occasionally comes back to visit has largely passed. I guess by most psychological standards I have adjusted. I have learned to cope, to find the positive life forces inside me that reside in all of us. But I still ask myself “Why?” “Why did this happen? Why her?”

I will never know the answer to those questions. In many ways just asking those questions is painful be-

cause they remind me how vulnerable we are, how we live in a world filled with random events and that bad things happen to good people.

But those unanswerable questions remind me of the importance of love and the need to fill one’s life with spirituality and faith.

Faith, Hope, and Love. Holding on is only possible with those qualities and those qualities allow you to let go.¹

¹Dr. Norman Straker, a psychiatrist, and psycho-oncologist, was a partner in Mr. Mancuso’s difficult journey. I, Norman Straker MD encouraged him to write and publish his book “The Courage of Hope” in the last year of his treatment with me. The book’s completion was a way of mastering the trauma and “making something good come of something bad” It documents the challenges facing a male spouse of a terminally ill wife, and offers recommendations to men facing this crisis. With the same motivation “The Courage to Survive, Facing the Loss of Your Soul-Mate” a video, was produced as a collaboration between psychiatrist and patient. Its purpose is to teach oncologists, palliative care specialists and mental health professionals the value of psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy for the spouse of a terminally patient. It also documents the challenges facing spouses of terminally ill patients and the role that medical professional can play in easing their difficult journey.