

[We hope] it's all Part of the Plan...

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *The final essay assigned in my UWP101 (Advanced Composition) course required a short but thoughtful analysis of a recent life event "from which [the individual student] learned something." It was a simple prompt with an overwhelming vista of experiences to choose from, but my run-in with cancer in 2010 stood out as an event with a message relevant to a perspective of life shared by myself and an audience of my peers. As I explained in my write-up of the essay, I chose my diagnosis of a large Anaplastic Astrocytoma of the brain, and my subsequent grappling with mortality, "because I felt that it addressed an illusion that the typical college student often approaches their future with (at least initially): that following a set of 'steps to success' is all one needs to do to transition smoothly to life-post college, and that our youth makes us immune to the shortcomings or fragilities of 'other (older, less-rigidly prepared, etc..)' people."*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *Because many students take UWP 101 near the end of their time at UC Davis, I ask them to use the final writing assignment in the class to reflect on their educational experience by discussing key moments that have shaped them in important ways as thinkers or as people. Sarah's essay takes us to a surprising place that few of us would like to imagine going to, but her intelligence, clarity and wit draw us in and return us to our own lives altered somehow, granted real perspective. It feels wrong to say that you enjoy reading about someone going through as traumatic an experience as Sarah describes, but Sarah's essay, like all of the work she submitted to UWP 101, is a true pleasure to read.*

—Sean McDonnell, University Writing Program

For young adults scaling the precipitous bridge between higher education and The Real World™, an ever-increasing pressure exists to have, to know, and to be prepared for a clearly defined socio-economic future. "The Plan" that parents, academia, and contemporary

social mores insist that we *must* have if we wish to achieve any shred of success in life is so impassively formulaic that it runs like a battle plan from a cheap medieval period-film. “We raise an army, we storm the castle, and we take the crown.” We endure four or more years of tedious lectures, academic bureaucracy, and term papers that make dragon-slaying sound like child’s play by comparison, we burst out into the job market, waving our degrees expectantly in the faces of corporate CEOs, who must be awaiting us with open arms for us to grace them with our fabulous abilities and intellect, and we get everything the American dream has taught us to strive for: family, penthouse, big bucks, and a smart phone with applications to walk your dog and sing to you in Russian. Follow the steps and results guaranteed, or your money back. Right? Wrong. Ironically, what “The Plan” for the so-called “Real World” fails to prepare us for are those innumerable variables of actual human existence that a simple 1, 2, 3, GO! can neither predict nor assess.

Two years ago I walked into the lobby of the imaging center at Sutter Davis for what an endocrinologist at the UC Davis Health Center called a “precautionary MRI.” Long story short, I was a high performance cross country and track athlete with a history of anorexia and hadn’t experienced “that time of the month” for several years. That aside, I was in excellent health and performing in my sport better than ever, so when the good doctor arranged the appointment to rule out a blocked hormonal gland as a possible cause, she walked me out of her office with a pleasant smile and a reassuring “Don’t worry, it’s pretty unlikely they’ll find a tumor. I just want to make sure.”

Fast forward a week or so and I am in that same imaging center, fresh out of the MRI machine and fiddling with my fingers in a back-room where the lab techs are preparing scans of my brain to be reviewed by a specialist. The techs are gossiping nonchalantly and complaining about their boss’s apparent habit of yakking away on his cell phone with his wife while he should be working. It’s a bit of a long wait, but my mind is more preoccupied with prepping for an early season cross country race I’ll be running the next day. “Get this done, call one of my housemates to give me a ride home from the hospital, and I’ll enjoy a nice pre-race meal before I call it a day...” is what I’m thinking.

When what I was told was supposed to be a fifteen to twenty minute wait for scan results turns into roughly an hour, a suspicion that something is not quite right begins to intensify. Why are the techs, who

not long ago were so bubbly, suddenly mumbling to each other and avoiding eye contact with me? Why does one of them, a pretty young girl with a blonde ponytail, get up and ask me, almost persistently, if I need anything to eat or drink? And where the heck is this specialist?

As if in response, a mousy dark-haired man in a lab coat and glasses emerges from behind a door adjacent to the tech-room and asks me to step into his office. Everything about him is slightly hesitant, from his weak handshake to the great care he takes in closing his office door behind us. The room is dark except for the glow of the doctor's computer monitors in the corner and a dim overhead lamp. Without thinking, I look directly at him and say, "You're not going to tell me anything good, are you?"

As tough as you think you are, nothing prepares you for the moment when you are made to face the immediacy of your mortality. It's more than a wakeup call; it's a cathedral of two-ton liberty bells drowning out everything but the frenetic questions you begin to ask yourself: "Is this it? *Is this really all the time I get?*" You shake. The room spins. You call your parents and whoever else comes to mind, trying to coherently communicate to them between hysterical sobs a situation that you yourself have not yet completely processed. Here you were basking in that vigor of youth that humors you with the illusion that the inevitable is far, far away, and now you're drowning in the unknown. Suffice it to say, The Plan was the furthest thing from my mind.

I should hope that no one factors in a slot for the diagnosis, surgery, and treatment of a large brain tumor when contemplating the series of events likely or expected to take place in their immediate future, as I had to. Becoming a potential chemo dunk-tank, or dying, for that matter, did not fit in between my plans of studying to become a counselor for victims of eating disorders or leading my cross country team to their first conference championship title. Heck, it didn't even fit my own sense of self as a living body – how the hell does someone who has no noticeable symptoms (aside from an absent menses, which is common in female endurance athletes) and is told she has near perfect health wind up with a defective mass the size of a gerbil lodged in her skull, under which conditions she shouldn't even be able to walk or talk, let alone run?

Happily, the majority of the mass removed from my brain via craniotomy was benign, and I handled various rounds of chemo (which I was able to take orally) and radiation fairly well. But that didn't mean

there weren't struggles or moments of weakness – in the weeks directly following surgery, I felt an almost total disconnect from my body (a nexus of identity and self-expression for any athlete) in its weakened and heavily medicated state, and my overall sense of autonomy all but shriveled in the presence of so many unknowns: would I ever “feel” normal again? Would friends distance themselves from me for fear of potentially having to watch me physically crumble or die if treatment was not successful? At some point in the midst of all this – call it epiphany or a stubborn will to live, I don't know what it was exactly that drew me out of my own gloom – I realized that I had to make a decision: I could wallow in self-pity and the “what ifs” and isolate myself from the world and the goals I had worked toward thus far, or I could accept my situation and learn how to incorporate those goals into my path to recovery.

I could choose to take ownership of my cancer or be owned by it.

I opted for the former. When I was well enough after recovering from surgery to walk for three hours a day to preserve some iota of my running fitness, I did it. When I was allowed to graduate from walking to pool workouts and fifteen to thirty minute runs, and then given leave to finally resume training with my team, I did it. I returned to Davis, dove back into school, and picked up where I left off. My Plan had failed me, but that in no way meant that *I* was the failure.

My intention here is not to scare my peers into believing that they should be checking every nook and cranny for the Grim Reaper when they leave the house (or the doctor's office), and I certainly don't mean to imply that having a rational, well-organized plan of action (school-oriented or otherwise) is useless in many situations – prudence is more often than not a helpful thing. I simply mean to emphasize that The Plan cannot account for everything. Even if by some stretch of the imagination human beings had access to some righteous crystal-ball juju, having foresight that certain events were/are going to happen to us would not fully prepare us for the emotional upheaval that accompanies them in the moment those events become real. Be smart, and be careful, but be at peace with the fact that you cannot control everything that the universe throws at you.

At the least, remember that the only outcomes set in stone are the ones you'll find in your local cemetery –and I don't know about you, but I'm not quite ready to set up camp there just yet.