

“Everyone has polyps,” my buddy said, laughing on the phone. I called her this past week to let her know everything seemed okay after an outpatient procedure at the Surgery Center. “Just so that’s all it is. But a polyp, no big deal.”



I would agree. Even recently, we learned the President of the United States isn’t immune to polyps, having had five removed from his colon. Polyps don’t seem to serve much more of a purpose than general annoyance. They don’t herald a place of high regard in polite society and they don’t generate much interest in the exciting world of life and death medicine. They are kind of like an extracurricular activity you know your high school offers but who wants to join that club? When you Google a polyp (and who shouldn’t experience that fun-filled research activity), you are subsequently directed to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia of the World Wide Web. You learn that a polyp is some strange and abnormal growth “commonly found in the colon, stomach, nose, urinary bladder and uterus.” Basically they are found where mucous membranes exist. So far, I’ve met up with these nodular playmates in two of the five organic playgrounds listed in Wikipedia and I don’t want them coming around to play anymore. They are not welcome in my dark and moist neighborhoods.

The really ugly thing about a polyp (other than the fact that they’re really ugly) is the fear that they may be the bearers of some not-so-great news. Usually, polyps have already caused you some sort of alarm or discomfort and they may introduce themselves with a very personal calling card engraved in the sudden calligraphy of blood with the occasional clot meant to embellish the unwelcome presentation. Of course, the fear that polyps pack in their designer luggage is cancer.

Is it too far reaching to suppose that almost everyone has been touched by cancer in some way? I lost my dad to lung cancer, a grandfather to colon cancer, a cousin and childhood friend to breast cancer and an aunt to brain cancer. My cancer contact list expands further to include friends that are cancer survivors. My father-in-law has some form of leukemia. Awhile back, I had an adventure with a basal cell, a type of skin cancer that is the most common form of cancer in the United States.

Just the possibility of cancer creates feelings incomparable to any other encounter. Suddenly, your perspective shifts, everything looks different, assumes new meaning and you are truly alive to the moment. Mortality is a fresh vocabulary word again. Your imagination runs wild with the possibilities of what is and what might be. Remember the old TV medical dramas starring such wise physicians as Dr. Marcus Welby, Dr. James Kildare or Dr. Joe Gannon of Medical Center breaking bad news to patients and families? Maybe those guys have been your only exposure to the delivery of life-threatening crises. ER will take it’s audience through the rehearsed melodrama of breaking bad news to a mock patient of a new lifespan of six months, maybe three or just weeks to live. All of a sudden the threat of cancer creates a heightened awareness that wasn’t there just hours ago. In a recent song release, Tracy Chapman asks her listener “if you knew that you would die today, saw the face of god and love, would you change?” You betcha we would.

So the lowly polyp has the power to raise potent consideration. My first response to outpatient surgery was to ask myself where I was spiritually and quite frankly, I didn’t think God was impressed. I have a mean streak in me the size of California and it comes out in sharp comments, twisted facial expressions and body language so loud you could understand my intent just by watching me cross the street. My second pre-surgery focal point was

acknowledging my inability to prioritize, as I tend to focus on the unimportant and procrastinate in preparing my affairs in the case of an emergency. If a polyp is a test of your personal Emergency Broadcasting System, turn off that nagging beeping sound in your head and get your act together!

In a morbid sort of way, the idea of dying is a kind of relief. From a very selfish prospective, you understand that some point of personal termination means you won't have to deal with debt, aging or wonder if that 401K plan is going to pull you through to eternity. You may wonder what it will be like for those you leave behind and I wouldn't believe anyone if they tried to tell me they've never once toyed with the thought of who would show up for their funeral services. Not only who, but what kind of service? Something quick and simple? Would there be many flowers? And what will be the key word or phrase on your marker? Beloved? Cherished? When my husband and I checked in with the Beaufort National Cemetery to understand the protocol for burial, the administrator provided "Snuggles" as one example of endearment by a well-meaning spouse. I'm hoping for Honeybunch, Cutie Pie or Snookums....

All bad jokes aside, preparation before a surgical procedure comes swiftly and it is amazing how quickly you change your outlook and priorities. Blue skies are bluer, marsh grass is greener and songs on the radio have new meaning. In the day and a half before my D&C, I went to Mass and confession, made sure the bills were paid up, pulled weeds and watered the plants at my shed, walked down to the shoreline of Battery Creek and put my toes in the water, tied up loose ends at work and then spent Surgery Eve hanging out with my mom and husband at the Water Festival Talent Show, snacking on a cooler of full of food and drinks, watching our local talent sing and dance the night away.

Now, I'm waiting for results from the pathology lab just like President Bush 'cause everybody gets a polyp sometime.