

# Learning to Celebrate Life

By  
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It seems that most, if not all, of what we do in life can be put in the categories of celebrating life or enduring life. The secret to a well-lived life is to do as much celebrating, and as little enduring, as possible. I am not saying we should all be “party animals.” Rather, take the little, mundane daily activities with a celebratory attitude and leave the enduring for another day. You will find that, over time, celebrating becomes the norm.

My own version of the “glass is half empty” story is there are actually three categories of people. The first sees the glass as half full, the second sees it as half empty, and the third wants to know who stole the rest of their drink. Since you can’t change the glass or its contents, doesn’t it make more sense to be the first guy? Of course, if you are the third guy, it doesn’t hurt to keep an eye on your glass).

In many cases, the same event can go in either the celebrating or the enduring category – the good news is you get to choose. More on how to do that later, but an example should help.

Cancer is certainly not a celebrating event, but it can be the catalyst for many celebrating things that happen along the way. I have not enjoyed my cancer, nor the treatments it necessitated, but I had to find humor in the following story.

When I found out that for the next 11 months, I would have to stick a needle in my stomach three times a week and self-administer my first regimen of chemotherapy, it sounded like “enduring” all the way. But the first day, three very caring, and

compassionate nurses set about training me to “get this done.” The heck with “getting it done” ... let’s have at least a moment of fun! As I looked into the half-circle of concerned faces, I said, “We don’t have to train me. I have already figured out how to get through this.” All three nodded seriously and one said, “That’s great. There are different methods and whichever works for you is the right one. What were you considering and maybe we can offer some advice?”

“Well,” says I, “ I am nervous about my ability to ‘stick the needle in,’ so I thought I would put the needle in my workbench vice, which is about stomach level to me, close my eyes, get a running start, and just run into the darn thing.”

Now, three slightly green faces looked back at me, and you could tell each was thinking, “Forget about chemo. We need to get this guy into psychotherapy.”

Then I couldn’t hold a straight face and we all started laughing! We four had the blessing of a celebrating moment (enriched with several funny stories from the nurses of things others who had to do this had said to them) before we got on to the enduring of training yourself how to do an unpleasant, but surprisingly painless, experience. I still bump into these nurses from time to time and they tell me they still use this story to help other patients from this experience from “enduring” to “celebrating.”

These are the observations of one traveler’s celebrating and enduring experiences on the road through cancer. It is intended to help those who are going through similar enduring experiences (not just cancer, but any enduring situation – job loss, loss of a loved one, or any of the myriad “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that life throws at any of us) to turn as much of it as possible – with the right attitude – into celebrating experiences.

As one of my nurses along the way told me, “If you do have to walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, take a flashlight with you.”

It is also intended as a philosophy of life. That sounds pretentious and I hope I do not make it so. Merely, it is my interpretation of how to make each of our lives “a life well lived.”

As a former minister of mine once said, “When people tell me they have never seen a miracle, I tell them they are just not paying attention.” Celebrating means paying attention.

In every day, try to find at least one small miracle (the body of a wren does all the bodily functions of an elephant’s body – I don’t get to see many elephants, but every time I see a wren, I think, “There goes another miracle.”) and one large miracle (great example: for another day, the earth continued to hurtle through the universe in a way that kept us all safe. For all of our knowledge and science, we still don’t know why it does that).

Do this at the end of every day, and whenever you think of it during the day, and you will find yourself doing a lot more celebrating than enduring.

As you read this, keep in mind the following table. Think of the events in your life and the factors in column four that could make that event a reason for celebrating rather than endurance. As you do so, hopefully with the help of the hints that follow, you will find your attitude centering more on celebrating than enduring life.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Celebrate</b>	<b>Endure</b>	<b>Helpful Hints</b>
			Laugh
			Cry
			Remember the Blessings
			All of life is a gift
			The Good Times – Memories of the Past ... Hope for the Future
			Recognizing the Blessings among the Curses
			Angels among us
			Be an angel
			Have a purpose
			Attitude
			Faith
			Rocks You Can Cling to

Before we begin to discuss each of these hints, a close friend of mine suggested (on reading an earlier version of this book) you have to provide some personal background so the reader can see where the hints come from. I am not particularly comfortable “bragging” about myself, but, here first is my brief history.

## My “brief” history

Unlike “novels” of growing up, my history does not start with my birth and flow gently and evenly to the time I reached the point at which I am writing. Like most of us, my history is a series, not necessarily in chronological order, of snippets, remembrances, and glimpses of a life. The only “plot” was growing up.

I did not even come to the realization of what a special childhood I had until I was a man grown – in my thirties with two young daughters of my own. It was not until, each evening, the two centers of my universe came running to me at bedtime squealing, “Tell us a story from when you were a little boy, Daddy,” and every evening I seemed to remember another story, did I realize what a special gift I had been granted in childhood. With two great rivers just walking distance from my home, and the family farm visited every day (we lived in town but owned the family farm – which I thought of as a great playground but my Dad seemed to see as a never ending source of chores – I had the opportunity for a “Huck Finn” childhood. And I took advantage of every such opportunity along the way.

So, no grand sweeping saga here. Just snippets of a childhood in a special place and time – some short, some longer; some comical, some ironical, and yes as in every life, some dramatic and tragic. But all threads in the tapestry that make for a childhood well lived.

I grew up in the Gap. No, I did not grow up in a clothing store. Long before the retail chain laid claim to the name, the area where I grew up – at the eastern tip of West Virginia, where the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers come together and go through a “gap” in the Blue Ridge Mountains – was called by all within a hundred miles, The Gap.

To say the view is breathtaking is the grossest of understatements. I have gone into art galleries in countries all over the world and found some artist traveled through my little hometown and painted The Gap – often from my family’s backyard. A friend of mine is reported (by himself) to have stood on a summit in the Alps at sunrise and, as others around him heaped praise on the view, said to his wife, “Heck, I got a better view than this from my back porch.” I can’t vouch for the veracity of this story, and I am certainly not going to get into a rousing round of “My view’s better than yours,” but I will confess adults have visited the home where I grew up, looked at the view from my bedroom window, and been reduced to tears of wonder.

Let’s talk about my room and its view. No, let’s talk about the house of which it was a part. Oh, heck, let’s start with the town itself. Harpers Ferry, West Virginia is where I spent the first 17 years of my life. A wondrous town to grow up, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when thousands of adults were about the business of reenacting Civil War battles (63 such battles took place in Harpers Ferry alone) and when I was about the business of growing up. Harpers Ferry sits on a peninsula - to the north of the town the aforementioned Potomac River tumbles by in a series of rapids, accentuated by a large island right in the middle of the river just below my house (I used to lie in bed on sick days and watch deer playing on the island – who needed television?). To the south of Harpers Ferry, is the Shenandoah River, which has spent the last few hundred miles flowing through one of the loveliest valleys in the world. The two mighty rivers meet and become only the Potomac (as a boy this never seemed quite fair. What happened to the Shenandoah? The water was still there?) at the eastern most end of the town and flow on through the Gap on toward the Chesapeake Bay.

The Potomac starts in the mountainous coalfields of western Maryland and West Virginia. As kids, we were never impressed with the story that George Washington once threw a silver dollar across the Potomac. When you have been to its source and stood on both sides at the same time, tossing a coin across seemed like a monumental waste of good money. The story also just doesn't ring true for a boy from Harpers Ferry. The view from my window looked directly onto a Potomac River that is more than a mile across. Even Jimmy (one of my buddies who could throw an apple and hit a tourist's car going down Shenandoah Street 150 feet away, a feat that got us in trouble more than once) couldn't throw anything across the river. So, as kids, we always figured the Father of Our Country just had a penchant for tall tales.

Where was I? Oh yeah, the Potomac defines much of the border between Maryland and West Virginia, but the Potomac River belongs, heart and soul, to Maryland. My Dad was fond of saying, as we boys headed down over the cliff in back of the house to fish in the Potomac, "Keep your feet on the banks, boys. If you step in the river and the game warden gets you, there's nothing I can do to help you." Now, in fact, I have to this day not met a single game warden that I did not like and respect. But my Dad had all of us convinced that Maryland game wardens would do horrible things to us for taking their fish from their river. I was a man grown before I figured out this was Dad's clever (yet futile) strategy to keep us from swimming and/or rafting in the river.

Did I mention a cliff? The house where I grew up sits on Ridge Street – appropriately named since the change in altitude from the backyard to the river is about a 300 foot drop. Not precipitous, but steep enough and filled with enough trails and caves to make it not only traversable, but really interesting for young boys.

Now to the other river. The Shenandoah is such a grand old lady of a river that she even has a song written about her – you know, “Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you, away you rolling river...” I know all this “grand old lady” and “she” and “her” stuff sounds sexist by today’s standards, but in the times in which I grew up the indisputable logic was summed up by one of the girls in our group, “Of course the river is a she. She has a song named after her and you never heard anyone write a song about a stupid boy.” Sound wisdom, we all agreed. At any rate, the Shenandoah starts way down in Virginia and flows Northeast through the valley that also carries its name. As an adult, I lived for many years in Southwest Virginia and in Tennessee, so I drove up I-81 whenever I visited Harpers Ferry. It has always seemed an appropriate homage to follow that grand river up its breathtaking valley on my pilgrimages home.

Harpers Ferry rises up a stately, yet not ostentatious, 300 feet above these rivers. An amazing old town that I think we can deal with through early snippets of my youth. In fact, my two earliest memories. I call them memories in black and white.

The white is probably my earliest memory. I remember coming around the corner of the house at what have been barely dawn and saw my mother (in a white house dress) hanging sheets of the line. The back drop for this tableau was the Potomac valley, filled with fog and illuminated by the morning sun. That image, of the physical beauty of the world around us, has never left me. It is the image that moves many enduring cancer experiences to celebrating times. I expect that image in white will be the first, and possibly the last, of my life. Not a bad image to start and finish the race.

I mentioned that Harpers Ferry was fought-over ground (my memory in black). Even before the beginning of the Civil War, John Brown (the famous abolitionist)

attempted to take the U.S. Arsenal then at Harpers Ferry. One of the great ironies of Harpers Ferry history is that, in Brown's bold attempt to free the slaves, the first man killed in the raid was a free black man (the porter at the railroad station who saw a large force of armed men coming across the bridge and ran to give the alarm). This man had just become the proud papa of a brand new baby girl (barely a week old when he was killed). This baby grew, married, became known to everyone in town as Mrs. Washington (presumably through marriage) – an especially revered named as she managed to outlive everyone in town. When I was a 5 year old boy in 1956, Mrs. Washington was 97 years old!

My second earliest memory is about the time of 1956 and of my mother one day taking me on a walk to an old home in town and saying, "It is time you learned the history of your town." I remember going into a dark room is an old gnarled black woman sitting in a chair (thus, the memory in black). She patted her knee and, when I had crawled up, she said, "So you are Tom Mentzer's boy? Then it is time you learned the real history of your town." What ensued for the rest of the afternoon (and many additional afternoons when I was comfortable visiting Mrs. Washington without the moral support of my mother) was an oral history of my town from before the Civil War up to the 1950s.

There is probably another entire book possible on the stories of my youth that made me the man I became, but that is not the purpose of this book. Suffice it to say that these two memories of black and white gave me a perspective that never left me, that you are the product of the terrain (the mountains and rivers of Harpers Ferry) and the people and family in which you were (and continue to be) formed.

## **Now on to the Hints**

So here, in no particular order of importance, are what I have found to be the secrets of celebrating life, even during the enduring times.

## **Laugh**

Almost any situation has an element of humor about it if you make the effort to look for it, and it is often the key to turning enduring into celebrating.

### ***Can you hear me now?***

The day I found out I had a melanoma under my left thumb nail was December 13, 2007. I got home from a trip to Ohio around 8 PM on the 12th and there was a message on the answering machine from my dermatologist (a great, caring, funning, “celebrating” man), “Tom, call me first thing tomorrow morning on my cell.” Talk about a message whose real message is, “get ready to do some enduring.”

The next morning, you can bet I was on the cell as early as decency allowed. The doctor answered and said, “I wanted to talk to you as soon as possible. The lab results came back positive for melanoma ...” and we lost the cell phone connection!

I sat there and thought, “Well, I guess I have to sit here and wait for him to call back (obviously a problem on his end, since I was on the house phone) and say, ‘can you hear me now?’” After 5 minutes, he did and said, “I talked for a couple minutes before I realized you were not on the phone. What is the last thing you heard?”

I said, “...the word ‘melanoma.’ This probably will not be a commercial on television for no more dropped cell phone calls.”

We both burst out laughing.

Initial nervous laughter over, we then began to plan the enduring (and yes, the celebrating) of my future fight with cancer.

### ***You didn't explain it to me.***

When I went through IL2 treatment (essentially inducing septic shock three times a day for five days), I was in intensive care the entire time. At one point, the nurse came in and said, "You will not be able to get out of bed for the next couple days, so we need you to urinate in this bottle." I eyed that bottle and said, "I am not sure I can do that lying here."

She said, "Oh, don't worry, if you can't we will just run a catheter through your penis up into your bladder."

I said, "Give me that bottle. I am sure I can do it. In fact, I bet I am great at it." Sometimes you just have to have your motivation properly explained to you!

### ***Sitting in the Tuba section of the orchestra***

Doctors understand this, and I think consciously try to introduce laughter into tough situations.

Although he never admitted it to me, I think one of my doctors did this on purpose.

There was a point in my treatment where the tumors were causing fluid buildup in my pleural cavity (the chest cavity that holds the heart and lungs), making it continually difficult for me to breathe. My pulmonologist scheduled me to have a pleural catheter inserted into my right side to drain the fluid. He said it was minor surgery, but we all

know that minor surgery is when someone else is having it – if you are the patient, it is major surgery.

I did not realize this on the morning of the surgery, but I kept getting moved closer and closer to the GI theater. GI as in gastro-intestinal, as in colonoscopy procedures – a very easy procedure where the doctor puts you under and then pumps air into the large intestine so they can “look around.” I have had this procedure and it is not bad. But, while you are recovering there is a certain amount of gas that is “released.” To get to the theatre where they were going to conduct my procedure, you had to lie on a gurney and wait in the GI recovery center (I never realized such sounds, in pitch, volume, and duration, could emanate from a frail, 80 year old lady who could not have weighed more than 100 pounds). By the time the doctor arrived, I was writhing in laughter on the gurney.

When the doctor asked me what was so funny, I told him, “I feel like I had tickets to the symphony and spent the last 15 minutes sitting in the tuba section of the orchestra.”

He never admitted it was on purpose, but I did see a smirk on his face.

Every time I think of that experience, it is firmly in the celebrating column (yeah, I can still remember the sounds of that room) and the endurance of having the catheter inserted has been pushed to the background.

## **Cry**

As that great philosopher, Jimmy Buffet, once said, “...part of life is magic and part of its tragic.” No kidding! I have a coffee cup on my desk that shows Snoopy and Woodstock dancing, and says, “At times, life is pure joy.” True. But at times the joy is hard to find.

Sometimes laughter just does not get it done. We have to cry. Loss of loved ones, fear of being the lost loved one, fear of the unknown, and many others are just sometimes too much to bear. God gave us the ability to cry for a reason. Whether you cry alone, cry on someone else's shoulder, or let someone cry on yours, we need these times of release.

My cancer has taken me down a tough road. I had a thumb amputated, all my left side lymph nodes removed, chest surgery, and through 24 months of three different regimens of chemotherapy – none of which have slowed the cancer (here's hoping and praying they come up with one that works). I have sat through the meeting with the doctor telling me you have "incurable cancer," which he was quick to point out does not mean they will not find a cure for me in time. It means nothing else is presently a viable treatment and I should "get my affairs in order." Also, the treatments switch from trying to cure me to "keeping me comfortable." You cannot go through that many disappointments without crying and comforting those close to you when they cry. In fact, you shouldn't. The crying is a blessing. It is God's way of letting you release the frustration and dread and get on with life.

The Reverend John R. Claypool based one of his published sermons on the passage of Isaiah, "... they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Reverend Claypool makes a powerful case that these gifts from God come at different times in our lives. Certainly, it is not hard to imagine celebrating those times in your life when you soared "with wings like eagles" and ran but were not weary. In my youth, I raced bicycles and exercised regularly (running, treadmills, weight lifting, etc.)

up until cancer curtailed my exercise. I remember the exhilaration when it seemed my body went beyond what it was capable of, and moved with a higher inner strength. I have also experienced this when the rigors of my career or family obligations required more of me than I thought possible. God was there to guide me and give me the strength to go beyond my own meager human capacities.

Reverend Claypool makes the case that Isaiah knew of what he spoke when he put these gifts from God in their proper order. What about when all striving is done and you have to simply accept. I think when Isaiah said God will give us the strength to “walk and not faint,” he knew that part of that strength comes with simply crying. Cry, get it out of your system, and then find God’s gift of strength to accept what is going to be. This, I believe does more to “keep you comfortable” than any drug (though I also believe the drugs to control the pain, when used as intended, are also gifts from God.

Still, crying does not mean we cannot still try to celebrate. Try this. Every morning, before you do anything else, thank God for letting you be here another day. After a while it becomes a habit, and soon after that it affects your attitude for the rest of each day. It is a lot easier to celebrate the events of each day when you recognize that all of those events (good or bad) are a gift. Even the gift of the strength to cry and “walk and not faint,” when there is nothing else left to us, are causes for celebration.

## **Remember the Blessings**

I have been given too many blessing to recount here, but let me give a few examples.

God blessed me with the ability to reason and to investigate, which made me partially successful at the research part of my career as a university professor. The ability

to write and to speak gave me the other part I needed to be a good teacher and author. However, it never hurts to remember that these gifts (though honed and applied by me), were gifts given freely. I did not make myself have these gifts, God did. It helps keep you humble and mindful of who is really in charge.

I remind my doctoral students that they are embarking on a career that is rife with ego-fluffing. Seeing your name in print, having a group of students hang on your every word in class, those same students coming in your office and telling you how much they enjoy your lectures (never hurts to remember that those students know who will be assigning them their grades) can't help but start to convince you that you are a pretty great guy. I tell each of those doctoral students to find a way to ground their humility. Mine is to remember that my brain was a gift from God, my insight to choose just the right career for me was a gift from God, my drive to succeed at this career was a ... well, you get the idea.

When they were small, my daughters often asked me, "Are we rich, Daddy?" I always answered, "Yes, we have been greatly blessed in the things that matter. We have a strong family. Your mother and father are devoted to and love each other. We have two wonderful children; loving grandparents; and a host of wonderful friends. What greater wealth could anyone desire? Yes, we did alright financially, but that was not the topic of discussion when the question was about wealth. That amused and maybe frustrated my daughters at the time, but as they grew into adults, I think the message stuck.

I certainly am not pleased to be battling a serious form of cancer at 58 years old, but I can honestly say that I have lived a wonderful life. I have spent most of my adult

life pursuing a career that I still love. I have been married for more than 30 years to the woman of my dreams (and I have tried to be the man of hers). I have been given two wonderful children, and was afforded the opportunity to watch them grow into adults. I am overwhelmed by the host of incredible friends with which I have been blessed. Sure, I want 30 more years to enjoy and give thanks for all these things, but if that is not to be, this life has been, and remains, worth celebrating.

## **All of life is a gift**

Beyond the manifold blessings, it has comforted me greatly through this trip through the Valley of the Shadow of Death to remember that all life is a gift.

We did not pick the time, nor the place, nor the station of our birth. It was a gift freely given to which we contributed nothing.

I was given the gift of being born into a loving family, with parents who were admittedly not perfect (no Pollyanna myths here) but were the best parents they knew how to be – what greater gift could they have given than to give to the limits of their abilities.

I was given the gifts of health, tempered with the normal childhood illnesses to build the tolerance for the things in life that cannot be changed.

I had a wonderful, joyful childhood, again tempered by the minor cruelties children inflict upon each other. Again, gifts to build the adults we become.

I went through the shock and tragedy at 14 of having two brothers, friends of mine (ages 12 and 14), drown on a lark to the river. I was not there when it happened. They stopped by the house to invite me along, but I was grounded for some now forgotten offense. But the experience of, at 14, serving as a pall bearer for two childhood

friends (and the many questions of the minor vagaries of life that kept me from being there when they died – if I had been there, could I have saved them or just been the third drowning victim?) has never left me. It has given me many opportunities over the years to ask God the eternal question of why. Some say that we talk to God but he never answers. I think we just often don't listen. I have received God's answer in many forms over the years. Other tragedies, other joys and triumphs, examples of behavior (good and bad) set by others, the readings to which God has guided me. I do not have all the answers, and can empathize with Job when God said to him, "Who are you to question the mind of God?" But I do think God has given me the answers if I am only willing to listen. Again, a gift of immeasurable magnitude and incomprehensible patience freely given to me.

As I said in the section on blessings, I would certainly like (hope and pray for) many more years to experience this life, but each day has been and is a blessing (I still start each day, no matter the trials that need to be faced, with the Psalm, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it.").

I did so on the day that I rode to Vanderbilt Hospital in September of 2009 to find out if the latest chemo treatment was working or if, as the doctors said when I started in five weeks earlier, if it did not work I had few months left to live. Imagine the joy of the gift when the doctor ran into the room yelling, "We have good news! Come down the hall and look!" Brenda and I dutifully traipsed down the hall to the lab to see the scans that showed the tumors had shrunk by 30 percent in just over a month! No cure, but the first good news we had had in 20 months of battling this disease. At least a surcease in its progression while the Lord's doctors could continue to search for a cure. Another gift

freely given! The fact that the gift was later “withdrawn” and three months later that treatment mysteriously stopped working does not stop that moment of hope and the three month surcease in despair, from being a great gift.

I hope the gifts keep coming, but one cannot gratefully accept such a great gift as life, and then when the gift is not as long as one wanted, be embittered by its finiteness. The life itself was a gift beyond all imagined generosity. When the gift is completed, can we not simply accept with gratitude and humility that we were given something so immensely generous that we can only say, “thank you.”

Also, can we do anything but celebrate all the gifts that came with that life?

## **The Good Times – Memories of the Past ... Hope for the Future**

As I have said before, as children at bedtime, my daughters (now fully grown and on their own) always asked me, “Tell us a story when you were a little boy, Daddy.” In many ways, that was my favorite part of the day.

With my “Huck Finn” childhood, growing up in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers converged, I spent much of my childhood on the family farm 10 miles away in Maryland, building rafts on the rivers, hiking in the mountains right behind the farm, and playing with my friends.

That joie to vivre (joy of life) continued into and throughout my adult life – especially my times in the “house of estrogen” – living with my wonderful wife of over 30 years and my two daughters (even the cats were female in our house). Memories of childhood, of romance and friendship with my wife, of being part of my children’s maturation, of times with friends, good times at work and play – too many stories to repeat here, but those memories are a grab bag of joy to draw upon when times are hard.

Pulling out the great times of your life and re-examining them can move the most enduring times at least closer to celebration.

### ***Hope for the future***

I have what is categorized as incurable cancer. That does not mean they will not eventually find a cure or that I will not be cured, it simply means there is presently no cure for my particular type of melanoma.

Miracles do happen, though. I have had many miracles in my life, but as I hope and pray for a cure for me and for others who have my type of cancer, I keep two dramatic personal miracles in mind. The first happened when my daughters were in grade school. I kept feeling tired and listless – two descriptions that few have ever used to describe me. When this had gone on for a month, my wife made me go see the doctor. After weeks of tests, the doctors concluded that I had a viral infection called Epstein-Barr, which kind of feels like you have the flu all the time. To make matters worse, I had a chronic case – which meant I was never going to get better (“You mean I am NEVER going to get better? Yes, Tom, that is exactly what we mean.”).

I learned to live with the energy loss and still managed to do my job and fulfill the role of father and husband, but with a lot less energy.

Several years past and I just got used to it. Then I went to see a new doctor for a physical. When the doctor came in with the results, he said, “I noticed in your blood analysis that you used to have Epstein-Barr.”

I said, “I thought it was chronic and I was always going to have it?”

He said, “Well, that may be the case, but it is gone now. How do you feel?”

“I noticed that my energy level had gradually come back up to the old level but figured I was just getting used to living with this. So what made it go away?”

He said, “I have no idea. I guess God just decided you didn’t need to have Epstein-Barr any longer. We have no better explanation for why it was chronic and now it is gone.”

The second miracle happened in late April of 2005. I was driving home on I-40 through our home town of Knoxville, TN with my older (then 21 years old) daughter as a passenger. It was a clear evening, I was staying in my lane, doing the speed limit, when a tractor-trailer came up on my left (in the lane that did not allow tractor-trailers), drifted over the line and ran over my car (later the police told me it was a perfect accident report – we had done nothing wrong and the truck driver had done everything wrong).

Not only did he run over us, but we were stuck under the front of the tractor. Since the driver was hauling on a revoked driver’s license, he tried not to stop and, as a result, dragged us half a mile before we popped loose and spun across three lanes of heavy traffic.

At this point I fully expected that the next person I was going to see was Jesus Christ, and I started praying that at least my daughter would survive the crash – I thought my time was up.

When the car came to rest, we were both surprised to find the car on the shoulder of the highway, the entire left side of the car was gone, and Ashley and I both walked away from the wreck unscathed (I had subsequent permanent back damage, but we did not know that at the time)!

When the police were interviewing us later, one of the patrolmen said, “You know, this is a unique experience for me. I have investigated over 400 wrecks like yours (involving a car hit by a tractor-trailer) and this is the first time the people in the car were alive to talk about it.” Another miracle!

Six weeks later, I was at a banquet in Houston when a woman at the dinner started choking on her food. Without thinking, I jumped up and did the Heimlich Maneuver on her (When asked what happened to the piece of meat on which she was choking, one of the other diners said, “Last time I saw it, it was flying out the door of the dining room.” So I may have been a bit more exuberant than necessary, but it got the job done).

Other miracles have ensued after the truck accident, but I have always thought, at the very least, God spared me from the wreck to be there to save her life. I am sure she has gone on to other “miracles” after her experience and, thus, the miracles go on and one.

So, not surprisingly, things sometimes look bleak in my battle with cancer. But I figure with those miracles at my back, another miracle is certainly possible.

Sometimes, the best strategy is, in the words of Alexander Dumas, “Wait and hope ... wait and hope.”

## **Recognizing the Blessings among the Curses**

It is hard to see melanoma as anything but a curse. But what if we had not caught it early? In February of 2007, I had a small growth on the end of my left thumb. I went to my dermatologist, who removed it, had it biopsied and found it was harmless. In November, the little growth was back. When I went to the dermatologist, he numbed my

thumb to remove the growth again and I said, “I may just be imagining things, but what is this little pink dot on my thumb?”

He looked at it with his magnifying lens and, a dermatologist with 25 years experience, said, “Oh, that is probably nothing, but since we are taking your thumb nail off any way to deal with this growth, I’ll have it biopsied.”

That little pink dot turned out to be the melanoma.

Now, you could say that the fact that it did not look like any melanoma my dermatologist had ever seen before is a curse. But my wife says, “If you weren’t such a meticulous person, think how long that thing would have grown before we did catch it!”

Little blessings among the curses!

We caught it at a stage where it had just spread to one lymph node. Of course it would have been nice to catch it before it spread, but catching it early bought me some valuable time to fight it.

You have to at least be thankful for that.

## **Angels among Us**

Life is a tapestry, and we are all threads that contribute to that life.

Each thread has its unique characteristics, but the tapestry of our lives gains its texture and its hues from the other threads through which our lives are interwoven. In particular, the threads that represent the angels among us greatly enhance that tapestry.

I enjoy this metaphor and looking back over my life and the threads that have enriched it (and the tapestries I have enriched with my “thread”). Each thread is truly a cause for much quiet celebration.

## ***Angels that enriched our tapestry***

As I look back over the time of my battle with cancer, many of the angels that were threaded into my tapestry stand out. This section gets a bit personal and I apologize at the outset to any angels who are woven in there and I failed to mention them here. You are just too many to mention here and you know who you are and that you have my everlasting love and gratitude, and are always in my thoughts and prayers. I also apologize if I embarrass any who are mentioned here but they were threads so prominent that they cannot go without my ongoing thanks.

First and most prominent is my wife, Brenda, archangel of the host, and the greatest thread in my tapestry. She never faltered in being there when I needed her, whether that was offering me a shoulder when I needed to cry, allowing me the honor and privilege to be the shoulder when she needed to cry, celebrated with me when the times were right, laughed at (OK, tolerated) my horrible jokes (even though doctors and nurses tell me that cancer patients always have a better sense of humor than their families do), or simply sitting through the pantheon of treatments I had to undergo simply because she knew I needed her there beside me.

Clearly next in line is Tony, our great friend and member of the doctor community, who has been there from the start to comfort us, to offer medical advice when we needed it, to spur the medical community along do to what needed to be done when he thought they were not moving fast enough (he still holds the world's record for moving my first set of tests through the hospital system in what my surgical oncologist described as "unprecedented speed"), and for regularly just showing up at our door for an update and a talk. He is also one of my two boon golf companions – guys who enjoy the

game and the companionship far more than the score, a gift to me since Tony and Mike are far better golfers than I. Both have always been there for whatever I needed from them – sometimes when I did not even know I needed it.

Tony is also the giver of the great gift of an MP3 player so I could listen to books on tape when I could not sleep at night. Tony and his wife (another angel named Debbie) decided Tom and Brenda needed to watch more movies but were too set in their ways even to subscribe to NetFlix. Thus, they gave us a membership as a gift. For a couple who hardly ever watch television, this has been a source of quiet companionship for Brenda and me, and was certainly a great gift we never would have thought of for ourselves.

To Mike my other golfing buddy, who has always been there when I needed to talk, came to visit when I needed it, and knew when to get me talking about the rest of our world that did not include cancer.

To Bob, the best man in our wedding many years ago, and a thread that has been woven into my life for over a third of a century (as doctoral students together, as coauthors, and as friends and confidants always, we have carried many burdens and joys for each other over many years). When Bob heard about the cancer and my impending surgeries, he dropped everything and flew down from his home in DC to “just be there.” That weekend visit will always mean the world to Brenda and me – it was just the right gesture at just the right time. He has been in constant contact all the way along since, just to give me someone to complain to or laugh with.

To my sister Susan and my mother Minnie, who lived too far away to visit regularly, but always kept in touch by phone. I was overwhelmed by their devotion when

I was too sick to travel and my sister and our then-92year old mother climbed on a plane to fly to Knoxville to visit. Also, to my brother in law Bill, for his many interruptions to his busy schedule to drive my mother for these 1,000 mile roundtrip visits. I am awed by their love and devotion.

To a host of unnamed friends who knew constant update calls were exhausting for us, used the gift of the internet to keep in contact, spread the news to others, and always emailed before calling to see if we were “up to” talking about the latest developments.

To our younger daughter Erin, who decided in those days when I could not get out of the house and “cabin fever” was setting in that Daddy really needed to teach her how to play chess. She took time every week out of her busy schedule as a senior in college to come play at least one round with the old man. Through graduating and starting her career, she still finds time to visit and call to check up on Mom and Dad.

To Ashley, our older daughter, who seldom shows her emotions to Mom or Dad, but has always been there with a gentle gibe to make me laugh when I needed to, or to regale me with stories of her kids at the preschool where she is a teacher. Ashley instinctively knows that the stories of children are always a tonic for me.

To the many nurses at the Thompson Cancer Survival Center who were there with moral support when the news was not always positive, who got me through the Dark Month of 3-hour Interferon IVs five times a week for four weeks in March 2008, who coached me through the subsequent nine months of having to self-inject Interferon three times a week, and who were still there to help me in the Fall of 2009 when my treatments moved back to their halls.

To the many nurses and attending physicians in the Vanderbilt Intensive Care Center who watched over me constantly during my two five-day visits for IL II treatments. These times defined the Valley of the Shadow of Death for me. The nurses and the doctors, along with the 24-hour a day attention of Brenda, were the angels who walked with me, or as I mentioned earlier, were the flashlights I took with me through the Valley.

To Connie, at the Vanderbilt Infusion Center, who took such great care of Brenda and me when I was going through my first couple six-hour long chemo treatments.

To Peggy, at Vanderbilt Hospital, who helped us navigate through the often indecipherable procedures of a large research hospital. Peggy always stood ready to help, even when our needs went far outside the bounds of her formal responsibilities.

To the many doctors (surgical oncologists, medical oncologists, pulmonologists, radiological oncologists, attending physicians, etc.) who were often far too overworked with the number of patients they tried to treat, yet still took the time to listen, advise, guide, and often just hold hands with Brenda and me.

To the unnamed horde of nurses and medical staff at the Thompson Cancer Survival Center, Ft. Sanders Hospital, Vanderbilt Medical Center, and The University of Tennessee Hospital, who acted with kindness, compassion, and empathy toward Brenda and me as we navigated many frightening, often uncomfortable, but hopefully beneficial medical procedures.

To my professional colleagues (fellow faculty, staff, and secretaries) who have stood ready to cover for me whenever necessary. I have perhaps taken undue pride in the fact that for the first two years of my battle with cancer (to the time of this writing), I

have kept my normal university teaching, service and research responsibilities. This is not entirely honest though. Many colleagues have covered for me on speeches to which I had committed, meetings I simply could not attend, and the countless little obligations that simply do not go away. Their help has allowed me to keep involved in the passion of my career, and I am deeply indebted to them for the sacrifices they have made out of compassion for me to allow this to happen. I cannot mention them all, but I can certainly single out, Matt, Mark, Ted, Terry, Diane and Dan here.

To the countless friends who have brought us untold meals. Brenda is a fine cook (though she denies it), but we have never eaten a finer fare in all our lives. Each meal has been seasoned with love and this is the greatest spice of all.

Speaking of countless friends, to the many friends of both mine and Brenda's who have quietly been there to lend help or an ear when we needed it.

To Stephen Sallee, my minister who took time out of a schedule that included managing a 4,000 member church and the time demands of opening a third worship campus, to visit with Brenda and me, bring me books to read and just be there when we needed him. He even went so far as to tell me he would be insulted if we did not call on him.

To the caring staff at Cokesbury United Methodist Church, who kept in constant contact with Brenda and me and never let us forget they stood ready to help.

Without these angels who have walked among us, Brenda and I could not have found the strength to go on. In a large sense, along with the inner strength he gives us, these angels are the outer strength that God sends to allow us to "walk and not faint." I am sure all these angels would be embarrassed to know how often Brenda and I praise

them and give thanks for their loving kindness and devotion. Embarrassed or not, you will always be loved and remembered, and a major part of our life tapestries and the reasons for the celebration of our lives.

To those reading this, as you look for ways to move events in your life from the enduring column to the celebrating column, I encourage you to imagine your own life's tapestry and the threads and angels who are threaded through it. You will find yourself thinking less about the enduring part of past events and more about the angels among us who helped you through these events. You will also notice those events gently sliding over into the celebrating column.

Finally, such thoughts lead us to concentrate less on ourselves and more on how we can be the angel threads in the tapestries of others.

### ***Be an angel***

Most of this book has been dedicated to recognizing others who have influenced our lives. Angels and threads that have been woven into our tapestry. But what about the times when we have been threads (and hopefully angels) in the tapestries of others – and have been the cause of celebration, not endurance?

Each night, I ask God to bless and keep those friends, family, and even strangers whose lives I have – even remotely – touched that day.

It is an acknowledgment that we are all interwoven into each other's lives, hopefully as a cause for celebration and not endurance.

My father died of colon cancer in 1980. I was only 28 – too old to be considered an orphan, but certainly young enough (barely getting my own family started with a wife

of two years and no children on the planned horizon) to feel the responsibilities of the larger family thrust upon me.

My only sources of celebration during that time of mourning was observing how others helped us get through these times.

My mother (who had always depended on my father) suddenly turned to me with a new personality. No longer was she the decisive mother-figure, but now the deferential woman looking to the only man in her life to make all the decisions. The fact that I was very uncomfortable with this male-dominate (today, we would call it a sexist) role mattered little at this point. She was a person who had just lost her life companion of over 40 years and if this is the role I was to play until her personality stabilized, so be it.

I hope I played the role well – making all the decisions for a while until she gradually became comfortable once again with running her life. I have always taken it as a measure of success that she went on to recovering her decision making ability (sitting for 20 subsequent years on the board of directors of the bank my father founded) both in her financial decisions (which she still strongly influences in her 90s), but in her role as mother, friend to many, and eventual grandmother. Still a force at 90 plus years, she certainly did not stay a “shrinking violet.” But all along the way, she had the support of the angels around her while she needed it.

A great example of these angels was Kay. Kay was a nurse of many years experience and perhaps my mother’s closet friend. I watched Kay many evenings when she would simply sit with my mother and talk and listen. Kay would get my mother to talk about my Dad until the talk got too sensitive, and then she would guide my mother to

talk about other things. Kay gradually nursed the wound of my father's loss until Mom could go on with her life.

Quite frankly, for me my contemporary friends were not much help at this time. We were a cohort of successful young professionals who had no experience with interrupting those life plans to deal with the loss of a life. This is no criticism of them (they were there standing ready if we asked for anything – we just did not know what to ask for). One of these same friends (30 years later when hearing I was having my thumb amputated on Monday) cleared his considerable schedule as an Associate Dean at the University of Maryland to fly to Knoxville for the weekend “just to be with us.” No one asked him to do this, it just “needed doing.” He certainly had learned over the years how to “be an angel in the tapestry.”

My angels during my father's death were my older relatives and my father's oldest friends. They just showed up (I guess you can't be woven into the tapestry if the thread is not available. Knowing it would not occur to me to call and ask, one friend showed up to mow my mother's yard. Since it was a warm day, he was glad to accept a glass of iced tea afterward. I recall it took him about 4 hours to finish that iced tea – time in which he just sat (mostly quietly) and let me talk about my Dad – stories we both shared, plans we had for the future that now would not include him. These plans ran from as grandiose as his role as a grandfather to as mundane as he was going to miss next month's fishing trip.

Many “iced teas” over the next couple months with many friends and family helped me solidify in my mind my memories of my father, what he meant to me, and initially what life would be like without his daily presence. I doubt if any of these threads

consciously got up in the morning and said, “Well, today I will go help Tom work on his memories of Big Tom.” I imagine they got up and said, “Tom is probably too busy to fix the broken board on the barn yard,” (about a 30 minute job) and then stayed much of the rest of the day to help.

In the Book of Job, I think the big mistake Job’s friends made was in trying to explain to Job why his travails were either his fault or God’s punishment. I have often thought Job would have been much more comforted if his friends had simply sat there and said nothing.

Sometimes the most important job an angel can perform is simply to show up.

I have tried to apply these experiences when the role is reversed and I am the thread in someone else’s tapestry. Celebration in those times comes from remembering the good times, and moving beyond the “Why” to “what do we do now that it has happened/is happening.”

## ***Why?***

I think the answer to the first question only comes through prayer and contemplation. Why the things that happen to us (good and bad) happen is a question that has plagued human kind for thousands of years and will continue to do so. I learned in a lifetime of pursuing a career as a researcher that the unanswerable questions should be set aside. “Don’t sweat the small stuff and anything that cannot be answered (no matter how large) is small stuff.”

We even have a convenient term for such unanswerable questions. We call them “fundamental axioms.” What a great term! I will never know the answer so we will assume it s a certain way and then not worry about it.

*“None of my philosophy works unless God is watching over our every move.”*

Then let’s assume he is and not worry about it.

*“None of my philosophy works unless God is no longer in control and does not watch our every move.”* Then let’s assume he is not and not worry about it.

*“None of my philosophy works unless...”* well, you get the idea.

By the way, we call this collection of fundamental axioms by a simply term – faith. This is why it is fruitless to argue religions – it is based on faith and either you have it or you do not.

I will briefly touch on my faith later and also briefly argue for why it is a strong basis for a celebrated life. It is not the only way to a celebrated life and I could waste many pages trying to talk you into it – wasted pages aside, it is still a matter of faith. But your faith is the one you have to choose for yourself. I encourage you (hopefully, throughout this book) to pick a faith that makes it easier to celebrate life than endure it. Using mine is just a way of demonstrating how it can work. My like is, I believe, proof that the celebrating life works.

### ***“What do we do now that it has happened/is happening?”***

The answer to the second question lies in keeping those we are losing in your hearts.

My Dad was the most honorable man I ever met. I am not saying he was not a loving father for he certainly was. I am not saying he did not have a sense of humor for some of these stories still have us laughing. But honor and integrity in everything he thought and did are to the strongest memories I have of him.

I lost him over 30 years ago. He grew up during the Great Depression. He had the nerve to leave the family farm in 1933 (the height of the Depression) and hitch hiked to West Virginia looking for a job in a plant. Miraculously, he found one as a common laborer. He formed many friendships, but two that were important to his future – one with the plant engineer (who taught him design) and one with the blacksmith (who taught him how to build his ideas). He works such long hours and had so many innovative ideas, that he had risen to plant manager when WWII broke out. Too old now for active service, he stayed in charge of the plant and worked “7 days a week, every week until the war was over.” He then retired from the plant and started his own company (this is about the point where I came along). I grew up watching this man succeed widely in the opportunistic times of the post-war era, but never at the expense of “doing the right thing.” This man (who, when he retired, owned three successful companies) taught me (among many other things) that you could be wildly successful at what you choose, though never letting go of your “moral compass.”

Marvin Gough (Brenda’s father) was the gentlest man I ever met. We lost him over 5 years ago. Of a different age than my father, Marvin enlisted and served in the entire European Theater during WWII as an army soldier. He came home from the war, married, moved to Flint, MI, where he worked in a safe job at a GM plant for over 30 years. Having successfully raised a family of three daughters (astoundingly, in a house with only one bathroom). He did retire back to his home town of Dexter, MO for over a quarter century. Successful by very different standards than my father, but a successful man all the same. He taught me that gentleness was a trait we should all nurture every day.

I also have lost long time friends – Dave and Kathleen, who were professional guidepost and confidants of mine – are two who always come to mind.

The fact that these family and friends are physically gone from me, does not mean I do not feel the presence of them all day, every day in my life.

These people in my life loudly answer the question, “What do we do now that it has happened/is happening?” for us every day. NEVER FORGET US AND WHAT YOU LEARNED FROM US. If you hear and listen to their voices every day, you will eventually find yourself celebrating this memory instead of mourning their loss.

More importantly you will also find yourself applying what they have taught you to other daily aspects of your life, both large and small, and asking yourself. “What would Dad do? “What would Marvin do?” “What would David do?” “What would Kathleen do?” and on and on. You will find your own personal chorus of memories guiding you to the celebrating box.

## **Have a Purpose**

My personal mission statement has always been “To Live an Impactful Life.” (I would not object if my tombstone read simply “He lived an impactful life.”) Whether it is through my teaching, my writing, my relationships with my wife, children, and extended family, or my friends, I have tried to make an impact through example, generosity, and empathy.

During the first two years of my treatments, I missed only one class for illness and still managed to write several articles and my ninth book. I do not mean this as bragging, but merely as an example of a gift – I have been blessed with these overarching purposes in my life and I could not help but continue to follow them – I had things to say and do,

and the gift of that driving purpose pushed even the most enduring cancer days into the celebrating (I was accomplishing my purpose) column. If it is a driving purpose, how can you not pursue it, and let it push the enduring events along the way into a less important status in your overall life – maybe even over into the celebrating column?

Only you can find your purpose. It could be finding a new job or career path. It could be changing your relationship with someone and/or some group that is important to you. It could be catching that big fish that has eluded your lure for years. It could be – who knows? Only you can answer that question.

Our family has a friend who came home one day from work, started fixing dinner for her two small daughters and husband, only to receive a phone call that her husband had been killed in a car crash on the way home. It took years for this family to at least partially recover – the children eventually went back to school and did well; the wife got on with her job.

Ten years later, this is one of the most celebratory people I know. There is still a huge scar in her life. But it has been partially healed over by a purpose. This woman has become head a health services for a large school system and dedicates much of her life energy into making this one of the finest systems around today.

Find the purpose with which you have been blessed and pursue it. You will find yourself celebrating the times you put into this pursuit and the enduring times will seem less important.

# **Attitude**

## ***Bumper sticker thoughts***

A friend and colleague of mine has spent a life time dealing with the debilitating effects of polio. These physical challenges have not stopped him from having a successful marriage of 30-plus years, three children, a growing count of grandchildren, obtaining a PhD in engineering, becoming a respected professor at a major university, and serving with me on the board of directors of the major manufacturing company. When I asked him how he has done so much, and been so successful, and celebrated every day of his life, he said simply, “They can’t amputate your attitude.”

Attitude during the good times is easy.

The trick is to find a way to maintain a positive attitude during the enduring times. For me, one of the secrets to attitude during those trials is to give endurance events celebrating names.

I went through a month of going in five days a week to have intravenous injections of Interferon – IVs that each day last about 3 hours. For a month, you feel like you have a bad case of the flu. I called this time the “Dark Month” and the room where this was done to me and others the “Chamber of Horrors.” A bit macabre I admit, but just the name and the practice of spending my time hooked up to the IV praying for the others in the room (they looked to me in worse shape than I was, and I imagine they thought the same about me) helped me get through it.

I spent 10 months giving myself injections in the stomach of Interferon three times a week – for the entire time, you feel like you have a mild case of the flu. I called

this time the “Marathon.” It helped my attitude to again start each of those days with the prayer, “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it.” The day can’t be too bad if you start off with that attitude.

When these treatments did not work, we moved on to IL2, which I described elsewhere in this book. For 8 days, I was in Intensive Care at Vanderbilt Hospital – IC because they were inducing septic shock 3 times each day. This in the hope that my body would fight the cancer at the same time it fought the shock, but there was a real risk the treatments would kill me. It did not work, but I still got to go through the joys of almost dying from shock three times each day – my attending nurse described IL2 as “hard chemo.” There is no easy way to get through this and I drew heavily from these other “hints” to get through it (probably helped to be delirious for much of the time). I do not know that I stared Death in the face during this time, but I am certain he was around. To give a lighter name to this time, we simply call this time the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

### ***Whoops***

It may not be a bumper sticker moment, but keeping an attitude of the silliness of some situations helps. When I went through IL2, Vanderbilt Hospital had to install a “pick line.” I went through this day of scheduled appointments: Is he strong enough for a pick line installation? Is he anatomically compatible with a pick line? When shall we schedule the pick line installation? I will admit to being a bit overwhelmed with the medical mumbo-jumbo. Brenda, bless her heart, finally had the good sense to stop a harried doctor and say, “Uh, what is a pick line.”

Finally, an explanation. With IL2, the doctors do not want chemicals slowly working their way through your body, they want them immediately in the heart. The easiest way to accomplish this is apparently to run a hose from some remote vein directly to the big vein entering the heart.

(Not sure at this point I wanted to know what a pick line was, but the doctor was on a roll) Ordinarily, the pick line enters a vein in the left arm and travels the short distance right to the heart. In my case, however (lucky me), since a year ago they had removed my left lymph nodes, they would have to enter the right arm, travel across the entire chest and then enter the heart (one of the big delays was finding a tube long enough for traveling up the arm and across my 48 inch chest without running out of tube before it reached the heart).

The technician told me one of the concerns (at least she did not say “dangers”) of doing it this way was for the tube to turn the wrong way and follow a vein into my head – which was exactly what happened to me.

During the procedure, I mentioned to the technician that there was water leaking somewhere in the room. She laughed and said not to worry, what I was hearing was the blood in my ears rushing past to tube (eeeewwwhhh!). We simply have to back the tube up and try again (not certain I agreed with the term “simply”). They eventually got it right, but not even an experience I want to hang a bumper sticker around.

Still, the “no big deal” attitude of the technicians certainly helped get me through a potentially panicky situation and celebrate its “silliness.”

## **Faith**

This book is dedicated to the great God, and his Son and Savior, who mainly brought me through the cancer experience to date. It is also dedicated to the host of great, wonderful, and caring friends and family who God put there to do the rest.

I am no theological scholar, so I will not presume to force my faith on the readers of this book – though I do believe it is the Way.

I will, however, say that faith in something greater than ourselves is a key to celebrating life. You cannot look at the universe, which science tells us is infinite and expanding, and not believe there is something bigger than us out there that has an infinitely greater grasp of the nuances of the universe and how it functions. My God is my answer and I hope He is yours, but you have to find that faith in something to truly celebrate life.

That faith is also manifested in those friends and family mentioned above. Whatever the Grand Design, God made us care about and help each other and that is certainly something to celebrate.

I am continually overwhelmed by the number and dedication of the friends I have garnered over my life. People who do not ask what we need, they simply look, decide what needs to be done, and do it. As I mentioned earlier, Tony, knowing of my love of books and hearing that some of the medicines were keeping me from sleeping at night bought me an MP3 player and showed me how to download audio books from the local library. Now, when the pain and the medications cause me to not sleep, I simply lie comfortably in bed and listen to my latest book – a blessing that would never even have occurred to me to request.

Relatedly, a group of colleagues knew my love of reading books and my frustration that I no longer had the strength to hold them. Without asking me (without it even occurring to me that I might use one) they bought me a Kindle because it is light enough I can still hold and read it. Find what your friends need from you and give it to them. This will cause celebrating all around.

The Reverend Leslie D. Weatherhead, in a series of incredible sermons given immediately after the cessation of hostilities in World War II (talk about a time when all of humankind was desperate for ways to move years of endurance to celebration), talks of the Will of God. Reverend Weatherhead speaks of the three wills of God:

1. The Intentional Will of God – What God wants for us if there was no interference.
2. The Circumstantial Will of God – Given that humanity is given freedom of choice, which often manifests itself in evil, the Intentional Will of God for us often gets distorted. God then acts through his will to move us back to the path he intended for us.
3. The Ultimate Will of God – Reverend Weatherhead contends that when God's Intentional Will is thwarted by evil, God always uses his Circumstantial Will to bring us back where he wants and always accomplishes his Ultimate Will for us and the world.

There is great comfort in this perspective. Evil things do happen to good people, but God is still with us. If I had not developed cancer, I probably would never have felt the motivation to share my thoughts on celebrating and enduring life. I hold to the hope that God still has plans for me to, as Psalm 23 says, “Walk in the paths of righteousness for his names’ sake.” In other words, to continue to do what I perceive to be His work

for me on this earth and proclaim His credit for that work. As a colleague of mine, Terry, is fond of reminding me when we talk about what I am going through that, “There can be no testimony without first a test.” However, if it is in the Ultimate Will of God that I succumb to this disease, I hope that the courage and fight I showed in this battle (freely acknowledging both were gifts from God) will serve as a beacon to others who face their own travails.

Finally, whichever path God has chosen for me, I hope and pray that the thoughts I have captured here are part of his Ultimate Will for me.

## **Rocks you can cling to**

There are rocks we cling to when enduring times come along. We each have to search for our own rocks, but perhaps mine will be helpful. Given my faith and experience, I have found three in particular that hold me against the impending floods, center me, and help me to remember to celebrate the day.

The first is the Lord’s Prayer. We often recite it by rote without thinking about the words. I find saying each phrase, stopping to think about what it means, and then moving on to be quite celebratory:

*Our Father, who is in Heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy Name.  
Thy Kingdom Come.  
Thy Will be Done, On Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the Kingdom, The Power, And the Glory,  
Forever and ever. Amen.*

Second, the 23rd Psalm holds what I consider to be two of the most comforting lines (line 5 of the first verse and line 3 of the second verse) in all of the Bible, and one of the clearest prescriptions for a celebratory life (last line of the first verse). No surprise it is one of the daily rocks to which I cling.

*The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want for anything.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death,  
I will fear no evil.  
For You are with me.  
Your rod and Your Staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a feast before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil.  
My cup runs over.  
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Third, I have been fascinated with the life of John Newton, a slave ship captain who evolved into a minister and writer of many of the Christian hymns we still sing today.

Newton once described himself in youth by simply saying, "I was wretched."

I do not know if that description works for me, but as Nathaniel Hawthorne once had one of his characters say, "I have committed no great sins in my time, but if you raked all the little ones together, they make a prodigious pile." I guess this applies to

most of us, and is certainly the reason the hymn, Amazing Grace, has always given me so much comfort.

Without equal, my favorite piece of music, it is the lullaby I sang to my daughters as babies (until they developed a sufficient sense of music to put their hands over my mouth).

Singing ability aside, the words still speak to the celebration of life. We have all been “Lost” at some time in our lives. The important part is finding our way back using the Hints in the table and get on with Celebrating our lives.

Sir Isaac Newton once said, “If I have seen far, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants.” Let us end this discussion of the third rock work by standing on the giant shoulders of Reverend Newton and seeing very far indeed.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me....  
I once was lost but now am found, Was blind, but now, I see.*

*T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear. And Grace, my fears relieved.  
How precious did that Grace appear...the hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares...we have already come.  
T'was Grace that brought us safe thus far...and Grace will lead us home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me...His word my hope secures.  
He will my shield and portion be...as long as life endures.*

*Yeah when this heart and flesh shall fail...And mortal life shall cease.  
I will possess within the veil...A life of joy and peace.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years...bright shining as the sun.  
We've no less days to sing God's praise...then when we've first begun.*

## **A good bye to all**

To finish this book, I stole mercilessly from Madison Ballou.

Madison wrote his letter to his wife (that, ironically, was never mailed) the day before he was killed at the First Battle of Bull Run.

I have always greatly admired this letter and thought it a great “coda” for a message to all who touched your life, not just your spouse.

Thus, I feel justified in my “theft” for several gratuitous reasons. First of all that the names of our wives were different (so there will be no confusion there), second, my wife – Brenda – would never have forgiven me the embarrassment if I had written this letter directly to her, third my death was much more imminent than his was (he and Sarah had a chance for a future (though he was killed and she remained a widow from age 24 until her death in her 80s), Brenda and I had enjoyed almost three times as many years of marital bliss as Madison and Sarah had (giving me, I think, more basis to talk about this marital state of affairs). Finally, this letter is not written just to Brenda (although the intimate moments certainly are) it is also written in friendship to all who are mentioned or even remotely referred to in this book. Even more finally, in the terminology of his time, “that boy could write!” How could I more explicitly express my final feelings to those whose threads have interwoven my life?

## ***A final letter to you all***

*My very dear friends:*

*Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that will fall under your eye when I shall be no more.*

*My friends, my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break. The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them for so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together. Since when you read this, I am gone, my dear friends, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escaped me, it was to whisper your names. Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness.*

*But, O Friends! If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights . . . always, always, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Dear friends, do not mourn me dead; think that I am gone to another place and wait for thee, for we shall meet again.*