

I Left My Prostate in San Francisco— Wheres's Yours?

A DIVISION OF THOMAS NELSON

Chapter 6 Sharing the News

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Deciding how, when, where, and with whom to share the news of my prostate cancer was not an easy task. There are no guidelines or protocol for doing this. When I first shared the news with other people, I had no idea what to expect. Obviously, most people were as shocked as I was. What images come to your mind when you think of someone with cancer? Maybe you think of someone who lost all of his or her hair. I've been bald for twenty years now. Maybe you think of someone who is severely underweight. I'm carrying at least twenty pounds more than I should be, mostly around the middle. Maybe you think of someone with cancer as someone who moves slowly, with an obvious lack of energy. I'm from New York. I do everything quickly. If I had to drive to my own execution, I'd be in the left lane, passing everyone in order to get there as soon as possible. I was still capable of living at that speed. The fact is, I didn't look or feel like someone who had cancer. That's what made the news so unbelievable to me and often to those I told. The people who had the most intense reactions were, as a general rule, those who had a friend or family member who had been diagnosed with cancer. For example, after I told someone I had prostate cancer, the first words back to me were, "I'm so sorry; my father died of prostate cancer."

I expected to share the news and immediately receive comforting words back. Instead I felt more anxious and afraid. After a number of these experiences, I had to take a break from telling people the news face to face. I told my pastor early on about my cancer, but I asked him not to announce the news to the congregation. He was both wise and kind enough to know we needed prayer, so he found a way to honor my request and still have our church family praying for us. Each week he'd ask the congregation to keep a friend of his (me) who had been diagnosed with cancer in their prayers. Some people prefer to use a blog or social media to share information with their friends or family. That saves you from repeating the same information over and over again. I found e-mail to be a safe way to share the news.

I own two sandwich shops. I told each of my managers the news face to face. I posted a letter at both my locations to inform the staff. I invited all my employees to speak with me about it if they so desired. There were a few life lessons necessary to learn before I was going to resume personally sharing the news. First, it was important to take into account how the news would impact the person I was telling. Receiving the news that a friend or family member was diagnosed with cancer is traumatic to the person receiving it. I was so preoccupied with my fears that I didn't consider what it would be like for the person receiving the news from me. Second, almost every person I told about my prostate cancer wanted to share an experience they had with cancer.

Most of those stories had a similar ending—someone they knew or loved died from cancer. Hearing these stories increased my levels of fear and anxiety, which was the opposite result of what I hoped to receive. I wanted to

feel comfort or feel better as a result of sharing the news. Instead, I got ticked off that I had to listen to a story about someone else who had cancer, especially when the end of the story involved that person dying.

At some point, I gained a valuable understanding about the stories people were sharing. I had assumed they were ignoring my plight and changing the subject by talking about their own experiences. I couldn't have been more wrong. I learned it was important to pay close attention to the story someone was sharing. This wasn't a case of someone changing the subject or ignoring my story; it was all about my news triggering the memory of a relevant experience. The story they shared provided me with an understanding of how they were feeling about the news they had just received. Since most of the stories were about people who had died, I realized the people I shared the news with had the same association I had when I first heard the word cancer, and that was death.

The people who told me those stories were afraid I was going to die from prostate cancer. Hearing the news that someone close to you was diagnosed with cancer brings up what I'll call an existential fear. I know all about this fear. So does every man diagnosed with prostate cancer. It is frightening to come to grips with how fragile our good health is. We don't like to think that one minute we can be healthy and the next minute discover we weren't healthy at all but in fact have a potentially life-threatening disease.

When you hear the news that someone you know and love had been unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer, your own sense of safety or good health is threatened as well. You think, *If that could happen to him, then something like that could happen to me.* Once I understood how traumatic it was for my friends and family to hear I had prostate cancer, I realized it was unrealistic to expect them to provide any comfort when I shared the news. Comfort would come later. Additionally, I stopped feeling angry, hurt, neglected, or frustrated as people shared their personal experiences with cancer with me. In fact, I paid close attention because I understood the stories they shared were the filter they were using to process and understand the news of my cancer.

Remember this: if you find yourself disappointed, neglected, hurt, or angry when you share the news, try to remember how traumatic it was for the person receiving it. He or she may need your comfort! My first opportunity to apply what I learned came when one of my staff members asked me how I was feeling. She was particularly worried about the amount of pain I was experiencing. I thought that was an odd query because I had never experienced any pain. So rather than answering her question, I asked about her experience with cancer. She told me all about her mom, who died a slow and painful death as a result of bone cancer. Since that was her experience, she was expecting me to be in the same pain as her mother. Additionally, she was expecting me to die in the near future. Once I understood her experiences, we discussed the differences between my cancer and her mother's. This conversation went well for both of us.

It took me almost two months after receiving my biopsy results to gain the insights and skills I needed to be ready to share my diagnosis with my church family. With those insights and understanding in place, I called my pastor. At the next worship service, he announced the news. I was ready to hear reactions from other people. Once this news was shared, we began to receive cards, phone calls, prayer, and other support. It is truly a blessing to be part of a church family when you are facing a traumatic event like cancer.

As I shared the news, I found myself educating men about prostate cancer. I'd ask men when they'd had their last PSA or digital exam. A few men made appointments with their doctors after I shared my story. Sharing the news with your children is different than sharing the news with other people. How you share depends upon the ages of your children. Since prostate cancer usually hits men in their fifties and older, most of the time children have reached at least their teens when you receive your diagnosis. There may be grandchildren you'd want to tell as well. If there are young children or grandchildren involved, my suggestion is to keep your explanations simple. Say, "Grandpa is sick and will need to go to the hospital to get better." That's as detailed as you need to get. I have three sons in their twenties and a teenage daughter. I believe it's a good idea to keep your children informed during each phase you go through. My first discussion involved telling my children that a doctor had felt a lump in my prostate, and I was referred for a biopsy to determine whether I had cancer. Once I received my biopsy results, I told my children I had cancer and

it was mildly aggressive. I explained that I chose surgery as the way to treat my cancer. I felt it was important to speak with each child individually. I wanted to provide each of our children the opportunity to ask questions and express their concerns, thoughts, or feelings without their other siblings present. If my children were frightened in any way, they chose to keep their fears to themselves.

There's something else I highly recommend you share with your children in addition to the news you were diagnosed with cancer. Share your love for each of your children and grandchildren. Let them all know how much they mean to you. Don't forget to tell your partner this as well. If there is a history of anger, bitterness, or unforgiveness, become a peacemaker wherever possible. Be the first to offer forgiveness. You have at least six weeks before your surgery to express your love and bring healing to estranged relationships wherever that's possible. Use that time in the service of love.

There is another important issue involving prostate cancer that every man should discuss with his biological sons. I chose to wait until I recovered from surgery and regained urinary control before bringing this issue up. There is a hereditary component to developing prostate cancer. Once you've been diagnosed, there is a higher probability your sons may develop prostate cancer as well. After age forty, it's important for them to be vigilant about yearly digital exams and PSA testing. It's not only important to share this with your sons; their doctors should be made aware of this medical history as well. Here's a list of issues I believe are important to address before you have surgery. These tasks may frighten you, but they are important and should be taken care of.

- Do you have a will? If not, see an attorney and make one.
- Do you have life insurance? If so, make sure your wife/children know the location of your policy.
- If you knew you wouldn't see your family ever again, what would you tell them?
- Make sure your wife, partner, or a family member has medical power of attorney.
- Prepare an advance directive, which makes your wishes known should you become incapacitated.
- Make sure a copy of this directive is in your medical files prior to surgery.

Q u e s t i o n s t o C o n s i d e r

1. How will you break the news you have prostate cancer to
 - A. Your children?
 - B. Your grandchildren?
 - C. Your extended family?
 - D. Your friends?
 - E. Your religious community?
 - F. Your coworkers?
 - G. Your boss?
2. Are there people you'd prefer to break this news to in writing?
3. Are there people you don't want to know about your diagnosis at this point in time?
4. How will you keep those who you want to share the news with informed?
5. Are there any other things you need to say or do prior to your surgery?
6. Is there anyone you'd like to appoint to share the news and updates of your condition?

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