



EMILY WINSAUER
MATT STAUFFER MEMORIAL AWARD RECIPIENT

Essay Question: "Create a message of hope - in the form of an essay, poem or short story - to a young adult with cancer or impacted by cancer through a parent's diagnosis or death."

The moment that you find out that you may die, you have a choice. You either get ready for a fight, or you get used to the idea of dying. For some, this moment comes in a doctor's office; for me, it was in the nearly-empty restaurant of the local Hilton. But wherever it occurs, it is definitive. How you deal with you cancer not only defines your experience and affects the outcome of your treatments, but it also changes how you approach the rest of your life.

But life is not clearly demarcated like that last paragraph implied. Rarely can we say truthfully, "at that *moment* everything changed," though we often do. That is why having cancer is such a valuable experience. It gives us a chance and a reason to make a fresh start. It is as clear a line as any we're likely to get. Something about the human spirit loves a blank page, a starting line, a clear beginning. And cancer has given me that. Although I'm not out of the woods yet, I think that having cancer may be the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Viewing cancer as an opportunity has made all the difference to me. I've learned about medicine, pain, people and most of all, myself. I know now that nurturing relationships is more important than my pride and timidity, and that finding out what I'm capable of is more important than staying safe. Cancer may seem like a limitation, but any limitation we have is in our minds. For me it has been freeing.

I had bone marrow transplant at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; altogether, I was in Durham for almost five months. During that time, I began to realize that I wanted a different kind of life than the one I was heading toward. I was preparing for the career I thought I should have rather than the one I wanted, and surviving gave me the confidence I needed to find a new direction.

Having cancer is a chance to renovate your life. I realize that I have said all of this with the presupposition of survival, but I don't believe that there is any other way to approach a life-threatening illness. If my hope is false, I would prefer not know it. When I went in for transplant, my doctor told me that attitude was on the most influential factors in determining the outcome; people who believe they will survive are more likely to. So I choose to ignore the fact of morality and focus on the fact of vitality. I will live as I have dreamed of living, however long it lasts, and if cancer cuts that time short, it has also renewed in me a great passion, and for that I am grateful. We, as cancer patients, have a very rare opportunity. With whatever wisdom our lives have afforded us, we have the chance to make remake ourselves. What greater opportunity exists?