

Living Next Door to Lazarus

by MICHAEL FINLEY

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Ned Berube

For the past five years I have had a little problem in my life – a four-inch long tumor that has taken up residence in my brain, next to my left ear. Not life-threatening, but no fun, either.

Folks, if you're middle aged and you think your mental powers are on the wane the natural way – you ain't seen nothing. Having a brain tuber growing inside you (I decided to name it after the potato, so it wouldn't sound so scary) even if it doesn't outright harm you, makes you dumb.

You forget things. You can't think things through the way you once did. When people talk to you, you sometimes don't understand. If you are used to being sharp and witty, that all goes away.

I plod on, because, well, what else can you do? But it's scary because I ever know if I'm nebulous because my tuber is taking over, or if I'm just a nebulous guy.

But enough about my cranium. I want to tell you about my preacher, Ned Berube. I have known Ned for 10 years. He has talents I don't have, like teaching kids how to ride a bicycle. In five years of trying, I only made my daughter scabbier and more frightened of bipedal transportation. Maybe it was my pre-pedaling lecture about gyroscopic action, complete with diagrams and a sidebar about Isaac Newton. Ned got her up and gyroscoping in a few minutes. He has The Gift.

Now, you need to know something about Ned. We have had what I call parallel health emergencies. Six years ago, about the time my tuber was diagnosed, Ned began to feel a numbness in his hands, which gradually spread to his whole body. It was a frightening, rare form of neuropathy that promised to shut down his entire body. Rachel, my nurse practitioner wife, shook her head at his prospects. To make matters worse, Ned had no health insurance to speak of, and only a small congregation to turn to for financial support.

It made me sad to see this happening to a good guy. He was probably putting all his hopes in God, and then would have to suffer the disappointment of God letting him down, with the eyes of his parish fixed on the failure.

Are you getting my point of view? While I have believed in God most of my life, it was what I call a "pre-disappointed" kind of faith – I never expected anything good to happen. (Not surprisingly, it didn't!) God has his eye on the sparrow? Sure, was my feeling – he watches the poor bird die.

I had zero illusions about healing. Rachel has seen so many patients suffer, way beyond the level of "what God thinks we can handle." You only had to switch on the news and see people dying in the Sudan, to know that wasn't true. My view of God was of an absentee scientist. He created the experiment, but he now stood outside the laboratory door, cooling his heels, leaving us to fend off microbes and lighting bolts on our own.

My contribution to Ned's time of sickness was to donate a spare VCR, and my videos of the Ken Burns baseball documentary, and some Twins World Series footage. I figured, this will ease his mind for a while. And isn't that about all a human being can do for another?

Ned underwent extensive therapies involving chemo, interferon, and things I don't know about. And periodically I would look in on him. Each time he looked thinner and weaker. The odd thing about Ned was – and I'm sure this doesn't fairly characterize his entire ordeal – he always seemed pretty upbeat.

He was learning things about the immune system that they don't teach in bible college, and it amazed and impressed him, how our nature, quite apart from divine derring-do, supplied us with an armload of miracles on a daily basis, battling germs and viruses out of the park with a shrug. What he had was an exception to that ingenious talent the body is equipped with. He fixated not on his disease but on the amazing systems of health that fend off so much disease.

I remember one Christmas eve looking out our window and seeing him wheeled up to his front stoop, too weak to stand. This, to any rational person, was a sad Christmas sight – a man coming home to die, but putting the best possible face on it.

The good news for me was that I felt sorry for him, and lucky for myself. My brain tumor had gone nowhere since my stroke, and I was starting to think it would not occupy every waking moment, as had been the case for an entire year.

It got very bad for Ned. He was unable to do anything for himself, and even breathing became labored. I must tell you that it was at this point I lost touch with him. We were not super-close friends – more like mutually curious neighbors, who appreciated the qualities of the other's spirit.

But Ned's problems were too scary for me, and I bailed. Seeing the end approaching, like in a scary movie, I put my hands over my eyes.

Well, wouldn't you know it -- Ned got better. Not just a little better, but a lot. It was some combination of steroids and chemotherapy. And it cost plenty, some \$30,000 per treatment.

It was the most stunning thing to see, Ned standing out on his porch again, arms folded, a funny little smile playing on his face as he watched his sons throw the football around. Even more stunning, a year later, to see him jogging through the hood, working up a sweat.

The other day, Ned invited me to a Twins game. Our team was down 5-4 in the late innings, and we could not seem to catch a break. My fatalism was working like a dream, but Ned seemed content enough. "Just wait," his attitude seemed to say.

I tried to be philosophical. "Of course," I told myself, "what difference does losing a game in a pennant race mean to a guy who has cheated death, or had it cheated on his behalf?" This was just a game.

Philosophical, schmilosophical. With two outs in the ninth inning, the Twin won the game with what everyone later called "the play of the year" -- a strange combination of inside-the-park homer, collision at the plate, and suicidal base-running. I nearly had a

heart attack. Ned just watched placidly. This sort of thing is almost ho-hum for him. God is apparent in every instant of life, if you look. And if you ask.

Like his money problem. Ned ran up hospital bill of half a million dollars. He had no insurance. So he attended an insurance committee hearing and he threw himself at the panel's mercy. He told them, "You're going to have to pay this bill for me, because I can't. It's a miracle, and I think we're just stuck with it."

The panel agreed, and in one stroke wiped all that red ink away.

You know, all this led me to a kind of precipice of thinking. All my life I have protected myself from a re-broken heart by never expecting very much. Truth: when I saw the scan of my head the first time, and saw my tuber outlined on the film, I thought THIS IS IT FOR ME. I AM GONNA DIE, end of story.

I gave up hope on purpose, because hope scared me. Better to do it myself, was my reasoning.

But now look at me. Middle-aged but alive, brain-damaged but (judge for yourself) semi-articulate, still a homeowner albeit an under-unemployed one.

I look at all that I have – my wonderful wife, my beautiful son, my beautiful, beautiful daughter. I am living in the lap of love, and that casual despair I cultivated as a young man is just starting to look so obsolete and uninformed.

And I look at Ned, who's going like a house on fire, and I know I can never match his eloquence standing in front of people. Nor do I want to match his history, laid in the grave like Lazaraus, then trudging out again, then breaking into a dazzling trot, then lapping us all with his courage and good cheer.

You know, Christian Science, and yoga, and Deepak Chopra, and all that stuff, is right on. We do get better, in ways we can't hope to understand. In ways that put even the fantastic marvels of medicine to shame. It's bubbling up in us, from the soul of our cells.

But it starts with believing – in the possibility of possibility. It starts with God.

And I am so grateful to my neighbor, given up by me for dead, for pointing that unarguable fact out to me, and I am chugging alongside of him, struggling to match his pace.