

GREEN GRASS
IN THE
JUNK YARD

GREEN GRASS IN THE JUNK YARD

HOPE FOR TOUGH TIMES

BECKY OVERHOLT & JOHN CANINE



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*To John's wife, Nanci, and Becky's husband, Steve. Their
steadfast love and commitment reflect God's love.*

To mom who always said we could.

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE PAST, I would have never chosen to read a book like this, much less attempt to write one. I was always frustrated with the endless prayer lists I received from church whenever someone got sick and the constant updates on his or her health. I always have felt there is more to life than just drowning in the immediate problems. Health issues are just temporary delays in the course of life.

Then I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Even after the diagnosis, I didn't want to focus on my illness. Shortly after I received the news, a woman in my church invited Sue, a good friend of mine who was undergoing treatment for HER2/positive, a very aggressive breast cancer that is less responsive to hormone treatment, and me to her house to visit with her good friend who was undergoing chemo for the second time. I didn't want to go, but I couldn't find any polite excuse to get out of it.

I left school a little earlier than usual and met the women at the designated location. This was not a tea party that I wanted to attend. The event's purpose seemed to be

to encourage me that I could make it through what I was about to experience. I smiled, talked, and agreed that God meets every need, but I wanted out of there. I wanted as far away from cancer as I could get. I preferred to be with the living and the healthy. I didn't want to hear that you could make it through chemo and that losing your hair was not a big deal. I didn't want to hear that God's grace would be sufficient. I wanted to run out of the house.

Now as I write this book, I have to smile. Am I doing what those women did to me that day? Am I expecting people to read about a disease they would prefer to deny? I hope that is not the case. Rather, in these pages I want you, the reader, to find courage for living in any circumstance life offers. I want you to connect to life, enjoy human hugs, fight the fight, accept the challenge, appreciate the encouragement, look beyond life's circumstances, and always know there is something to look forward to.

I also hope that just as I have learned to reconnect with my brother through my health crisis, you will reconnect with those who matter the most to you and begin to appreciate in a deeper way family members and friends who offer their support in tough times. I hope in these pages you will be able to relate to the emotions you or a friend might experience in a similar situation. For those who are caregivers or part of a support team, I hope you will begin to understand the source of encouragement you can be to your loved one. I trust my brother's approach will be a model for your communication.

Above all, I hope you will see the reality of the spiritual struggle we face in tough times. My brother and I were raised in a pastor's home. The Bible had been an important part of our lives since before we could remember, but when I was diagnosed with cancer, no amount of "trusting" or meditating on God's Word could completely remove the

struggle or the doubts. I was human. I experienced fear. I had meltdowns. I couldn't focus on verses I had embraced and quoted over the years. I questioned God's presence, I struggled with the possibility of death, and I secretly wondered what I had done to make God so mad. This is the spiritual struggle, and, in my opinion, we are not transparent in this struggle. All too often we glibly claim victory and peace that we don't actually have.

As I went through my diagnoses, surgeries and treatments, I tried to be honest with myself. Frankly, many days I did not have a positive attitude or spiritual prowess. In fact, if a positive attitude was the prerequisite for healing and spiritual living, then I would be physically dead and my spiritual life would be in shambles. But I believe God understands our humanness. I believe He walks with us through every difficulty, even when we are kicking and screaming or running wildly to avoid the inevitable.

One individual from Florida, who received my letters from a mutual friend, was a new believer in Jesus when she received news of her cancer. She was feeling guilty that she was struggling with the diagnosis. When she read my letters, she told her friend that if a pastor's wife could have these feelings, then she could accept her own struggles and not think she was going through them because her faith wasn't strong enough.

When you allow yourself to let down the walls and lead a transparent life before others, they will be encouraged by your honesty and know they are not alone in what they are experiencing. Whether you are reading to find comfort in your situation or whether you are interested in how you can help a loved one through a difficult time, I trust you will be authentic in your relationship with God. Why not? He knows what you are thinking anyway.

It has now been three years since my first cancer diagnosis. As I look back on my situation, I know I would not have chosen the path my life has taken. Being diagnosed with two cancers within two months would not be something I consider a “gift.” Life is the gift God has given me; cancer is ugly. Nor will I say that the purpose of my cancer was for God to teach me. I am a teacher by profession (currently a principal), and I don’t think teaching has to be painful or distasteful. I did learn from my experiences, but I will not accept that the primary reason I contracted cancer was for God to teach me. God uses all the experiences of our lives to draw us to Him—and cancer, disease, and death were never a part of His original plan.

What happened to me is only my story. God will write the story of your life. I am resigned to accept that in my situation, I may never know why I had two cancers. Likewise, you may never know why the events of your life have unfolded the way they did. I do know cancer caused me to reflect on what God’s Word teaches, and I know my brother helped me define many truths for living. I loved life before cancer, I looked for ways to enjoy life during the surgeries and treatments, and I am loving life again.

There will come a day when each of us will enjoy life even more than is now possible. So as God writes the story of your life, be transparent and honest with yourself. It is my and my brother’s prayer that this message of faith, hope, and love will encourage you on your journey.

SEVEN MAXIMS

1. Connect to life.
2. Enjoy hugs and home.
3. Accept the challenge.
4. Fight the fight.
5. Appreciate the encouragement.
6. Look beyond the circumstances.
7. Celebrate the future.

Chapter 1

CONNECT TO LIFE

Often the test of courage is not to die, but to live.¹

—Vittorio Alfieri

September Diagnosis

IT WAS THE end of summer, and I had completed my third year as principal of Tuckerton Elementary. I was anticipating a smooth start to my tenure year. At church, my husband, Steve, a pastor, and I had finished a week of vacation Bible school with more than 250 children and a hundred adult leaders. To end the summer, we were more than ready to spend some vacation time in Florida with our children, Joshua, Joanna, and Jodie, their spouses, and, of course, our grandchildren. We had planned a family get-together and rented a house with a pool outside the back-patio door. The complex also had a larger pool with a lazy river and waterslide. Everyone was ready for some fun.

We were sitting at an outside table around the complex's pool one afternoon when my cell phone rang. It was my

gynecologist's nurse, calling to tell me that my routine mammogram had showed something suspicious. She told me not to worry and to enjoy my vacation, but said when I returned home I should come in for a second mammogram. I followed her advice. Several turns on the waterslide, numerous rounds on the lazy river, and a trip to Sea World kept me from worry. However, on the plane ride home, I began to note dates and intervals of previous menstrual cycles and document that my body was going through some changes.

The results of the second mammogram revealed a suspicious area, and I was immediately given an ultrasound on my right breast. When the radiologist came in and told me she recommended a breast biopsy, I saw the nurse was leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. I could tell by the sympathetic look on her face that I was in trouble. I left the hospital in tears.

One week later on September 22, my wedding anniversary, I had the breast biopsy, and my husband and I drove from Atlantic City to Philadelphia to deliver the mammography slides to The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn). That was Friday. On Monday, our family doctor called and told my husband that the biopsy had shown that the growth was malignant. I had breast cancer. My body trembled as I absorbed the news. I fell on our bed with my knees to my chest and tried to shelter myself from what I was hearing.

The next day, I traveled with my husband to the Rena Rowan Breast Center at UPenn. We walked into the waiting room and sat. My mind was in shock. Here it was only four days after the breast biopsy, and my husband and I were meeting with the surgeon and having a conversation I could barely comprehend.

Six days later, my brother John called me. The next day, I sent an e-mail to him and ended with something I had never said to him: “I love you.”

Not a Baby Sister

It was not cancer but my brother John who sent me on my first trip to the hospital. Dad had a hobby of buying old houses and then arranging the family vacation so everyone was available to fix up the disaster. We spent our vacations scraping, painting, scrubbing, and removing rubble.

We were on one such planned vacation, working on a house we affectionately had named the “white monster,” when John decided to take a break and play out front. John worked very hard at avoiding hard labor. He was racing with a wagon/wheelbarrow sort of contraption on the broken-up sidewalk in front of the white monster. Being four years younger, I thought it looked like he was having fun, so I raced to the end of the wagon and attempted to jump in the moving vehicle. John yanked it, and I fell on the broken sidewalk and tore open my knee.

I was taken to the local emergency room, where the doctor sewed five stitches, and then my family returned to the white monster. I was never convinced (even with my parents’ chidings) that John was genuinely concerned about my knee. His opinion was that it was stupid for me to try to jump into a moving vehicle, and that by doing so I was just asking to get hurt.

My brother John never wanted a baby sister. For three and a half years he had been the baby of the family, the last of three children born to Margaret and David Canine. Then one day, my mother told him he was going to have a baby brother or sister (there was no ultrasound back then). This was not good news for John. As he recalls:

I did not ask for a baby brother or sister. In fact, I kind of liked getting all the attention myself. My older brother and I had a great relationship, and my older sister was a teenager whom I rarely saw. I did not think we needed anyone else in the family—we were already a family of five, the “perfect” family back in the 1950s.

Nevertheless, it happened. On August 27, 1952, Rebecca Sue Canine was born. From that time on I had to yell, scream, cry, tease, perform, and in general, engage in bad behavior just to get a smidge of attention. In my mind, my mother’s beautiful baby girl got it all.

Someone might think I am exaggerating or I could not possibly remember that well at that age. Pictures are proof! When I was eleven and Becky was seven, our mother took us to a small photography studio in our hometown of Blanchester, Ohio. My sister was dressed in a black and white birthday party dress with all the “fixings,” plus an umbrella. Interestingly, it was not raining that day, and I think my mother called the umbrella a “parasol.” I was in a shirt and tie with a sport jacket.

The photographer seemed to take hundreds of pictures. I was in very few, and hardly in any by myself. Becky was in all of them. It was pose after pose, picture after picture, smile after smile, and I thought it would never end. Everybody seemed to be excited about what was happening except me. I would have rather been playing baseball, and besides, when I heard the photographer say Becky’s pictures were going to be good enough to display in the studio window, I truly lost interest.

If there ever was a defining moment in the childhood relationship I had with my younger sister, it happened a week later while I was walking home from school with some of my friends. We had to walk by the photography studio, and as we did, one of my buddies looked up to see my sister’s pictures in the window. It was embarrassing enough to see her pictures there like some movie star, but even more embarrassing was the fact that I was not

in any of them. Actually, as one of my friends pointed out, I was “nowhere to be seen.”

My so-called friends had a lot of fun at my expense whenever we passed that studio on the way home from school. They seemed to derive a sick sort of pleasure in reminding me that my picture was not in the display window. They told me things like, “Your mom and dad like her better,” “She is going to make millions of dollars being a model,” and “Everybody knows who your sister is, but nobody knows you.”

I finally had enough, and because I was the leader of this little band of preteen misfits, one day after school I told them we were walking home a different way. I thought that would solve the problem, but little did I know that a greater and longer-lasting issue was just beginning. My sister and I began to distance ourselves from each other.

At the beginning this was probably somewhat normal, but after a few years our relationship became characterized by competition, one-upmanship, over-achievement, and apathy. Becky competed against me through “brain power”; she was the intellectual and educationally a hard worker. I competed through athletics, working hard to be the best I could be.

As we grew older, all I really wanted was for my big brother to accept me and acknowledge that I was special. He was an all-state basketball player, a college star, and the life of the party at every family gathering. I admired him greatly, and I secretly hoped he was proud of me. I studied hard and became the valedictorian of my high school class and the President Award Recipient at the college I attended. He applauded when I received these awards, but I was never sure how sincerely.

John married in 1967, and I in 1973. Children soon followed, and for many years we lived in separate states.

Our communication revolved around family gatherings on holidays, occasional summer meetings at the river cottage, funerals, and the hospital waiting room when our dad had open-heart surgery.

John got his first doctorate in education, writing his dissertation on grief. He earned his second doctorate in psychology and had a successful counseling practice. I was a minister's wife and a teacher for nineteen years, and then I became principal of a local school. John and I stayed in contact through typical extended family experiences and Christmas cards, but at the time of my diagnosis we had not spoken to each other in two years.

Email Connection

As I mentioned, John called me eight days after I received the news of the diagnosis. I think God knew I could use a psychologist and counselor during this time and the surgeries and treatments that followed. More importantly, I think He knew I needed my brother. John was someone who could help me concentrate on life and not focus on whether I would die from the disease. He was someone who would support and encourage me throughout the treatment process. It happened through e-mails.

Tuesday, October 3, 2006

Hi, John,

We were at the Eagles game last evening and didn't get home until one A.M. I'm exhausted, but it was good to have some fun and talk about something other than cancer.

My receptor report was encouraging. It was not HER2/positive; it was 98 percent estrogen and 95 percent progesterone. I told Steve that I always did like to get A's.

Tuesday, I go to UPenn to participate in a testing protocol. They will complete a CAT scan, PET scan, breast MRI, and digital mammography. After the tests, I will discuss with the surgeon my surgery options. After the surgery and the node results, I'll meet with an oncologist to determine treatment options.

I have a very close friend, Sue, who is HER2/positive, and the cancer has metastasized to her lungs. She is going to UPenn, but the Herceptin and chemotherapy treatments have not worked. She just started a clinical trial program. She and her husband met Steve and me at UPenn last week when I had my first appointment. It is hard not to superimpose her experience on mine. I've had some sleepless nights.

I asked Steve, "Where is God and faith?" I have prayed for the past year for Sue, and she continues to get bad news. Now I find myself going through the same thing. I'm scared.

Through some tearful prayer times, confession, and pouring out of my heart, God has given me peace. More than anything, I want to know His presence in my life whether that is in life or death, hard times or good times. As Sue often tells me, "It is going to be OK." If she lives it is OK, and if she dies, it is really OK.

I love you,
Becky

Wednesday, October 4, 2006

Becky,

"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world" (C.S. Lewis)². Sometimes I am not sure where God is . . . maybe distant thunder . . . but I always come back to the fact that He wants all of me. That is where He is, waiting for full communion with me . . . which will not be completed until death. Having said that, I am fairly confident

that you are not going to die for a long time. All the signs thus far seem to be in your favor for a complete recovery, and I will believe by faith in that. However, you will then be left with the hard part: for what purpose did God bring this into your life? That has been the hardest question for me in my life. We are praying daily for you.

Love you,
John

You are Going to Have Time

In over five thousand communities in twenty countries, more than 500,000 cancer survivors walk in the opening lap of Relay for Life. Yes, they walk, a normal, healthy everyday activity. These people are not bound to a bed or a house. When they are walking, they are not sitting in a chair receiving chemo or laying in a hospital bed wishing they never had been diagnosed with cancer. They are out and active, with friends, celebrating life. They are living life after cancer. This year, the American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org; 1-800-ACS-2345), which sponsors the event, will help eleven million cancer survivors celebrate a birthday of surviving cancer.

Because cancer is a life-threatening illness, though, it is normal for a person receiving a new diagnosis to equate cancer with death. But the truth is many people live years with cancer, and their treatments enable them to lead normal lives. Furthermore, on a daily basis, medical science is getting closer to finding cures for many cancers. Cancer patients—especially those recently diagnosed—need to know they have time to live. Death is inevitable, of course, but cancer does not make it imminent. We are created to live. Therefore, we must embrace life.

On October 9, 2006, I underwent my first surgery to remove the cancer in my body—a lumpectomy with sentinel node biopsy. As I recovered, my brother helped me connect to life at a time when I was absorbed with death.

Monday, October 23, 2006

John,

My next biggest hurdle will be the chemo decision. I'm dreading it. I picture myself in hospice care, saying goodbye to family, lying in a hospital bed in the living room with oxygen tubes coming out of my mouth as I gasp for air. Every so often these thoughts lead me to a meltdown. I had one today, and then I decided it was time to live my life and get back to school. Spending a couple of hours at school was good therapy. Retirement is looking better all the time.

Yesterday, a missionary was with us. He told Steve that his first wife survived two mastectomies and then died in a car accident. You just never know how much time you have. Yet, I know that worrying about my days isn't going to add one more hour to my life.

Love ya,
Becky

Tuesday, October 24, 2006

Becky,

Time is a most interesting concept. None of us know how much of it we have, and it does not exist in eternity. I guess that leaves us with the issue of quality. The quality of our time is the meaningfulness of life. No matter what, in regard to your cancer, you are going to have a lot of time. Don't focus so much on the junkyard that you miss the beauty of the green grass and the blue sky. OK, I realize this is a random thought, so feel free to revise, expand, or throw it out, but in the end (sorry to use that

word) this type of thinking is the stuff of life—a process
our family does well.

Love ya, and I pray for you daily,

John

One of the worst things about my big brother when we were younger was his ability to knock the breath out of me. Mother often said he did not know his own strength, and a push or a knock to the ground would leave me breathless and panicked for a moment. Cancer was the same way. It had a lot of strength and knocked the breath out of me. Now it had tightened my chest in fear, suffocating the life I so enjoyed.

Whenever I visited the oncologists, all they talked about were percentages and chances of survival. I wanted to wear a big sandwich-board sign that said “100 percent” in huge letters to remind myself that their percentages were not going to affect my story. Regardless of how much time I had left on this earth, I was going to live 100 percent of the life that God had given me.

Tuesday, October 31, 2006

John,

The tumor in the node is complicating the process. The surgeon says there is a 50 percent chance that he will find more cancer in the nodes when he does the second surgery. Also, the tumor in the node makes my survival rate lower (about 75 percent), which is why they are encouraging me to have chemo after the surgery. My percentages decrease further if they find cancer in more nodes. I finally said to my surgeon that they have percentages for everything. He smiled and said that my frustration with percentages is justified, because when you survive, then you have a 100 percent chance of survival.

It is hard to remain positive when I am faced with all these percentages. It's as if the doctors are having all of us cancer patients sit in a circle for a game of Duck, Duck, Goose, only the words they use when they tap you on the head are "live, live, live, die . . ."

I have not slept the last two nights. The fear is worse than the cancer. The spiritual struggle is worse than the physical one. Last evening, I cried and read my Bible. There were tissues all over the floor this morning. I begged God to give me some sense of peace and comfort. He did. I have no answers and I am still horrified at the thought of chemo, but God did meet my needs today.

Thank you for your thoughts and prayers.

I love you,
Becky

Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Becky,

Stay close to God. He is your protector. He will order each and every step you take. No one knows what you are going through but you and Him, and that is all that needs to be known. Please try to remain positive about this. Let them continue to evaluate and gather the information, and then sit down with your family and make some decisions. Put them into a plan of action, and then work toward the goal you desire. "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). All the while, pray for wisdom and healing, and remember that God is forever with us.

We all are praying for you, and we love you,
John

Surviving

For a long time, I did not accept the cancer diagnosis. My life had drastically changed, and there was no time to absorb the shock. It was difficult to think about surviving.

After all, how could I concentrate on surviving something I didn't want to have?

Every time I had a medical phone call or went to an appointment, they would ask for my name and my date of birth. I hated to say my name, and giving my date of birth was another slug in the stomach. Each time I gave this information, it forced me to admit I had cancer and acknowledge everything that was happening to me. This was not me. This was not the life I had planned or the future I wanted. I was young. I wanted to finish my doctorate at Rutgers, complete a few years as an administrator in our elementary school, and continue teaching in the ladies' Bible study and other ministries at church. I felt mocked every time I gave my name and date of birth. I was overwhelmed. I couldn't concentrate.

Wednesday, November 1, 2006

Becky,

I am sure your head is spinning with all the information you are receiving. You are doing the right thing; you need the information to make appropriate decisions. My next-door neighbor is an attorney/physician, and he told me about a thirty-year-old woman he knows who had breast cancer in many nodes. She went through six months of hell with radiation and chemo. It has now been two years, and she is cancer free. She works out and looks great.

He also told me some time ago about his aunt who was diagnosed with breast cancer in her fifties. She had two treatments of chemo and then told the doctors she wouldn't have any more. She lived to be seventy-five. You would need a lot more information before you make a decision like that, but the point is to not give the cancer any more power than it has by thinking negatively. The 75 percent chance of survival your doctors gave you is for

you to reach your life expectancy, which is eighty years of age. We both know all the things that could happen before you reach eighty. We also know all the things that science could uncover in the next few years that will help many cancer patients (one of the few positives of capitalism).

At this point, we all need to be supporting you and encouraging you to fight this disease with all the strength God can give you. You have every right to be afraid. None of us will ever be able to understand what you are going through, but try to keep your focus on the future. That is where your hope is. How you handle the disease and treatment is up to you. Do what you need to do, but be self-protective. Keep your attention on the quality of life you believe God has for you. He does not like this disease, and He does not want you to have it. So, therefore, you must believe and have faith that He will heal you.

John

My brother helped me realize that even though cancer was a part of my life story, I needed to concentrate on living. There are millions of people who have survived various cancers. These individuals don't wear signs when they are out shopping and in public, so you never know who they are simply by sight. A few public figures, such as Lance Armstrong (a fourteen-year cancer survivor), have stepped forward to share their stories, and they are an inspiration to all suffering from the disease.

Cancer Survivors Network, an organization sponsored by the American Cancer Society, provides story after story on their website of people who have survived everything from breast cancer to prostate cancer. Some have had stage four with extreme node involvement, which makes their treatment more difficult and their chances of survival not as clear. With early detection and better treatments, many

women are beating breast cancer. In fact, of all cancers, breast cancer survivors are the largest group, and detection and treatments are continuing to improve. (Actually, the number one killer of women is heart disease—it kills ten times more women every year than breast cancer.)

Although cancer had drastically altered my life, I could lead a normal life and enjoy work and time with my friends and family. I could live fully the days and time I had been given. In spite of my circumstances, I could connect to life and enjoy the blue sky and green grass.

Green Grass in the Junkyard

All it would take was for one of us kids to get a splinter or small cut on our hand and Dad would say, “The last guy I knew who had that died.” We’d stop crying and laugh, because we knew kids didn’t die from splinters. Dad helped us to laugh at our cuts and bruises, and afterward we felt better.

But cancer is no joke. Although I thrived on the stories of cancer survivors, I knew many people diagnosed with the disease did not survive, and I cringed each time someone told me of a friend who had died. One day after my diagnosis, I was standing in the school office when a mom came in to check out her child. I asked her about their family and how they had been. The mom proceeded to tell me that the family had recently been to a family member’s funeral. I gave my sympathies and then asked about the situation. The mom looked at me with fear and said, “I can’t tell you.” Then she literally ran out of the office without her child. I turned to the secretary and with a smile knowingly said, “She must have died from breast cancer.”

As my brother said, cancer is a junkyard. Yet, he had also advised me not to focus so much on the junkyard that I missed the blue sky and green grass. Each day God had

something He intended for me to enjoy. As long as I had life, I had hope. I was probably not going to die tomorrow, so I needed to live today. People survive cancer, car accidents, heart attacks, and other tragedies. I had to concentrate on the survivors, life, blue skies, and green grass.

On mornings when I was paralyzed with fear, I simply said, "I'm probably not going to die today, so get up and live." This day, this moment, is all that we have, and we need to live 100 percent of the life that God has given us. Nothing, not even a cancer diagnosis, should make us miss the blue sky and the green grass.

Wednesday, November 1, 2006

John,

Thanks for the prayers. There are times when I cry and pour out my heart to God and He gives me such a sense of peace, but there are times when it is difficult to pray. During such times when I am spiritually weak, I know the prayers of others are carrying me through.

There was cancer in the nodes. One, the sentinel node, had a tumor. This has been the biggest test of faith I have faced in my life. I want to know God's presence, and I don't want fear or anything to separate me from God's love. But I am scared.

I do believe God will heal me, yet I cannot presume. As I told you, one of my best friends has breast cancer that has gone to her lungs. She is in a clinical trial program at UPenn. Before I knew I had cancer, I had cried and prayed with her on many occasions. It is hard to set her experience aside and realize I am a different person with a different cancer.

On a lighter topic, I had a third-grade student yesterday who was sent to my office for calling his teacher a bad name. I would tell you the word he used, but your e-mail filter would probably block it . . . let's just say it was really offensive. The funny part is I didn't know what

the word meant, so I had to have the student sit in the hall while I called Steve to ask him. Fortunately, after talking with the boy, I was sure he didn't know what the word meant either. He just knew it wasn't nice. I'll spare you the rest of the details.

Love ya,
Becky

Thursday, November 2, 2006

Becky,

Your e-mail gave me a good laugh . . . you ought to hear some of the words out of our six-year-old Sophia's mouth. She has no idea what they mean. One time when she and Nanci were out trick-or-treating on Halloween, she said she was "pissed off" that it was so cold.

Anyway, take your time with all this and be involved in all the decisions that are made. I believe the Spirit does approach God on our behalf when we are too tired, afraid, or angry to pray, and I believe the prayers of others accomplish much. Friday night and all day Saturday, I teach a death and dying graduate class at Spring Arbor (hopefully you'll find some humor in that). I am convinced that you are going to live a lot longer than you think, and I am not convinced that you will die of cancer. However, I am convinced we both will die some day . . . we are terminal.

Enjoy today. Love ya,
John

Thursday, November 2, 2006

John,

I don't know how I would walk through this without your support. God must have known that someday I'd need an older brother who was a counselor. My reconnection to you has been worth the cancer. OK, so the "worth" it is an exaggeration, but your confidence helps me be positive.

My next surgery is scheduled for November 9.

My verse for the day is Isaiah 41:10. I have said it so many times that I have it memorized. Let's see if I can type it: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Interestingly, that was one of Dad's favorite verses. After today, I know why. It was my anchor all day. At one point as I was walking the school halls, I told God, "I understand why You gave Yourself as God to people; I can't make it through this without You. I need You with me." That is backward theology, as He created us, but it makes sense for me to think of Him as my gift today. And Jesus is the gift of God.

Love ya,
Becky

Friday, November 3, 2006

Becky,

Thank you for the verse—Isaiah 41:10—and especially for the thought of Dad. There are so many little things he said to me (and I'm sure to you too) that have stayed with me. Interestingly, they were not things he said in the pulpit but in private. I can honestly say there are times when I miss him and would like to see him and talk with him.

Your e-mails are showing to me a deep fellowship with a loving God. I could be wrong about this, but I believe this is what God wants from all of us and, respectfully, I say He does not care how He gets it. He will use accidents, illness, broken relationships, or any other experience to bring us closer to Him. I pray daily that He will be real in my life . . . a dangerous prayer, in my opinion, because I may not like the circumstances of His realness. Nevertheless, I need to pray it, because what He gives me is all I have.

I am sure we both are glad we had a father who preached the life-changing message that God came to be with us in Jesus Christ, and that Christ died for us so death would not have any sting. It takes faith to believe that.

Take care. We all love you.

John

When the nurse was preparing me for my first surgery, I told him I never expected to have cancer. I was always going to have heart disease. After all, my dad had died of heart disease, and I had many relatives who had died from heart problems. The nurse's answer to me was, "Well, we'll get you all fixed up with this, and that can still happen." He was making the same point John had made—that I was going to live a lot longer than I thought right then, and that he wasn't convinced that I would die of cancer. So whatever the junkyard of life deals you, play your hand, connect to life, and cherish the blue sky and green grass.