

The Letter I Would Like to Have Received from a Friend or Relative During My Illness

By Anna O'Connor

To my dearest Anna Banana,

As I lay here about to go into my second stem cell transplant, I think of you my friend. I remember the first time I met you. You were a bald, meek, scraggly-looking teen who was curled up in a chair waiting for yet another chemotherapy to begin. I was thrilled to see you! You were the first fellow High School senior I had met since my relapse. I went over and introduced myself to you. I recall my first glance of your piercing eyes filled with determination and passion. I also remember how we became instant friends and immediately started telling each other jokes about effects of Benedryl that would make your best friend nervous to overhear.

Cancer distorts your concept of the most essential necessity in your life, the need for love. When confined to your bed you no longer have the opportunity to seek out relationships that will satisfy your innate longings. You are forced to wait in anticipation for those interactions to come to you. Be patient. God will bless you and send you friends that will love and support you through these trials. When I was first diagnosed with cancer my friendships all changed. Some of my alleged "best friends" deserted me. At first I added this to my list of reasons why I am the unluckiest person in the world, but soon I realized it was a blessing. The friends that remain loyal are reliable and will never hurt you so you know you can trust them and be completely at ease and honest with them.

I realize that relationships change and at times you will feel lonely. You will feel left out because you are away from your friends. But, through cancer, the definition of a good friend develops: a good friend is no longer someone who comes to your house after school to gossip and hang out. A good friend holds your hair back when you are sick and holds your hand when you shake from blood allergies. A good friend listens to you rant and rage as you search for meaning in a foggy abyss. Remember, one good friend is better than a million fake friends.

You know you will have to deal with the usual problems of being a teen, now with the new twist called cancer added. Your heart will pound when a guy walks in and says or does something that catches your attention. You, being the teenager girl whose hormones are starting to kick in, will want to flirt. But, no longer do you feel like the adorable, non-threatening girl. You are bald!!! Not only do you feel like crap, but you also feel ugly with your golden locks gone. Don't worry about being bald, though. Let me tell you something, Anna, people will like the way you look. Anyway, people will love you most of all for your spirit. Any guy who does not see you for the wonderful person you are is not worth a moment of your precious time.

I understand the difficulty of just hanging out with friends. For one thing, you feel awful. In the last 24 hours you probably endured more pain than your friends have in their entire lives. Don't dwell on this. Try not to complain about your discomfort; it is reasonable to let yourself escape for a couple of hours from the dark side of the cancer universe. I know the uncomfortable feeling of this foreign body that is not only constantly changing because of your age, but it is also deteriorating right before your eyes. Don't give in to it; stay active if you can. Take walks. They provide great opportunities to enjoy the beauties of nature and exercise helps your body stay stronger so you'll even feel better.

It was in good times, in between treatments, that I realized just how significantly my life had changed. In public places I was amazed at the impact my experiences had on people. When I went to

school I was treated almost as a celebrity because people came rushing over to ask me how I was feeling. God will use you Anna to touch others merely by sharing your experiences on your website. The fact that hundreds of people are affected by my struggle encourages me to keep fighting. When you feel isolated from the world, remember all the people who are praying for you and the impact your existence has had. You will make a profound difference in the lives of others.

Make sure you don't envy or hate anyone. When I was first diagnosed I was disdainful of those that complained of petty problems. Take people as they present themselves to you. You do not know the whole scope of their lives, and they might have a good reason for acting the way they do. They may have struggles or even mental problems you cannot comprehend. Picture them as curable by love and compassion. Never compare your cancer to their troubles, instead learn sympathy through others' sympathy toward you.

Anna, I know they told you that it is almost impossible for you to live another year with all the cancer that is left, but you are not just a statistic. Whatever you do, don't overanalyze the numbers or put your faith in statistics. You are a girl made in the image of God, and if God wants you to survive, you will definitely survive. I know that chemotherapy is not working for you, but enjoy each day and don't worry about tomorrow. No one can know what will happen to them, therefore, don't envy anyone who you view as more fortunate. You just never know how their life, or yours, will turn out. You have a wonderful, loving family and friends that will support you through all you do, so put your focus on them and the many ways you have been blessed.

No one ever says, "Congratulations on being one of the lucky few to receive cancer." You don't have to be happy to be sick. Cancer will educate you on the secrets of a life of love, but it does not demand constant cheer. We both know death; we have each faced it and conquered. Don't store your fear in the bottom of your stomach. Take my advice and journal about your worries. When your family and friends don't want to talk about the potential unpleasantness in your future, your journal will always linger, waiting for you to confide. Don't hide anything, your diary does not judge and shudders at the thought of gossip.

You have a choice, Anna. I have met only two kinds of cancer patients. Half become very bitter towards their disease and dwell on their misfortune. Because they think the world revolves around them and owes them something, they become very depressed. The other half of cancer patients do not ignore the fact that they are dying, but choose to take advantage of all that is good in life. They genuinely care about others despite what is happening to them. When they become sad, they have a good long cry, but afterward they decide there is nothing they can do about the situation, so they pick themselves up and take advantage of the life left in them. Become that second person, Anna! One of the most important choices you will make in life is the attitude you adopt. This determines the kind of person you'll be.

Remember to seize every moment of every day. Do not live life dwelling in the past; rather use your mistakes for future success. Even a day spent in agony can be viewed as another day to spend meeting nurses, talking with friends and family, and learning what matters most in life. I found that when I felt the worst, I woke up praising the Lord the most for allowing me to live another day. For the brief time I tasted remission, my joy faded for I was not forced to ponder over life. When you feel good, don't always go to bed early; discard any self-consciousness and grab for memories that will sustain you through that next month of intense pain and isolation. Become aware of the simple pleasures in life: a cup of warm soup that slides down your throat warming you from the inside out, a breeze that screams vivacity and energy, filled with life. Relish every conversation. Listen to others and seek to pry new truth from their words. Hunt for every detail of life like a child. You will find an awe that starts at the bottom and fills your whole soul with a wonder that calms you and gives you an uncomplicated peace.

Anna, we've only just met, but in this horrid disease we have so much in common. I hope these words encourage you as you fight this battle. Live large. In spite of your distress you have so much to give to others and so much of life still to enjoy. Find those moments and relish them. Cherish what you have now. Someday we'll celebrate remission together.

Love,

Elizabeth

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