

9 June 2001

Bek, Bek, Bek,

As I write this letter, I am picturing you in the hospital. I see you curled up in bed. Your eyes stare into space, heavy with drugs and pain. You drift in and out of consciousness. The fingers on your right hand absent-mindedly pick at the bandage from your lung biopsy. An array of tubes and bags of nameless fluids surround you. Somewhere a machine beeps as it pumps these fluids into your punctured arm. Your boldly bare head shines gently in the overhead lighting. This is what I imagine you are enduring, but I smile. For I know that if I were to ask you how you are, you'd reply that you were fine.

How are you?

In the time that I have known you, you have always been fine. There has never been any situation you were unable to handle. This ensures me that in spite of this sickness your spirit will prevail. I have already seen you struggle and triumph in the face of difficulty. Last year you had to deal with a new school and new friends, and of course, your studies. You showed me that your determination to achieve excellence applies not only to academics, but to all aspects of your life. It is this determination that has led me to respect you and to expect great things from you.

I think, perhaps, this determination comes from your maturity. You have always struck me as more mature and insightful than most of your peers. In the past two years, I have come to think of you as a friend and colleague rather than as a fourteen year-old student. However, having to cope with this illness may force you to grow up at an even faster rate. I can't bear to think of you being robbed of the last of your innocence before your time. Innocence is a precious thing. Please do not become embittered because of your illness.

I imagine you are upset at being unable to attend school and participate in normal activities for a person your age. The eighth grade graduation ceremony is soon. Will you be able to attend? I hope you will. If not, you will be missed.

Feelings of frustration and anger at your situation are understandable. You are missing a chunk of your youth because of this illness. It would be better, perhaps, to think of it as a rare, albeit unjustly expensive and unwanted, opportunity. Your time in the hospital exempts you from normal, daily demands on your time. Few people get such unadulterated time to think. Use it to consider your life. Think about where you are and where you want to go. Realize the infinite possibilities open to you and determine how to pursue them. Use this time to see the "bigger picture" of life.

Fortunately or unfortunately, this experience makes you unique among your peers because you have encountered death. You are conscious of its reality and inevitability. But do not let your fear of death morph into fear of life. Do not be timid. Be bold. Allow this consciousness to force you to appreciate life. Make the effort to experience life fully. Determine which emotions--fear, embarrassment, regret--are wastes of time and do not bother yourself with them. Focus instead on those emotions that enrich life, such as love and joy. Attempt to incorporate those into your life as often as possible and your life will be a happy one.

There is no doubt in my mind that you will conquer this sickness. What you do with this experience is, however, completely up to you. There is absolutely no reason why you were afflicted with cancer. This is unimportant. It is up to you to give this event meaning. You are in pain now and perhaps it feels as though life will never be anything beyond the white walls of your hospital room. But it will. One day you'll look

back on this period of your life and it will seem like nothing more than a terrible dream. Time will steal the feeling of reality from it. You may choose to walk away from this experience forgetting that it ever happened. No one would blame you for this. But think for a moment of this experience as a unique opportunity to change your life profoundly. Think of this sickness as your Life's Ordeal and bypass the confusion of youth and the crisis of middle age. Figure out what makes you happy now. Use your knowledge of life's transient quality to avoid making the mistake of falling into a life that doesn't please you. Use this time as a source of focus, strength, and motivation. Don't forget it. Embrace it.

In the future, you may feel that as a cancer survivor it would be ungrateful to not pursue a career in medicine. You may feel as though it were expected of you to devote your life to finding a cure or to caring for the sick. This is not so. Although it would be wonderful if you wanted to do these things, no one expects it. All any one can expect from you is to strive to become the best person you can be and to give back to the world in a way that you enjoy. The doctors, nurses, and your mother want nothing more than to give you the opportunity to accomplish this. Utilize this time to think of how to utilize their gift wisely.

Stay strong.

Con carino,

Jack McFarland.

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