Ars Medica
A Journal of Medicine, The Arts, and Humanities

Volume 11
Issue 2
2016

Great Faith in a Seed

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> Though I do not believe that a plant will
> spring up where no seed has been,
> I have great faith in a seed. … Convince
> me that you have a seed there, and I am
> prepared to expect wonders.
>
> —Henry David Thoreau

After a series of operations, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, stage four, and would likely survive for only three months.

I had been thinking about the land and putting a cabin on it for some time. In the middle of the property is a large pond, crescent shaped, stocked with bluegill, bass, and catfish. We now also have non-invited crappie. There are frogs, turtles, salamanders, and water snakes near the water's edge, and colorful dragon and damselflies that share the air and surface with waterfowl. The occasional Great Blue Heron is most impressive. The water is surrounded by trees, some native evergreens and some that we have planted, but mostly a mix of maple, elm, oak, sycamore, beech, redbud, and dogwood. Unruly willows battle to stay close to the

water's edge. There are mushrooms, blackberries, and paw paws. It may not be God's Country, but I like to think it is a place where she might visit.

In 2008, my sister spent more nights in a hospital than out of one. After much chemo and transfusions of platelets and one failed autotransplant of her own recycled stem cells, her doctor sent her to the bone marrow clinic for evaluation. Though her chances for survival were slim, it was decided that she would receive an allogeneic transplant, preferably from a family member. Brothers, sisters, and sons were eager to be tested for compatibility. Four of the five siblings were a match, which, apparently, is a remarkable statistic. After further examination, I was asked by my sister's oncologist to donate cells.

After months of planning, revising blueprints, conversations with a builder, lining up subcontractors for excavating, well drilling, and septic digging, a flatbed transfer truck rolled down the gravel road with the logs: Eastern White Pine, fourteen foot lengths, six inches thick, uniformly milled, double beveled, flat inside and out, with pre-cut dovetail corners. They looked great. Inspecting the logs as we unloaded, my interest in their condition was quickly matched by the arrival of carpenter bees that sniffed the fresh cut timber greedily and with personal intent. Later, we would do battle for ownership. For now, I was just glad that the logs had arrived. Once the truck driver and those involved in the delivery had pulled away, I thought about the distance the logs had travelled to get to the Indiana building site. Like me, they were raised in North Carolina, and, like my sister,

they had once lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I covered the logs with tarps to protect them until construction would begin.

Throughout the summer and into the fall, most of my weeks were divided between trips to the cabin construction site and days in front of the computer. To trigger my writing, I often planned routine visits to the local library. There, I would browse the collection and eventually check out exactly ten books on random topics from pond management to the origin of language. I would scan the material, take notes, and then write dialogue without play manuscript formatting: description, setting, character names, or stage direction. These things would come later. Though skeletal, the dialogues were not generic—in other words, they were intended for the sound of two distinct voices—a kind of duet, or, to take the music analogy a step further, *étude*s, or short, lively scenes for two.

In early summer, I received a call from the clinic to schedule the apheresis procedure. On June 12th, cells were collected, or harvested, and transplanted into my sister. It was a hopeful day.

In mid-July, a Case bulldozer and cement truck arrived on the construction site to dig trenches and set the footers. An impressive piece of engineering, the compact Case broke ground and moved mounds of dirt effortlessly. It seemed almost alive.

Shortly after the transplant, it was reported that the cancer was in remission or undetected. I would call it my sister's cancer, but clearly the disease is indifferent to humanity and has no regard for those things that make her beautiful and alive.

It also appeared that the newly acquired stem cells were slowly reproducing. In spite of these good signs, her tired body struggled to fight off infection as doctors began to treat her for graft-versus-host complications. She could not eat and did not rest and her rapid weight decline marked a downward spiral. Two months later, I would return to donate NK-cells (natural killer cells) for a lymphocyte infusion to boost her immune system and, hopefully, kill the infection.

I have grown to appreciate the pond ecosystem and to be attentive to the delicate balance of fish, plants, and other animals. An invasive species, like, crappie, I have read, will often prey upon the resident fish and compete for food. I don't know how to get rid of them, and so, for now, I am learning to understand their particular fight while doing what I can to encourage health for the other residents. Pond equilibrium is also threatened by an unhealthy amount of leaf debris on the bottom and too much algae on the top. To improve pond health, we aerate and oxygenate, and even perform "lake rescues" to remove excessive thread-like plants.

In thinking about duet writing, I often worked with pairs, such as "kinks and hard knots." Sometimes the pairs would have specific or logical origins, like "flora and fauna," but there are other pairs, like "kit and caboodle," that have entered our language without a clear explanation. We speculate, we surmise, but in the end, we are left not knowing the exact origins of "kit and caboodle." We try hard, though, to make sense of it all. I should clarify what I mean when I say, "I often

worked with pairs." I mean, I think and write about two characters sharing or maybe competing for one space, two characters in conflict with each other, or with some other external force. Sometimes they arrive at a mutual understanding, like my characters Maggie and Lydia in *The Gazing Ball*, or seem to share a curious brain like Tori and Tracy in *The Examination*, or the two characters that I have yet to name in the play *Nuts and Bolts*, who are forced to work beside one another even though they are not compatible.

We were told that engraftment would take time, but we were not prepared for the harsh side effects and ensuing infections. My sister's daily trips to the clinic meant more blood analysis, blood products, drugs, and substantial fluids to keep her from withering away. There was no simple solution to the infection. When her doctor first suggested hyperbaric treatment, she was unable to consent. Two hours per session, twice a day, for two weeks in a pressurized chamber seemed, understandably, intolerable. And though the treatment is said to be painless, the thought of being isolated in a tank used for scuba diving injuries, decompression sickness, oxygen toxicity, and carbon monoxide poisoning, was not painless. When she asked me, "What should I do?" I told her, "I do not know."

It is sometimes surprising to feel the rush of cold water while swimming on a hot summer day. Six to eight feet below the pond's surface, a sudden change in temperature separates warm surface water from the colder water below. This separation or stratum creates an environment for un-

wanted pond weeds and does damage to aquatic life as methane and carbon monoxide gases become trapped below the thermocline and in the organic matter on the lake bottom. Disrupting the space between warm and cold water, I have now dropped oxygen diffusers into the pond, and, with bottom to surface aeration, I am told it will improve the quality of life.

I am not surprised she came around to it. She has given it her all from the very beginning, or, as her attentive husband has said, "She has tremendous fight, hope, and faith." So, when she first entered Chamber A at the Center for Hyperbaric Medicine and Environmental Physiology, we desperately wanted the pure oxygen therapy to make the difference. Nothing else seemed to work. She had to try.

I wrote a short play called *Cockleburs*. Like the others in my collection, it involves a pair—two homeless men, Tank and Ritty. The two are waiting for a soup kitchen to open. The younger man, Ritty, is as easily agitated as he is intellectually curious. Tank seems less engaged and more concerned with the visceral and with intoxicants. For now, they depend on one another for companionship. Cockleburs, those seeds that latch on to us as we pass through their fields and meadows, are, as Ritty explains, the inspiration for Velcro.

> RITTY: In 1948, a Swiss inventor got the idea for Velcro from cockleburs—cockleburs, Tank, caught in his clothes and in his dog's fur!
>
> TANK: You don't say?

RITTY: I do. He put the burrs under a microscope and discovered a hooked shaped to them that gave him the idea for Velcro! Velcro, Tank, a material that keeps shoes on my feet and holds a human heart, Tank, holds a human heart together. Velcro! That keeps objects from flying off into space.

TANK: Burrs?

RITTY: Yeah, burrs. It matters, Tank. It matters to me. His name was George de Mestral.

TANK: Right.

RITTY: A Swiss inventor. George. That was his name. (*Silence*) What is yours?

TANK: What?

RITTY: Your name. Your mother didn't name you "Tank."

Near the end of the play, Ritty becomes angry when he discovers this quote, without citation, written on the soup kitchen exterior wall: "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning." Ritty believes that no one has the right to withhold information, and he becomes enraged at not knowing the source of the quote. After all, names matter. To Ritty, names matter.

Here are a few that I remember: John tested the soil. Jerry approved construction permits. The Mundy Brothers dug the well. Darrel excavated the septic field and buried the tanks. Bob marked

the utility lines. Brett was the builder. Thomas was a carpenter. Brad was the electrician and plumber. Nate built the cabinets. Tom spread top soil. His son-in-law, Jeff, helped me with some loose ends. David did the final inspection.

Dr. Lewis was the oncologist. Terri was the physician's assistant. Ellie was an oncology nurse. Brenda was the phlebotomist. Rhonda managed the Adult Bone Marrow Clinic.

Keith was a young donor from upstate New York, twenty miles from the Canadian border. He sat in a recliner next to mine at the clinic. Like my sister, Keith's brother would receive the cells later that day. But now, his father sat nearby, watching the blood flow from a vein in Keith's arm through a web of tubes in the apheresis machine and return, somewhat depleted, to a vein in Keith's other arm. The procedure takes a while, but it is a short time compared to the long car trip from upstate New York to North Carolina, a journey that this father and his sons had made before and, if Keith's brother required, would make again. Between light naps and machine adjustments, Keith and I talked about fly fishing and bait fishing, Indiana bluegill and the Northeast Speckled Trout. We wondered about the smallmouth bass, lean and muscular, made so by his fight with the river's current, while his largemouth relative grows fat in standing lakes and quiet ponds. The father listened to the two of us approvingly. He had little to say and yet his eyes said it all: he needed rest. Keith finished apheresis before I did, and when he came out of his recliner and stretched, I said, "It feels good to stand again,

doesn't it?" He nodded agreement and in a clear and sincere voice said he hoped everything would work out for me. I nodded. He slowly walked away. His father, trailing behind, carrying his son's backpack, turned back to say, "I hope your sister gets better." I replied, "And your son."

I relied on a builder who hired a couple of good carpenters, and a plumber who was also a licensed electrician, to do most of the work. I helped when I could, served as general contractor, prepared stages of construction, and with my spouse on Saturdays, cleaned the site, recycled, and disposed of garbage and rubbish and waste. Though most trees were physically unharmed, I was shocked by the amount of woodland space cleared for the septic field and felt little reassurance in the excavator's attitude that nature would return with a vengeance. There were times during the construction that I felt unwelcomed by the surrounding nature, flora and fauna, as if I were an invasive species. Maybe I am. I hope to do better in the future and prove my trustworthiness.

The NK-cells, two weeks of hyperbaric oxygen treatment, and a steady regime of antiviral drugs did little to rid my sister's body of infection. In the New Year and deep into the winter, it seemed that my sister's health was marked with not much variation, and while we received reports of increased white cell counts, graft-versus-host infections continued to cause great trouble.

I am not sure I should call my scenes "duets." Even though they are two voices, they are seldom compatible, rarely harmonious, and mostly in conflict.

Henry David Thoreau's *Faith in a Seed* was one of the books that I had checked out of the local library. And while I can comfortably say that I know nothing about the propagative parts of a plant and maybe even less about faith, I am beginning to understand the determination of cattails. While their surface appearance, stems, and flowers appear idyllic near the pond's edge, under water their rhizomes spread like madness in a tangled mess of tubers, lapping up water and laying claim to the soggy earth below. It seems that if they are not contained, they will join forces with the unruly willows, the filament algae, excessive organic debris, and exuvial junk and turn a pristine pond into a swamp, or maybe something worse, like an abyss or nothingness. Is that so bad? Isn't that a natural order? After all, I am told, ponds have a life, too. I struggle to fight off these things, but I don't have much faith.

> Nature works no faster than need be. If she has to produce a bed of cress or radishes, she seems to us swift; but if it is a pine or oak wood, she may seem to us slow or wholly idle, so leisurely and secure is she. (Henry David Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed,* p. 37)

Winter was slow going for building the cabin. We had hoped to be in the place by the New Year, but that was what is called "wishful thinking." It was months later, a few days before the Fourth of July, when I first prepared topsoil and planted grass seed around a finished cabin. The pine logs

that were delivered the year before were now locked together, shouldering a metal roof that gave us shelter. The logs would need staining. We would like for them to remain the same bright, light pine color they were when they first arrived on the site, but that is not possible. A natural building material, of course, the logs began to age or break down the moment they came to rest on North Carolina soil as felled timber. Instead of working against that process, we chose not to resist, and stained them a western gray. Perhaps, more important than appearance, the stain would protect the logs during harsh weather and intense sun rays.

The cocklebur is from the genus *xanthium*. The name *xanthium*, I've read, means "rough" and comes from the ancient Greek word *xanthos*, which means "yellow." *Xanthos* is also the name of the river god, who, angered by the bloodshed in his water, attempts to drown Achilles in Book XXI of the *Iliad*. The origin of the cocklebur, the plant, is unknown. Botanists tell us that each prickly, football-shaped burr contains two seeds. They will produce their own generation of cockleburs. It is normal for one of the two seeds to take root during the year, while the second seed, his twin, requires more oxygen and remains dormant so that he might populate a field the following year or so. As hitchhikers, they depend on us and other animals for transportation. We have all found them clinging to our pants legs, grasping our sleeves and socks, and without reservation, we have dropped them here and there, which was their survival plan, or nature's plan, or someone's plan, to begin with.

If you walk in their neighborhood, their locality, they will use you to escape their native soil to proliferate and extend their reach. They are called pesky plants and noxious weeds. They are remarkable and tenacious.

If not for the pending birth of her first grandchild and a steadfast constitution, I am not sure my sister would have lived to see the end of 2008. Her first grandchild was born December 23rd.

I have a first draft of a book manuscript.

With construction now complete, I wonder if the cabin's appearance is less troubling than it was when we first arrived to rearrange the earth with noisy equipment. In a gated community of nests, dens, roosts, warrens, tunnels, webs, and all the other natural hideaways, is there an acceptable place for this cabin in the woods? I have to think so. But whatever I have done to this piece of land, it will not be the same.

They arrived in two cars on July 3rd, one day after I planted the grass seed, to celebrate the Fourth of July, or more truthfully, to celebrate purpose and perseverance. It had been a long trip from God's Country, broken up by a night in a motel near Lexington and other stops along the way. We were told in advance that her health was improving, that her appetite had returned and cells were reproducing. We were also warned about her physical condition. When she stepped out of the car, bruised and thin, her skin drained of color, she reminded me of Mother, near the end. How did she make that trip? I do not use words lightly, but it seemed like a damn miracle. One of my other sis-

ters got to me first, saying, "I know she doesn't look very good, but she's back. She's bossing me around."

Thoreau speaks of the inconvenience of too many guests, of too many "souls" under one roof, in his chapter on Visitors to his cabin in *Walden*, and that "big thoughts" need room. We did not have that luxury. Instead, it rained all day while food and song and story filled the room. We were brothers and sisters, family, reunited for a short time. On the Fifth of July 2009, they left the log cabin to begin the long journey home.

I stare at my sister on the other side of the pond. She and I are tossing stones into the water, breaking each other's ripples. She has a new blood system. What was once blood type A is now AB+. Some in the family tease that she has become stingy and ill-tempered, like me. I do not know about that. But—maybe—we are a pair.

* * *

Postscript: It has been five years since my sister received the allogeneic transplant, and though she is still on the road to (regaining) full health, the PET scans indicate no active cancer. She now has four grandchildren.

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Reference

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