



Book Review

Stewart Justman. *Seeds of Mortality: The Public and Private Worlds of Cancer*. Chicago, Ill: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher; 2003. 240 pages. Cloth cover, \$24.95 US.

I know why the editors of *Cancer Control* selected me to review this book. I have a reputation for incorporating literature and the arts into my teaching and even into my conversations about cancer. The review seemed a perfect opportunity for me to show how I could not only “talk the talk,” but also “walk the walk.” Despite this interest, I had a difficult time at first getting into this book, and I was concerned that they had picked the wrong person to review it. The book seemed a little too pedantic and abstract, even for me — someone who could be both those things, but I struggled along reading it. However, when I came to the sections dealing with discussions and applications of Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilych*, a story that I love, I became mesmerized by Justman’s messages. I went back and reread the beginning and found I had been missing the point and missing the message. When Yogi Berra was asked what he thought about when he was at the plate hitting, he said, “I can’t think and hit at the same time.” That’s how I approached this book, and I must admit I do it a lot, especially in reading scientific texts. I had not been thinking and reading, and this book demanded both of those things. As I realized this, the book became much more interesting and useful. It was as if a light bulb went on: I got it!

The author, Stewart Justman, is a professor of English at the University of Montana and a man of the arts. He was faced with a serious diagnosis of prostate cancer and complex and complicated decisions on its treatment. He chose radioactive seeds, and the details of his journey in which he faced the “seeds of his own mortality” were filled with “seeds of doubt.” In his time of crisis, he sought and found wisdom and solace in his old standbys, those works of art and literature he taught about and loved. In so doing, he came face to face with some of the current “wisdom” and “advice” in the public discourse about cancer, and he didn’t find these thoughts or pieces of conventional advice so comforting or consoling. This is the gist of the book.

The current public stance on cancer is that patients are being told to face up to it, fight it, wear

pink ribbons, join in marches, shout about it, and show public outrage. They are bombarded with advice about stress, relaxation, meditation, diet, exercise, and support groups. But Justman points out that not all patients want to do these things or approach their own cancers with this mindset. That stance was certainly not the one he wanted to pursue for himself, and I suspect there are many others like him. In the book, Justman skillfully separates the personal experience of having cancer from the expectations that pervade the public culture. Individuals experience cancer in their own way and seek supports that are consistent with their own lives, their past experiences, and their values. Justman preferred to take the stance championed by Montaigne: to “quietly endure the course of the human condition.” As one author, McIntyre, opined: “We wish to disclose of ourselves no more than we think right and no one wishes to disclose all of himself.”

I especially liked the way Justman discusses many of the inconsistencies patients face. In a brilliant, satirical way, he exposes our interesting use of language about cancer, which is often rich with war metaphors and tales of heroism in our patients. But the messages it may portray may be antithetical to where patients may be “at.” He tells of doctors who are much more comfortable discussing parts of male anatomy than discussing issues like trust and fidelity. The first chapter includes a brilliant discussion about informed consent that opened my eyes to the fact that we are mostly covering our butts. Our consent forms seem to “bewilder and defeat the signer,” to frustrate the ends of disclosure itself. They seem to succeed best in protecting the physician and hospital from legal action. Justman quotes from *Gulliver’s Travels*, where there “was neither physician to destroy my body, nor lawyer to ruin my fortune.”

Justman also exposes the world of confusing statistics. He felt he was “told half-truths” in his conversations with the doctors. In confronting the confusing statistics, cancer patients find themselves in a “Cretan Labyrinth of questionable information.” He says that a fixation on the statistical data can block treatment and even diagnosis, for data of the required quality don’t exist in the world of prostate cancer, a city of numbers. Again from *Gulliver’s Travels*, he describes the physi-

cians in this way: “Although they are dexterous enough on a piece of paper, in the management of the rule, the pencil and the divider, yet in the common actions and behaviors of life, I have not seen a more clumsy people.” He says, “Who wants to live by a table of calculations?” and “Our very existence on this earth illustrates the limitation of this way of thinking that overrates the importance of calculation in human life.” He discusses the “spirit of uncertainty” and the pervasive role of chance in cancer.

One of the central images Justman uses is a painting by Pieter Brueghel called *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. This painting, which appears on the cover, portrays a plowman tilling his field while sheep graze and life goes on. Nearby, the leg of a boy is disappearing into the ocean. This is Icarus, who dared to tempt the fates by flying as close as he could to the sun. He was struck down. Justman likened the plowman to his doctors, who seem to be able to persevere amid the tranquility of life and the chaos of their patients who are trying to tempt the fates and fly close to the sun to seek redemption or deliverance or “forbidden knowledge.” One of the most important messages that I gleaned from the book was Justman’s respect for his doctors and his lucid articulation of what he (and indeed most patients) wanted from them. The key word was trust, and he got it in spades from his Dr. Green, who came across as an impressively human, fallible, and honest man. What Justman wanted most from his doctor was honesty, which “matters more to patients than almost everything else that they experience when ill. Honesty to the patient is just part of the fidelity to the practice of medicine.” How beautifully said, and what a lesson for us all as we drown in that “sea of numbers.” Dr. Green was Brueghel’s plowman who pushed along amid the sea of chaos that engulfed his patients. He was the steady rock who guided them. He was the servant Gerasim who tended Ivan Ilych with simple acts of kindness.

Justman’s turn to literature and the arts for solace reminded me of a friend who, when his wife was pregnant with their first child, couldn’t seem to get enough of those “How to Father” self-help books, while his wife calmly read Chekhov and Tolstoy. That’s who Justman turned to in his time of crisis — to those great authors to whom he had turned so many other times in his life. And they didn’t disappoint. Two pieces of wisdom from Tolstoy struck me: “Our lives have not been authored in advance, but are lived as we go. They are process, not product.” And “Each unhealthy organism is unhealthy in its own way.”

This is not just another cancer diary. As a reviewer says on the back cover, it is a literary discussion of the

highest and rarest order. The key lesson is that each patient fights cancer in his or her own way. It is not a book to be taken lightly, and it is an opportunity to “think and hit” at the same time. That in itself would be a great gift to bring to patients, to be “present” to their needs and worries. By carefully reading this piece, we may even be able to more carefully read our patients.

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