

Cancer scare helps put life's 'important stuff' in perspective

There are a million things I want to do before I die, but I figured I'd better narrow my scope a little. So, neatly tucked away in my drawer labeled "Important Stuff" is a list of 100 things I want to accomplish in my lifetime. I want to publish a novel, do the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii, found a center for missing children, have my grandmother tell me her life story, cycle across the United States, go to Denmark. I have the most sincere intentions of accomplishing these things — all 100 and then some, if I have time.

I pull out the list about once a month or so to see how I'm progressing. Although I'm not able to accomplish a lot of the things at this point in my life, looking at my list gives me a certain kind of motivation. I've been keeping this list since I was in the second grade. It's been revised several times (that's good, because otherwise one of my goals would still be to be chosen captain of the kickball team at third period lunch). The point is, no matter how many different goals I've set for myself and then changed, I've always had some, and I've always believed I'd have the time and determination to accomplish them.



Cheryl Petersen

Last spring I looked at the list and laughed at myself for being so presumptuous. Then I cried and tore the list up into the smallest pieces I could. A doctor in a yellow lab coat had just told me he thought I had bone cancer.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't a "poor me" story. If it were, I wouldn't have the right to ask you to read this. After all, everyone has problems and mine aren't any more important than yours. But what I learned from this whole ordeal may help you or interest you.

As it turned out, this doctor was mistaken in his diagnosis (I should have known. Good doctors don't wear yellow lab coats). In the days between his mistaken diagnosis and when I found out my poor health was due to something very common and very curable, I learned a lot about the power of the mind over the body and the power of the body over the mind.

Being a runner and an all-around klutz, I'm pretty used to an injury every now and then, either running too much or tripping up the stairs or something. So when my legs began to hurt last winter I really didn't think much of it. I had started running with a group of

women who were a bit out of my league, and I attributed my pain to my efforts to keep up with them. After about a month of this, I gave up running with the group. I just couldn't keep up, and if I even *tried* to keep up I could hardly walk the next day. I vowed to take up all kinds of weight programs and running workouts on my own to improve enough to run with the group again. I did, but my legs still hurt.

Quit Running

I quickly dismissed the thought of seeing a doctor because I knew exactly what he/she would say. "Quit running." Looking back, that would not have been altogether bad advice, but at the time I was blinded by a crazy obsession to run. The funny thing is that I wasn't then, am not now, and probably never will be a top-notch runner, but the competitive spirit in me would not let me quit. Instead of having a doctor tell me to quit running, I waited for my body to tell me — no, *insist* that I quit.

For four weeks I didn't run one step, I drove to class, and stayed off my feet as much as possible. I swam laps to stay in shape, I ate all the "right" foods, I took vitamins, I used ice packs and heating pads. At the end of four weeks of my own "therapy" I foolishly tried to run. I couldn't even make it out of the driveway. Still in mismatched socks and inside-out sweats, I called every doctor in town until I found one that could see me right away. Not shopping for a good doctor was just as big a mistake as not going to one in the first place.

I told Dr. Quack (not his real name, of course, but more appropriate than his real name considering his yellow lab coat and lack of medical expertise) the whole story and he ran a bunch of tests. The whole while he was telling me that yoga was really the best kind of exercise. I told him I'd never seen many people run a marathon who trained by doing yoga. He snorted when he laughed and asked what a marathon was.

I went back to his office two days later to find out the results of the tests. That's when he told me he thought I had a form of cancer. He recommended that I see another doctor. I calmly listened to him and then walked out of the office. At home, I took my list out of the drawer and looked at the first item which I expected to complete before the others. The Ironman Triathlon. Without talking to anyone or allowing myself to think at all, I immediately went out to run. I don't know how far or how fast I ran, but I didn't get back until well past dark. I couldn't even feel my legs. My mind had blocked out the pain, just as it had blocked out all thoughts of what Dr. Quack had told me.

I picked up the list from my desk

and looked at the other 99 goals I'd set. That's when I cried and tore it up. Interestingly enough, that's also when my legs began to throb again. I went through the whole ridiculous process of feeling sorry for myself, only making it worse by not telling anyone and by assuming that I was going to die within a month. When I was through crying I felt so angry, so enraged. What had I done wrong? I didn't do drugs, I didn't smoke, I exercised, I ate rice cakes and yogurt. How could I possibly be sick?

Exactly at that moment, I made up my mind that I wasn't. Of course, just telling myself that I wasn't sick wasn't what made the "cancer" go away. I mean, I never had it in the first place, but I didn't know that then. My change in attitude was so abrupt. It changed everything for me in a matter of minutes and I was able to think rationally again. For the first time, I think I realized a small part of what terminally ill and permanently handicapped people have to go through to go on with their lives. I admire them and, frankly, I think their outlook and attitudes toward life are often much better than the rest of the "normal" world.

I made a list of numbers to call the next morning to find a good doctor to straighten this mess out. As I've already said, things turned out great. I'm lucky, and I know it now, but I didn't realize it before this ordeal. It's cliché to say that you don't know what you've got until it's gone (or you think it's gone), or that if you've got your health you've got everything. Now I know why those clichés have survived. They're true.

New Outlook

I can't say I'm glad I had this experience, but I sure do look at things differently now. This experience doesn't make me smarter or better than anyone else. It just gave me some insight and I feel a lot happier and more content now.

I had never realized the importance of having a good doctor that you trust, that bad things can happen to good (or basically good) people, that you can't put off accomplishing your goals, and that you have to keep things in perspective.

We're all guilty of these things, but I think the college population may be even moreso. We get so caught up in our college lives, we forget there is another world out there. Students commit suicide over bad grades or other pressures. Girls think their lives are just *over* if they don't have a date to the sorority ball. Sure, these things seem important at the time. They are — but not *that* important. We need to keep it all in perspective. Most of us have a lot of years ahead of us to do, or try to do, all the things we want to do. But some of us don't. The catch is, we don't know which of us do and which of us don't.

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Rec Scoreboard

Results from cross country meet last Friday:
Men's — 1. Marc Adam, Beta Alpha Psi, 12:26; 2. Jim Fuller, Chi Phi, 12:30.
Men's team — Warriors.
Women's — 1. Sharon Mahlman, Sandoz 3, 18:07; 2. Linda Jakub, Independent, 21:32.
Womens team — Sandoz 3.
Co-Rec — 1. Mark Wightman and Sharon Mahlman; 2. Steve Gordon and Linda Jakub.

Men's, women's and co-rec archery will be today and Wednesday at Mabel Lee 301. No advance entry is required.

Today is the entry deadline for men's and women's fast pitch softball tournament, men's flag football, co-rec soccer and men's and women's darts. Entries are taken at the Office of Campus Recreation, 1740 Vine St.

Men's slow pitch softball results:
Sigma Phi Epsilon B — 9, Chi Phi B — 4
Phi Kappa Psi — 8, Chi Phi B — 4
Jamokes-Hansen — 11, Anug — 10
River Rats — 17, Team Name — 12
Electric Company — 18, Wish We Could — 9
Untouchables — 8, Sodbusters — 3

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