

Curative cause for Thanksgiving

My wife completes chemotherapy just after Thanksgiving. It's been a long six months. Monica was diagnosed with breast cancer in May, had surgery in June and started chemo in July. Her treatments have included seven hospitalizations, thrice weekly doctor visits, and long days of incredible fatigue, isolation, and nausea. She has been rudely forced to receive, endure, and simply "be." As the oldest of 10, mother of four, and a hospice/parish nurse, just "being" has been the hardest.

Many of chemotherapy's terrible side effects have afflicted Monica. Her first, treatment triggered intensive care isolation for severe infections and dangerously low blood counts. Constant tiredness, nausea, loss of hair and deathly pallor, compounded by a lack of mental acuity known as "chemo brain," ensued shortly thereafter. Understandably, Monica also experienced many periods of depression, fear, anger, and frustration.

We often wonder how chemo's benefits could ever outweigh its negative impact. Recently, Monica's hands and feet blistered, becoming so red and numb she couldn't navigate on her own. Four anti-nausea medications barely kept her lunch down. Her loss of eyebrows and eyelashes traumatized her even more than her earlier balding. Continual hot flashes necessitated two motorized fans for temperature regulation.

By early fall, Monica required a wheelchair to conserve energy and was regularly quarantined due to her compromised immune system. Her decline resulted in a difficult transition from her usual take charge persona. More challenging, however, was her treatment locus in Germany, where she accompanied me last fall for my job and our travels, far from family and friends.

Slowly, Monica has learned to do by "not doing." She now accepts that some of her days are totally horizontal and gracefully welcomes assistance –a stunning role reversal. She's reached out to her God, husband, family, and friends (new and old) for help, and inspired many in the process. Recently, a diabetic, dialysis patient pulled me aside to tell me how much knowing her and her situation had helped him deal with his own.

When Monica publicly thanked our new congregation for rallying behind her with meals, rides, cards and visits, worshippers were so stirred by her story that many shed tears. Our priest noted that their outpouring was ironic in that, last fall, Monica started the special needs ministry for which she is now the primary beneficiary.

As Thanksgiving approaches, we find ourselves increasingly aware and grateful. We're more conscious of the curative power of prayer and compassion and how both can flow from unlikely places – like the German grocery clerk who surprised Monica with flowers. We're more aware of humor present during dreadful times and now keep a running list of cancer's advantages: donated meals, savings on shampoo and razors, enhanced softness due to hair loss, and guaranteed forgiveness of late payments.

What are we grateful for? Certainly, the end of chemo and Monica's strength in bearing it, but also health care systems in which doctors, not insurance companies, determine patient readiness for hospital discharge. German doctors' expertise, English fluency, and use of homeopathic medications to complement the best American drugs deserve special mention, as does our insurance's catastrophic limits. Why aren't all Americans similarly entitled?

We're thankful for support from those with whom we work and worship and those we barely know. We're grateful for Monica's longtime friend, Lisa, who religiously sends a card or gift every week, and for her new friend, Barbara, who leaves weekly soup and flowers on our doorstep. We're thankful for her sister, the working mother of three, who flew here to help care for Monica for 10 days. And we're so grateful for family and friends, who have blessed us with countless cards, dinners, prayers, pictures, gifts, and kind words.

Last month, as Monica was wheeled around the track during the Walk for the Cure, she looked glorious in her pink wig, laughing and encouraging others with similar stories. Today, as we contemplate the most classically American holiday, what we are most grateful for is each other's simple presence, our renewed perspective on what is truly important, and the promise that her cancer is gone forever.

Mike McGrew and his wife are from St. Joseph Catholic Community in Eldersburg. He took a leave of absence from his job and the couple resides at Spangdahlem Air

Base, Germany.