

LEARNING WORDS OF A NEW LANGUAGE

We began this year with expectant enthusiasm for learning Spanish as a second language. Imagine our surprise in being compelled to abandon our first enjoyable lessons and adapt to the convoluted lingo of a decidedly ominous tongue: cancer.

My wife's unexpected diagnosis of kidney cancer in January set us on a fast track. First came surgery to remove the diseased kidney. All went well and initial indications were that no further treatment would be needed.

But one troubling word--pathology--kept popping up to plague us. So we waited... two weeks, in fact, for an expert pathological opinion from Emory University that taught us another fearsome term: sarcoma.

Sarcoma is a cancer of the body's connective tissues. It's rare in kidneys, appearing there only about one percent of the time. Three other words from the pathologist describe Mary's variation of sarcoma more precisely: primitive, unclassified, high-grade. And like much nomenclature of this new language, we don't fully comprehend, but we do have dark suspicions.

Confusion is a word that's long familiar, but it's assumed gargantuan proportions as we've tried to decipher the data we have. CT scans for the past year, for example, have been tracking a peculiar mass in the chest that's tentatively been diagnosed as benign and suspected to be remnants of thymus tissue.

But a recent CT scan to analyze a newly-discovered mass attached to the rib cage showed neither the old chest mass nor the new rib cage mass. Instead, it pinpointed suspicious nodules in both lungs; the radiologist suspects they're related to the malignancy in the kidney.

The ribcage mass remained a mystery, however, until an ultrasound just this morning classified it (in my non-medical terminology) as funny-shaped cartilage between the ribs. So we shout another word: relief. Still, there's plenty of concern.

In the last two weeks the word hectic describes our dashings between doctors and tests as time is of the essence. For two full weeks I scurried hither and yon, attempting to corral stampeding medical records in hopes of securing Mary an appointment at the renowned M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Just yesterday MDA confirmed that appointment.

Lest I paint a lopsided impression, cancer has also enriched our vocabulary with bright phrases that include hope, faith and encouragement.

Through an unusual set of circumstances which I may detail in a separate column, Mary has been reunited with friends she knew while in the eighth grade in Portland (Ark.). Two, Shelia Drake and Pat Pennington, even came for an afternoon's visit a few days ago. In addition to their gifts, they bore words of cheer and endearment--punctuated by laughs and squeals.

A reunion of eight "girls" from that class is scheduled in Conway this weekend. Cancer has a way of bringing focus (now that's a good word) to what should have been important all along.

Friends and family have risen to occasion, standing by us with words and deeds of assurance, confidence and love. Last Sunday night our church gathered around us and prayed for us. Calls and cards continue to pour in.

Hope seems to rise and fall with the latest words from doctors, test results, those who know someone with a similar condition. And our hopes have been no exception. Ultimately, however, our hope and faith rest upon God and His ultimate purpose and plan for us.

He has miraculously stricken the word fear from our lips, replacing it with another: cheer. After all, Jesus Himself commanded, "Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."