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The Last Page: A Null Set: No possible solution

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Evening dinners are the most important time of the day at the Clapp house. Bill ’87 and I work very hard to provide this together time despite my 18-year-old’s play rehearsals, my 15-year-old’s soccer practices, and my 12-year-old’s dance classes. Our dinners are lively, fun, and full of conversation. As a math teacher, Bill likes to use this forum in his lonely quest to help our family understand how math can have real-world applications. For instance, he has taught us that a null set means there is no possible solution to a mathematical problem. I came to understand that this term could apply to other unsolvable problems as well—such as how you tell your children that their mom has cancer. That was the most difficult dinner conversation we ever had.

Telling our kids I had breast cancer was a heartbreaking act of parenting. As a social worker, I knew that this news, no matter how we couched it, would change the way the kids looked at the world, at me and, most importantly, at their own lives. But good teachers, like my husband, say that complex problems are easier to tackle when you break them down into smaller parts.

**Step 1: Develop a plan.** Bill and I made decisions about my treatment plan before we told our children. Cancer can be mathematical. It can be all about risks, odds, and percentages. It took many doctor appointments and lots of tests for us to understand what kind of cancer I had and what treatment, we hoped, would eradicate it. Then we told the kids. This was mind-numbingly hard despite knowing the plan. Their eyes got wider and filled with tears each time we said the word. As we talked I realized that it was the word “cancer” that was scaring them. So I suggested we name the strawberry-sized lump in my breast.

**Step 2: Use humor.** It may seem inappropriate to find humor in cancer, but some things were really funny, and drawing attention to the humor helped the kids feel less scared. This became true when we named my lump. They came up with some good suggestions, like Tic or Gremlin, and the exercise helped the kids laugh through the tears. Eventually we decided on “the Little F***er,” because we didn’t think the tumor was cute, didn’t like it, sure didn’t want to get attached to it, and, frankly, because I love to curse. And if not now, when? Cancer is insidious and mean. We wanted the name to reflect that. The use of humor also made it easier to emphasize that I was strong, cancer was not going to be all consuming, and I was a much more interesting person than my diagnosis.

**Step 3: Create open lines of communication.** Naming the lump set the tone for how Bill and I helped the kids manage their sometimes-overwhelming fear. Humor, though, didn’t always work and wasn’t always appropriate. Instead of being able to celebrate their milestones, my preteen and teenagers had to take care of a sick mom. They heard of the possibility of me losing my life and my breast just as our girls were getting theirs.

The kids needed to know they could talk to us about their fears and questions. Each time I began a new stage of treatment, we talked to them and asked how they felt. Sometimes we talked as a family, sometimes alone. The asking part was the key. Because we invited them to give voice to their emotions, they were able to process in meaningful ways even when they were afraid. Our middle daughter said, “I think your parent having cancer really depends on what you make of it and how you respond. Don’t make it an awkward silence.” Our son wrote, “As my knowledge and understanding of cancer grew, my fear and apprehension gradually subsided.” Our youngest turned to poetry. She wrote, “She’s back from the hospital, we put smiles on for her sake/she’s uneven/that large scar/painful to look at/like a tightening zipper.”

**Step 4: Create a support network.** Family (especially my sisters), friends (including fabulous Colby classmates), and the amazing medical teams I had made it easier for us all not to worry. The outpouring of love in the form of cards, gifts, meals, flowers, prayers, and visits from dear Colby friends touched all of our hearts. My support network truly made me well. I am healthy and strong and have successfully rid my body of cancer because of this very support.

My breast cancer diagnosis changed the way the kids look at the world, at me, and at their own lives. They learned people are incredibly kind and generous. They saw I was strong and would fight cancer for them, for their dad, and for myself. More importantly, they learned they are brave, wise beyond their years, and able to face adversity with grace and humor. Unexpected solutions arrived in unexpected ways despite what appeared to be a null set, an unsolvable problem. Solutions were found in ourselves, our family and, yes, our Colby roots.

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