

2022 UU sermon: Courage Upsidedown & Backwards: Facing what you fear when you have a choice. Amelia Habicht

When I was approached about giving one of my talks again, I gladly accepted - the themes of courage run through my life, as many of us know. To briefly recap: in 2008-09, I was competing in run/triathlon races, with some age-group placements, a big “win” for a non-pro, like me. I was never at the front of the pack, but I was consistent, enjoyed workouts, and I knew that things would be like this forever. I ran a marathon in 2004, so Oliver ran one. I ended up running four, so Oliver ran four. (we had a healthy sense of fun competition over everything).

By 2008 I was more into triathlons (swim-bike-run) than marathons and I trained for the half-ironman distance for 2009. Four days after my best triathlon, I had a stroke. Woke up one day and just as my body broke in half, into the paralyzed/stroke side & the unaffected side, my life broke in half, into the before & the after, the should & the shouldn't-have.

1. The stroke was June 2009. In June 2010 I lost my job. In June 2011 Oliver lost his job.
2. We had two young kids & a mortgage. What choice was there but to summon up some resolve, lean on our networks, and move forward?

This backstory brings us to the title of this talk: courage is doing what you fear, but really only in the instance of having a choice. For both Oliver & me, there was no choice but to keep looking ahead and doing all we could. Giving up on living was not at the table. The idea didn't even have a ticket to the party. Through forward-thinking and this tacit choice to work hard, my recovery started moving steadily along. I had no choice but to work hard at it. And Oliver got another IT job. Things were looking up by 2013.

3. Fast forward to 2018. Oliver had just turned 51 when he started to not feel very well. He started to explain it away with “well, I'm into my fifties by now & so things start to break down” But as most of you know, it could not be explained-away for long. September 5, 2018 was D-Day, diagnosis day: pancreatic cancer. With chemo & other harsh treatments, the doctor said he could have 6-12 months to live.
4. Nine months of chemo & radiation led to a brutal surgery. The treatment drew on every inch of Oliver's graceful courage. As a pragmatic person, he accepted that his death would come by cancer. He had a choice, to face treatments or to give up sooner.

5. Lining up for chemo infusion required this courage. He dreaded the abuse to his systems so damn much. He had a choice to let the cancer take over sooner than later, but chose the courageous path, to let his family and friends have time to process and prepare, with him.
6. After chemo and radiation, the excruciating surgical recovery did lead to another 9-months of beautiful cancer-free life.

We lived on the knife edge of hope and terror and by 2020, the concerning blood marker re-emerged. On March 16, 2020, the very same day NY State shut down all businesses due to an emerging pandemic & most of the world was doing the same, we were in the doctor's office to review the most recent blood work and definitive scans. The tumors were back, on pancreas AND liver. The oncologist delivered the blow: this time it would be fatal within 6 months. We went to Ciao for lunch & cried.

So what, in the cancer years, represented courage? If courage is running along the path that scares you, when you have a choice, This path would not require courage, exactly. There was no choice but to face it. Yet, I'd characterize another part of Oliver's very graceful courage: He chose, maybe unconsciously, to hold out hope that maybe he could live among the 2% that survived pancreatic cancer. By sometime in the summer of 2020, he was going through the closet to see what clothes could be put to good use through donation or dropping off to a friend. We were both in preparation mode to downsize, but he insisted on holding onto some of the favored work clothes for winter- "but what if I need these next winter?" & the subtext after living without cancer for almost a year was "there's a glimmer of hope I might live through this". Oliver was very practical and realistic as he faced the prognosis, so allowing for a glimmer of chance (however subconscious) was, itself, courageous. He feared what faced him, but had a choice. He was gracious & kind & courageous through the end. For my recovery, there's been no alternative on the table. There's only one way: to keep moving ahead, so I don't call what I'm doing courageous. I just call it living.