



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

Parker Cane

It's What You See

"Perspective is an incredibly powerful thing."

--Brad Synder, blind U.S. Paralympic athlete and retired U.S. Navy EOD officer

I thought being seventeen and not the "kid" I was before would afford me with the ability, the armor, to handle what life threw at me. School, having a divorced family, adolescence. I had it all under control. Boy was I wrong. In the middle of my junior year in high school and on the verge of starting the college visitation marathon, my dad broke the news to my younger brother and I that he was diagnosed with cancer, and a "rare" one for men, breast cancer. Confusing and compounding this news was the fact that his girlfriend (whom we all live with) had just gone through the same thing the year before and had undergone a full mastectomy and a year's worth of chemotherapy and radiation treatments, along with three surgeries. What was happening?

Processing the information was very hard for me at first, partly because I didn't fully understand what was going on, while part of me wanted to avoid what was going on because I was so scared. Why was this happening to him? Could he really die from this? My dad had gone through divorce, his dad had just passed away a year before, and now this? It wasn't fair. My feelings moved from fear to anger and back to fear again. And even though I often talked with my younger, 16-year old brother about what was happening to our dad, I often felt alone and

scared at times. I didn't know if anyone knew what was going to happen and the more and more I thought about it, my thoughts turned more to negative outcomes as opposed to positive ones.

At school, even though I didn't think I was doing anything different, some of my closest friends said I was becoming more withdrawn and quieter. Foolishly, the more and more they inquired and offered help the more angrier and spiteful I became. Why was this happening to our family? I was angry because instead of realizing these were my friends who cared for me and wanted to help me, I thought that no one truly was understanding what I was going through. I didn't think anything was going to change, but I soon came to find that the source of all my worry and anger would be the one to settle me down: my dad. After so many weeks of going through my own personal struggles my dad sat me down and talked to me, really talked to me.

He expressed how he was scared and anxious too. But he also taught me that whereas it's natural and OK to feel this way, we can't let these feelings control us. He told me he learned from others with cancer who had teenagers that they all felt different ways, and that however I felt was OK. Not everyone with a parent with cancer is going to look at it the same way. What also helped was I also realized that it wasn't just my family that was going through this horrible ordeal. The more and more educated I became about what cancer was, how many people are affected by it, how they deal with it and most importantly how they survive it I became more and more comfortable and my old self.

It's been exactly one year since I learned about my dad being diagnosed with cancer, and he has gone through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation and—most importantly—is doing well. Knowing this brings me much comfort, but it also has changed me as a young individual. Put simply, it has changed my perspective and overall expectations on life. Not only in terms of accepting the fact that anything really can happen to anybody, but to embrace life and "carpe diem!" Things I thought of as insignificant—driving to school each day, seeing my friends and family, running on an athletic field and feeling the cool air fill my lungs—I no longer take for granted. And those parts of life I thought were automatic, like going to college, now mean that much more to me.

Experiencing cancer that a loved one—particularly a parent—is going through has taught me to count my blessings and be grateful for a number of things. In particular, the importance of education in one's life and that it doesn't always just land at your door. And having the chance to increase my schooling would not be lost on me as it relates to my family and my household. With a younger brother who will be looking to pursue his own college dreams in about a year, I know the pressure of paying for school will be intensified.

Before my dad's diagnosis, I just thought going to college was the next natural step. I'm ashamed to say I had no real focus, other than to continue the progression of school, one fall after another. Once faced with a chronic disease that could take away my father, I realized I was scared and didn't know what I wanted to do. But as he battled the disease, showing resiliency and determination each day, my whole perspective changed. He taught me how to handle the disease so that I could be there for him.

Sometimes it's hard to see what is really happening around you, especially when you are a kid and much of what preoccupies your time and your world is yourself. I'd never wish any illness on anyone, but my dad's battle with cancer has certainly opened my eyes in an encouraging and constructive way. The poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau is credited with saying "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." And I am grateful for seeing the world (mine and those around me) in a totally different and positive way.