A close-up of a sign

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**2024 Ben Straus Higher Education Grant Essay Contest**

**3rd Place Winner**

**Daniel DiCriscio**

**Living with Less and More**

When I first heard the word “cancer” in relation to my dad, I was speechless and shocked. I had never encountered such a jarring moment, in which I felt completely empty, but the conversation moved on. In the coming days, reality set in, and I acknowledged that my dad has cancer. I comforted my sister with an embrace, muttering the hopeful phrase, “It’s going to be alright.” Despite my lack of knowledge of the future, I trusted that we would stick together throughout the journey that had begun. I listened to my family relay communication with doctors about moving forward with surgery and treatment. In experiencing my dad’s cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, I have learned the benefit of radical acceptance; accepting all aspects of everything. Marsha M. Linehan, American psychologist and author, defines radical acceptance as the moment “when you stop fighting reality… and let go of bitterness.” My experience with cancer is my reality, and it is an ongoing process that I find myself in at any given moment. As with all experiences with cancer, there are good days, bad days, and plenty that lie in between. Although it is not quick, nor is it always easy, I learned that it is beneficial to radically embrace every low as easily as I cling to every high. A growth mindset has enabled me to persevere, despite challenges and lows. As an aspiring teacher, I plan to foster a growth mindset in my classroom to encourage students to believe that there is no upper limit to their potential. My mindset has allowed me to maintain hope for good days when peace can be felt, a laugh can be shared, and smiles can warm you just as strongly as any embrace.

However, I have had temptations to forget optimism and stop believing that peace, growth, and happiness are achievable. In those moments, I feel the exhaustion, frustration, and defeat, but I remind myself about the last time I felt those. I think of the continuous cycle of ups and downs, which come and go. Optimism is acknowledging there will be positive moments and desirable outcomes while accepting doubt, struggle, failure, and loss along the way. Linehan highlights that everyone has limitations on their future, but only realistic limitations need to be accepted because life can be worth living even with painful events and difficult moments in it.

Cancer in my life broadened my sense of community and promoted my belief in the interconnectedness of everything. Experience with cancer is on the extensive list of conversation topics. Any conversation, being between two or more people, has potential to reveal a learning opportunity. I have found myself in several conversations with another person who has experienced cancer in their life. While some individuals have shared a nearly identical experience to my own, I have listened to other experiences that seem to have no overlap with mine. Within that disconnect is where we can learn during all conversations, not only those about cancer. Experiences with cancer may feel like living with less freedom and power, but my experience has invited me to live with more community, connection, and optimism.