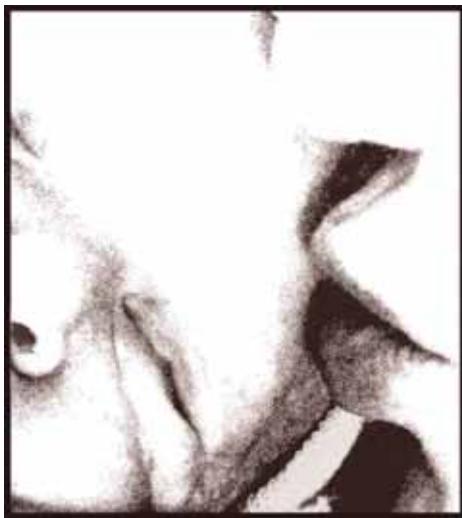


Savannah, Cancer and Politics

By Donato (Danny) Pietrodangelo



In the past several months two extraordinary events took place in my life: My first grand baby arrived, and, I have cancer.

It's all been a bittersweet experience of magic and joy, sober but calm acceptance, the affection of family and friends – but, at the same time, the nagging haunt of what-ifs .

Let's begin with the sweet half of bittersweet.

As parents of grown children, over the years, the awe and angst of a newborn slips into hazy, warm memories. For the most part, the soft focus of time diffuses the little details, the ones we want and long to hold on to -- if only in the mind's eye. But it was, after all, a lifetime ago.

There are some memories, though, that do remain sharply focused, imprinted and a profound part of you.

It was late. I'd been rocking her for a long time – a difficult, restless night – now sleep was finally drifting in. In the quiet, I remember looking down at this wondrous mystery and suddenly being overwhelmed; terrified might be a better description. At that instant I realized my life had intersected with another life, she was asleep in my arms, I was responsible, incomprehensively in love, and things would never be the same. Later I found out they weren't. They had become so much better and rewarding with Amy.

More than three -and -half -decades later, my first grandchild, Savannah, just an hour old, is asleep in my arms. I'd returned, in a different way, to that same, life-altering intersection. Age has a way of making things not so scary or overwhelming, but no less awesome.

What an extraordinary piece of work I held. Ethereal, near translucent eyelids with a wisp of eyelashes, ruddy newborn cheeks, miniature fingernails and toenails, and the sensation – resting against my chest -- of a tiny heart, beating as fast as a sparrow's. Two hours earlier, she was aquatic, comfortably floating in her mom's belly. Now she's screaming at the top of those air-breathing lungs. And, to my sheepish relief, her mom reaches out to take her.

Momentarily setting aside the ooh-aah factor , you just have to marvel. Two hours ago she was aquatic, comfortably floating in her mom's belly. With the swipe of a scalpel she became, terrestrial, air breathing. Wow. Now she's screaming at the top of those air -breathing lungs. She's definitely not happy. I look around, a little panicked. What did I do? But then, to my sheepish relief, her mom, my daughter Amy, reaches out and says, "I'll take her."

That's when it hits me: my baby has her own baby. I realize that along with the joy of your first grandbaby, comes a little sadness. It's real now. Your little girl is all grown up. Then I smile as I think, that's okay, its Amy's turn.

Now, the other event, you might call the bitter side of bittersweet.

A few months ago I was diagnosed with cancer, no actually cancers. The first is "guy cancer." It's aggressive and came out of nowhere. If I were a car, people would be awed by my zero - 60 performance. It was a surprise; a year earlier things were all good. Blood tests, basically normal. A precautionary biopsy came back nada. Twelve months later, follow-up tests revealed advanced prostate cancer. I was lucky. With the benefit of repeated tests, it was caught early, it hadn't spread, a Transformer-like robot operated and I'm home now with a very sore abdomen.

Coincident and unrelated, the tests showed something else. I call it my "cancer in waiting." The red and white cell and platelet counts in my blood are dropping. The specialist summed it up simply: "Your blood is pooping out." For now, the course is regular testing, wait-and-see. Though, if it continues to poop-out, it could lead to Leukemia.

All-in-all I'm really lucky, as I mentioned. But I can't help but being haunted by the question: What if?

What if I hadn't had multiple blood tests and biopsies? I'd had no idea that anything was wrong. I have no symptoms of cancer. None. I teach karate twice a week, walk miles taking photographs and work 60 hours a week at a job I love.

Health insurance made multiple tests, retesting and quick treatment possible. But again, I'm lucky. Though self employed, I have an extraordinary – and insured – spouse, Karen. Otherwise, I might be on my way to visit Jim Morrison.

Grandparenthood also brought with it a what if. Savannah was born about three weeks early. That meant mother and baby needed more intensive -- and more expensive care -- before, during and after. The final bill will probably be in the mid-five figures. Most of it will be paid by their insurance.

What if?

As uninsured parents, that would have meant struggling with the uncertainty, stress -- and too often, baffling bureaucracy – of a patchwork of services for high risk births – in a state that's just cut \$5.4 million from a vital service, to help in those cases, Healthy Start; one that's just cut nearly half a billion dollars from Medicaid and plans to put millions more on the chopping block.

The actions and public policy of Florida's leadership, and too much of the country's, seems to be saying: no insurance – good luck with that cancer thing and sorry about the grandbaby.

My two recent experiences make the issue of national healthcare personal. So, personally I have to ask: Congressman Southerland, Governor Scott and Attorney General Bondi who oppose -- and in General Bondi's case, is fighting against -- a national healthcare program. What if you had

cancer or an at-risk baby and you didn't have access to your government subsidized health insurance?

How do you look at yourself in the mirror -- with good conscious,-- and not be ashamed of your political posturing which says: "Good health my fellow Floridians, I mean, those of you who can afford it"?

I hope it won't take an "experience" like mine for you to recognize the shame in your perspective.

Several weeks ago I was asked to babysit Savannah – solo – setting aside the questions.

Again, I found myself rocking a baby to sleep, grateful that my life had intersected with this beautiful creature's. Through teary eyes I looked down and imagined I saw my grandfather's sparkling, blue eyes, my mother's gentle smile, my son's love of life, my wife's patient love – and my daughter's fierce character and fire. I want to believe I saw a little of myself as well.

I want to get to know the goodness of this mysterious angel, along with her cousin who will arrive in January. I want to stick around so they'll get to know their grandfather -- and hopefully see the good in me.

No ifs about it. The Lizard King will just have to wait.

Hanoi



Picture this: several hundred motor bikes and cycles, interspersed with cars, fork to fender, swarming – full tilt – towards a four point intersection. No stoplight, no yield, no hesitation. Heads down, weaving, dodging and swerving like motorized prize fighters they punch through the center and, without pause, continue down the street to the next intersection for the next round.

Now, picture this: you need to get through this melee to the other side of the street. You'd settle for any one of the four. ↗

Good Morning Vietnam, more specifically Hanoi. Some observations:

On the approach to Vietnam's capitol, names and places begin appearing on the LCD screen at the front of the cabin: Da Nang. Hue. Hai Phong, Vientiane. Chu Lai, The Central Highlands.

The names are unsettling and ring harsh for anyone who came of age in the 60s and 70s. They were the stuff of banner headlines and grim, black and white nightly, new casts. They came with pictures of wounded GIs, civilians caught in the cross fire, a burned little girl running on the road, flag draped coffins and the haunting moan of taps.

The words open a wound. A divided America. Conscripted warriors, mostly, returning home to an ungrateful nation; civil strife across the country, nearly 60,000 – no more than kids – killed; a million Vietnamese dead.

A generation carries the scars.

This was my first trip to Vietnam. I wasn't called up during the war, nor did I volunteer. Some impressions on the first visit:

Until recently, war was a way of life for the Vietnamese. For 2,000 years the country was in a near-constant state of siege: multiple Chinese occupations, Mongol invasions, proxy wars