Reflections on the Knife Edge

INTRODUCTION

The accompanying article, written by John Murphy, a retired lawyer and lifelong outdoorsman from his beloved Colorado Rockies, draws the striking parallel between his experiences as a mountain climber and as a patient with metastatic melanoma facing the hope and uncertainty of experimental therapy. Both are life-threatening circumstances, demanding courage and hope, and challenging our soul in a way almost unique to human experience. Both involve a conscious choice to move forward into dangerous and uncertain territory, and require a determination to look death (John's "Reaper") in the eye. Many remarkable books and films have been written about such experiences. I recall in particular the 2003 documentary film *Touching the Void*, about the incredible survival of a mountaineer who returned from a perilous fall in Peru. I highly recommend it to the reader. Another is Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken: A World War II Story*

of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption (Random House, 2010), about the survival of a prisoner of war, the celebrated miler Louis Zamperini. Again, unbridled courage and undeniable hope turned futility into future.

John Murphy's reflections remind us of the daily heroism of our patients who are holding tight to the lifeline offered by clinical research. Good climbing, John. All of us are with you on that Knife Edge, waiting for our turn to ascend... and hoping to be as courageous as you were then on Capitol Peak and are again now on the Knife Edge of a clinical trial. For our turn will come.

Bruce A. Chabner, M.D.

Editor-in-Chief, *The Oncologist*

Clinical Director, Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center

THE KNIFE EDGE

I am thinking about the time I faced the Reaper, got control of myself, and snuck past him. I'm hoping I can do it again. It was in the 70s when I was a physical fitness fanatic. We had just come back from climbing Washington State's Mount Rainier via the Kautz Glacier route and now we were doing a late-season Colorado 14er (mountaineer jargon for peaks over 14,000 feet), a special one, Capitol Peak, one of the harder ones.

That day I think I went out looking for the Reaper.

Here's how it happened: the day before we hiked in and camped at Capitol Lake. My climbing companions, Stan and Craig, and I woke in the dark with light snow on the tent. Up the side of the Capitol Peak -- Mount Daly ridge with our headlamp lights bouncing off the granite we

Capitol Peak, Colorado (14,130 feet)

climbed with the sound of wind that predicts the dawn. Just at sunrise we were on top of the ridge that connects Mount Daly with Capitol Peak.

Stan and Craig chose to follow a longer, but safer route down the other side of the ridge sacrificing 1,500 feet of altitude and then resuming their climb up the mountain's side to get to the notorious "Knife Edge" ridge --- a clear rock, inverted V part of the ridge top where you are exposed on both sides to sheer drops of more than a thousand feet. You can mount the ridge, like a horse, one leg on each side, and scoot yourself across this final challenge, just below the summit of Capitol Peak. I called down to them, trying to convince them not to lose the 1,500 feet we had gained in the dark. "Let's do the dance atop this ridge which will take us to the Knife Edge," I challenged. We had rope, we had experience, let's do it. They looked at me aghast; the very idea gave them the Willies.

They begged me to come with them and be sensible, but I looked at the ridge top and went it alone. My route was directly along the ridge, but steep and dangerous. Soon they were tiny as they descended and I stayed. I decided to go it alone. "It was the right thing to do," I thought, and indeed the beginning was alluringly safe. Little did I know that within an hour of our parting I would be splayed out on the sheer rock wall, below the ridge top, trying to keep composure and confidence. They would see me clinging to the rock but they were by then too far away to provide any help.

The Reaper was waiting for me that day. We spent perhaps the better part of an hour together as I clung to the wall. I got my nerve together, and I crossed the hardest part, the "crux of the climb" solo, un-roped. I did it. I had no idea I could climb so well. I was committed. I just did it. I was so relieved when I got past the crux, I relaxed and looked from my ledge at what was in front. There was the real crux, far harder than what I had just endured. All sorts of chemicals fired up inside me, I seemed to get bigger as my breath became a pant, looking at what I had to do somehow. I did it, and I was safe. And then, I found myself coughing up clear liquids; I guess it was excess adrenaline. I had made it, just yards away from the Knife Edge that now looked big enough to scamper across compared to what I had just experienced.

Stan and Craig looked astonished all the way to the Capitol's summit. They almost seemed astounded when they rejoined me on Knife Edge ridge. By then I had almost composed myself, trying to downplay my own astonishment at the feat.

The last time I met the Reaper, I asked for the dance, but now, he comes at me.

Capitol Peak's *Knife Edge* with the summit above

Okay so this match is going to be much longer. Let's see, you came barging in here, into my life, into our lives, in early October, and now days get longer. Hell, it's been two months with you, and it's been stabbings and testings and samplings, sometimes in very confined spaces. And then the lung biopsy that seemed interminable. It's been having a Hannibal Lecter contraption encase my head, and then back into the tight spaces of "scanners" with their whirling hammers and bangs. Reaper, it's been one hell of a lot of flying across the country, to get away from you. Where are we, how long will this match be, Reaper? How soon can I be away from you, and cough up clear, pure adrenalin when I am safe once again. When will Mary, my bride, be able to relax and smile free and laugh with abandon again?

John Murphy, Knights Peak, 10,500

Listen, you bastard, if you do take me, whether by the inch or by the yard, when you have taken what you can, you better understand you don't get my spirit. I am the fellow who snuck past you years ago, and the same spirit that got me on to that ridge and took me across the Knife Edge to the summit is facing you again. This spirit is something you can't take, you Thug.

It is just the thing I need now, and it's finely tuned and ready ... I even detect a whiff of adrenalin in the air.

I believe I can slip by you once again.

It'll just take longer, this match, but this time I'm not up there all alone on that wall, just me and my spirit to live. No,

this time I am belayed by learned companions from one of the nation's great cancer centers, who will show me the way ... but it will be my spirit that can win the day.

I'm coming after you, Reaper, early in the morning on December 28th when I swallow the smart bombs, the "targeted drugs" that are aimed at the melanoma tumors you snuck into my lungs.

Reaper, beware!

John Patrick Michael Murphy

Composed en route to my first investigational targeted tumor therapy, December 26, 2010