Asceticism Imposed: The Desert Theology of Oncology

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Disclosures of potential conflicts of interest may be found at the end of this article.

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Through the side effects of treatment regimens, oncology patients may experience an infliction of ascetic living: fasting secondary to nausea, extended silence motivated by mucositis, isolation introduced by contact precautions, renunciation of material wealth because of work days missed, celibacy endured during extended hospitalizations, and resigned humility by virtue of reliance on care providers. The original desert fathers and mothers, the ascetics, are lauded in Christianity for being preservers of the faith and founders of the monastic movement. This concept of seeking instruction from ascetic practice is not unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition, as demonstrated by the Middle Way central to Buddhism, the Sanyasa stage of life in Hinduism, the Nazirite vow of ancient Judaism, and the Zuhd renunciation in Islam. Like the ancient ascetics regarded by many faith traditions, oncology patients may encounter abstinence from worldly pleasures as a result of the imposition of disease-directed treatments.

The desert spirituality at the heart of the historic Judeo-Christian tradition represents a testing ground and a pursuit of spiritual meaning. The desert is a place of solitude and struggle, a place of seeking the holy despite harsh surroundings. The Pentateuch references Moses' 40 years of wandering in the desert, and the New Testament refers to Jesus' 40 days of

temptation in the desolate wilderness. These religious texts emphasize the enlightenment of expectations, the

centering of commitments, and the purity of purpose gained through desert dwelling. The modern Christianese phrase, "a time in the desert," implies a season of suffering during days of discernment. This phrase is most often applied to a time when an individual feels overwhelmed by the expansive dunes of life's larger questions. References to the time Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Paul, John the Baptist, and even Jesus physically spent in the wilderness are shared as incentive to find meaning in the midst of desert dwelling. Self-sufficiency was humbled, wisdom was granted, and life-giving streams were revealed to these faithful ones in the desert. The expanse of sand must have seemed unending and yet divinity proved vaster. The encouragement is that time in the desert has potential to stretch, stimulate, and possibly even strengthen.

Cancer is a fierce landscape, a rugged terrain, and, at times, a seeming wasteland. The journey through cancer requires a heroic soul. The desert of cancer forces a letting go of things that are not life-preserving or life-affirming. Through the desert of cancer arises a contemplative perspective and certain purification. The refinement of this austere, arid environment imbues survival with the potential to evolve into

Photographs courtesy of the author.

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a powerful existence, a purposeful thriving. The desert reprioritizes, and, surprisingly, one may find viable perspective and even new life in the desert. Survival through the desert means a celebration of each new day thereafter.

These photographs, taken in the desert lands of Namibia and Angola, celebrate the successful adaptation of desert creators (Figs. 1–3). This adaptation testifies to both the harshness of the environment and the beauty of survival. These photographs were taken by Meaghann, the author, and her husband Glen with a Nikon D4 digital camera as raw files. The purpose of their journey together through this geographic

terrain was the celebration of Glen's completion of his initial cancer treatment.

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. . . . Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.'—Isaiah 35:1–4

DISCLOSURES

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