

What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party

After years of living with stage IV cancer, I have some suggestions.

Leer en español

By KATE BOWLER JAN. 26, 2018

DURHAM, N.C. — EVERY 90 days I lie in a whirling CT machine, dye coursing through my veins, and the doctors look to see whether the tumors in my liver are growing. If they are not, the doctors smile and schedule another scan. The rhythm has been the same since my doctors told me I had stage IV colon cancer two and a half years ago. I live for three months, take a deep breath and hope to start over again. I will probably do this for the rest of my life. Whatever that means.

When my scan is over, I need to make clear to my friends and my family that though I pray to be declared cured, I must be grateful. I have three more months of life. Hallelujah.

So I try to put the news in a little Facebook post, that mix of sun and cloud. I am trying to clear the linguistic hurdles that show up on my chart. Noncurative. Stage IV. I want to communicate that I am hoping for a continued “durable remission” in the face of no perfect cure, but the comments section is a blurry mess of “You kicked cancer’s butt!” and “God bless you in your preparations.”

It feels impossible to transmit the kernel of truth. I am not dying. I am not terminal. I am keeping vigil in the place of almost death. I stand in the in-between where everyone must pass, but so few can remain.

I was recently at a party in a head-to-toe Tonya Harding costume, my blond wig in a perfect French braid, and a woman I know spotted me from across the dance floor.

“I guess you’re not dying!” she yelled over the music, and everyone stopped to stare at me.

“I’m working on it!” I yelled back, after briefly reconsidering my commitment to pacifism.

We all harbor the knowledge, however covertly, that we’re going to die, but when it comes to small talk, I am the angel of death. I have seen people try to swallow their own tongue after uttering the simple words “How are you?” I watch loved ones devolve into stammering good wishes and then devastating looks of pity. I can see how easily a well-meaning but ill-placed suggestion makes them want to throw themselves into oncoming traffic.

0

ARTICLES REMAINING

A friend came back from Australia with a year’s worth of pictures to tell and ended with a breathless “You have to go there sometime!” He lapsed into silence, seeming to remember at that very moment that I was in the hospital. And I didn’t know how to say that the future was like a language I didn’t speak anymore.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Subscriber login

Most people I talk with succumb immediately to a swift death by free association. I remind them of something horrible and suddenly they are using words like “pustules” at my child’s fourth-birthday party. They might be reminded of an aunt, a neighbor or a cousin’s friend. No matter how distant the connection, all the excruciating particularities of this person’s misfortune will be excavated.

This is not comforting. But I remind myself to pay attention because some people give you their heartbreak like a gift. It was a month or so into my grueling chemotherapy regimen when my favorite nurse sat down next to me at the cancer clinic and said softly: “I’ve been meaning to tell you. I lost a baby.”

The way she said “baby,” with the lightest touch, made me understand. She had nurtured a spark of life in her body and held that child in her arms, and somewhere along the way she had been forced to bury that piece of herself in the ground. I might have known by the way she smoothed all my frayed emotions and never pried for

details about my illness. She knew what it was like to keep marching long after the world had ended.

What does the suffering person really want? How can you navigate the waters left churning in the wake of tragedy? I find that the people least likely to know the answer to these questions can be lumped into three categories: minimizers, teachers and solvers.

The minimizers are those who think I shouldn't be so upset because the significance of my illness is relative. These people are very easy to spot because most of their sentences begin with "Well, at least ...". Minimizers often want to make sure that suffering people are truly deserving before doling out compassion.

My sister was on a plane from Toronto to visit me in the hospital and told her seatmate why she was traveling. Then, as she wondered when she had signed up to be a contestant in the calamity Olympics, the stranger explained that my cancer was vastly preferable to life during the Iranian revolution.

Some people minimize spiritually by reminding me that cosmically, death isn't the ultimate end. "It doesn't matter, in the end, whether we are here or 'there.' It's all the same," said a woman in the prime of her youth. She emailed this message to me with a lot of praying-hand emoticons. I am a professor at a Christian seminary, so a lot of Christians like to remind me that heaven is my true home, which makes me want to ask them if they would like to go home before me. Maybe now?

Atheists can be equally bossy by demanding that I immediately give up any search for meaning. One told me that my faith was holding me hostage to an inscrutable God, that I should let go of this theological guesswork and realize that we are living in a neutral universe. But the message is the same: Stop complaining and accept the world as it is.

The second exhausting type of response comes from the teachers, who focus on how this experience is supposed to be an education in mind, body and spirit. "I hope you have a 'Job' experience," one man said bluntly. I can't think of anything worse to wish on someone. God allowed Satan to rob Job of everything, including his children's lives. Do I need to lose something more to learn God's character?

Sometimes I want every know-it-all to send me a note when they face the grisly specter of death, and I'll send them a poster of a koala that says, "Hang in there!"

The hardest lessons come from the solutions people, who are already a little disappointed that I am not saving myself. There is always a nutritional supplement, Bible verse or mental process I have not adequately tried. "Keep smiling! Your attitude determines your destiny!" said a stranger named Jane in an email, having heard my news somewhere, and I was immediately worn out by the tyranny of prescriptive joy.

There is a trite cruelty in the logic of the perfectly certain. Those people are not simply trying to give me something. They are tallying up the sum of my life — looking for clues, sometimes for answers — for the purpose of pronouncing a verdict. But I am not on trial. To so many people, I am no longer just myself. I am a reminder of a thought that is difficult for the rational brain to accept: that the elements that constitute our bodies might fail at any moment. When I originally got my diagnosis at age 35, all I could think to say was, "But I have a son." It was the best argument I had. I can't end. This world can't end. It had just begun.

A tragedy is like a fault line. A life is split into a before and an after, and most of the time, the before was better. Few people will let you admit that out loud. Sometimes those who love you best will skip that first horrible step of saying: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry this is happening to you." Hope may prevent them from acknowledging how much has already been lost. But acknowledgment is also a mercy. It can be a smile or a simple "Oh, hon, what a year you've had." It does not ask anything from me but makes a little space for me to stand there in that moment. Without it, I often feel like I am starring in a reality program about a woman who gets cancer and is very cheerful about it.

After acknowledgment must come love. This part is tricky because when friends and acquaintances begin pouring out praise, it can sound a little too much like a eulogy. I've had more than one kindly letter written about me in the past tense, when I need to be told who I might yet become.

But the impulse to offer encouragement is a perfect one. There is tremendous power in touch, in gifts and in affirmations when everything you knew about yourself

might not be true anymore. I am a professor, but will I ever teach again? I'm a mom, but for how long? A friend knits me socks and another drops off cookies, and still another writes a funny email or takes me to a concert. These seemingly small efforts are anchors that hold me to the present, that keep me from floating away on thoughts of an unknown future. They say to me, like my sister Maria did on one very bad day: "Yes, the world is changed, dear heart, but do not be afraid. You are loved, you are loved. You will not disappear. I am here."

Kate Bowler is an assistant professor at Duke Divinity School, the author of "Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved" and the host of the forthcoming podcast "Everything Happens."

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on January 28, 2018, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: How to Talk To the Angel Of Death.