

F R O M F E A R T O
F A I T H



A S U R V I V O R ' S S T O R Y

MATT D.
TALFORD

SPECIAL
PREVIEW!

Excerpt from original journal...

Thursday, February 3, 2011; 1:49pm EST:

It's been a whole week since I received the dreaded news from my GI doctor.

*"Adenocarcinoma," he said. I was sort of shocked and not shocked at the same time. He referred me to a surgeon in Charlotte. I went to see him two days ago and now, I have a surgery date of Valentine's Day! Wow. All so sudden... I'm feeling so many emotions at once that it is taking every ounce of emotional strength that I have not to break down. Fear is one of the toughest enemies anyone will ever face. I'm not sure right now if I'm more afraid of the surgery and the post-op recovery than of the sickness itself. By the way, you won't hear (read) me say the 'c' word much here. I still have a hard time associating it with myself: someone I've always personally prided for his fitness, resilience, mental and physical toughness (yes, I refer to myself). I have been a child of the Most High since birth and as such, I will not complain or exclaim, "why me Lord?" This knowledge allows me to "chin up and take it like a man." Still though, this does not feel good. Anyway, I digress. Regarding me being a child of the Most High, I realize that **He** has a purpose in all things. (I'm fighting back the tears as I write). I am not afraid of death, as I know that death as it applies to this world and our time slice in it, is only a stage in our eternal existence. One day, all our energies will leave their respective shells and be re-assigned. While I've ever only personally known a few that either overcame or succumbed to the 'c' word, the fear that they shared seemed to be fear of the unknown... not knowing how their battle with the sickness would play out. What am I writing?? I don't mean for this to sound dark. I actually believe I was meant to wear this thing for a minute; to express some work from my inner being... perhaps, to catapult me to the next stage of my existence, in **this** time. For years I've felt that I was more than a nine-to-fiver and over the years, have found myself somehow stuck in the corporate mire of getting paid, paying the bills, competing to keep my job, trying to get a good review, etc., all for the good of my boss' boss' boss' bottom line. "No, not Matthew!" God placed a greater work inside of me; one that cannot be accomplished sitting behind a desk doing work that does not count in the*

grand scheme of things. If the 'c' word is an end for me, it will not be an end to my time here (to me it is much more glorious to die the death of a soldier or a wise old man); no, the 'c' word is an end to my mediocrity. It's time to step off the wheel and do great things. 2011 and the 'c' word is not the end; it signals a new beginning.



FROM FEAR TO
FAITH

A Survivor's Story

MATT D.
TALFORD

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This book is a personal account in which the author has tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from his memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, in some instances the author changed the names of individuals and places, and may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

Though it provides a detailed account of steps the author took to manage his health during a crisis, this book does not offer medical advice and is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians. The reader should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

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PROLOGUE

Author's Note:

*During my journey, I never once said "I have c*ncer." While I was fully aware of my condition, I chose not to give it power by calling it by its name, unless I was commanding it to leave my body. Aside from that, I never took ownership of the condition and mostly refused to acknowledge its presence in my body. As such, throughout this book, with the exception of a few occasions, I substitute the word "cancer" with "C word", "c-word" and "c*****."*

I am not a physician. I am not a counselor. I am not a member of the clergy. Once upon a time, I served as a member of the United States Army Medical Corps whose primary role was to act as a first responder for sick or injured service members, but I make no claims of being someone who is licensed or trained to offer advice, guidance or direct medical, psychological, emotional or religious assistance or care. You must consult with a doctor, licensed clinical practitioner, ordained minister, etc. for help in those areas. So you may be wondering, who am I and why did I write this book?

I am a son. I am a husband. I am brother and a cousin; a nephew and an uncle. I am a neighbor, a teammate, a fellow citizen. I am the guy you see jogging down the street; the guy you see browsing the produce section of your local supermarket; the guy you see taking out the trash or checking his mailbox; the guy who enjoys friendly afternoon chats with his next door neighbor. In 2010, at the age of 37, I began experiencing symptoms that would later lead to a dreadful diagnosis that

would change my life. All told, I spent some 11 months on the front lines of the “War on C****r,” and months longer recovering. Because God blessed me to survive, I feel it my duty to inform anyone who is or will be the age that I was or younger, that your youth does not automatically grant you immunity to disease; and should you find yourself where I was (Heaven forbid), that you can, not only survive it but emerge stronger, **if you will to do so.**



INTRODUCTION

According to the American Cancer Society's "Cancer Facts and Figures," some 1.6 million new cases of cancer are expected to be diagnosed by year's end 2014 (that number does not include non-invasive types of cancers, nor does it include basal or squamous cell carcinomas of the skin, for which, there is no cancer registry reporting requirement – American Cancer Society, 2014). Of that number of those newly diagnosed with "The C Word", over 1/3rd are expected to die. According to that same document, the majority of those newly diagnosed are age 55 and older (roughly 77%); but as was the case for me (and many I know or have known), those age numbers continue to creep south. Each time I hear a story of someone being newly diagnosed, or worse, losing their battle, my heart's "tear ducts" open and "release a fresh set of salty droplets." I'd never paid much attention to the disease and was largely disconnected from the "remote" stories until one day, "The Scourge" decided to take a stroll down my block.

It first visited a cousin in New York: a lump in the breast (as my mother had explained it to me). "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that about her," was my response. If that initial response sounded somewhat empty, it was not due to a lack of caring. It was just that, well, this particular cousin and I weren't really that close. I loved her for who she was (my cousin), but there was a huge age difference, so it wasn't like we grew up playing together or anything like that.

As time went on, I found myself repeating the words "sorry to hear that" more and more. Somehow though, with each utterance, those words grew deeper in

meaning; and like the tendrils on a cucumber vine or a beanstalk, my words began to grow more connected to the subject of the report. I found myself saying them less in third person and more in second person. Soon, the stories became less about distant celebrities, distant relatives or friends of remote family; and more about people I KNEW.

Well I, being the guard dog that I am; the night watchman, the soldier, the St. Bernard as my wife so affectionately refers to me; decided I'd rise to the occasion and help my friends and loved ones fight. "Together, we'll kick this bully ("The Scourge") right off our block and right out of **our** neighborhood," I thought to myself... Until one day, old man Scourge came knocking at my door...

My name is Matt D. Talford - I am a veteran and survivor of the "War on C*****" and this is my story; my personal journey through fear and uncertainty to faith and triumph.



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CHAPTER 1

A FICTITIOUS CHARACTER

My earliest memory of the C word came circa 1978. I remember watching a television show and remember seeing one of the characters grabbing his mid back and being doubled over in pain. This continued through various spots in the program until later in the show, the guy went to the doctor for a checkup. The news he received was dreadful. "I'm afraid you have cancer," the doctor told the man. The character went home to share the news with his family. I remember seeing all the long faces and knowing that it must've been something bad. I didn't know much about the C word in those days. No one in my family or anyone I'd known personally during my early years had ever had it (or at least, been diagnosed with it; not as I had known or heard about), but from the mood set from that point forward in the program, I knew this [C word] thing was pretty bad.

I was always an inquisitive kid and because of my passion for learning, I was no stranger to reference materials like dictionaries and encyclopedias. While reading was a skill I'd developed at a very early age, I still preferred materials that included pictures to those that didn't. I began browsing through encyclopedias, searching for pictures of this C word. What was it? What did it look like? Why did the TV character have so much pain? I managed to find a few pictures of what this C word thing looked like. I remembered thinking to myself, "ewww... is that what a stomach looks like when the person has cancer?" I began to both hate and fear the

word. I didn't even like to hear it uttered. As a kid, whenever I had the slightest pain in my back, I remembered the television show and wondered if I had the same condition that the TV character had. I remember asking one of my aunts about the C word and being told that it was something people got when they were old and only if they smoked or drank too much over many years. "Whew!" was my response. In my mind, I was safe. "All I've got to do is never drink alcohol or smoke and I'm good? Piece of cake," I thought to myself. I went on with my childhood from there, but admittedly, every time my back hurt and I wasn't sure why (even well into my teenage years), my mind went back to that TV show.

"DEXTER"

Dexter was the guy who lived next door to us when I was a teenager. I didn't know him very well on a one-on-one basis though. He was older than me, and I only really saw him when he was outside in the yard. I did however know his sister Julie. She and I were around the same age and rode the same bus to school. Julie was nice but because she wasn't exactly "my type" (whatever that was) and because we didn't share any common courses or teachers, we didn't discourse much beyond small talk. Now, her brother Dexter (again, considerably older than me) had one attribute that I always remembered. The thing that stood out with him was how incredibly fast he ran. I was always awe struck by guys who could "run like cheetahs," mostly because I was never really fast. Dexter was definitely the mold for what you wanted if you were recruiting a football player or a track star, but if he possessed one visible flaw, it was how remarkably bad his skin looked.

His skin could best be described as "tired" and his lips were often very dry, chapped and cracked. Atop that, he appeared to have sores and bumps all over his scalp.

I didn't think too much about the condition of his skin at the time. I just thought it was something people had to deal with. After all, I'd had my own skin issues growing up and saw my mother struggle with her skin.

After we moved from our tiny dwelling to a slightly larger one not far away, I only saw Julie on the bus and as such, spoke with her a lot less. As time went on, I noticed that some of the light had gone out of her demeanor. Julie had always been a quiet person anyway, but now something was noticeably different. I've always hated seeing people in a somber mood and if it was someone I knew, I would feel especially compelled to say something or do something to try to make them feel better. Because I'd never been close enough to Julie to "pick up where we left off" (so to speak), I thought I'd just strike up a small-talk conversation. I asked how she was doing and she rendered the classic reply, "fine." When I asked her how her brother Dexter was doing, she began to cry and our conversation came to an abrupt halt. She was whisked away being embraced by a close friend. I later asked that friend what was wrong. She told me her brother Dexter had passed away back in the summer. I asked what happened and waited to hear that perhaps he'd been a victim of an automobile accident. The real answer hit me like a baseball bat to the chest. "He died from cancer," she told me. My mind went back to the sores he'd had all over his head and the bad skin. Now I had a new point of reference. Seeing skin and scalp that looked like that might indicate someone being sick in some way. At any rate, there was that C word again. I'd first heard of it as an elementary school-aged child and that in the form of a fictitious character on a TV show. Here I was a teenager, a couple years from graduating high school and now I hear of this disease again; only this time, it was a real life story. Not sure what to say to Julie when I saw her again, I simply told her I was sorry to hear about her brother. I wondered about what my aunt had told me when I was a kid; that people only got the C word when they drank or smoked for a number of years. Dexter did smoke, but I didn't know him to drink (and frankly, I never inquired or cared to know if he drank; I only remembered him smoking). In either case, the pre-conceived notion I'd had that people got the C word when they were old and only after a lifetime of abusing their bodies quickly became a myth-debunked. Dexter was far from old: only maybe five years older than my older brother, who is only a year older than me.

“MAXINE”

Maxine was a college friend of my wife’s who sang with her on the gospel choir. I had met her one day when my wife (who was my girlfriend at the time) invited me to one of their performances. I didn’t know Maxine personally at that time, but what stood out about her was not only her beautifully melodic voice but her outer beauty, grouped together with a warm smile, a gentle, calm spirit and an overall friendly disposition that made you feel like you’d been friends with her for years. The gospel choir was such a gifted group (led by Charles, an All-Star musician and director whom I am yet friends with to this day), that I went to see them perform every chance I got. They were always so welcoming to me. They even let me join in and perform with them whenever they conducted workshops that included session-ending performances. Maxine was one of several talented singers in the group, but she was always my favorite.

Weeks after the December 1993 commencement ceremonies at my wife’s college, Charles married the love of his life, who was also one of the gifted singers/soloists in the student gospel choir. Well, guess who was the featured soloist at their wedding? If you guessed the lovely and talented Maxine, you guessed right! I felt so fortunate to not only attend one of the most beautiful wedding ceremonies I’d ever experienced, (well, I guess that was the first one I’d ever attended), but I also got to hear Maxine sing again! I remember thinking to myself, “is this girl ever going to record?” Well, lucky for me, after our friends’ wedding, I would get to hear Maxine sing *one* more time. My wife asked Maxine to sing at our wedding, which was to occur several months later. Unbeknownst to both of us at the time, that was to be our last time seeing Maxine sing. Maxine had been fighting a quiet battle that we would only come to learn about a year or so after our wedding.



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