

Finding Yourself on the Open Road

Kevin Horan

You just received the news no one wants to hear. You have cancer. Now what? You might even wonder, “Why me?” So you get educated, read books, search the Internet, and get second opinions but, in the end, you do what you have to do to survive. For some it’s surgery, whereas for others it may be radiation, chemotherapy, or some other treatment. Whatever your choice, the main ingredient is attitude. You can do research till the cows come home but your mental outlook is everything. Each life touched by cancer is unique and mine, which is special to me, is offered to you for consideration.

I was diagnosed with prostate cancer in the summer of 1997 at the age of 42. I took the news in stride and, like any good patient, set off in search of knowledge. I would be the youngest patient in my urologist’s long career to undergo a prostatectomy. With the loving support of my wife of 16 years, I survived the ordeal and overcame much of the fallout associated with the surgery.

Everything changed 13 years later. My world imploded within a short window of four months. The economy tanked in 2009, my wife lost her job, our finances crashed, foreclosure hit, my mother died, and 28 years of marriage ended in divorce. Then, in the spring of 2010, I was diagnosed with a recurrence of prostate cancer. I was shell-shocked to say the least, but stepped up to the recommended radiation treatments with courage and determination. I started the first of 39 radiation treatment on April 19, 2010; however, on the day of my first treatment, I made the 62-mile commute to my office and was informed that I no longer had a job. I felt at the end of my proverbial rope. How could so many challenging circumstances befall one person in such a short amount of time?

I can’t explain why or how, but I awoke one morning in May 2010 and came to a realization that I must leave south Florida. I knew there had to be a reason everything collapsed at once. I asked myself, “Where is the most beautiful place I’d ever been or seen?” The answer was Jenny Lake in Jackson, WY. I decided to go back.

A spontaneous plan was unfolding and I brought my usual left-brain approach to it. I purchased an older model Harley-Davidson motorcycle although I hadn’t ridden a motorcycle in about 30 years. I clearly understood the danger. At this crossroad, mortality had become a moot point and my decision to find the most dangerous mode of travel was somehow poignant for me. It’s important to note that, while my sensible approach to cancer treatment was clear and straightforward, my emotional state was anything but. One might easily accuse me of being reckless, but those who know me can attest that I’m far from stupid. No one would find fault with my execution. A few thought me crazy to take such a journey alone, but most expressed their envy and jokingly asked if they could join me. Close friends cheered me on, but I clearly sensed their fear for my safe passage.

I have a long-standing affinity for Native American culture and, one Sunday, took notice of a bulletin from the church I attended. A church member was hosting a sweat lodge nearby, so I decided to check it out. When the host of the lodge

heard my story, he strongly advised me to get myself to a Native American sun dance. I knew nothing about a sun dance but asked when the next one was being held and was told July 23 in New Mexico. I happily agreed to make it part of my motorcycle odyssey.

With finances extremely limited, hotels were out of the question. I learned about pop-up campers that could be towed behind motorcycles. I found the perfect camper on Craigslist and asked

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a friend to help me fabricate a tow hitch for my Harley. Riding a motorcycle is inherently dangerous, but towing a camper made the danger exponentially greater.

On the morning of June 22, three days after my final treatment, I rolled out the driveway and didn’t look back. As my route unfolded, I stayed with family or friends who received me with open arms and each added a healing touch in some significant way that transcends expression.

When I crossed the border into New Mexico, it hit me just how far I’d ridden. Good Lord my tailbone hurt! No music to listen to and no one to talk to as I rode this steel horse. Time alone without the usual distractions we take for granted these days was a platform for introspection.

Kevin Horan is the supervisor of West Coast field operations for Masco Cabinetry in Oscala, FL. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the article. The author did not receive honoraria for this work. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the author or editorial staff. Horan can be reached at joat@bellsouth.net, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org.

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