Nurturing Gratitude in the Face of Adversity

David Weiss – November 30, 2025

Message for Merging Waters Unitarian Universalist, New Brighton, MN

When Cancer Comes Calling – Book Three: Soundings #5

NOTE: I gave this message at Merging Waters UU, the congregation where I'm a member. Our theme for the month of November was "Nurturing Gratitude." My reflection was the final one of the month. Hence, the gentle humor in the opening lines. ☺ Some years back the congregation identified three shared values that shaped their life together: authentic curiosity, mindful interdependence, and courageous love. I use them as touchpoints in my message because I knew they would resonate for so many of the people to whom I was speaking most directly. Hopefully they'll resonate with you, too!

Here we are friends: we've reached the *fifth* Sunday of November. In other words, welcome to the end of gratitude. ☺ (In about 28 minutes!)

Most of you know I've spent 2025 battling a very aggressive form of prostate cancer. As we conclude our month of reflections on gratitude, I want to share a bit about what I've learned about nurturing gratitude in the face of adversity … while battling cancer.

Now, I know there are persons besides me at Merging Waters who have also faced cancer very directly. Either in your own person, or in someone you dearly love. Each cancer journey is its own unique collision of hope and fear, learning and loss. Each journey presents unexpected joys, unimaginable fractures of meaning, and heartbreak in a million ways—some small, some large, some altogether shattering.

My reflections are rooted in my own experience. I'm not trying to sum up "cancer journeys" in general. But we *all* face adversity—and in forms far beyond cancer. So, I hope that from wherever in life you are listening, you glean something worthy in my words.

Also, I'm a *relative newcomer* to the cancer club. Frankly, it's likely that in the coming years my journey will contain chapters more harrowing than the ones I've faced so far. So, I share these reflections with a healthy measure of humility. Still, I hope what I've learned over this first year living with cancer will help me as I meet my own uncertain future.

I could tell my story in many ways. I've chosen two themes to help both of us—you *and* me—see the patterns. The first theme is that sometimes we make choices that help us find gratitude … and sometimes others make choices that help gratitude find us. The second is that, while I didn't plan to use our congregation's core values as an organizing device, as I reflected on my year, I kept encountering echoes of authentic curiosity, mindful interdependence, and courageous love. So, you'll hear them today.

The first notice of my cancer appeared in a blood test last October, followed by a consultation with a urologist last November. But nothing was certain. Both my primary care physician and the urologist reassured me that while the lab result merited further testing, it did *not* mean I had cancer. So, of course, Margaret and I both clung to the hope that it wasn't cancer. Until it was.

Last year, on December 29, Margaret and I co-hosted our end-of-the-year service right here. We called it "community driven worship": sort of an open mic around the theme of being "On edge." It was our last service of 2024, and we were on the threshold between two years, and two presidents. I described it as a *liminal season*: suspended between a vanishing "now" and a very uncertain "next."

Ironically, Margaret and I were co-hosting that liminality most personally that day. Earlier in the morning, before we gathered here with you, we'd gone for an MRI, the first of two procedures that would confirm my cancer diagnosis. So we were both "on edge"—though in different ways. About an hour before the service, I saw the MRI report was available in MyChart, and I glanced at it. The results were highly suspicious of cancer, but I didn't want to unsettle Margaret right before the service, so for the moment I kept that news to myself.

That day I learned what a gift it is to part of a community willing to be so authentically and honestly "on edge" together. Neither you nor I knew at the time just how much or how soon I'd need that. But I can still remember Teri singing "Both Sides Now"—and knowing I was among my people.

I learned a second thing later that day, when I shared the results of my MRI with Margaret. We didn't know exactly what it meant—we wouldn't meet with my urologist for a week. But we knew it wasn't the news we'd been hoping for. We were suspended between a vanishing "now" and a very uncertain "next." And yet, as we held hands in the stillness side by side on our sofa, I learned the gift of a spouse who would be with me every step of the way.

In January, first a biopsy and then a PET scan, gave me a definitive cancer diagnosis. Despite hearing the words "high risk," at the time I didn't realize how serious it was. I had two uncles and two cousins in my family, all ten years on the far side of surgery for prostate cancer, and they all seemed to be doing fine. Plus, my urologist told me *not* to worry. He would surgically remove my prostate and while, yes, there was a real possibility of recurrence in the future, in the short term my life could get back to normal. I now realize … "normal" isn't coming back.

Over January and February, I made two crucial choices that helped me nurture gratitude.

First, I shared my diagnosis with family and friends, including during Joys and Sorrows right here. I was *blanketed* with deep compassion. My decision to be vulnerable opened me to the care of others. And having a circle of care around me from the beginning has made all the difference.

Second, I began to recount my cancer journey on my blog. Each of us has unique gifts and skills. Words are foremost among mine. Leaning into my adversity through words allowed me to meet the cancer on my strongest terms. Authentic curiosity became a discipline. I followed it wherever it led me. Initially, as I described the various procedures I underwent, that curiosity paid me back in wonder. Later, it would pay me back in fear. But I am grateful for *both*, because at some point the fear was necessary as I came to terms with the full scope of my diagnosis.

In early March my prostate was surgically removed, in fact at the earliest date possible after my biopsy. That should have alerted me to the urologist's sense of urgency. Instead, I put my stock in his calm reassurance: everything would be fine. Spoiler: it wasn't.

My biggest anxiety about the surgery itself was the slim but real possibility that something could go catastrophically wrong. And I might not wake up. This wasn't my first surgery, but it was my most significant. And I didn't want to leave anything to chance. So, on the day before my surgery, I hand wrote eleven short “just in case” letters. To my dad and two sisters; to each of my six children; to my dear friend Tachianna; and to my beloved, Margaret. I mailed ten of them that afternoon. I set Margaret’s letter on her pillow the morning we left for surgery, so she’d find it when she came home that night.

There is no shortage of people I love dearly. But I couldn’t write to them all. These were the people that—should anything go wrong—I wanted to make sure they received a last word of love from me. I came through surgery just fine. But it was an exercise in gratitude and courageous love to write those letters. To this day, I’m glad I did.

The day before surgery, Katie texted she was taking my surgery day off to keep Margaret company. Byron joined her a bit later. Their presence to Margaret while I was in surgery, and then to me in my hospital room when I woke up afterwards was an immeasurable gift. Sure, they’re family (Katie and I are cousins)—but this was *next-level family*. Unasked; simply offered. Our gratitude ran deep.

I came home the next day and slept all afternoon on the sofa … with our two cats, Ozzy and Zoey, perched atop me on the blanket. They’re friendly cats, but it’s rare for them to climb on us and lie down. Somehow they knew I needed gentle care. And my gratitude learned to reach across species.

Over the next week, a series of friends—including several from Merging Waters—kept us supplied with fresh meals. That’s mindful interdependence with meat on it. Well, for us it was plant-based meat, no egg or dairy, and gluten free. We were gratefully well-fed. Our two young adult Brazilian housemates happily covered my physical household duties, so our experience of interdependence went international as well.

For the rest of March through the first half of June, we waited. It wouldn’t be until June 16 that we’d get our first rush of real relief at my first post-surgery lab test to confirm the cancer was gone.

During those months I participated in a Stanford University Mind-Body Study about using your mindset to make a difference in your cancer experience. It proved to be a good opportunity for me to grow in appreciation of my own capacity to leverage my inner strengths in meeting cancer.

This was especially important because that mid-June rush of relief *never came*. Instead, the June lab test confirmed the *persistence* of cancer after surgery. In barely twelve minutes, my urologist told us the surgery had not succeeded: my cancer was still there—and aggressive. He explained that both radiation treatment and hormone treatment were in my very near future. And, oh, have a nice day. Bye.

Margaret and I were floored. And fearful. We’d braced ourselves for possibility of disappointing news—but not for *devastating* news. We entered another liminal season—an unsettling in between time.

Over the next several weeks I met the *hard gratitude* that comes from following authentic curiosity to bitter conclusions, whose only redeeming value is their truth. I was not happy with what I learned about the depth of my disease or the equally perilous course of treatment I was being rushed into.

Here, in a nutshell, is what I discovered. 85% of prostate cancer is considered medically manageable. 15%, deemed “high risk” or “very high risk” is aggressive, unpredictable, eager to metastasize, and particularly hungry for bone—from whence it is often deadly. My cancer was rated *very high risk*: an apex predator among prostate cancers. It was at this point that I became grateful for the word FUCK because nothing else captured my visceral sense of lostness.

That lostness deepened as I read up on the proposed treatment: a testosterone blocking drug, given as a six-month time-release injection. It would hopefully “freeze” the cancer’s growth while radiation took a swipe at it. But the drug had a host of potential side-effects—with no off-ramp for the six months it would last. And my urologist was suggesting *24 months of this*, as if it were no big deal. Besides instantly cancelling my libido, it was likely to slowly weaken my bones, trade muscle for fat, stress my heart and liver, fuel sometimes debilitating fatigue, play havoc with my brain chemistry, and potentially disfigure my male genitalia and give me breasts in exchange.

Gratitude was sparse indeed in June and July. It arrived in unexpected moments of companionship.

Knowing I was going to visit my dad for a few days, Roger (who has lived with prostate cancer far longer than I) came by my house to gift me a book before I left. On the 8-hour drive to Indiana, I listened to hours of prostate cancer podcasts. Once there, I read the book from Roger and spent hours reading online anecdotes of men who’d walked this path of hormone therapy before me. Their vulnerability made mine bearable. *Very little of what they wrote was comforting*. But I was grateful for their willingness to speak their truth even when it was spoken as lament.

When I voiced my fears to my dad, he responded with quiet solidarity and respect. No stranger to health challenges himself, he said that if I chose to do radiation treatment but not hormone treatment, he could understand why and would support that decision. Ultimately, I chose to do a testosterone blocker—two, in fact. But that choice was easier to make knowing that both my dad and Margaret would’ve honored *any* choice I made; they trusted both the learning and the inner wrestling I was doing.

I came back from Indiana determined to more aggressively self-advocate regarding my cancer care. For several weeks my gratitude had “an edge” to it. I canceled the appointment I’d made two weeks earlier to get my initial 6-month testosterone-blocking shot. I started walking in earnest. Aiming to average 10,000 a day. Based on the book Roger gave me, I disciplining my eating habits to maximize my health, and I mapped out my own routine of supplements to support my body’s ability to fight cancer. Then, I received a box of supplements in the mail before I’d even ordered any—another gift from Roger. In a sense, I became both curious about what my body was capable of and mindfully appreciative of how plant medicines were part of the interdependent web—willing to support me if I invited them.

I searched for a medical oncologist to get more thorough information about hormone treatment. And for an integrative oncologist who could guide my use of supplements.

I found an integrative oncologist whose profile identified *love* as her driving passion. She celebrated my commitment to empower my own body, and she’s guided my diet and supplement choices for the past four months. Now relocating to Atlanta, at our final appointment she said, "I can no longer be your doctor. *But now I will be your friend.*"

I found a medical oncologist who described her joy in offering not just medical care but *human care* to patients. Soon into our consultation, she stated that unfortunately I could *not* be her patient—because she only worked with persons whose cancer had fully metastasized. My cancer, though potentially deadly, had not moved beyond my pelvic lymph nodes.

Still—and this was among the most astonishing graces I received all year—she spent an entire hour with me and Margaret. Listening with full presence, not only to my concerns and fears, but also to my hopes and passions. She referred me to a new urologist who she believed would better address my specific hesitations around hormone treatment. She said he'd have the expertise to advise my treatment choices and the appreciation of my intellect to engage me in generous conversation as I weighed my options. She was right.

He was also a faculty member at the U and when Margaret and I met with him, his gifts as a teacher were quickly evident. He explained my cancer with brutal caring honesty, helping me finally recognize just how much of a wall I was backed up against. With no easy options in front of me. Avoiding hormone therapy was a near suicidal choice. But he heard my concerns and affirmed my self-advocacy for a newer testosterone-blocker: a daily pill rather than a six-month injection. I still faced the prospect of unsettling side-effects, but at least I'd have the security of a quick off-ramp should I need it. He showed me the research indicating that while my odds were long in any scenario, they were *best* if I combined radiation with hormone treatment.

It was not the news I wanted to hear, but the news I needed to hear. I left that consultation with bitter but boundless gratitude for his uncompromising care for my whole person.

Next I met with a radiation oncologist, also a medical school faculty member. Her credentials were impeccable, of course. But I chose her because in her profile she named *kindness* as central to her understanding of quality care.

It was another brutally honest conversation. She'd reviewed my file meticulously in advance. She knew my disease, my doctors, and my reservations about hormone treatment. She explained that her treatment plan would have "curative intent," but the simple fact that my cancer had already reached my pelvic lymph nodes meant the chances for a true cure, were all but nil. Nevertheless, her goal would be to push my cancer below detectable levels for five years, maybe longer.

And who could say what new treatments might appear during that time? Who could say what times I might relish with Margaret, my children, or grandchildren during those years?

This is some fierce gratitude. To be thankful for the person who says, with kind honesty, *I probably can't "save" you. But I can perhaps slow the course of your cancer. And I can do so while honoring who you are. So, if a day comes when the testosterone-blockers become too much to bear, I will support you in setting them aside and finding ways to give you the best care that fits with the deepest values in your life.*

Then she added, "By the way, there's some exciting new research suggesting you can delay metastasis and extend your long-term survival by adding a *second* testosterone-blocker this early in your treatment. That's your decision, but I'd encourage you to meet with colleague of mine who's a brilliant medical oncologist to discuss this option."

To make a long story short, I did and I am.

This September I started on *two* testosterone blockers, persuaded that, despite the risks, this offers me the best chance to get the best results from my treatment. The fact that I went from being ready to reject hormone therapy to embracing it, reflects a rugged curiosity that learned hard truths; the interdependence I found in my chosen medical team (and in the constant care of family and friends); and the courageous love that manifest itself in strong self-advocacy in a medical model almost designed to disempower.

October and November have been marked by seven weeks of daily radiation treatments on weekdays, growing fatigue as the radiation that aims to kill my cancer also exhausts the rest of my body, and a string of unexpected gifts.

Radiation fatigue is a weariness you can't sleep off or rest away. It clings to me *all day long*. For a month now my days are stitched together by deep sighs, extended pauses, and long hugs. It's not exactly or entirely physical weariness. Yes, it takes extra work to climb the stairs, but I still manage 10,000 steps a day—though with decidedly less spring in each step. It includes a psychic or soul weariness: my attention is tired and my spirit falters. All. The. Time.

My sense of being productive has largely come to a halt. Granted, I managed to write this message, and a blog post and a couple pretty amazing poems, but that's about *all* I have to show for the past two months. I know, I've been busy getting cancer care. Yet even in my weariness I've been restless—and helpless—to do more.

Which is where those unexpected gifts come in, arriving as my fatigue has crested.

My friend Rebecca tagged me in a Facebook post showing a regional training event in Iowa by More Light, the Presbyterian LGBTQ welcoming program. They were showing people how to use a readers theater script in building congregational welcome. It was one of *ten* such scripts *that I wrote* about fifteen years ago. And here they were, still building welcome today.

Soon after that I received a message from Amalia, a longtime friend, now a pastor in Arizona. She told me how profound my 2013 children's book, *When God Was a Little Girl*, has been in her ministry, helping expand God images with children.

Just a few days after that, I received an email from Holly, whom I only know virtually—we both participate in monthly Zoom meetings as congregational connectors with MUUSJA (Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Association). She's a seminary student at United, and she wrote to share the slideshow she'd made for a final project in one of her classes. It was about a pilgrimage she'd made to Prague, in the Czech Republic. She explained she was inspired to do this project *by my blog post about Norbert Capek and the first flower communion.*

I am *so so* tired these days. Unable to do much at all to make the world a better place. And it is as though the Universe has conspired to remind me that my past good work still echoes across time, generating more goodness again and again, even while my afternoons these days are given to naps.

And as I look around this room, the gratitude echoes everywhere. I think of all the times that so many of you have checked in with me before or after a service. Those of you who've shared about your own cancer journey. I remember a long gracious lunch conversation with Rev Krista, in which we discussed the deep questions of theology and personal identity, posed not just by cancer but also hormone treatments that plays havoc with both body and mind. Truly, each of you is part of the gratitude I've found—or that's found me—this past year.

But listen, even at 26 minutes, I've barely told the half of it.

You look up at the night sky on a clear dark night, and the constellations leap out at you. But if you hold your gaze and let your eyes adjust, you realize these constellations are set against a backdrop of *countless stars*. And so it is for me. Over these long months of making my way into this uncertain, unchosen journey that is cancer, I can set some of the choices I've made and some of the gifts I've received into constellations of a sort. But even these are set against a backdrop of countless more.

Here is the final lesson I've learned. *Ultimately, gratitude is not tied to outcomes*. Because here is a hard truth. Even knocked on its ass by hormone therapy and radiation, my cancer still dreams about living its best life … in my bones. And while there will hopefully be some sweet victories and restful reprieves in my journey, *good news will likely NOT get the last word*.

But gratitude can.

Yes! I am grateful right now for the prospect of more life. But finally, gratitude is not about being grateful *for* something. It is the invitation to be *unconditionally grateful*. Period.

That is still a mystery to me. I sense the truth of it most days, but I won't claim to know it from the inside. Maybe someday. But not yet.

I do understand now that we are—*all of us, and in every moment*—entirely vulnerable. Cancer drove that home for me, but it was true all along. The grace I am coming to know is this: that it is possible to be *mutually vulnerable*. To be authentically and humbly curious about one another. To be mindfully and reverently aware of our interdependence. And to be courageous in our love. *This is what saves us.* Not by keeping us safe. But by keeping us cared for—and in that sense, keeping us human, and keeping us whole.

May it be so. For all of us. Indeed.

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