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, on 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 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.

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The sun dance in Chakon, NM, was everything I’d heard and more. Native American tribes have held these ceremonial events every year for centuries and I was honored to be invited as one of six participants charged with tending the sacred fires used to superheat the sweat lodge rocks. With about 100 people in attendance, many as supporters in some fashion, I interacted with wonderful people from all over the world. Those invited to dance prepare themselves with four days of purification prior to the four days of the actual sun dance where they sweat, fast, and dance around the tree of life that symbolizes the connection between man and the Great Spirit. Sweat lodges are held each of the eight days, with the one on the morning referred to as the “sweat in,” and the one in the evening referred to as the “sweat out.” The hardship endured by the dancers is intended to lessen the suffering of all people on the planet and is steeped with prayer and a disciplined focus on humanity, the Earth, the elements, nature, and the heavens. Wisdom and traditions are passed between generations to preserve the teachings of their ancestors and I count myself fortunate to have shared in this experience. I then spent the entire month of August in Colorado with a brief chilly ride into Wyoming and the remainder of my time wandering eastward in advance of winter’s breath.

I’m not sure what compelled me to take such a long trip alone and with no definite end. I was totally okay with never coming back. I know deep within my core, going “all in blind” was right for me and while it may not be for everyone, facing fear with dignity and integrity will blaze a trail for healing. If nothing else, you reconcile your life with your boots on. One hundred and twenty-five days, 7,545 miles, and 15 states encompassed the greatest experience of my life. I was greeted by friendly faces all along my route and was fortunate to be embraced by all who allowed me to connect with them along the way. When I wasn’t staying with friends or family, I camped in some of the most beautiful places in the United States and, although my tailbone may never be the same, I wouldn’t have done it any differently. I returned safely to Palm Beach Gardens on October 18 with a renewed sense of appreciation for the many blessings I had been given and learned humility in the face of what might otherwise be thought of as bad luck. You’ve heard it before. It’s not the cards you’re handed in life, but how you play the hand. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Whatever the cliché, find one and make it yours.

The wonderful staff at South Florida Radiology Oncology in Palm Beach Gardens were very supportive and they followed my weekly journals sent via e-mail from the road. Their excitement, enthusiasm, and caring compassion greatly helped me through one of the toughest times of my life. I honor them for offering a safe path for all who must face cancer and the fear that comes with it. My remission is a combination of the miracle of modern medicine and the will to survive.

—Kevin Horan

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