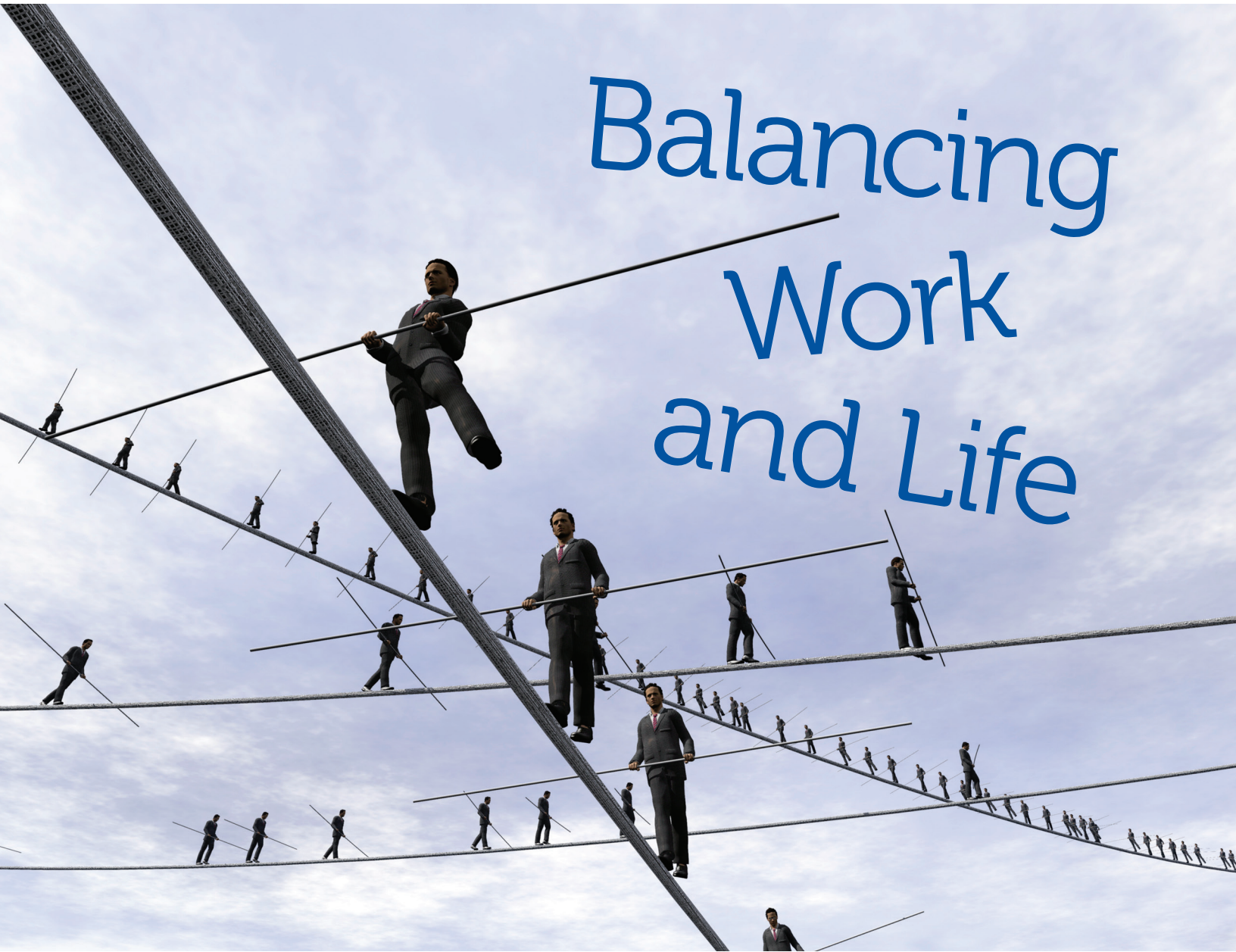


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Balancing Work and Life





BALANCING WORK AND LIFE AFTER TWO TYPES OF CANCER

By Matthew W. Argue



I had worked for thirteen years at my law firm to become partner and head of the construction litigation group. During that time, I worked 60-70 hours per week. Although I enjoyed my work, it left little time for personal and family life. I remember trying to slow down while I was at the law firm. I looked forward to a time in my career when I could enjoy the fruits of my prior labor and not work so many hours. Somehow it never worked out. Instead, I worked the same, or more, hours each year. The cases kept getting bigger and there were more cases to work on each year. I told myself that when I finished a big case that would be the time to take a break. That never happened. However, cancer changed how I was thinking about my career and the future. I felt that the stress of being a trial attorney was not conducive to healing cancer. When I discussed leaving the law firm because of the possible adverse impacts of stress on my health my wife was supportive. She wanted me alive instead of focusing on financial security. Thus, began our journey to build a more balanced life style.

My battle with cancer began on January 14, 2000. Although I did not know it at the time, this one day changed the course of my life forever. I was on my way to work when I felt a sharp pain that would not go away. I called my office to cancel my appointments for the day and went straight to the doctor's office. I was referred to the urologist who told me

nodes between the kidneys. This time the tumor was inoperable. My only options were radiation or chemotherapy. I had gone from Stage I to Stage II testicular cancer. There are only IV stages. It took this second occurrence before I was forced to reevaluate my future in light of cancer.

I first took a leave of absence from the law firm. I needed time to clear my head, to visit various doctors about treatment options, and to consider what life might be like if I no longer worked at a large law firm. I did not know what I would do, but the priority now was healing and developing a more balanced lifestyle. This meant being more available to my family instead of coming home every night from work physically and emotionally exhausted. I realized I was giving too much time to work, and there was little time left over for my friends and family after work. Also, I was looking at the possibility of having children; something my wife and I had dreamed about together, but now the diagnosis of testicular cancer plus chemotherapy meant that I might not be able to have children. For this reason, we tried several alternative cancer therapies with the hope that it would heal the cancer without toxic side effects. During the next two years, we were blessed with two perfectly healthy boys! Although the alternative cancer therapies did not "cure" the cancer, it strengthened my immune system and when I opted to treat the



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he needed to run some tests but that he suspected I had testicular cancer. The next week, I had surgery to remove a cancerous tumor. The week after that, I returned to the office a little sore from surgery but hoping the "cancer speed bump" was a thing of the past. It never occurred to me that the cancer might return. My attitude was "business as usual" and I wanted to get back to work immediately. I had no more regard for the fact I was diagnosed with cancer than a common cold or flu. A year later, after an annual follow-up exam with the oncologist, I found out I had a new tumor in the lymph

testicular cancer with chemotherapy I responded well to the treatments. I eventually found myself energized by the change in life style, and I loved spending more time at home with my family. In short, we were growing and prospering even in the face of a serious health challenge.

The next step was to find some type of work that required fewer hours and was less stressful. My former law firm played a key role in encouraging me to resume my legal career as a professional mediator.

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At first the idea of becoming a mediator seemed impossible. I thought only retired judges or senior attorneys with lots of name recognition could be successful mediators. What drew me to the idea of mediation is that it is a “cooperative” as opposed to an “adversarial” process. I thought my personality would be more suited to the mediation process instead of being a litigator. I also thought that I would have more control over when and how I worked.

The decision to become a mediator was not just about lowering stress at work. It was also based on doing what I wanted to do as opposed to what I thought I could or should do with my life after cancer. I knew it would not be easy to start a new career, but after surviving cancer some of the fear of failure was gone. Also, I was excited about a new challenge and looking forward to once again working in the legal profession. The deciding vote was cast by my wife who is a great encourager and not afraid to take a risk when she believes it is good for our family.

Getting to work as a mediator was a slow process. I had to train and develop skills to be a mediator. I took a number of well respected mediator training courses and enrolled in a mediator credentialing program that resulted in over 100 hours of live training. I was fortunate that a retired Federal District Court judge, who was a full-time mediator, offered me the opportunity to do a mediation externship with him. I spent the next eight months observing him and many other mediators. I volunteered to do pro bono mediations to gain experience. Ultimately, I began to have opportu-

settle I do not agonize about such a result. I now have time to be with my family, to be home for dinner most nights, to enjoy golfing with my boys and take time off for vacations every year.

Our family thought that cancer was a thing of the past, but we were wrong. In October 2009, I was diagnosed with a second type of cancer known as Acute Lymphoid Leukemia (ALL). ALL is rarely seen in adults, but the doctors believe it is a “secondary cancer” side effect caused by the chemotherapy drugs I received to treat testicular cancer. Our initial reaction was one of disbelief. It did not seem possible that we would have to do the cancer treatments all over again. Earlier in April 2009, I had passed the 5-year mark with no sign of reoccurrence of testicular cancer and thought I was “cured” for good.

I have been asked if dealing with cancer a third time is easier or more difficult than the first or second time. For us it was more difficult. Our family had already been through the trauma of cancer and chemotherapy. We knew all too well the devastating emotional, physical and financial impacts of an extended illness and inability to work or earn a living. We were told by the doctors that the typical treatment time frame for ALL is one to two years. We had no idea how we could make it financially for the next two years without income. The treatment regime involves chemotherapy, radiation and ultimately a need for a bone marrow transplant for survival. In some cases, the side effects of a bone marrow transplant can be rejection of the transplant resulting in death or life long debilitating conditions. Having a sibling as

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nities to work as a private mediator; mediating construction defect cases in the area of law I formerly practiced.

Being a private mediator has been a great experience. I enjoy interacting with lawyers and judges on a daily basis. I work in a positive environment to help solve problems and settle cases. I am not subject to the same stress as I was as a lawyer who is concerned about the opponent, the legal arguments, the court's rulings and the outcome of the trial. As a mediator, I work hard to settle every case, but if the parties decide they do not want to

the donor results in the best outcomes. I have one sibling, a sister, and the likelihood of her being my donor was less than 25%. Incredibly, my sister was not just a match but a “perfect match” meaning she and I matched on all eight criteria for her to be my donor. Accordingly, I was able to do the bone marrow transplant without delay, which also increases the chance for a good outcome.

The treatment was hard but definitely doable. I had to be in the hospital for several months. I spent nearly a month in isolation and was not able to see my children. I have never felt so tired

in my life. During the most difficult times, I found that gentle kindnesses of the doctors, nurses and other patients made a big difference. The key to my survival has been the support of family, friends, co-workers and other mediators. (Just as during my other bouts with cancer, the upside is more quality time with my wife and two boys who are 9 and 7 years old. These are the times I will never regret spending as I get older.) I am truly amazed how many people stopped their busy lives to help us. I had the overwhelming feeling that I was not alone and that more people cared about me than I ever could have imagined. I have so many reasons to make a full recovery.

I have been blessed with an opportunity to learn an important lesson about myself and life. The thing that matters most in life are other people: first, my wife, my boys, my sister, my dad, my in-laws; second, my friends and other people I see every day at work, church, around town; and third, people I have not yet met but which may become terrific friends sometime in the future. I have learned that a friend is forever, especially during the times you need them most. Everything else in life (careers, houses, cars, vacations, etc.) is nice but has little lasting value. So, why do I, and so many others, spend the vast majority of time chasing after the things that have no real lasting value?

My answer is the mistaken belief that tomorrow is guaranteed. If I have one day left to live, then I know exactly what is important. But, if I think I have 10-20-30 years to do all the things that are important, then I will forget about how I can help those around me and instead focus on how I can make my life easier or more comfortable.

Only by going through a life threatening event did I realize that tomorrow is not promised to anyone. We're all terminal. Each day is a gift. And, it is up to us to make the most of it. By a miracle, I have been given another chance to enjoy life and the blessing of a new day. So, in my new life, I hope to enjoy each moment, to laugh a lot more, to take time for a long walk, to be my wife's best friend and my children's greatest fan, and to be known more for being a person of character than being a captain of industry. These are the things I have learned from my three bouts with cancer. I hope my story will encourage others to evaluate what is important to them in life, pursue meaningful relationships and make lifestyle changes without the hardship of dealing with cancer. ♦

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