



By Caryn Sullivan

DREARIES BE GONE, THERE'S WONDER IN THE WORLD

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It's that time of year, when the drearies materialize after a strong wind blows in, whisking colorful leaves off the trees and ushering in gray skies for a long, and most unwelcome, stay. This year, it is especially difficult to fight the November blues, particularly if I've indulged my news-junkie tendencies and listened to the radio or watched TV and heard the latest reports on the economic downturn.

Like many, I've been distressed by the dramatic and unexpected change in the economy. Realizing that it's not a bad dream, I've decided it's time to accept the new reality and to adopt a survival mentality, instead of embracing a doomsday perspective.

I've resolved to nurture my psyche by listening to music instead of talk radio and reading books instead of depressing news articles. I'm determined to be mindful that despite the unremitting reports of negative economic indicators, there are still many things in life to celebrate.

Earlier this month, I had occasion to do just that when my husband and I attended the University of Minnesota Bone Marrow Transplant Program's 40th anniversary celebration. While it's always difficult to return to the scene of the most wrenching experience of our lives, we wanted to share the day with those who, using her brother's bone marrow, wrested our daughter from a deadly disease and gave her a new and healthy life. We did so with equal measures of joy and heartache, recognizing that while our daughter had a stellar outcome, others we knew were not so fortunate.

Unexpectedly, I ran into a mom with whom I shared many difficult moments when our girls underwent their transplants several years ago. Her daughter, the most tenacious soul I've met, fought three types of leukemia, fended off death through the Christmas holidays, and spent a total of seven months in the hospital. Yet, this month, there she was, like a typical teen-ager, asking her mom when they could go home.

Bone marrow transplant therapy, developed in the late 1960s to treat lymphoma and since applied to more than 5,000 bone marrow patients at the University of Minnesota, is being used to treat a variety of conditions, sometimes with unexpected outcomes. Last year, the university made headlines for transplanting two brothers who shared a rare genetic skin disease, recessive dystrophic epidermolysis bullosa. Their mother, Theresa Liao (another tenacious soul), implored Dr. John Wagner, director of the university's Pediatric Bone Marrow Transplant program, to try the novel therapy on her sons.

Recently, there have been reports about the remarkable recovery of a 42-year-old AIDS patient who underwent a bone marrow transplant in Germany to treat his leukemia. Amazingly, the patient has shown no signs of the AIDS virus for 600 days post-transplant. While his physician was not seeking to cure the AIDS, by deliberately

selecting a donor with a naturally occurring genetic mutation that renders his cells immune to almost all HIV strains, he may have done just that. Experts are uncertain about whether the outcome was a fluke but they (and their patients) are cautiously optimistic about the treatment's potential.

While there is much to be concerned about today, there is also much to feel optimistic about. My daughter and her transplant buddy, the Liao family and the university's transplant professionals, the German physician and his patient all epitomize strength and innovative spirit. While those who are struggling with seemingly insurmountable challenges may feel they have used their last bit of energy, I know it is possible to dig deeper and find a little more strength and resolve.

Whether by design or by chance, innovative therapies are providing new life to those with an otherwise poor prognosis. Liao's success with Wagner is an instructive reminder of the power of a parent's advocacy and the importance of faith in a grave situation. Our transplant buddy is a living example of how sheer determination can be a potent ally when fighting huge obstacles. On a dreary November day, it helps to recognize that while life can be gloomy at times, it is rich with examples of unexpected wonder and inspiration.

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