



Transformation Begins with Me

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This is the story of how I saved my own life by deliberately living the principles I espouse at work every day, and of how that decision built me into a better person and a better coach. We all have change we want to make at work. That change starts with the change we make in the mirror.

1. INTRODUCTION

The sticky note said, “Stop Dying.” It was a family sprint planning exercise in my kitchen not too long ago, and my son wrote that story for me. I had been staring up at the 5’x4’ whiteboard/Kanban board on our kitchen wall, frustrated that the stories in my “In Progress” hadn’t moved. I was having a moment—focused on output and progress—and my college-age son chose empathy. With that card, he refocused me on the outcome that mattered.

My family wasn’t always that interested in my Agile ways. My previous attempts at shaping my teenage daughter’s thinking had been met with, “Daaaaaad! Stop trying to coach me!” There was lots of eye rolling involved. Now I don’t even have to make the attempt. She comes to me asking just how we might implement Agile delivery sprints and other concepts with her high school Robotics team.

We have shifted from a push model to a pull. That shift was part of a larger change, one that showed up across everything I do, not just my home life. That change shifted who I am both as a coach and as a person, and that in turn changed my influence on the people around me in all of my various roles. That change made “stop dying” a story I could actually work on, but before we talk about that, we need to back up a bit for some context.

2. SPINNING MY WHEELS AND GOING THE WRONG WAY

It was fall of 2016. My son was just leaving to spend the next two years as a missionary in Sweden, and I decided that I wanted to be a better person by the time he came home. I still imagined myself to be the guy I was in college, the guy who ran half-marathons at 145 pounds, but injuries, age, travel and long hours meant that I was actually sitting around 240. By the time he got back, I wanted to look a lot more like how I imagined me, and not the 200+ pounder he and his sister had known their entire lives.

I had another goal as well. My son had started learning martial arts at age 5, and a couple of years later, his sister and I had joined him. Since then they had both become 2nd degree black belts, and my daughter would get her 3rd degree before he got home. I was still stuck at brown belt. I made it to class only sporadically because of my 60-hour work weeks and constant injuries. I dreamed of finally earning my black belt and being able to share that accomplishment with my family.

Things were changing anyway. I had just gotten a big promotion at work. I was being asked to build a world-class development group within the organization. It was going to mean more authority, more opportunities to apply my own Agile vision within the company, and access higher up the corporate ladder. The company was even including me in the search for a peer to be the company leader for Agile transformations, with the intent that the two of us would be joined at the hip. What better time to become who I wanted to be?

Fast forward to fall of 2017. My glorious journey to a better world had gone off the rails. I had just reached a new high of 255 pounds. My new agile peer and mentor was on his way out of the company, and I knew I would not be far behind him. Our vision for change had hit a brick wall. Meanwhile, progress in karate had been stymied by more injuries. Every time I got injured, if I went to the doctor, I would be reminded that a lot of the problems I was having were related to my weight: back issues, joint problems, muscle strains, etc. My doctor was even starting to mention diabetes as a future concern. I knew that I had crossed over the line to obese

somewhere between 200 and 220 pounds. At this point, I was worried about crossing over to morbidly obese. My family is not known for living to old age, especially the men. And I was the unhealthy one.

There I sat, depressed, exhausted, feeling like a failure, staring down my own mortality, and riddled with pain both physical and psychological. I knew I wanted to be different, but all my efforts to change my weight had actually left me further from my goal than when I started. I prided myself on helping people change, and yet I could not even change myself.

3. CHOOSING TO BE DIFFERENT

A few months earlier, as part of my grand vision for change, I had started working on developing my “courageous authenticity.”[Anderson] As I sat in my miserable state, wallowing in woe-is-me self-pity, I pondered what it actually meant for me to be courageously authentic. I had been focusing on speaking up about what I believed even when it was uncomfortable, and on opening up about my weaknesses and vulnerabilities so that my own humanity would show. Now I wondered if it meant something different to me.

I started to question whether I actually believed in the principles and values I was evangelizing. Was I advocating from a place of authenticity, from an inward belief that they are true? Or was I doing so from a place of expediency, because that was where the market was going and where I could make a living? Did I have the courage to be authentic, to act on what I believed?

I am a religious person, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and as such, I had already come to understand for myself that faith means not just believing but acting on that belief. Courageous authenticity in my mind looks a lot like faith. My experience with religion had also given me a belief that true principles tend to apply broadly. The principles I found to be true in a spiritual context should be true at work, at home or wherever.

If I consider agile principles to be true and in alignment with my values, would they not also apply everywhere, not just at work? And if I’m advocating those things from a place of authenticity, wouldn’t they show up, not as a façade I put on when I go to work, but rather as something that permeates everything I do? Do I have the courage to be that kind of authentic?

Something resonated there, and as the echoes reverberated through my soul, I knew how to move forward. I put on my coach hat and decided that I would be my most important client. I had read Simon Sinek, so I knew I needed to start with why [Sinek]. I also knew I needed a why that was about something bigger than myself. In the midst of my misery, there was actually a pretty easy answer to that. I want to live long enough to know my grandkids, and hopefully to know their kids. I want to be there for all of the important moments in their lives, to celebrate, to mourn, to comfort, to uplift.

Having found my why, I decided immediately that I was not going on a diet. Diets are projects. They are temporary efforts with a start and an end. I wanted a lifestyle change, something long-term, a product. Having decided that, now I needed to do some experiments with small, incremental improvements.

I gave my notice at work, with a plan to become an independent coach, where I could control my own destiny as I regained control of my life. At the urging of my friend and mentor, I signed up for Agile Coaching Institute’s weeklong coaching bootcamp to up my game and improve my marketability. The bootcamp was held at a beautiful retreat in Petaluma, California where every meal was made with fresh produce raised onsite. Even the orange juice was fresh-squeezed from fruit picked from the trees outside. By mid-week I noticed that my breakfasts and lunches had all been vegetarian, and my dinners had been close to that. I had been eating vegetables all week and had loved it all. I determined then and there that I like vegetables, and that I’d just never understood them before.

I left the bootcamp with my first three stories, the first three changes I wanted to experiment with. The first would be to eat more vegetables. I was not going to cut out meat or carbs or even ice cream. I was just going to bias towards vegetables. The second experiment would be to create some transparency. I hypothesized that if I could see what I was eating, I could understand what I was doing to myself and hopefully choose something different. The third story was to take walks. During the bootcamp, I had started exploring the hills above the retreat before breakfast, seeking out solitude to ponder. I had discovered that while not anything super strenuous, it was exercise, and I could do it without injury.

The first few weeks of tracking my calories coincided with the holiday eating season. That provided the opportunity to prove out all three hypotheses in rather spectacular fashion. I came out of the bootcamp at 250 pounds and started tracking everything I ate on the “Loselt” app on my phone. I also set a goal in the app to lose about a pound a week. The app provided me with a daily calorie budget for how much I could eat and still progress toward my goal. My initial budget was 2449 calories a day. I connected the app with the data from my

watch and my scale, so the budget could account for exercise and changes in calorie needs as well as track my progress towards my weight goals. Initially, the goal was 225 pounds. That was the point at which I guessed I would be able to physically deal with more strenuous exercise.

As I started to track my calories, it was staggering to realize that a half dozen Oreos (because who eats just one) was more than 300 calories, and my daily food intake was 2-3 times what I needed. I traveled constantly for work, and a nice restaurant meal could easily be as much as my entire day's budget. With my eyes opened to this reality, my behavior immediately shifted. I was free to eat as much as I wanted and whatever I wanted, but I insisted on staying under my budget. If I wanted dessert and I didn't have the calories for it, I'd go take a walk until I did. I started eating much smaller meals, targeting about 700 calories each. I quickly found that vegetables gave me more volume, so I felt full on a lot fewer calories. Eating veggies meant that I had more room for the other treats I wanted. I was also finding that I really liked the freedom of mind that came from walking for an hour every day.

Within two weeks I was down to 241 just in time for Christmas. At Christmas the calories don't count, so I didn't count them. I flew off to visit family for the holidays, leaving behind everything I had changed, and on January 3, when I returned home and weighed in again, I was back up to 249. Virtually all of my progress was lost, and yet I had also inadvertently proved to myself that my experiments were working via both a positive and a negative test. I just needed to turn it into something I could maintain.

Just as I was starting work on those first few stories, I was also starting my new adventure as an independent consultant. This was not an impulsive adventure. I had planned for this. I had trimmed the family budget, and I had enough money in reserve to cover a few months. I had set up a business relationship with DevJam (now Cprime) to help me find work, and they had a couple of good leads for me, but we were still waiting for something to close.

While I waited, I continued my experiments. I kept up the calorie tracking and budgeting, the exercise and the bias toward vegetables while layering in other things. I had previously read Greg McKeown's *Essentialism* [McKeown] and had already started developing a routine that would allow me to focus on what was important. I noticed that my routine looked a bit like a sprint cadence. I was planning my day every morning, working down the backlog through the day, and journaling as a form of review in the evening. I could experiment with that cadence and the elements of my routine the same way that I did with any team I might work with. I folded some appreciative inquiry into my evening retrospective. I included reading, meditation and prayer as I looked for a balance of mind, body, spirit and emotion. I was looking for integral transformation—change for all of me—so that the change would be part of me and not just a change of clothes that I might put on and take off.

My last day in my old job was January 12, and by the time I showed up at my first client as an independent on February 20, I was down to 229. By the time I got my first paycheck six weeks later, I was down to 211. By that point, quite a few things had changed. I was traveling every week again, and my hotel was 2.5 miles from the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. My daily 1-hour walk had turned into a 5-mile round trip to and from the memorial. I started working with a nutrition coach who encouraged me to incorporate high-protein snacks and water throughout the day to keep my metabolism up and eliminate some of the chemical triggers that get confused with hunger. My calories were now coming in smaller batches, coming more frequently and focused on getting me the value I needed from them when I needed it.

Once my weight was under 225, I started interspersing some running. I'd walk a mile then run a half, then walk one and run another half. As my body got stronger, I made the running more frequent, walking only a half-mile before running a half. Soon it was walking a half-mile and running a whole one.

As the weight came off, it was easier to do martial arts as well. In the month between gigs, I got in enough karate classes to earn the stripe on my brown belt. I now needed just 96 classes to earn my black belt. It had taken me 12 years to get this far, and I was eager to finally finish it. Black belts are only awarded twice a year—the first weekend in May and the first weekend of November. May was too soon, but perhaps if I stayed focused, and took care of my body, I would be able to finish by November. It would be the perfect time. My son would get home from Sweden in October and wouldn't leave for school until January. I would have my entire family together to celebrate a huge personal milestone, and at rate things were going, I'd be celebrating my ultimate weight goal by that point as well.

I had sailed through the first goal weight of 225 pounds. The next milestone was 200, the lowest I had ever gotten on previous attempts to get in shape. I found that I was enjoying myself immensely and not just in the exercise. I was spending more time on self-care than I ever had. I was at peace with who I was and what I was doing. I was doing work that felt valuable, and it came easier than I could remember it being.

I was the lead coach for a dojo at Capital One at the time. We would bring in teams for 6- to 8-week challenges and immerse them in Agile and DevOps. We were in a separate space away from their normal environment, where the teams could focus on improvement and personal growth. It is an intense experience of doing two sprints a week. That puts pressure on the system such that inefficiencies become visible, and we can quickly explore improvements. I was used to high effort to make such an endeavor work and give it the impact that I wanted. In that previous life, I'd have handled it with a great deal of busy-ness—scheduling meetings and 1-on-1 conversations, preparing thoughts, and trying to be the person that was needed and making sure everything and everyone was on point. This time, I found that it was enough simply to be me, and to be present.

I did put in effort. I prepared facilitation guides. I led chartering sessions. I taught lunch-and-learns on Chef and Docker and unit testing. I mentored coaches. I paired with team members. But I also just sat there and held space. I no longer had to run around “making sure.” I was comfortable enough in my own skin to just... be. And that could be enough, because as I did so, I could trust others to act on their own. I began to see the connection between personal transformation and leading transformation. Helping others to change requires a different way of being, and the conscious, deliberate journey of personal development I was taking was opening doors not only for myself, but for those around me.

When I first arrived in the dojo, the first team asked, “Are you really going to make us do two sprints a week?” They were struggling to understand how they would be productive in that cadence. They had been doing two-week sprints, and their end-of-sprint events (demo and retrospective from the last sprint, grooming and planning for the next sprint) were taking them an entire day. Even in the dojo, with only 2½ days to an iteration, their events took essentially the whole day the first time through. As coaches, we focused on safety and on learning. We asked questions and challenged the team to question why they were doing the things they were doing. Did those things add value? If not, did we still need to do them? By the time the team left the dojo, those same sprint events took just 45 minutes altogether, and every bit of it was valuable time spent.

They had discovered along the way that some of their patterns weren't serving them. They were working in a large, shared codebase where all new code had to be approved by two other teams before it could be merged in. They spent their first several sprints completing stories and getting them “ready to merge,” and then when it came time for their first release, they submitted the pull request. For their next three sprints (a week and a half), they worked on getting the release merged in. It took them days to get anyone to review their pull request and several more days to make required changes. They resubmitted, again waited for a review and got more changes. Eventually it got approved and merged, and we held a retrospective. Nobody liked that they had done three sprint reviews with nothing to show because of the merge issue. One of the team members asked, “Can we just do a pull request for every single story?”

That became their next experiment as a team. They reached out to their peer teams and asked them to be prepared for a steady stream of pull requests over the next two days. Those requests would need to get reviewed quickly so as not to back up. The peer teams agreed although somewhat reluctantly, but given that this was just a 2-day experiment, it seemed a minimal imposition. That sprint, the team completed almost twice as many stories as they had in the previous ones, and every single one of them was merged into the main codebase before the sprint review. As they demo'ed their work, the team (including the product owner) was in full celebration mode.

We took time in the retrospective to recognize what had happened. Because each pull request was only a few lines of code, their peer teams needed far less effort to review it. Because of that, they happily jumped on the request as soon as it came in, instead of waiting until they had a few hours to review and make comments. The comments and needed changes were fewer each time, but also arrived in a much shorter feedback loop that prevented the mistakes from propagating across multiple stories. The team learned quickly what to expect, and as the stories progressed, fewer changes were needed. Their relationship with the peer teams improved dramatically. What had been rather adversarial became a trusting partnership. Work was moving swiftly through the system in single-piece flow.

The coaches were growing too. It can be very tempting as a coach to see something headed toward failure and step in to prevent that. We worked on pausing in those moments, stepping back from owning the teams' success or failure, and choosing to ask questions instead. It was the teams' decision how to respond to the questions. Even if the team failed, we would have the chance to reflect on it and learn from it within the next two days. The fact that the teams *could* fail was the most important learning they were getting.

In my personal evening retrospectives, I often marveled at the changes I was seeing, and the lives impacted. I felt joy for the teams and peace with myself. The pace of their change mirrored my own. My weight was dropping rapidly, and my body felt light, strong and full of energy. Just before my engagement ended in June, I

reached a major personal milestone: I completed my nightly trip to the Lincoln Memorial in just 56 minutes, running all 5 miles.

When I returned home from that last trip to DC, I weighed in at 195. I had lost 60 pounds and was under my 200-pound goal. My next weight goal was 170: the point at which my Body Mass Index (BMI) registers as no longer being overweight. I had a few weeks before my next client gig, and I threw myself into training. I ran 25-30 miles a week. I did karate workouts almost every day and sometimes even twice a day. I did push-ups and weight training. With all that effort, I expected my weight to keep dropping. Instead, I fluctuated between 190 and 205 for about a month. Some of that was admittedly due to poor vacation eating, but some of it was a shift in body composition as I converted more fat to muscle. I could see it in the metrics my Bluetooth scale was producing. It gave me my muscle mass, body fat percentage and much more. I could follow the data and see that I was making valuable progress even if my weight didn't show it.

Come August, I was back at work, this time for Verizon, in their dojo in Tampa. I was running every night in Florida and doing karate workouts on weekends back home in Minnesota. I finally broke through the 190-pound plateau at the end of August, and by the end of September, as I was pre-testing for my black belt, my weight crossed under 180. It was all coming together. My son had his plane tickets to come home from Sweden. He would be home a week before my black belt promotion. I was counting down days until his return. I was counting classes left for black belt. I was counting pounds down to 170. My goals were all right there, and I was actually seizing the moment.

On October 26, the day my son's plane landed, I weighed in at 170 for the first time. It had been just 53 weeks since I had weighed in at 255. I had the next week off of work to be with my family and to prepare for the black belt test. We rejoiced in being all together again, and in everything that had changed for us. In between the family pictures, visits with extended family and all the other festivities, I went to karate classes and did home workouts with my daughter, recently hired as an instructor at the karate studio. It was a week of pure joy, culminating with the test on Thursday, November 1. I was who I wanted to be. I was with the people I cared most about. My transformation had been wildly successful, and that night I got to bask in it for just a moment.

4. BLINDSIDED

The next day, I went in to see my doctor. I had seen my eye doctor in September for new glasses, and while scanning my retinas, he noticed some small hemorrhages. He'd said those could be signs of possible high blood pressure or diabetes, and that I should get it checked out. I'd just eliminated all my risk factors for diabetes, and I was pretty sure that wasn't an issue. I knew my blood pressure. It wasn't high. At all. I didn't worry about it at the time, but as September pushed into October, I started noticing that I was breathing heavy walking up the stairs. Sometimes I would stand up out of a chair, and my vision would collapse down to a narrow tunnel for a second. They were signs of anemia. I'd had that once before and knew the symptoms. I figured I'd been working out too hard. It was a concern, but I wasn't going to let it stop me. If I missed the black belt test, I wouldn't get another shot until May. I set up an appointment with my doctor but scheduled it for the day after my test so that he wouldn't be able to tell me not to do it.

I went into the appointment figuring we would do a blood test. The doctor would tell me to take some iron pills and dial down the exercise a bit. When I explained to him what I was experiencing, he had similar thoughts and ordered the test. Twenty minutes later, I was back in the exam room for the results. It took another ten minutes for the doctor to come in. "Well, you are anemic. Here are the numbers," and I looked. Yep. Just as we expected. "But those aren't the numbers I'm concerned about. It's these." The normal range for white cell count is between 3000 and 9000. My past blood tests over the last couple of years were consistently around 5000. He'd checked. He showed me my current number: 142,000. "Those numbers are highly indicative of leukemia."

I left the doctor's office in shock, struggling to process what I had just heard. My blood work was already on its way to the Mayo Clinic to confirm the diagnosis and determine what form of leukemia we were dealing with. I had an appointment scheduled for a week later with an oncologist/hematologist—a specialist in blood-based cancers. That week was torturous. I was in limbo. What form of leukemia I had would determine both the prognosis and the form of treatment. I had to cancel all of my travel, and I needed a bone marrow biopsy to see how far the disease had progressed. With a white cell count that high, I was immune-compromised and had no business traveling anyway. Without travel, I didn't have work to distract me, and I was living on savings for I-didn't-know-how-long. Exercise was off the table as well due to the anemia the cancer had triggered. My life and all of my progress had come full stop in an instant.

I had been through transformations that had suffered big setbacks: layoffs, re-orgs, mergers, changes in leadership. I had coached teams through the feeling of being stuck, unable to focus. Now I was the one in trauma. I had cultivated a level of comfort with ambiguity, but this was way beyond that comfort zone.

I was desperate to be productive, but unable to complete anything as both mind and body were fully engaged elsewhere. I stared up at the family Kanban board, frustrated with myself and my lack of even the illusion of control. That was the moment when my son grabbed a black Sharpie and stuck the Post-It up on the board: "Stop Dying."

By the time I got to the oncologist, I would have been okay if he'd told me I needed a bone marrow transplant. That would at least give me a plan. The answer I got was chronic myelogenous leukemia. Prior to 2001, only 20% of patients with CML survived more than 5 years [Bauer]. But 2001 was when the FDA approved Gleevec, a drug specifically designed to target the protein this cancer uses to propagate. Now, almost everyone responds almost completely to the treatment. My oncologist explained that he had a patient who had started taking the drug during clinical trials in 1999, and 19 years later was still taking it. Yes, he was still in treatment, but it meant he was alive to be in treatment.

With the diagnosis in hand, it was time to start working on that "Stop Dying" story on my Kanban board. I had a whole new set of goals. Weight was no longer the issue. The numbers that mattered now were blood counts, and they were still headed the wrong direction. On the day of my visit, I had spiked to 171,000 on my white cell count, and a genetic screening showed that 94% of my blood cells were positive for the cancer.

I started treatment the very next day. I was getting weekly blood tests to track my progress. I needed my white count to be down to normal before I could travel at all, and my red cell count would need to come back up to normal before I could exercise.

It was a painful process, and not just because every bone and every organ ached. I had come to identify with the lifestyle I had created for myself. I had reached a level of perfection in how I followed my practices. For months I had logged every single calorie, every workout, every glass of water. The only exceptions were holidays and vacations. For every day I had tracked over the last year, I had never exceeded my calorie budget without a corresponding workout to compensate. I hadn't missed a day of meditation, journaling or anything else in months. Suddenly, it was a struggle to get out of bed. A bowl of ice cream was no longer a treat after a 5-mile run. It was a balm for the pain rolling through my body. I felt my lifestyle slipping away, and with it, the identity I had crafted for myself. I wanted desperately to resume my routine, but denied that, I attempted to transform my cancer like I had my weight.

There were stories of patients responding to treatment so well that within three months the cancer was below 0.1%, what's known as major molecular response. In my mind, I pictured myself as one of those people. I was meticulous about my drug schedule and the eating schedule that went with it. I focused on eating healthy foods (outside of the ice cream anyway), drinking lots of water, getting plenty of sleep, managing my side effects, and avoiding anything that would interfere with the treatment (the pharmacist provided a 67-page list). As my weekly test results came back, I was encouraged by what I was seeing. Week 1: 124,000 white cells. Week 2: 43,400 and only 82% positive for the cancer. Week 3: 7000 white cells. Normal. First goal met, and I could work and travel again, albeit on a limited basis. The red cells still hadn't increased, but that was expected. Now that the bone marrow wasn't over-producing white cells, there was room to produce red cells, and I could expect to see those numbers improve. By week 6 of treatment, they were starting to improve. Better yet, the latest test showed only 55% of the cells had the cancer gene. I was on track. I was out of immediate danger. No more tests until the 3-month mark, and at the rate I was improving, that one could involve lots of celebrating.

I knew that wouldn't mean I was done, but it would be a huge milestone. With CML, there is no cure without a bone marrow stem cell transplant. All it takes is one cell with the wrong gene floating somewhere in the bloodstream or tucked away in the bone marrow, and the whole thing can come back. I knew that. I could, however, start ticking off milestones of incremental improvement, and I had plenty to work on. My first target was complete hematological response. That's where the white and red cell counts return to normal. I'd already met one of the two criteria for that. The second was major molecular response—that 0.1% level on the genetic test. Eventually we would be looking for complete molecular response at less than 0.0037% where it is no longer detectable in the blood. At that point, there is the potential to stop treatment, even if only to get a short break from the side effects.

2019 dawned, and in late January I headed to the clinic for the long-awaited results. First up, the blood counts: normal for both types. I had complete hematologic response, and was cleared to exercise, work a full schedule and anything I felt up to doing. One goal down. Next up was the genetic test. 60% of my cells were positive: not the 0.1% I had hoped for, and actually worse than the 55% in December.

I have to admit that I panicked, even though the doctor had taken the important clinical step of warning me not to panic before telling me the number. I tried hard to be calm and ask questions from a place of genuine curiosity, but inside I was in full fight-or-flight mode. The pain, fatigue, nausea and other side effects were bearable if it was at least making a difference. This was not only no difference, but difference in the wrong way.

Over the next few weeks, in addition to my normal work schedule, I tried to go back to karate, tried to run, tried even to stretch myself in other areas. I could push myself hard in the moment, but there was always a cost. Each time, my body pushed back with pain, with exhaustion, with something. It finally started to sink in that my new normal was not just that I had a few annoying symptoms to deal with, but that I was fully engaged in a fight with cancer, and my expectations for myself would have to change. I couldn't just power through this.

There is a concept in *Site Reliability Engineering* of error budgets [Beyer]. This is the idea that systems should not be more reliable than promised and create higher expectations in the mind of the consumer than actually sustainable. Instead, if our service level agreements allow for an hour of downtime a month, we should treat that as a budget and use it. I had to give up my expectations of perfection and create some room for failures. I would have to learn to dance with my disease: sometimes leading, sometimes following. I was still learning how my body responded to treatment, and in fact, its response was evolving and changing. I could not necessarily control what days were good and what days were not. I had to be okay with a bad day. It had to be okay to curl up under a heated blanket, eat ice cream, and sleep. It had to be okay to show up to work with something less than my "A" game. I would show up with the best game I had each day, and it had to be enough.

In reality though, that's all any of us can do. A wise man once said, "when you meet someone, treat them as if they were in serious trouble, and you will be right more than half the time" [Eyring]. Everyone is going through something hard. Everyone is bringing the best they've got today, and hoping it is enough. As I began to accept that in myself, it was easier to accept that in others as well. My coaching stance evolved. I had started from the position of coach as expert—as someone who has been down the path and could show the way. Now my stance became one of coach as partner—as someone who will find the path with you. As I began to set aside judgment of my own imperfections, I was able to find greater empathy for others' imperfections.

Just a few months later, that empathy was put to the test. I was shifted from Verizon's Tampa dojo to the one in Irving, Texas. At the end of May, I met a group of 20 aspiring software engineers. I would be coaching them in a 6-month program called Project Athena. The participants were drawn from under-served and under-represented groups across the local area. They were diverse in age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education and experience. The hope was that we could open up new sources for recruiting engineering talent while also diversifying the tech community within the company. Each person applied for a scholarship, through which they would then be paid as contractors while going through a full-stack JavaScript curriculum and an apprenticeship, at the end of which they could apply for full-time roles as Verizon employees.

On the first day of the program, as we established our working agreement, I took a few moments and shared: "Everyone here is going through something hard. It's okay to have a bad day. We all have something hard. This is mine." And I told them of my journey with leukemia. Over the next six months, I learned their stories. Some of them were heartbreaking. Some of them were going "home" to a Salvation Army shelter at night. Some of them were riding busses and trains for three hours each way to come work with us. Some of them had been told their entire lives that they were stupid and would never amount to anything.

For six months, I cheered with them at daily standups when they completed a lesson or a project. They cheered with me when my blood work showed my cancer levels dropping. I took walks with them and offered them hugs as they struggled with challenges at home or with learning the material. They did the same for me when I stopped responding to treatment and had to switch to a new drug or when I came to work in pain and not my normal, cheerful self. We celebrated together as 19 of the original 20 in Texas graduated from the curriculum to the apprenticeship, and again when 18 of them got hired as permanent employees.

On November 1, 2019, while the apprentices were interviewing for their new jobs, I sat down with my oncologist for my 1-year checkup. I had done both bloodwork and a bone marrow biopsy in the weeks leading up to this. The bone marrow showed 0% cancerous and the blood was at 0.8%. I had complete cytogenetic response and was approaching major molecular response. My weight was at 176 pounds. I was taking walks most nights after work, and occasionally running even. For all the struggles, and the less-than-perfect, I had accomplished a lot, made my own life better, and even helped others make their own lives better. I cannot take credit for their change; only for having walked with them, and for holding the space so they could change.

5. RETROSPECTIVE

Today, as I write this, it is May 2, 2020: 18 months to the day since I was diagnosed. My numbers spiked again in January, and we are still figuring out whether that's an aberration or a need to change treatments again. I have not conquered my cancer. The dance continues and will for the rest of my life.

Most days I'm okay with that. I am just glad to be alive. Had I not started my transformation when I did, I would have either missed or ignored the signs I had. I probably would have waited another 6-12 months before actually going to my doctor, and that would have been too late. Before I got healthy, the signs would have been just another "broken window," just another sign of my disrepair among so many. Once I got healthy, the smallest abnormality stood out as something that did not belong and was worthy of redress. I have no doubt that saved my life. With my numbers where they were, any delay in diagnosis and treatment would have made it far harder to treat. Even more, had I not changed when I did, I would not have been in nearly as good of shape to fight it.

Transformation often starts with something specific in mind for how the investment will be returned. Mine certainly did, and while I have indeed gained those benefits, I don't actually care so much about them anymore. I value far more the unintended consequence of being prepared for my own personal "black swan" event. Black swans, though exceptionally rare, do exist in nature. All of our normal experience tells us not to expect one, and it can be quite shocking to see one. We all have events like that, which in our experience have never happened and probably will never happen, until they do happen and catch us by surprise.

It is those events in which I see the value of transformation, continuous improvement, and agility. They are the unknown unknowns we cannot anticipate. They can feel like huge setbacks in the moment, yet they are the measure and the instructor of our agility. Are we able to dance out of the way of the oncoming train, or at least turn a head-on blow into a glancing one?

While my leukemia diagnosis was shocking, painful, and horribly disruptive, I would not trade it away. Without it, I might have come to believe I had all the answers and become complacent or rigid. Instead, it taught me—and still teaches me—to accept ambiguity, to look for small steps forward, and while seeking improvement to let go of my need for perfection. I am still learning how to dance with my disease: how to acknowledge my limitations, but not let them be a crutch; how to push ever forward, but not overwhelm myself; how to embrace the broken me, but not let the breakage define me.

I believe it is in this dance that I find my strength as a coach, and I believe each of us has our own dance. Each of us has our own experiences that shape us and teach us. Each of us has opportunities through those experiences to transform ourselves for our own good, and for the good of those around us. Transformation begins with me, with you, with each of us deliberately choosing to grow, to be something better, and in so doing, making room for others to do the same.

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