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## Life, Interrupted: Changed by Cancer

By [SULEIKA JAOUAD](#)

On Monday evening I stood on a stage in front of a thousand people and talked about what I've learned since my diagnosis with cancer two years ago at the age of 22.

I was speaking at the Angel Ball, the yearly red-carpet event for the [Gabrielle's Angel Foundation](#), which in this past week alone raised nearly \$4 million for blood cancer research. I had never spoken in front of so many people before. It was one of the proudest moments in a tough journey over the past two years. And I was able to meet world-class doctors and researchers, other cancer survivors and even some celebrities.

On the drive over, though, my nerves were shot. All I could think about was whether I had spent enough time memorizing my speech, and whether I'd chosen the right dress. Lurking in the back of my mind was a laundry list of "to do's" and checklists thrown like scraps on a mounting pile of anxiety.

But there was something different about this stress. It took me a minute to put my finger on it, but there it was: For the first time since my diagnosis I was stressed about something that didn't have to do with cancer.

I bristle when the word "gift" is used in the same sentence as "cancer." There is no upside to having a life-threatening illness. It can ruin lives, friendships, families and dreams, and trying to focus too much on finding a silver lining can trivialize real suffering. I would never have voluntarily chosen to go down this path. But like any other struggle, cancer has changed me. I wish I could learn about overcoming struggle by training for a

marathon or applying for a new job, like many of my peers are doing in their early 20s. But life is unpredictable, and we don't always get to choose our battles.

Cancer robs you of your ability to look at the big picture - or at least obscures it. The news that I had cancer ripped away the expectations I had of myself to be a certain type of person with a certain type of life. I used to think that looking at the "big picture" meant figuring out 1-year, 5-year and 10-year plans. Back in 2010, I had just graduated from Princeton with highest honors, and I felt pressure to get on the fast track to success - whatever that meant. Like a lot of my peers, I was in the thick of the culture of anxiety surrounding achievement. I signed a two-year contract at a fancy corporate job even though I knew I much preferred Birkenstocks to high heels, creative writing to spreadsheets. This path wasn't right for me, but even though I felt miserable I continued going to work each morning because I was focused on the idea that having a practical, long-term plan was part of seeing the big picture.

I like to think that I eventually would have found my way to a career that both inspired me and paid the bills. But before I was able to figure out what that was, the cancer showed up. My life was interrupted. My doctors told me I would need intensive chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant. From the looks on their faces, I could see that there wasn't going to be any quick fix for my disease.

I had spent a lifetime focusing on the big picture, but cancer forced me to look at the small picture. I had no choice. I quickly learned that trying to predict the results of a bone marrow biopsy or a round of chemotherapy was a torturous and futile exercise. So, for the first time in my life, I began to focus on the present.

In the midst of doctor's appointments and long hospitalizations I tried to organize my days around small acts of happiness by asking myself: What will make me feel better right now? How do I handle the worry I'm feeling right in this moment? Gone were the vague worries about a future career. Sometimes the answer to those questions was writing in my journal, visiting with friends and family, or eating peanut butter cups and watching bad romantic comedies. On other days, it meant having a good cry under my comforter. Little did I know, I was building muscles along the way - not lats and biceps, but invisible muscles that now kick in to carry me through stressful situations.

And so there I was, sitting in the limousine, a few minutes before I was to give my speech. I was nervous - that wasn't going away. But I also felt a sense of calm. After two years of nonstop chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant, I realized that as a cancer patient, I had experienced my share of real stress and pressure, and I had learned how to confront it and cope with it.

I still can't see the big picture - the long view remains obscured. I can't change that. But I'm noticing that I am changed. And I learned on Monday night that giving a speech in front of a big crowd - something that would have been difficult to imagine before my cancer diagnosis - was now well within reach.

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