

“Get your affairs in order! Perhaps, Six months.”

After two days of tests and six hours in the oncologist’s office, those are the only words that reverberate through your mind as you make the long drive home from Syracuse to Lewis County. Your spouse, seated in the passenger’s seat, has sensed that it’s time for silence; even though she wants...she needs to know what you are thinking and what you are feeling. How do you start the conversation that you have never had? Where do you go for help after the doctor has sent you away – six months!

Life to that day had been rich and fulfilling – a wonderful family, grown children with one grandchild and one on-the-way, a fulfilling career just reaching its peak, a circle of friends and acquaintances supporting a rich community life, looking forward to retirement and travel. What now?

“Affairs in order?” Well, we did prepare our will, even though we hadn’t looked at it since the children were toddlers and we didn’t own a house. Do we tell our children, our friends? Do we seek a second opinion? How do you go about doing that? I barely know my family doctor; I have never been sick much. What will the pain be like? I feel no pain now. This isn’t fair; life is just getting to be all that I wanted it to be! I just feel numb – no anger, no sadness, no love. Is this what “giving up” feels like? I pray every day, Lord, but I left my church years ago. I pray: please send me an angel or, at least, a community to pray with me?

God answered that prayer over and over again through many angels: initially through a wife, son, and daughter that remained patiently there at my side, a supportive Marriage Enrichment Group, a team of medical professionals at a national cancer center, leaders and colleagues at work, the American Cancer Society and Relay for Life network, and a faith community that welcomed me like I had always had a place with them.

And then after four years living with those words, “Get your affairs in order!”, my wife walked in the house and announced, “We are taking the Hospice Volunteer Training Class”. Karen Seaver (now, Peterson), the skillful instructor, gently guided my wife and me through “that conversation that we still had not really had”. She reframed for me the last four years of a life waiting to die. I began to live, with joy and hope, each day of life. My wife and I discovered there is support for living a rich, full life even at the end of life, and that you can “get your affairs in order.”

If only on that drive home, we had shared our thoughts and feeling. If only on that drive home we had decided to phone Hospice and asked for a program explanation. I would have learned that I was qualified for their help. And in “one stop” the angels that I needed for medical, emotional, legal, interpersonal and spiritual guidance would have been sitting in my living room.

Before you or a loved one hear those words, “Get your affairs in order! Six months,” I urge you: call and sign-up for the Hospice Volunteer Training Class (volunteering is optional and secondary benefit after taking the class). Help Friends of Lewis County Hospice advocate for a high-quality palliative care service that does not exist in Lewis County today.