

### ▶ FROM BEYOND THE HOSPITAL WARD

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There are two days that have defined my life. The first, I was told, was a blistering hot day on 29 January 1967 - the day of my birth and it defined 43 and a half years of my life. The second was on Wednesday 4 August 2010 at noon when the Almighty provided me with a new lease on life...for however long He chooses it to be.

#### **THE BEGINNING**

The first day had been long in coming. My parents had anxiously waited three years for their firstborn and on the day of my arrival, my aunts tell me, I made my first mark by being ornery. Those who know me are not surprised at this point.

Babies like coming at night. I came at high noon. Babies come feet first. I came out butt first. Go figure! It was a long, arduous Ceaser birth for my mother. Since these were the days when men were not allowed in the labour ward, my dad drove around the Stellenbosch hospital in a frenzy, making all sorts of promises to the

Almighty. (I love you too, Dad.)

When at last I was born - my wise mother told me in every verbal battle throughout those turbulent teen years - that once they lay me in her arms, before she even put me to her breast for my first feeding, she made a pledge. All her children would be given in service of Allah and humanity. (Try messing up after something like that... As I said, she is a wise woman, my mother.)

Then my father laid the seal on it by choosing for each of us a name that brings its own legacy and responsibilities. For me he chose a name from the Holy Quran - Munadia, someone who called people to Islam - a broadcaster doing da'wah came pretty close. It is a name I carry with great pride and humility as it outlined my career over two decades.

Abdus Salaam, the slave of Allah who serves by keeping balance in the environment as he helps with world food creation. And Tauha, the one who serves by teaching others the virtues of the Quran and Sunnah. Two more were to be born two decades later from a second marriage - Fatima and Abdullah - with a slew of nephews and nieces followed. Each, we pray, will find their own legacy of service to our Creator.

#### **ENTER THE 1ST PHASE**

Things pretty much went well in the first phase of my life. The real crux came when at the age of 39, I was diagnosed with breast cancer out of the clear blue sky. But as with all challenges presented to me, the levelheaded, faith-based response from those closest to me kept me in a good space.

In pretty quick succession, the problem was diagnosed, the tumour removed, I received radiation and was back on my way to recovery within six months. The experience of being confronted with cancer - the one

word that spelled death to most people - had been sobering and I was only too aware of having dodged a whizzing bullet.

For the most part, I took care to stay cancer free in the next four years. I meticulously took my medication, went for every check up and determinedly stayed cancer free on a mental level. The latter is not easy if you consider the fear in knowing that breast cancer can be stopped by early detection, but it has a 75 percent chance of recurrence.

All that is good and well, but I was failing another battle - one that was all about finding a balance in life. Commitment to duty, even a divinely inspired one, is commendable, but if it is not tempered by a good balance in one's physical, mental, and spiritual health, it loses its value.

What's the point if you do what you do for Allah, but never spend time with your kids? What if you become so busy with earning an income that you forget the simplest things like just being with Allah in the big things and the small?

This is something I kept postponing. I've wanted to walk to a different beat, taking on new challenges for my career, trying out the road untravelled, exploring other skills... But I kept procrastinating. In January, Allah decided to make the choice for me and I was called to account...

At the time, I felt a new reprieve because my six monthly breast checkup with xrays and mammos were all clear, as was the case at the end of June. On went life, but within days, my back began to ache and over the last seven months it escalated. No amount of costly treatment by physiotherapists or chiropractors made a difference.

## **A NEW CHALLENGE**

By the end of June, I took sick leave to deal with what we thought was a misaligned spine. But instead of getting better, over the next six weeks it got worse. The pain became excruciating and gradually sapped the quality of my life.

I could no longer drive my car, go shopping, go to work at my desk, visit the loo or even brush my hair. And the best part was, I had no idea what was going on, what the problem was or how it would end. All I knew was that I was slowly becoming a quadriplegic.

Then came that 2nd defining day on 4 August when fate struck a blow in a 45 minute period while I was home alone. On my way to the shower, I fell, fracturing my spine. There was no feelings in my legs. After lots of high drama of doors being kicked down and high speed ambulance chances, I was hospitalised.

Xrays and MRI scans showed that my breast cancer had returned to infect the spinal cord. Immediate surgery was needed. Much to my own surprise, if hearing that you have cancer once is a shock, than hearing that it has metastasised and returned as bone cancer barely caused a blink.

## **THE LOAD IS LONG**

It was as simple as hearing my mother say, "Well, then we accept and get on with it." And that was that. Since then, things changed in a flash. I was operated on by a highly skilled team twice within a week to fix the spinal fracture, remove most of the tumour and implant a bone strut on one side and titanium nuts and bolts on the other. Alhamdulillah, both procedures were successful, thanks to Dr Andrew Walsh and his thoracic experts at UCT Academic Hospital.

But the hard work is far from over. I am now in the process of rehabilitation, learning to mobilise again - sit up, walk, go to the toilet and all the little things one easily takes for granted. In another week or two the oncologist steps in to work out a program of radiation and or chemotherapy over the next year to ensure all remaining cancer cells are killed off.

So it remains a long and winding road ahead, but what a journey it has been. Instead of fearing it, it has become the highlight of my life. Every step fell in place at exactly the right time. How dare I therefore question Allah's will?

His love for me is so vast that He jerks me closer when I start to stray. And when He does so, He gives me a solid, loving ring of support from my family, employers, friends and the community that I dare never think I walk alone. I have asked for your duas as my family and I try to heal and your response was overwhelming. Know that every dua you made for us has been echoed with duas from our side.

This has been the most amazing journey of my life, made more miraculous by the manner in which our familial ties have solidified. My incredible parents who have stood so firm - you are my foundation. My brothers and sisters who simply took over - I have never been prouder to be your tietie. My nieces and nephews, many of whom have been caring for me, but who will also join our own Karaan family Shavathon if I lose my hair to chemo - you are the sparkling stars of my future.

As for me, far from signalling the end, I have been inspired by a whole range of very different work that I hope to do in future...at a much easier, healthier, more balanced pace. Much remains in writing, guiding VOC creatively, but keep watching this space as the second wind of my life unfolds. Allah be praised.

*Acknowledgement with thanks to Munadia Karaan's Journalist Blog and The Voice of the Cape in our reproduction of this inspiring story by a remarkable person, in the hope that it will inspire others in their search for meaning to their afflictions / sufferings / discomfort to help facilitate their recovery.*

**--Webmaster**