

Wilderness life

In my three-year sojourn with cancer, I've faced fears, limits, and questions of who I am now that I can't be a pastor in the ways I once was.

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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Three years ago I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma.

Two years ago I ended my work as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Asheville.

In January my oncologist let me know that the leading indicator of cancer's activity went down, after having gone as high as it had been since I underwent a stem-cell transplant at Duke in the summer of 2014. Because, across the fall, I had experienced worsening fatigue and intensifying bone pain, the fact that it went down was a most welcome surprise. I'm so grateful both for the great news and for the fact that I'm feeling much better than I did in October and November.

These three years have been like a sojourn in the wilderness. I've been facing off with fears and limits, recognizing that some of the diminishments I've sustained are permanent, and accepting that, from now on, I will live (and will eventually die) with this illness. This wilderness work is ongoing.

There have been oases of rest and renewal, moments and places which have given me a sabbath from the challenging inner work that being sick demands of me. Though much of that work is finally mine to do and despite the pain and fatigue which only I can feel, I haven't been alone. I've had remarkable traveling companions: skilled medical caregivers both in Asheville and in Durham, a supportive family, caring friends, and an insightful therapist. They've helped me to make my way through sometimes treacherous and threatening territory.

The wilderness is a crucible of identity. What does it mean for how I see myself—and for how others see me—that I am chronically sick with a presently incurable disease? Who am I now that I no longer have the physical or psychic energy to live out a pastoral calling in the ways I once did?

I'm very thankful for the work I do these days as a university professor, as a congregational consultant, as an interim pastor or supply preacher, as a seminar or retreat leader, and as a writer.

These roles give me meaningful work to do. None of them has the same identity-shaping or identity-expressing power that the vocation of pastor once had. It's good that they don't because I discern that one of my wilderness tasks is to be less concerned about role and more concerned about soul—to be less attentive to position and office and more attentive to personhood and the simple offering of my gifts. I get to learn that it is enough, more than enough, to be a child of God in whom God takes great delight.

Reynolds Price called the memoir he wrote about his struggle with cancer *A Whole New Life*. I resonate with the title. I'm beginning the fourth year of a *new* life, a life different than the one I imagined I would be living on the threshold of 60, a life more acquainted with loss and pain, but also more sure of grace and more open to joy.

It's a *whole* life in that the whole of me has been affected: body, mind, soul, spirit, relationships, and vocation. It's also whole, though, as in healed-and-being-healed. Not *cured*, but *healed-and-being-healed* of fragmentation and fear.

I'm not out of the wilderness. I don't expect to be. The liberated Hebrew slaves wandered in a desert for 40 years, living on mercy and manna, which came day by day.

They had each other and they had enough signs of God's presence to keep them on their feet. I do, too. My wilderness life is still a *life*, one which is new and whole and good.

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