



A Convocation

by Becky De Oliveira—

August 2009. My husband was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Now, this is the “best kind of cancer to have” as no fewer than a dozen people informed me at the time—and experience proved them more or less correct. Japhet recovered after only two surgeries and two rounds of radiation over a period of about 15 months. It only cost us about \$11,000 out of pocket, and I only had to talk to a representative from an insurance company questioning the “appropriateness of the treatment” at 7:30 in the morning on one occasion. While it was suggested, in the end we never did have to fly to Malaysia for cheaper treatment. He had both his surgeries in the great state of Michigan—in St. Joseph and Ann Arbor, respectively.

So in the grand scheme, no big deal. But at the time, I was freaking out. Our kids were small—just nine and five years old. You hear the word cancer and everything fades to black. I catastrophized a little. I’d be left alone to raise these kids. They would have no father. I would have no husband. We lived in Michigan, away from both our families, but at least I had a job there. Would I be able to keep it? What was I going to do?

The day of his first surgery, in St. Joseph, I hung out the whole day until the surgeon came to speak to me. “There was cancer everywhere,” he said, ominously. “I think I got it all.” (As it turns out, he hadn’t. Hence the second surgery 15 months later in Ann Arbor.) I unleashed a torrent of tears all the way home—relief? fear?—and then pulled myself together to put on a brave and happy face for the kids, who knew Dad was sick but weren’t especially worried out it. And that, of course, was by design.

He was awake the next morning, so I visited him before going to work. He was groggy and in pain. When I arrived on campus, emotionally frazzled and raw, I headed to Pioneer Memorial Church for convocation. I was unprepared to march as I usually would—I’d left my regalia at home—but I didn’t feel like going to my empty office alone. I wanted to be where people were, and convocation was where everyone was that morning. I found the rest of the members of my department. They were all lined up and ready to march into the church. They urged me to join them. “I’m not wearing my regalia,” I pointed out. “Who cares?” they said, waving their hands dismissively. They engulfed me into a great warm wave of robed and hooded bodies, and I was swept along, up the middle aisle of Pioneer Memorial Church, wearing jeans and, probably, a t-shirt. I saw some of my students in the audience. They smiled and waved. “Look how cool Becky is,” some of them later said they whispered to each other. “She doesn’t even have to wear



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the stupid gown!”

The fallout, of course, was swift. There was a lengthy email to the faculty the next day urging appropriate attire for convocation, but the person who wrote it had no idea of my personal circumstances. He didn't understand how much that simple act of inclusion— “You will join us; you are one of us; we don't care what you're wearing” —had soothed my weary soul. It made me stronger and more able to face everything that came: the drive home from the hospital, the two weeks of post-radiation isolation, the weeks of recovery, the worry, the bills, the holding it all together so the kids would feel secure and no one would be too uncomfortable.

Turns out I did have family in Michigan.

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