

In late April 2017, when I was a sophomore in high school, I was diagnosed with leukemia. When I first heard the news, I was in shock. But shock was a luxury I could ill-afford. I needed, instead, to rapidly make a decision: fight and live or surrender and die.

I reached deep inside myself, and I chose to fight and live.

I quickly learned, however, during the course of my treatment, that all of life's choices come with consequences. In the past year and a half of treatment, I have become intimately aware of such consequences, but, never once, during this entire time, have I ever wavered in my commitment to live.

At the start of the process, I was blissfully unaware of all of this: Moments after hearing about my cancer diagnosis, I met with my new oncologist who outlined the three year 'routine' - as if anything, I have since learned, about leukemia is ever routine - treatment protocol was scheduled to follow. Unfortunately, my particular experience with leukemia has been anything but routine.

During that initial meeting, the doctor also outlined the likelihood of my experiencing certain anticipated 'speed bumps': The euphemism used by the oncologist to describe potential, anticipated side effects of the chemotherapy. In actuality, not only did I encounter most every one of these named speed bumps, I also encountered a slew of far more severe unnamed, unanticipated speed bumps along the course of my treatment. In fact, these unanticipated speed bumps were the primary cause of my being hospitalized for eighty-five days, a third of which time was spent in the hospital's intensive care unit.

The first unanticipated speed bump arose at the start of my treatment protocol. Due to a physical mutation, my body rejected the initial round of chemotherapy. As a result, my treatment protocol had to be revised, leaving me more vulnerable to stumble upon more severe medical complications during the rest of my treatment.

And stumble I did. For example, throughout the course of my treatment, I developed pneumonia, sepsis, pancreatitis, and severe sores, extending from my mouth to my bowel. All of these conditions were physically painful and medically life-threatening, requiring my immediate placement in the hospital's intensive care unit.

In addition to the aforementioned unanticipated physical speed bumps, I also experienced a slew of extremely uncomfortable anticipated physical speed bumps, including: episodes of extreme nausea, loss of appetite, loss of hair, and debilitating fatigue. Not to mention my having to endure endless rounds of chemotherapy, blood tests, and blood transfusions, which will continue up until August 16, 2020.

Still, all throughout, I persevered.

Having lived throughout Hurricane Sandy, I am well acquainted with natural disasters,

but nothing could have prepared me for the all-consuming leukemia tsunami which has enveloped my life since last April. During this entire period of time, leukemia has tried its best to take everything away from me. And yet, paradoxically, the more leukemia weakened me, physically, the stronger I became, mentally. For example, I was determined to graduate with my high school class, despite, suggestions to the contrary by well-meaning school administrators. In the end, I returned to school in the Spring semester of my junior year, took three academic classes, and finished at, or near, the top, in all three of those classes.

Still, some of life's speed bumps are harder to surmount than others: On March 11, 2018, I learned that my father had taken his life the day before. This particular mental speed bump -this particular personal tragedy - far longer for me to process.

In April 2017, a frightened teenager stared death in the face and chose life. Thereafter, that same teenager suffered mightily for this choice. Still, in the end, while leukemia was my nemesis, I refused to allow leukemia to become my namesake. Quite the opposite, in fact, in trying to destroy me, leukemia, paradoxically, has helped me to become the strong, confident person I am today.