

Reason for Everything

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Recommended Citation

Shadoan, Katelyn (2018) "Reason for Everything," *The Mall*: Vol. 2 , Article 32.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol2/iss1/32>

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Reason for Everything

Katelyn Shadoan

A blaring, never-ending beep woke me from a short night of sleep. I pried open my weary eyes and glanced at the red glare of the alarm clock on my nightstand. Wednesday morning had finally arrived, and I was ecstatic. I crawled out of my bed covers and leaped out of bed, flipping on all the lights as my room lit up like a Christmas tree. I hurried into my little brother and sister's room down the hall switching on their lights as they grunted at the sight of the bright morning light. My navy and white striped sweater along with my favorite pair of dark jeans were all laid out on my floor, wrinkle-free and ready to wear. I had to make the best first-impression for my first day of high school, since this was the beginning of the next four years of my life. I scurried down the stairs and out to the front door for our classic first day of school pictures. Primping my perfectly curled hair and sliding on my sandals, I was ready to take on my first day of freshman year. My siblings and I jumped in my mom's car with sprinkled donuts in hand, along with the excitement and readiness to conquer another year of school.

"Have a great first day, sweetie! You'll be great!" my mom embarrassingly shouted out her car window as I walked across the parking lot and opened the door of awaiting opportunities that lured me inside.

I was fourteen years old and filled with more excitement than ever before. School had never been necessarily exciting for me, until my freshman year began. I began to picture what my new life would look like, who I would hang out with, and all the endless possibilities I would be given. I was a football cheerleader on the JV squad and thought that I ruled the school. As any other freshman thought, this was a new school where I would make all new friends and have brand-new, exciting surroundings.

I knew I had a busy year ahead of me, filled with lots of homework, cheer, and less sleep than I was used to. Cheering for the school team, while also cheering competitively for Indiana Elite, didn't leave me much free time during the week. While balancing practices with a new and more intense homework load, I knew I was in for more than I had hoped for. As my mom has

always told me, “You never know until you try,” so I decided to give it a shot. Being the vulnerable fourteen-year-old that I was, I thought I could do anything and everything. Unfortunately, this mindset didn’t turn out in my favor as I originally hoped it would.

As I continued on with my busy schedule, I slowly became lethargic and worn out toward the end of my first semester. My family began to notice this when I’d come home from school and fall into a deep sleep until I woke up to the alarming sound of my mom’s voice, “Sweetie, it’s time for dinner!” I let out a grunting sigh and counted down the hours until I could go back to sleep again. Surprisingly enough, I would still be tired enough to sleep for almost nine more hours the same night. My siblings and I gathered around the dinner table while my mom brought out the sizzling chicken tenders and cheesy mashed potatoes, our classy family dinner. We sat around and told the funniest and most embarrassing stories from our day at school, laughing until all of our stomachs clenched, and we couldn’t make out any more words. As much as I enjoyed every crazy moment around my family, I felt as if I wasn’t fully present mentally. I was so tired all the time, and all I could think about was sleep.

I felt as if I was dragging a lifeless body along with me wherever I went, but that wasn’t stopping me yet. I continued cheering and going about my weekly schedule with limited free time with my friends, until my tired body became too heavy to keep pushing along. My concerned parents scheduled me an appointment with our family doctor, for a usual checkup that would give them some reassurance about my energy levels and health status. At least that’s what they were hoping would be the definite answer from my doctor.

One day after school, my mom picked me up early from school and we headed to the doctor’s office. I never liked this place, especially because I clearly remember my mom dragging me here when I was little for a “just a checkup,” but I usually came out with two or three pokes on my arm covered with Scooby-Do Band-Aids. My mom expressed her concerns to our doctor, which she concluded were fairly normal, but decided to prick my finger anyway and test me for mono. The results came back positive, and the doctor ordered me to sit out of cheer along with any physical activity for four to five weeks. I was devastated I couldn’t cheer and was forced to sit out and watch my teammates continue on without me. After a few weeks with lots of rest and hydration, I wasn’t getting any better. I’d still randomly wake up in the middle of the night to my

clothes drenched in sweat, feeling like I just ran 50 miles, along with a fever of over 100 degrees. I was frustrated with myself for getting sick, especially when I was so excited to cheer with all my new friends at the high-school level, which I had dreamt about since I was a little girl.

As I continued to watch my teammates cheer from the sidelines, I became lonely and sicker. My parents were more worried about me than ever before and began scheduling appointments with a variety of specialists. Our family doctor referred us to Riley Children's Hospital, where I would soon get many CT and PET scans as more doctors attempted to uncover the reason behind my mystery illness. I cannot explain the frustration I was feeling, but I sometimes catch myself remembering what it felt like. I was disappointed in myself for ruining my opportunities that I was so ecstatic for all summer leading up to my freshman year. I knew this journey was going to be a long one, and my body kept assuring me of that. After a weary, dreadful, and perplexing twenty-two appointments of blood draws, scans, and debriefing with many different specialists at Riley, I was finally given my ultimatum.

I recall sitting on the crinkly tissue paper on the exam room table, waiting aimlessly for the doctor to return. My mom was sitting in the chair across from me, and I clearly remember hearing the mumbling from the nurses and doctors outside the closed wooden door. The hematologist was supposed to return with the results of my latest PET scan. I sat up on the table as we heard a knock, my heart rate steadily racing. The doctor sat down next to my mom with a trembling look on her face, crossing her legs while she gathered her thoughts. I had already guessed the outcome, but I knew my mom was still hoping for the best. My vision became blurry and I felt my body turn instantly cold, as my hands were shaking at my side.

My body began to shut down and my selective hearing only allowed me to make out a few words, "large mass behind the breastbone," "tumor," and "possibly malignant." The room was originally filled with desperate hope, which slowly faded away after each word she spoke. My mom burst into an uncontrollable number of tears as the doctor grabbed her a tissue box and reached for a hug, embracing the fear and sadness everyone was attempting to avoid. I was present physically, sitting on the table in silence with a cold, stiff face and a strong gaze at the doctor that hadn't broke since I watched those words trickle out of her mouth into the bitter, cool air. My mind was racing, and I couldn't force out any tears, emotions, or words. My legs had

stopped bouncing from anticipation. My hands had stopped sweating and I felt my heart stop beating. My vision still appeared blurry, even though the outcome was now clear. I had been diagnosed with stage 3 Hodgkin's Lymphoma, an extremely rare type of blood cancer. Rare enough that only ten percent of cases are diagnosed in teenagers and children in the U.S. each year. My spleen was severely enlarged, and I had diseased tumors sitting behind my breast bone and surrounding my spleen. I was about to embark on a journey that no normal teenager should experience, or anyone at all. The next year and a half of my life was going to be a constant battle, but I was ready to fight.

Breaking the news to my family was hard and unbearable, as I watched the disappointment and fear appear in the faces of my brother and sister. I was supposed to be their role model, the oldest sibling that was there to help them with anything they needed, and I felt as if I had let them down, let my team down, and let myself down. I couldn't bear to think of myself as "the sick cancer kid" when I was always so energetic and hopeful. I wish I could say that I only had positive thoughts throughout this whole experience, but that wasn't the case. I became frustrated and upset with God and with myself. Why was God letting this happen to me? My life was great, so why now? What did I do to deserve this?

The next few days were a blur, with more hours spent in the hospital and in procedures than hours of sleep I received. The day after my diagnosis, I had my port inserted so I could begin chemotherapy as quickly as possible. School was obviously not the main concern for me or my family at the time; their first priority was making sure I was healthy again. I was given a rigorous schedule of a three-month treatment plan, which included two eight-hour sessions, two four-hour sessions, and one thirty-minute session of chemotherapy each week. I began my first eight-hour chemo the next day, which came with lots of great naps, endless snacks, the most supportive family members, and the best doctors and nurses in the world.

One of the few reasons I was determined to keep fighting and never give up was not purely due to inner strength, but more so from the people that surrounded me. My first treatment was full of lots of fear, tears, and hand-holding. My parents were right there by my side helping me push through the pain and worry, along with my doctors and nurses. After I got through all the sticking and poking, I dozed off to give my puffy eyes some rest. I woke up, to what I

assumed was a few minutes but turned out to be over three hours later, to the sound of an unfamiliar voice. “Lord, I ask that you watch over and provide her with enough strength and courage to keep on fighting through this battle. Amen.” I slowly peeked over my blanket to see who it was. Nevertheless, it was our family pastor from church, Dustin. When my parents broke the news to our community, Dustin was the first to call and check in. He asked if he could come visit and give a quick blessing of healing. My parents and I were overwhelmed by this gesture and all the kind words we received from our family and friends.

As I quickly learned the ropes of life in the hospital as a “sick kid,” I became very close with my nurse, Alisha, who always gave me courage to keep fighting. She became my best friend and was the most trustworthy person throughout the whole process, especially because she was always willing to tell me the cold, hard truth. We talked about everything, from hair loss and learning to eat even when I felt too nauseous to stand, to catching up on all my school work and staying in contact with my friends. Alisha gave me comfort on the hardest days and helped me smile through the unbearable pain. As I lay there on my stiff, cold bed, she sat beside me as we watched my favorite Bravo shows and gossiped about all the characters. She always knew exactly how to cheer me up and helped me through the days when I felt too weak to keep on fighting.

I had the biggest support system and always had someone checking up on me, but everyday still seemed to get tougher and tougher. I felt my face flush from the liquid poison that was dripping into my veins through a tube that stretched from the IV pole up my shirt and became queasy and nauseous. I didn’t want to eat or drink anything, not even my favorite sour patch kids and starbursts my mom always brought with her. As I’d wake up with groggy eyes from a deep, four-hour sleep, my bladder would be so full I was sure I was going to explode. My parents would sit me up and drag me out of bed, as I wheeled my IV pole behind me, down the hall from my isolation room to the bathroom. The walk was about thirty seconds for any normal human being, but for a sick kid like me, it felt more like a three-mile crawl to the finish line.

After many rigorous treatments and more trips to the hospital than one person should have total in their lifetime, the day had finally come. April 14, 2014, was my last day of chemotherapy and I was cancer free. The support my family and I received from our community

along this journey was remarkable and almost unbelievable. My school cheer team hosted a chili dinner in my name in which they designed and sold t-shirts, collected donations, and told my story at our school's pep rally for Riley in preparation for our Riley Dance Marathon. Everyone was so supportive and caring, which made it all much more bearable knowing I was supported by the people who mattered most. I was constantly showered with gifts, big and small, from so many people, some I barely even knew. I decided I wanted to do something with all of the support I was receiving, so I decided to design my own t-shirts. They were bright pink and had a quote on the front that read, "Don't worry about tomorrow, God is already there." and the back designed with the hashtag "#pray4kate." I raised over \$1,600 with the help of my classmates, friends, family, teachers, and coaches who all contributed. I decided to donate all the money raised back to blood cancer research, in hopes of increasing the chances of finding a cure for cancer.

Everything happens for a reason. This cliché often comes to mind when thinking about my journey through adolescence. As I look back on my experiences from freshman year, I realize that life is too precious to waste. I have become more appreciative of each and every day, finding the little joys in life. Not only did my journey shape me into the person I am today, but it has also allowed me to look at the world with a different perspective. I have a more open-mind and a kinder heart that allows me to push myself outside my comfort zone through new experiences. Now that I am healthy and fully recovered, I remember the positives during the hard times that got me through. I remember there's always a purpose behind everything. Even though I haven't fully discovered God's purpose for my journey yet, I'm determined to find an answer. I hope this purpose grants me the opportunity to give back and help others through hard times, like my family and nurses did for me. This journey has made me especially thankful for my health and has also contributed to my newly inspired motto: "Live each moment like it's your last."