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NON-FICTION | SPRING 2016

## Who's Counting

By Beth Leibson

Can cancer count? Obviously not.

Like any other group of cells, cancer cells aren't especially mathematically inclined.

Cancer cells do have certain skills, though. They grow out of control – think cells gone wild – because, and this is another one of their annoying traits, they don't listen to all the body's signals that enough is enough. Remember the situation when Calvin, of Calvin and Hobbes fame, built a replicator and created a half dozen clones of himself? Now imagine a replicator that doesn't break down.

If overpopulation weren't enough, cancer cells also conquer existing healthy cells and enslave them, forcing the healthy buggers to produce food and cook (AKA provide oxygen and nutrients) and take out the trash (often called body waste). These cancer conquerors even connive healthy cells into hiding them underground, concealing them from the body's immune system. Someone ought to sit down with our healthy cells and explain the concept of “enabling.”

But counting is not in the cancer cell repertoire.

Or is it?

When we're five years out from diagnosis and those nasty little cells are nowhere to be seen, we say we've been clean 'long enough' and we're in remission. When a woman in her twenties has a lump in her upper chest, she often hears that she's “too young” to have breast cancer. If they can't count, then how are those cells figuring out how to use a calendar?

Then of course, the cancer cells (often but not always) know to run for cover when they've been doused with a given number of chemotherapy showers or radiation bursts. At 11 blasts, they're still willing to go up to play but when it hits 12, they want to run for cover? Somehow, when we look for reassurance, we're willing to concede certain intellectual skills to those tiny oncological units.

Might there be some secret sort of covert counting conspiracy?

Here's the thing: I was diagnosed with cancer in 2007, 2010, and 2013. So, as we face the dawn of 2016, this question – can cancer count? -- takes on some significance for me.

I guess I'm a little superstitious. My father died when he was 36, for reasons not related to cancer. So, when my ex-husband reached his mid-30s, while we were still married, I was very nervous. And when we celebrated his 37<sup>th</sup> birthday, I planned a series of surprise parties for him to symbolize my own surprise – and relief – at his achievement. (A series because he figured out about the first one but I assumed that by the third one he'd be at least a little bit stunned. Though I suppose I overdid it as he told me, "Next year, I'm not telling you when my birthday is.")

The good news is that if I make it through 2016 with an oncological clean bill of health, I'm home free. Woo-hoo. Medical mundanity. No more cancer. Hear that, body cells?

The catch: twelve months is a long time to hold your breath.

Three isn't always such a great number, either. After all, two is company, but three is a crowd. You want to evade a three-alarm fire or anything that's as cold as a three dog night or phony as a three-dollar bill. And it's best to avoid becoming three sheets to the wind.

Usually, though, three is considered a lucky number. Three times is a charm, three times lucky, and it's great when something is as easy as one-two-three. Threes can also be a lot of fun, like at a three-ring circus or three cheers for the home team (which would be those benign cells!). In Christianity, there's the notion of the Holy Trinity, but I don't know if that bodes particularly well for me, as a Jew.

In the end, I'm flexible. I'm willing to go with the notion that cancer cells can't count. Or I'm prepared to assume they can – on the theory that they're equally familiar with certain of our superstitions and idioms. I'm trying to replace the notion of cancer cells that can count with an All-American concept focused on baseball. The idea being three strikes and you're out. I want those cancer cells to know they had three shots at me -- and they've struck out. So now they have to take their bat and ball and leave me alone.

I'm even willing to consider the possibility -- thanks to all my wonderful doctors -- that medical care is relevant here.

But either way, you'll probably hear me sigh come New Year's Day 2017.

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