

DEFINING HEROISM

U.S. literacy has not changed since 1990. So for those of you still reading, here is a spelling quiz. Spell heroism. Well, I do not know either, but maybe if we used it in a sentence. Hmmm, how about this; heroism is no farther or more familiar than ones everyday freedom to choose.

Here is a true story of a young fellow who didn't win seven Tour de Frances or cavort with Sheryl Crow, but who was ravaged by the same beast as Lance Armstrong and also conquered mountains.

Jacob was a 20-something, engaging and indomitable USAF Sergeant. Suddenly, testicular cancer, worse than Lance's, ravaged Jakes abdomen, lungs, bones, and brain; yet not his spirit.

Weaned in rough and tumble barrios, Jake always had mountains to climb. He saw the cancer as no greater peak than he had faced before. He embraced the diagnosis with maturity beyond his years and spent hospital time cheering up other patients. Then all hell broke loose. Relentless nausea and vomiting; kidney and lungs were both failing. After massive surgeries, Jake was simply too wasted to even cast a shadow.

Yes, Jake loved to climb mountains. His dream was to conquer Half Dome in Yosemite. It became his vision quest, his reason to fight. We would talk of manly things, athletic escapades and the heroic exploits he would have when well. When it appeared that we might loose the battle, his engaging and courageous demeanor smote me. It was the right stuff of heady inspiration.

I saw him 12 weeks before the big showdown - the one-year mark after therapy. He was a cane-assisted, barely walking testimonial to the carnage of his journey. His right chest wall had been partially removed and replaced by space age alloy mesh while two titanium rods strained to support his spine. There was no mistaking his battle-wearied seriousness as he stated calmly to me before we reviewed the test results, 'Doc, a man has to know what a battle is and what a war is. I am not going to confuse em. So, in three months we are at a year, a year since the last chemotherapy. If it is back again, well, ah, I ain't afraid of dying as much as I am of not ever living again É so its okay É well just find a way.'

Three months passed. There was something impish and teasingly spry about Jacob. There was a lilt in his banter. An engaging hint of a wry smile flirted across his face. Crazy sprouts of curly black hair danced merrily on his once bald head.

That was when he produced his prize. Unbeknownst to me, he had gathered all manner of folk who had shared his two-year saga just outside the exam room. Beaming and bouncing, he produced his treasure trove. It was a small banged up, seen better days, dirty cooler. With pomp and circumstance befitting a king, he bid me to open it. Placed on a bed of mountain laurels, moist, and glistening, as were both our eyes, was a wet, weeping ball of ice - a snowball. He handed me a photo. Plain in Gods sight and shirtless with a deformed chest and titanium rods in his back sticking out like bionic harpoons, was

Jake. He was high atop Half Dome in Yosemite, smiling wider than the valley with his fists in the heavens and a snowball in his hand. It snowed in my clinic that day. We both went out to play.

So, how do you spell heroism? It is not TV, CD, or DVD. How about this - m-i-r-r-o-r. Heroism is reflected in the choices we can make everyday - to be more afraid of not ever living again, than afraid of dying. Now go out and slay your dragons.

P.S. Jake is a father, husband, a software executive and oh yes, still a mountain climber.

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.