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INTRODUCTION:
GOING ON A BEAR HUNT

As a kid, one of my favourite campfire sing-alongs was “Going on a Bear Hunt.” For the uninitiated out there, it’s a simple enough ditty where the leader sings one line and rest of the group repeats it.

We’re going on a bear hunt. (Repeat)
We’re going to catch a big one. (Repeat)
I’m not scared. (Repeat)
Look at alllllll those stars. (Repeat)

(Now, as an animal lover, I don’t really like the idea of shooting a bear. So for our purposes, let’s say this bear hunt is more like a catch-and-release kind of operation, where we’re looking for a bear cub so we can return him to his mother.)

For each verse, someone picks an obstacle that their band of intrepid bear hunters must find a way to overcome — a tree, pit of vipers or other impediment barring the way forward. For example:

A tree! (Repeat)
Can’t go over it. (Repeat)
Can’t go through it. (Repeat)
Can’t go under it. (Repeat)
Guess we’ll have to go around it. (Repeat)

The song continues indefinitely, as various obstacles are identified and overcome on the way to the bear’s
cave. Ogres and quicksand you go around. Rocks and logs you go over. Low-hanging branches and dragon-guarded bridges you go under.

But what happens when you’re confronted with a scorching desert, raging snowstorm or lethal minefield that stretches for miles in every direction? Indeed, sometimes on your journey, you crest a hill and come face to face with an obstacle that leaves you with only one option: Sometimes you just have to go through it.

Obstacles come in many shapes and sizes. Ironically, the biggest one I’ve ever faced was so tiny you needed a microscope to see it when I was diagnosed with leukemia at age 27. But whether it’s a break-up, a challenging time at work or a nasty bout with cancer, we all face obstacles in life.

The stories in this collection are about those times. Some are about my experience with cancer, while others hearken back to different moments in my life. And I hope the pages that follow offer some helpful, obstacle-busting ideas for whatever bear hunt you’re on.
MY STORY

Looking back, you’d wonder how I could miss so many of the early signs. But hindsight is 20/20. And when you’re 27 years old, your biggest health concern tends to be something like dandruff, not leukemia. Cancer never entered my mind.

Still, the symptoms were there.

Creeping crisis

In 2007, I was working in Toronto as a project coordinator for an international development charity. I was by no means a health freak, but I took care of myself. I biked to and from work, going so far as to carry my bike up the nine flights of stairs to my apartment each evening. I was a vegetarian, didn’t smoke and did my best to avoid fast food joints. I loved to hike and competed in eight-hour adventure races that involved trekking, canoeing and mountain biking through the wildnesses of Ontario.

When I think about it now, I probably should have noticed something was amiss at one of those races that summer. The event took place near Ottawa, and I had teamed up with two of my brothers, Dan and Damien, to form the “Mad Martins.” During the mountain bike leg, I kept falling behind, completely winded.

Gasping for air as my brothers disappeared around a bend far ahead, I tried to pedal harder. It was one thing to be outpaced by Dan, who was a bit of a fitness nut. But Damien? Come on! The man never got exercise. Embarrassed, I climbed a small hill to find Dan and Damien once again waiting for me to catch up. I’m really out of shape! I thought.

What I didn’t realize at the time was that me dragging my butt had less to do with my workout regimen and more to do with the fact that my oxygen-carrying red blood cells were dangerously low.

After an abysmal showing at the race, I returned to civilization. The weather turned cold and I put my bike away for the season, promising myself I’d get in better shape over the winter.
Bleeding eyeballs

I quickly forgot about my poor athletic performance and got back in the grind of deadlines and overflowing inboxes. But it didn’t take long for another sign of the microscopic mayhem raging inside me to show up — this time in the form of an annoying blurriness in my left eye. Too much time in front of the computer screen, I figured, shrugging it off.

By Christmas however, the blurriness was no better and I finally got around to booking an appointment with my optometrist. Maybe I needed eye drops or a new prescription. At her office, Dr. Tang shone a light into my eyes to see if she could suss out the source of the problem. It didn’t take her long. “The inside of your eyeballs are haemorrhaging,” she said. Well, that can’t be good, I thought.

Concerned it might be diabetes, Dr. Tang suggested I go see my family doctor to have some blood work done.

Annoyingness gave way to genuine concern.

584,000

“I need to see you,” Dr. Merker said over the phone. “We need to talk about these blood results.” My mouth went dry. He briefly explained that my white blood cell counts were through the roof and my reds ridiculously low. After agreeing to come by his office over lunch, I hung up the phone and stared blankly at my cubicle wall. Suddenly, all those urgent deadlines and emails didn’t seem so important.

Next stop: Google. I had no idea what a high white blood cell count might mean, but I knew it couldn’t be good. I typed in “high white blood cell count symptoms” and quickly scanned the results. There were several possibilities, but one kept popping up, site after site: leukemia.

Moving from concerned to scared to death, I hopped a bus and made my way to Dr. Merker’s office. Please don’t be cancer, please don’t be cancer, please don’t be cancer. I spent the entire ride repeating this prayer in my head.
Dr. Merker met me in his office and handed me a printout of my blood results. It might as well have been written in Klingon. Although today I’m an expert at reading and interpreting blood work, at the time I had no idea what I was looking at. Dr. Merker walked me through it.

He explained that the average number of white blood cells in a healthy adult male is somewhere in the range of 4,500 and 10,000 per microlitre. Mine? 584,000. Crap. Though we’d need a bone marrow biopsy to confirm, there was little doubt in Dr. Merker’s mind: I had leukemia. “You’ve got a journey ahead of you,” he told me.

I didn’t go back to work after my less-than-cheery visit with Dr. Merker. I didn’t call or visit anybody. Instead, I caught a bus back home. I stared out the window, marvelling at how the world could keep spinning when mine had just come to a screeching halt.

I cried, shattered and unprepared for this kind of obstacle.

Relax, you’ve got cancer.

The anguished wail of a woman snapped me back to my surroundings. I was sitting in the cancer ward at the newly opened Brampton Civic Hospital, waiting my turn to have a bone marrow biopsy to confirm Dr. Merker’s suspicions. The wail came from one of the offices adjoining the waiting room. It sounded like someone had just told her she was going to die. Quite possible, given where we were.

I didn’t want to be here. Though calm, cool and collected on the outside, I was a wreck. Besides my boss — who needed to know why I was missing so much work for the flurry of medical appointments that followed my initial visit with Dr. Merker — I still hadn’t told anybody about the cancer. No friends. No family. The pin was pulled, but I wanted all the information I could get before I hurled this grenade at my loved ones.

A nurse called my name. I got up and followed her to one of the patient rooms. I was terrified of what lay ahead, but also relieved to have the wheels finally in motion. The suspense was nearly killing me as much as the cancer was.

Let me be clear: Bone marrow biopsies suck. The doctor uses an auger-like hand tool to dig into your pelvic bone and snap off tiny chunk of bone and marrow. Not pleasant. A while later, an oncologist came bustling into the room, my chart in hand. “Relax with a capital R,” he told me.
Relax. Riiiiiiiiight.

He went on to explain. Although there was no question I had leukemia, the good news was I had an extremely treatable form of the disease. Chronic mylogenous leukemia they called it — CML for short.

Unlike other forms of leukemia, CML can typically be treated with a relatively new wonder drug called Gleevec. Taken orally once or twice daily, Gleevec doesn’t cure the cancer but keeps it in check, preventing the mutated chromosomes from mass-producing cancerous white blood cells.

It remained to be seen if the medication would work on me, but for the first time in a week, I let myself breathe.

The next few weeks went by in a blur. A weeklong hospital stay in Brampton so they could monitor me as the meds lowered my white blood cell count. Emotional emails, phone calls and visits with friends and family. Getting my records and care transferred to Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. Returning to work.

The bear hunt had begun. And unfortunately, despite my doctor’s rosy assurances that I could relax, the hunt was about to get far more difficult.
“Rare as hell,” my primary oncologist Dr. Lipton said as he reviewed the results of my latest bone marrow biopsy. My leukemia had gotten real aggressive, real quick, entering unexpectedly into what’s called the Blast Crisis phase. And while most of the medical mumbo jumbo I’d been bombarded with flew right over my head, I figured anything with a name like “Blast Crisis” couldn’t be a good thing. By the look on his face, Dr. Lipton was as stunned as I was at the latest development. He told me that in twenty years he’d only ever seen something like this happen once before.

Mama always told me I was special.

The medication I had been taking was no longer considered a viable long-term treatment option for me. Instead, I would need to blitzkrieg my body with months of powerful chemotherapy and radiation in an effort to pound the disease into remission. But even that wouldn’t keep the monster at bay. No, I’d need to rid myself of my defective bone marrow entirely and replace it through a risky stem cell transplant — assuming, of course, they could even find me a donor.

I worked up enough saliva in my mouth to croak out a question. “What are my odds?”

Dr. Lipton didn’t sugar-coat it. “Forty to fifty per cent.”

Hoo boy.

I returned home from my appointment with Dr. Lipton, shell-shocked. Forty to fifty per cent. A coin toss, really. With that in mind, I grabbed a quarter from the desk in my basement office. “Heads I live, tails I die” I said, flicking the coin into the air.

I caught the quarter and held it under my sweaty palm on the back of my other hand. I held my breath and took a peek.

Heads. Phew.
Though thrilled to have Lady Luck on my side, I knew it would take more than a fortunate coin flip to get through this. There are times in life when going it alone isn’t an option. This was one of those times. To survive this journey, I was going to need one hell of a team.


Lean on your team

No one is an island. There’s strength in numbers. Two heads are better than one. Whatever your preferred cliché, overcoming obstacles happens by having the right people by your side.

I would have to choke down a lot of big, nasty pills during my treatment. But the toughest pill to swallow was giving up my independence and asking for help. I hated putting my family and friends through this. Worse still, I hated the idea of being a burden. But as time went by and as the treatment took its toll, I would have to accept that I did, in fact, need help.

I also started to better understand that I wasn’t being a burden — my family and friends were desperate to help. When you’re facing an obstacle, the feeling of helplessness can be crushing not just for you, but for your loved ones as well. Letting them chip in, even if you might not think you need it, can be as much a gift to them as to you.

It took a while to be okay with it, but eventually I allowed myself to share my heavy load. Friends and family graciously offered to help out with household chores, rides to and from my appointments and other everyday necessities so I could focus on getting better.

No matter who you are, there will be times when your motivation flags, when everything that needs doing overwhelms you or when you can’t see the way forward. At those times, you’ll need to lean on the strengths and support of others.
Indeed, as I packed my bag for my month-long stay at the hospital to kick off my chemotherapy protocol, I was grateful to have more than a coin flip to count on.

Who’s on your team? Take some time to identify some of the key players who can help you on your journey. Who do you know who can provide you with motivation? Expertise? Distraction? A listening ear? On the flip side, who’s getting in your way of achieving your goals? Be mindful of negative people who might be draining your mojo.

Once you’ve identified your players, talk to them. Whether you formally invite them to be part of your journey is up to you, but it’s important to know who you can turn to when confronted with an obstacle.

Below are some of the roles various team members can play. Bottom line? Build a team that’s best equipped to handle the challenge at hand.
The Inner Circle

The Rock — Your Rocks are the people in your life you can depend on, no matter what. They’re the ones who’ll drop everything to help you, the ones you can spazz out on and not worry it’ll ruin your relationship, the ones you can call at 2 a.m. to come get you after your car breaks down. They’re also the ones who will tell you straight up when you’re acting like a total jerk and the ones who’ll be more than happy to give your butt a whooping when it needs it.

The Motivator — Finding your way through the wilderness can be exhausting — physically, mentally, emotionally. When the tank is running low, seek out your Motivators: the ones who always have a supportive thing to say. Positive energy is contagious. One coffee date with a Motivator can reenergize you for days.

The Distractor — Some people will tell you to weed out all distractions and focus on the problem in front of you. However, although hard work and focus are critical, sometimes you just need a break. At those times, having someone you can go see a movie with and not talk about whatever you’re going through can be exactly what you need.

The Experts

The Pro — Who are the experts you’ll need on your team? If you’re starting a new business, it could be your web developer, banker, partner and accountant. If you’re facing something like cancer, it could be your doctors, nurses, acupuncturist and pharmacist. If you’re training for a marathon, it could be your personal trainer, physiotherapist, nutritionist and the dude who can get you a deal on the gel that keeps your nipples from chafing.

The Mentor — Do you know someone who has experienced what you’re going through? Whether you’re looking for a new career, dealing with the loss of a loved one or picking up the pieces in the aftermath of a broken relationship, find someone who’s “been there, done that.” Not only for advice, but also for inspiration that there is indeed light at the end of the tunnel.

The Unbiased Ear — As great as friends and family can be at listening and understanding, your personal relationship and history means there will always be certain biases and baggage between you. You may be more willing and able to open up to professionals — be it counsellors, therapists, support groups, life coaches or the person at the other end of the crisis hotline — who can provide a more neutral and objective point of view.

The Ones to Be Wary Of

The Buzzkill — Also known as the Naysayer, Party Pooper or Sad Sack, the Buzzkill oozes negativity from his pores. Dissenting opinions and constructive feedback are great, but watch out for people who are doggedly pessimistic.

The Blocker — The Blocker has a knack of derailing your efforts. It could be the co-worker who doesn’t pull her weight or the micro-managing boss who doesn’t give you any creative latitude. It could be the friend who’s an expert at convincing you to go to an all-night kegger when you have an exam the next day. Keep Blockers off your team whenever you can.

The Biscuit — A Biscuit is someone who crumbles under pressure. When dealing with a big challenge, you want people on your team who know how to handle stress. For example, your mother may be the sweetest person in the world, but if she’s breaking down and yelling at your doctors every time you go in for a check-up, you may want to bring someone else along for your next appointment.
WHAT A SLEDGEHAMMER TO THE THUMB TAUGHT ME ABOUT USING THE RIGHT TOOLS

Back in 1997, my dad hooked me and my brother Nicholas up with summer jobs on a construction crew building a new pig barn near our home. As teenaged, pimple-faced manual labourers at the absolute bottom of the totem pole, our job was to suffer through whatever menial and unpleasant tasks our co-workers could think of.

Our crew was responsible for constructing the barn’s concrete foundation, floors and walls, and after a while our days took on a predictable routine. In the morning, we’d use interlocking wooden forms to create a mould for a new wall. After lunch, the cement truck would arrive and fill those moulds with wet cement. Once they hardened, we’d go and peel off the wooden boards and start the process all over.

One day, Nicholas and I were told to pry the forms off of a recently poured corridor floor. Seeing that this job would require more than my bare hands, I strolled over to the tool trailer and found myself a crowbar. Nicholas, however, decided that the 20-second walk to the trailer was far too arduous and opted instead to make use of whatever tools were within arms-reach.

The first tool on hand? Giant pickaxe.

Nicholas heaved the hefty tool into position, wiggling one point of it behind the wooden frame. He was close, but couldn’t quite wedge it in far enough to get the leverage he needed to pop the board off. He’d need to pound the pickaxe further down.

Enter tool number two: giant sledgehammer.

Nicholas steadied the end of the pickaxe in one hand and grabbed the sledgehammer in the other. Like a hard-hatted Norse god of thunder, he hoisted his mighty hammer aloft, gripping the handle near the head for better control. I cringed as the sledgehammer swung swiftly down, finding its mark. But instead of the metallic clang you’d expect from metal striking metal, all I heard was a dull, stomach-churning thud. Somehow, my
brother had managed to smash his thumb between the sledgehammer and the pointy tip of the pickaxe.

Picture the profanity-inducing pain that comes with hitting your thumb with a regular hammer. Now multiply that by a hundred. Nicholas shuddered as he dropped his ill-chosen tools and grabbed his now-mangled hand. His face contorted in pain, his mouth gaped open, but no sound came out, either from shock or embarrassment or both.

Our foreman, Paul, who had also witnessed the incident, wandered over to check on his moron of an employee who clearly could use immediate medical attention. “How’s your thumb?” he asked, his tone more mocking than empathetic.

“Oh, pretty sore,” Nicholas replied in what had to be the understatement of the century.

That night, Mom used popsicle sticks to set Nicholas’s broken thumb and sent him back to work the next morning to see what other bones he could break.

**Tools of the trade**

Whether you’re building a barn, getting in shape for a marathon or tackling a personal challenge, the right tools make all the difference. Oftentimes, using the wrong tool for a job can end up wasting more time — and causing more pain — than if you had done it right in the first place.

Sure, grabbing the sledgehammer and pickaxe sitting next to him saved Nicholas a trip to the tool shed. But in the end, his half-assery just led to a mangled thumb and a job poorly done.

Finding the right tools was key during my cancer treatment. Taking the subway to and from the hospital was an option, but not advisable considering my immune-compromised state. Instead, I was able to borrow a car from a friend to get to my appointments.

Getting enough to eat was super important, but at times super challenging as I realized while barfing out a hamburger a friend brought me. Taking the time to find chemo-friendly recipes and cookbooks made a world of difference.

And when I felt my anxiety levels spike, I learned to use the guided meditation CD my roommate had given me rather than curl into a ball in bed with the lights out.

Whatever obstacle you’re facing, take the time to identify what tools might help you through it. If you’re dealing with back pain, see if your HR department offers ergonomic
assessments. If your productivity is flagging, find a workspace with fewer distractions. If your relationship is on the rocks, consider couple’s therapy.

Before tackling a challenge, ask yourself some questions. What tools do you have at your disposal? Are they the right ones? What else might help you succeed? Because attacking a problem with a pickaxe may sound good in theory. But with a bit of thought, you’re bound to find better tools for the job.
WHAT A SUNDAY STROLL THROUGH BURNING NETTLE TAUGHT ME ABOUT LIFE’S SHORTCUTS

Whoever said two heads are better than one clearly didn’t know me and my brother Nicholas. Individually, we could make sensible — some might even say smart — decisions. Together was another matter entirely. We were the intellectual equivalents of beer and Cheerios: fine on our own, simply awful when combined.

As teenagers, the plans we hatched seldom went smoothly. A perfect example is the time we decided to embark on a two-day hike up the Nine Mile River near our home in rural Southwestern Ontario.

One bright summer morning, we slung backpacks filled with cans of brown beans, sleeping bags and some bug spray over our shoulders and started our mini-adventure. Our plan was simple enough: follow the river east, make camp when it got dark, sleep under the stars and trek back the next day.

We logged a lot of miles the first day, sticking close to the water’s edge where the brush wasn’t as dense. However, following the meandering twists and turns of the river was adding considerable distance to our journey. Fed up with our winding inefficiency, we made the decision to cut through a large patch of thigh-high vegetation to avoid a particularly long, lazy bend in the river.

Botanically ignorant, we failed to realize that the greenery was in fact something called burning nettle. The innocent-looking plants were actually covered in tiny, barbed “hairs” whose tips come off when brushed against. Once hooked under your skin, they release histamine and other chemicals, which produces its signature dear-god-my-flesh-is-on-fire stinging sensation.

Wearing shorts didn’t help our situation. By the time we emerged from the nettle patch, we were howling in pain and begging Mother Nature for mercy. Any time we might have saved cutting through the nettle was lost as we waded into the river in an attempt to soothe our inflamed legs.
Unfortunately, Nicholas and I are slow learners and decided to attempt another shortcut the next morning. With legs still raw from our misguided misadventure through the Patch o’Pain, we dreaded the long, winding return trip. We knew that there was a road not far to the north of the river that would provide a smoother, straighter — and nettle-free — route home.

To get there though, we’d need to first climb out of the steep river valley. Great in theory. Soul-crushingly miserable in practice.

Between us and the top of the hill was a wall of sharp brambles and dense thickets. It was only through a combination of Martin stubbornness, brute strength and a dull hatchet that we managed to hack and bully our way out of the valley.

By the time we emerged up top, our bloodied arms and legs made the burning nettle encounter look like a tickle fight. The road home was still a couple farmers’ fields away so we pushed onward, wincing as the morning dew from the ankle-high beans stung the open wounds on our legs.

**Shortcuts? No such thing.**

In the age of high-speed internet, fast food and same-day delivery, we’ve come to expect immediate gratification. Reality shows like The Voice and X Factor feed the fantasy of the overnight success. Meanwhile, a webpage taking more than four seconds to load or sitting in a plane on the runway for an extra 20 minutes is cause for murderous rage these days.

That expectation sometimes spills over to other aspects of your life. You want the perfect body, the corner office or the million YouTube subscribers — and you want it now. But as I learned on our hike along the Nine Mile River, there are few shortcuts in life. Far more often than not, success involves hard work, perseverance, patience, discipline, and yes, taking the long way home.

So keep putting one foot in front of the other. Take your time and enjoy the journey. Steer clear of those who peddle quick-fix solutions. Because like cutting through a patch of stinging nettle, shortcuts are rarely what they’re cracked up to be.
WHAT THE GREAT PORT ALBERT TOBOGGAN WARS TAUGHT ME ABOUT CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

The pom-pom on top of my toque bobbed as I trudged up the snowy Port Albert hill, my cheap plastic toboggan dragging behind me. My four-year-old cousin Ria walked ahead of me, toughing out the cold and the climb like a boss.

Suddenly, my Spidey senses tingled. Farther up the hill, I saw my uncle on his toboggan come roaring toward us. We were off to the side, but some quick-fire calculations in my head determined that this February freight train was heading straight for us.

Now, I put my snow pants on one leg at a time like anyone else, but I knew at that moment Ria needed a hero to save her. I snapped into action with only seconds left before my little cousin became a tobog-goner. Grabbing Ria, who was light as a popcorn fart, I tossed her off the path … and directly into a bramble patch where she became tangled up in thorny branches.

Naturally, my uncle came nowhere near us. You’re welcome, Ria. You’re welcome.

In my family, being tossed into a thorn bush is fairly mild compared to some of the other injuries endured on the toboggan hills. My sister Becky suffered a massive concussion after slamming headfirst into a tree. I got 36 stitches in the back of my left leg after crashing my sled into the pointy end of a fallen log. At best, our tobogganing afternoons ended in tears. At worst, a trip to the emergency room.

Our family’s competitive nature only increased the odds of these injuries. Every outing included a number of violent, full-contact, cry-home-to-mama races.

As a scrawny kid, I didn’t have a lot of weight to throw around. As a result, I got roughed up a lot by my three big brothers, who delighted in knocking me off my sled, running me into walls or sending me flying off the edge of the hill and into the woods.
It was business as usual one chilly afternoon, my brothers bullying me out of contention race after race. That is, until, I got an idea. We lined up at the top of the hill for another race, and sure enough, I didn’t make it a quarter of the way down the slope before I was flipped off my toboggan.

However, rather than wallow in defeat with a face full of snow, I jumped to my feet and ran back up the hill. While the others were still duking it out downslope, I put my plan into action.

Before long, my brothers came trudging back up the hill to find me casually waiting for the next race. We lined up for another battle. On your marks... Get set... GO! I pushed off and started toward the finish line. Immediately, fists and feet were flailing as we jockeyed for position.

My brother Dan grabbed the back of my sled, attempting to send me into a tailspin. This time, I was ready. Like a pilot hitting his ejector button, I leapt off of my toboggan.

In one fluid motion, I unzipped my coat and pulled free the plastic Crazy Carpet I had secretly wrapped around my torso while the others were finishing their last race.

Diving onto the plastic sheet, I torpedoed down the hill headfirst, crossing the finish line in first place. I made sure to throw in a braggy, over-the-top victory dance for good measure.

Laughing and pointing at my brothers, I revelled at my ingenuity. I beamed as I waited for their congratulations and pats on the back. Instead, I got a less-than-enthusiastic response. “We were wondering why you ran back up the hill so fast that last race,” said Chris. “We just figured you crapped your pants and needed to clean yourself up.”

Think outside the box

They say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Race after race, I was attempting to win through brute force. And race after race, I was getting beat up by my brothers.

Rather than continue to hit your head against a brick wall, approach a problem from a different angle. Get creative. Find workarounds. Seek out a fresh perspective on the situation from an outsider. If I couldn’t out-muscle my siblings, I knew I’d have to outsmart them. It’s about understanding your strengths and using them to your advantage.
Problem solving often means a lot of trial and error. The path to success is littered with mistakes and failure. It’s up to you to embrace those experiences as learning opportunities and use what you’ve learned to move forward. As media magnate Sumner Redstone said, “Success is not built on success. It’s built on failure. It’s built on frustration. Sometimes it’s built on catastrophe.”

It’s all right to be bummed when you make a mistake or fail at something. But don’t let disappointment spiral into brooding and an unwillingness to try again. Besides making me cold, I knew laying in a snow bank wallowing about yet another crushing tobogganing defeat wouldn’t do me any good. If I wanted to win, I had to get up, brush myself off and get my ass back up the hill. Because the next race was about to start.
WHAT ALMOST GIVING SHAUN A HERNIA TAUGHT ME ABOUT SELF-SABOTAGE

I stomped the gas pedal harder, kicking gravel and dirt up into my friend Shaun’s face. The back wheels of the used car I had just purchased sunk further into the soft earth, refusing to propel me up the steep laneway.

I transformed into a rage monster.

I blamed our friend Rob for having a cottage at the bottom of a hill. I blamed that sleaze ball car dealer who clearly sold me a lemon. I blamed Hyundai for allowing such a lemon off their assembly line. And I blamed Shaun and his no-good noodle arms for being too weak to push me to the top.

My blood pressure climbed steadily higher — unlike my no good, piece of $#%@ car. This was no way to end a beautiful Canada Day long weekend at the lake.

Releasing the gas, I angrily shooed Shaun away and put the car in reverse so I could have another run at the hill. As I looked down to make the gear change, I noticed one minor detail that I had overlooked.

My parking brake was on.

Cue face palm. Sheepishly, I leaned out my window. “Uhh... All right,” I said to Shaun who was still panting from our last attempt. “That was good. But this time, I’m going to try it without the emergency brake on.”

Needless to say, the next attempt up the hill went a lot better.
Setting yourself up for failure

If nothing else, the experience was a real lesson in self-sabotage. That, and the importance of remembering to disengage parking brakes.

How often do you look around for others to blame when something goes wrong, instead of reflecting on how you might have F’d things up? It’s certainly easier than assuming personal responsibility. The hill is too steep. My car is a piece of crap. Shaun is a big sissy. But no matter how many external obstacles — whether real or imagined — stand in your way, you may never get up that hill unless you’re willing to take a hard look inside and take ownership of a problem.

Besides, many external obstacles are outside our control anyway. I couldn’t flatten the hill to Rob’s cottage any more than I could have given Shaun a stronger back. But you always have control over how you respond to a situation, and a little bit of self-reflection may be all it takes to realize you left the parking brake on.
WHAT SLEEPING IN A BARN TAUGHT ME ABOUT KEEPING YOUR FIRES STOKED

Each December 26th, my mom’s side of the family gathers in Port Albert, Ontario for some post-Christmas partying. Invariably, the raucous event draws out-of-towners like myself who need a place to crash once we’ve exhausted the boxes of wine.

That’s where the Van Osch barn comes in handy. Now, before you start picturing me sleeping in manure with a bunch of pigs, let me explain. Years ago, my aunt and uncle cleaned out the building’s hay loft and converted the upper level into a finished, insulated guest suite, complete with its own washroom.

However, one Boxing Day, I hesitated to use it because my cousin and her boyfriend were already up there by the time I returned from the holiday revelry. The last thing I wanted was to walk in on them playing Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

Instead, I decided to sleep on a dirty couch on the ground floor of the barn — the uninsulated, unfinished and frigidly cold ground floor of the barn. Though questioning my judgement, Uncle Bernie nonetheless helped me out by loading up the wood stove that sat next to my makeshift bed. We popped inside the main house to let the space warm up, and after a couple more drinks, I bundled up and trudged out to the barn.

Suffice to say, Uncle Bernie knew how to make a fire. Stepping in from the howling, Huron County snowstorm, a heat fist punched me in the face and I was instantly drenched in sweat. I’ve dug wells under the noonday sun in Ghana. I’ve hiked in sweltering jungles along the Equator. I’ve played badminton in Taiwanese humidity.

The barn was hotter by far.

I immediately stripped everything off except my newly acquired Christmas gotchies, tossed the blankets to the floor, flopped down on the ratty couch and fell asleep in a pool of my own sweat.

Several hours later I woke up convinced I had been transported to a wampa’s cave on the ice planet Hoth. I would have killed for the warm guts of a tauntaun. The fire had
gone out while I slept, and any residual heat had long since been sucked out through the gaps in the barn boards.

I lay there in my underwear and wanted to cry. Impossible of course, since I’m pretty sure my tear ducts had frozen. My entire body was racked with chills so powerful my back ached.

With numb fingers, I put all my clothes back on, including my winter coat, toque and mittens. Adding more wood to the stove, I pulled the thin blankets over my head and spent the rest of the night convulsing from the cold.

Staying fired up

Projects we take on in life can often turn out to be like my Boxing Day in the barn: all fired up in the beginning but then quickly sputtering out. Whether it’s a new workout regimen, a book you’ve been picking away at or a home renovation, it’s important to find ways to stay motivated and ensure a sustained burn over the long haul.

Keep yourself energized by putting together actionable plans with clear milestones. Seek out mentors or collaborators to help keep that spark alive. Start an accountability group to share your goals with, and update them on your progress on a weekly basis. Surround yourself with like-minded people, whether it’s joining a running club as you train for a half marathon or sharing workspace with other passionate go-getters. Post motivational quotes or reminders around your home or office to remind yourself why you’re working toward something.

If you really want a new project to succeed, keep your fires stoked.
WHAT BILL CLINTON GETTING IN MY WAY TAUGHT ME ABOUT ADAPTABILITY

Bill Clinton has a personal vendetta against me. OK, that may be overstating things a bit. But still, the 42nd President of the United States does have an annoying habit of interfering with my plans.

The year was 2001. Having just completed my freshman year of university, I was keen to do a bit of adventuring. My brother Dan and his wife Ioanna were working in Hong Kong at the time and had just given birth to their first kid, Gabriel. The chance to visit my newborn nephew seemed like a great excuse to travel, so I packed my bags and hopped a flight for the Far East.

When I wasn’t hanging with Gabe the Babe, I was out and about, touring around the sprawling megalopolis. One afternoon, Dan returned home from work and relieved me from my babysitting duties. He suggested I check out a small antique market a short walk from the apartment.

Changing my t-shirt that Gabriel had once again covered in vomit, I stepped out into the oppressive heat. I didn’t get far. Although access to the antique market was literally across the street, getting there proved trickier than expected.

A wall of beefy men in black suits and sunglasses barred entry, their granite features and clear “I-know-how-to-kill-you-with-my-pinkie” vibe making me sweat even more. Weighing the pros and cons between getting into the market and having my arms torn off, I opted to give the scary men a wide berth.

I was disappointed by the unexpected detour, but made the most of it with a visit to a nearby shrine. Unfortunately, the peace and serenity I felt inside the sacred space was quickly replaced with mild paranoia as I exited the building and saw that the men in black were back and had now cordoned off the entire street I was on.

For a fleeting moment I wondered if it was possible that I was actually a rogue government agent with amnesia like Jason Bourne or Wolverine, and that these men were here to take me down. And that I would need to brawl my way through the streets...
of Hong Kong like a scene from a Jackie Chan movie, using deadly martial arts I didn’t know I had.

Nope. Just Bill Clinton.

The former Commander in Chief strolled out of a side street as his black-suited security detail kept a close eye on the small crowd that had gathered. The official story was that Billy Boy was in town for an economic forum. I prefer to think he was there with the express intent of disrupting my Hong Kong sightseeing. Stymied again, I left the scene in search of an alternate route back to the apartment.

Fast-forward five years.

By this point, I had graduated university and was working for a large international development charity. During the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto, I took the bus downtown to attend the event. It was a jam-packed day filled with inspiring and depressing stories in equal measure.

Too jam-packed, I discovered, when I realized how late it was and that I’d need to hightail it out of there if I hoped to catch my bus. I headed for the nearest exit and got a move on. Once again, I didn’t get far. Rounding the corner of the building, I skidded to a halt, the entire sidewalk jammed up with a large crowd.

With no time to spare, I considered worming my way through the sea of people, until I noticed that the way forward was blocked off completely. By several men. Wearing black suits. Who looked like they could kill me with their pinkies. The conference centre doors swung open and there he was: Bill “I’ve Got The Need to Impede” Clinton.

Half a decade later, the former US president was still out to get me.

Rolling with the punches

Whether it’s a flat tire, crappy weather or a saxophone-playing head of state messing with your schedule, life has a way of throwing monkey wrenches into even the best-laid plans. Indeed, being flexible is as important as being well prepared.

That was certainly true throughout my cancer journey. After I left Princess Margaret Hospital for my initial month of treatment, I was beaten up and had even less hair than what I went in with (which wasn’t much).
The first round of chemo had worked, hammering the rogue army of cancerous white blood cells into remission. However, it also took a serious toll on the rest of my body. I stepped outside and breathed in fresh air for the first time in over a month. Immediately, my super-chapped lips split and bled everywhere.

My friends Rob and Julie took me out for a celebratory lunch where I scarfed down so many fajitas, you’d think I was trying to gain back the 20 pounds I had lost in the hospital — and do it all in one sitting. I was hungry. High doses of steroids and six weeks of hospital food will do that to you.

After lunch, we headed toward the pharmacy to fill a prescription. Rather than go all the way to the crosswalk, we opted to make a break for it and jaywalk. I stepped into the street and started to run. Well, I attempted to run. With muscles completely wasted from the chemo, my legs buckled underneath me and it took everything I had to remain upright. Cars sped towards me as I staggered to the other side, begging my legs to work.

It was an important reminder that I was going to have to adapt to a new reality. Things were different now. With my liver already overloaded with all the toxic chemicals the doctors were pouring into me, I couldn’t go out for beer with the boys. My weakened immune system meant I couldn’t go to crowded movie theatres and had to do my grocery shopping at odd hours. I had to adjust my schedule around my medications, making sure drug A was taken on an empty stomach and drug B with a full one. And yes, sprinting across a busy Toronto street was no longer realistic.

As I adapted to life as a cancer patient, I also quickly realized that my journey from diagnosis to recovery was going to be a zig-zaggy one. I had a treatment plan, but frequent setbacks forced me to constantly modify it. My blood counts would sometimes crash and we would need to postpone some of my chemotherapy. A viral infection would knock me off course on more than one occasion. An adverse response to a particular drug meant the doctors would have to adjust my meds.

The more responsive and open you are to changing directions — be it finding a back alley shortcut in Hong Kong or taking a later bus home — the better equipped you’ll be to handle life’s curve balls. Below are a few ideas to get you started.

#1. Nurture a flexible attitude
Plans change, things happen, projects get derailed. Acknowledge that setbacks are inevitable so you won’t be too discouraged when they do happen.

#2. Be ready with a Plan B
Plan ahead so you can adapt to unexpected changes. Put away extra money to deal with an unpredictable car breakdown or health issue. Don’t put all your eggs in a single investment basket. Bring five ideas to the table in case your first four get nixed.
#3. Be open
Keep an open mind. There are a hundred ways to get from A to B so don’t be rigid about your plans. Listen to other people’s opinions, ask questions and explore your options. You may have a clear vision of what your engagement photos should look like, but your photographer may have an even better idea.

#4. Let go
Adapting to a new reality means letting go of the past. There’s nothing wrong with a little bit of nostalgia and reminiscing. But when that devolves into whining and fixating on how things used to be, then you probably need to give your head a shake and get back to the business at hand.

#5. Find opportunity in obstacles
Embrace change as an opportunity for growth. That big client backing out is an opportunity to introduce fresh ideas to your strategy. That broken leg is an opportunity to catch up on reading. Losing your job is an opportunity to re-evaluate your career goals. Fail your way to success by embracing snafus as learning opportunities.
WHAT THE DAWSON CITY DEMON TAUGHT ME ABOUT GETTING AWAY

My beer-filled bladder yanked me out of sleep, but I really didn’t want to get up to pee. Partly because I was warm and comfy inside my sleeping bag. Partly because the camp toilet was a bit of a hike from my cabin. But mostly because of her: the weeping demon girl, whose picture hung next to my bunk, waiting to steal my soul.

I’ve seen weird hotel art in my time, but this monstrosity was something straight out of a horror flick.

Eventually though, urinary yearnings won over my fear of creepy devil children and I crawled out of bed. Since it was two in the morning, I figured I could get away with a quick whiz next to my cabin instead of walking all the way to the outhouse. However, my hopes for an inconspicuous pee break were dashed when I pulled open the door and remembered where I was.

Right, I thought, stepping into daylight. This was July in the Yukon. The cover of darkness meant very little in the Land of the Midnight Sun. I relieved myself in plain view as quickly as possible and hoped none of the other campers saw me.

My cabin was part of the Dawson City River Hostel, which would serve as my home base while I was in town for the annual music festival. I needed the vacation. The monotony of the nine-to-five grind back home had been getting to me. I felt dried up creatively and a creeping feeling of being stuck had started to sink in. It was time to hit the road, and fulfilling a lifelong dream of visiting the Yukon seemed like the perfect escape.

It didn’t disappoint. In between rocking out to ukulele-laden performances and hanging out with my childhood hero Fred Penner, I spent my time exploring the tiny, time-warped town. The unpaved streets, relaxed pace and Klondike-era aesthetics gave the place a Wild West look and feel — a far cry from the go-go-go, modern madness of my then-home Toronto.

Those differences really hit me on a hike up the mountain overlooking Dawson City. Having grown up in rural southwestern Ontario, I thought I knew what “remote” looked
like. But even if I was camping deep in the woods somewhere back home, I knew a gravel road, farm or other sign of civilization was only a few kilometres away at most.

This was something else entirely. A vast expanse of awe-inspiring terrain and rugged wilderness surrounded Dawson City as far as the eye could see in every direction.

Double-takes and raised eyebrows were commonplace on this vacation, as the adventure and unfamiliarity of Canada’s North gave my brain a welcome workout. I was looking for a break from my cubicle in the big city and the trip to the Yukon delivered. I returned home with a refreshed and re-energized outlook (in addition to recurring nightmares of the Dawson City Demon Child). The creative juices were flowing and the time away helped clarify the path forward.

**The benefits of being out of place**

Changes in your external environment can affect your internal reality, and sometimes being out of place is the best place to be. Nothing unclogs creative juices or blasts you out of a rut like getting away. It’s not about running from your problems. It’s about getting perspective on them.

Feelings of stress, frustration and panic are the equivalent of stomping around in a river while looking for a gold nugget. The more you stomp, the more you muddy the waters and the harder it becomes to see anything at all. Sometimes the best approach is to step out of the river entirely and give the waters a chance to clear.

And getting away doesn’t always have to involve a plane ticket. I can’t count how many times stepping away from the computer to do the dishes or go for a walk has cured my writer’s block. A lot of times, stepping away from a problem and turning your attention to something else entirely is just the shift your brain needs to allow a-ha moments to break through.

The same goes for those times you feel like you’re in a rut. Teasing out the source of your ennui can take a lot of hard work, but something as simple as changing up your routine can be a great place to start. Whether it’s getting to the gym more often, rearranging your bedroom or taking a new route to the office, little changes can fuel your motivation for bigger ones.

However you choose to do it, getting out of your normal routine and disrupting the status quo may be the jumper cables your brain needs to kick-start your journey toward positive life changes.
Dealing with a major life obstacle can be all consuming. That’s certainly how I felt when I started the induction phase of my chemotherapy protocol in March 2008. As an inpatient, I was to stay at Princess Margaret Hospital for a month while the amazing team on Floor 15 reined in my wild blood counts. During that month, I would eat, sleep and breathe cancer.

When I wasn’t receiving chemotherapy, I was thinking about it. It’s hard not to. Being hooked up to a whirring and beeping IV stand 24/7, your circumstances quite literally follow you around. From my blood counts written on the whiteboard each morning to the containers I peed in so the nurses could measure my fluid output, CML crept into my every moment.

So preoccupied with trying not to die, I almost forgot about my 28th birthday at the end of the month. I was a bit bummed that I couldn’t go out and party with my friends, but true to their awesomeness, they brought the party to me. Under the leadership of my friends Rob, Meagan and Royce — and with a mob of more friends and family than I realized I had — a “human art show” was performed for me on the street far below my hospital room window.

Set to the tune of “Eye of the Tiger,” they ran around the cordoned-off street, forming words and pictures out of their bodies in an amazing choreographed routine. Having seen most of these people on the dance floor, I was impressed they could pull off such elaborate coordination. From high above, I watched them spell out words like Happy Birthday and OneMatch.ca, as well as morphing themselves into a birthday cake, fireworks and even two giant stick figures playing ultimate Frisbee.

The next morning, my nurse came into my room to check my weight and vitals. “You need to have more birthday parties,” she said cheerily. She then proceeded to write
down the day’s blood counts, which had taken a healthy jump in the right direction since the epic street performance.

A break from the incessant worrying and obsessing was just what the doctor ordered. Well, a potent combination of asparaginase, vincristine and dexamethasone was what the doctor actually ordered. But you know what I mean.

Remembering to breathe

My dad once told us kids, “Don’t be afraid to giv’er, but don’t giv’er all the time.” Sure, it’s not Shakespeare, but great advice nonetheless. Overcoming obstacles takes a lot of hard work, but no one has an infinite supply of energy. Balancing great effort with beneficial pause is crucial.

Breaks allow you to regroup and recharge your mental, emotional and physical batteries. They’re an opportunity to check the map and think strategically. Stepping back from the “one-foot-in-front-of-the-other” grind lets you take stock of the bigger picture and remind yourself of why you’re on your bear hunt.

I could only bury my head in literature about my leukemia for so long before I needed a break. When I found my brain endlessly obsessing about my situation, I’d distract myself with some light reading, a movie or some video games. My friends and family always wanted to know how my treatment was going, but we were sure to balance those heavier conversations with small talk about the weather, politics and whether Batman or Iron Man would win in a fight. (FYI, the answer is Batman. Obviously.)

Navigating obstacles can be a long and difficult process. Don’t forget to come up for air from time to time! Below are a few ideas to consider.

#1. Take a focus walk

One technique I use to get out of my head and its jumble of thoughts involves going for a walk and concentrating on just one sensory experience. For example, I may decide to focus on sounds and then make a deliberate effort to take a mental inventory of the various sounds I am hearing at that moment. You’ll be amazed at the symphony going on around you, from birds singing, to cars driving by, to the sound of your footsteps. Or, if I decide to focus on smell, I pay careful attention to the many aromas around me: the smell of flowers, leaves, my deodorant, concrete, or the old man ahead of me who clearly just farted. Bringing your focus to your immediate surroundings is a great way to clear your head and be in the moment.
#2. Meditate
Another way to get out of your head is by focusing on your breathing. Breathe in for a count of four, hold for seven counts, and slowly blow out for eight counts. Repeat this four times in a row twice a day.

#3. Set boundaries.
These days, the prevalence of emails and smart phones can tie us to our work 24/7. Whether you implement a strict no-phone rule at dinner, set aside one day a week as date night or join a beginner’s kung fu class, it’s important to make an effort to step away from your bear hunt from time to time.

#4. Switch off the guilt.
Don’t beat yourself up for wanting to take a break. Breaks not only let you recharge your energy, but a change in scenery can also get the problem-solving juices flowing. I can’t count how many times I’ve been stuck staring at a blank screen with writers’ block and how getting away from my desk to do the dishes or go for stroll around the block will jar the ideas loose and give me the words I was looking for.

#5. Go on a retreat.
Going on a personal retreat can give you the peace and perspective you need to tackle an obstacle. Pack your bags, get out of town and embrace the clarity that solitude and new surroundings can bring.

#6. Socialize.
Even if it’s just a half-hour coffee date with an old friend, force yourself to get out of your head and your house. Yes, there’s so much to do. But your relationships should be a priority and need to be nurtured and cared for too.
The Overcoming Obstacles Handbook

WHAT LIFE’S THUNDERSTORMS TAUGHT ME ABOUT PUTTING ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER

The day started out beautifully. My friends Shaun and Tina and I decided to take advantage of a sunny Saturday afternoon with a hike along Ontario’s Bruce Trail. We parked our cars at the trail access, laced up our boots, and headed out for a day of wandering through sun-dappled fields and forests.

A couple hours later, we agreed we had probably gone far enough and turned around to head back.

That’s when the weather changed. Fast. Ominous clouds rolled in, blotting out the blue skies we had been enjoying. The trees started to creak and sway as the wind whipped up. We picked up our pace, but even before the first thunderclap, we knew we wouldn’t be outrunning this storm.

It was a doozy.

We felt the first drops of rain while walking along the grassy edge of a farmer’s field. A moment later, we were drenched as the sky opened up and the torrential downpour began.

Soaked to the bone, kilometres from our vehicles, we pressed on through the howling wind. There was no sanctuary from the storm — nowhere to hide and no sense trying to wait it out, sopping wet as we already were.

The only option was to keep going; to put one squelchy foot in front of the other and hope the lightning bolts around us didn’t get any closer. As we made our way in single file along the now-muddied trail, my mind flashed back to a few years earlier, when I was navigating a much different kind of storm.
It was October 2008, and I was in isolation at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto after the bone marrow transplant I received to treat my leukemia. The incredibly complex medical procedure boiled down to the doctors decimating my defective blood-producing cells with heavy-duty chemo and radiation. Once the crappy stuff was destroyed, they transplanted new stem cells from a healthy donor.

There were some risky and unpleasant consequences of the transplant. Until my new transplanted stem cells engrafted, I was left with virtually no immune system and prone to all manner of infection. Hence the isolation. A simple sneeze from a visitor could spell disaster.

With no immune system, the usually harmless bacteria in my mouth were able to take hold and do some damage.

Large sores formed on my tongue, and every breath I took filled me with excruciating pain. I couldn’t eat. I had a hard time talking. The nurses made me sleep with the head of the bed raised up so I wouldn’t choke on my massively swollen tongue.

When I saw Dr. Galal the next day, I begged him to do something about the mouth sores. He was, of course. I was being treated with antibiotics and a mouth rinse to speed recovery along, and they had my morphine jacked up as high as they safely could.

A warm and compassionate man, Dr. Galal looked at me and assured me that they were doing everything humanly possible. “The only thing I can do,” he said, “is promise you that you’ll be feeling much better when I see you again next week.”

In the midst of the pain that the medication barely seemed to touch, “tough it out” wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear. But sure enough, in a few days time, the swelling went down and the sores started to shrink in response to the treatment. Slowly but surely, day-by-day, I eased off the morphine.

And when I saw Dr. Galal the next week during his rotation, I smiled at him and thanked him for keeping his promise.

Keep going

Like our walk through the woods or my mangled mouth, there are times in life when the only thing we can do is keep going. Caught in that thunderstorm with our cars still a long ways away, we just had to keep putting one foot in front of the
The Overcoming Obstacles Handbook

other. Stuck in the hospital with a mouth full of sores, I just had to endure and wait for the medications to work their magic.

Although there are challenges like these we simply can’t hurry along, I’ve found that there are always things we can do to make the storms more bearable. Below are some ideas that have helped me.

Life is full of unexpected rainstorms. But the trick isn’t to avoid or try to hide from them. There are some you simply won’t be able to outrun. No, the trick is to find ways to cope — to bring the right umbrella so you’re ready when the storms do roll in.

#1. Break it down
My journey from cancer diagnosis to recovery seemed to stretch on forever, with no end in sight. When you’re faced with an absurdly large problem, breaking it down into manageable chunks can keep it from overwhelming you.

#2. Celebrate the little milestones
Making a point to acknowledge the little achievements — getting through the first phase of chemo, remission, finding a donor, being able to do a push-up or walk up a flight of stairs — helped me see that I really was making progress. Set milestones for yourself along the way and celebrate your successes.

#3. Be disciplined
The best strategies in the world won’t matter unless they’re backed up with hard work. Find ways to stay focused. Learn to say no if you’re feeling stretched, get out of your house to study if you find your TV or roommate distracting or schedule a work date with a friend who will motivate you to stay on task.
WHAT A POOPY RAINSTORM TAUGHT ME ABOUT A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Getting drenched in a shower of feces may not seem like the best way to spend an afternoon. Especially while you’re in the hospital dealing with a life-threatening illness. Even so, there have been few occasions when I’ve laughed so hard.

It was October 2008 and I was back as an inpatient at Princess Margaret. After seven months of searching international bone marrow registries, my doctors had finally found me a match. With the anonymous European donor lined up, my weekly chemo outpatient sessions were stopped. Now I had to prepare for the big show: the bone marrow transplant that would (hopefully) cure me of cancer by replacing my garbage stem cells with healthy ones.

My month-long pre- and post-transplant stay in the hospital made my induction phase stint seem like a cakewalk. For starters, they weren’t just trying to get my cancer into remission. They were out for total eradication, firebombing my bone marrow into oblivion with heavy-duty chemicals and multiple sessions of total body irradiation.

The transplant itself was pretty tame. I pictured myself undergoing a dramatic operation like Wolverine getting his adamantium skeleton, with long needles boring into my bones and infusing me with new marrow. Instead, I got a little bag hooked up to my IV just like any of the other dozen blood transfusions I’d had.

It didn’t take long for the side effects of the transplant, radiation treatment and innumerable drugs I was taking to emerge. During that time, I endured all manner of physical horrors, including nausea, vomiting, mouth sores and a tongue so swollen that I had to sleep in an upright position for a couple nights so I wouldn’t choke on it.

I also suffered through a few days of ridiculous diarrhea. I had to keep meticulous track of all my liquid intakes and outputs to help ensure I was getting enough fluids each day, which meant recording the amount of water or juice I drank. It also meant peeing into a container to measure how much I was voiding. And yes, unfortunately, the watery nature of diarrhea meant that I now had to measure those excretions as well. To
accomplish this wretched task, I was given a special plastic container that fit over the toilet.

When you’re rushing to the toilet every twenty minutes or so, measuring your poop gets tiresome in a real hurry. And it doesn’t take long for the container to become intolerably filthy. I decided my poo bucket needed a scrubbing. Befouling my sink where I brush my teeth was out of the question so I turned to the bidet next to the toilet. I should have held onto the bowl with a firmer grip. I cranked the bidet on full blast and underestimated the strength of the water pressure, as a geyser of water blasted the diarrhea-lined container from my hand and sent it skyrocketing.

The stream of water sent the bowl crashing into the bathroom’s high ceiling, and sent torrents of feces-tainted water crashing back onto my head. Although I managed to shut the bidet off quickly, the damage had been done. It looked as though I had been caught in a rainstorm.

My mom, who was with me every day while I was hospitalized, started to wonder what was taking me so long. She asked through the closed bathroom door if everything was all right. Emerging, I sheepishly walked out drenched from head to toe in my own sewage.

Despite the horror of being caught in a deluge of dung, it was exactly the release we both needed and we both broke into fits of uncontrollable laughter. Finding humour in such a difficult situation did wonders for our mood and helped us get through the tough times we were facing.

I strived to maintain a positive attitude from day one of my cancer journey. “I hear you’re unconquerable” was the first thing my dear friend and mentor, Myrta, said to me after my diagnosis. I was determined to beat this cancer, and from then on “unconquerable” became my mantra. No matter what the disease did to me physically — even if it killed me — I promised myself I wasn’t going to let it beat me mentally, emotionally or spiritually.

I would find other ways to keep myself motivated. In the seven months leading up to my transplant, I would take my dog Stockie for walks in the cemetery behind our house. Passing gravestones, I would point to them and shout “Not yet!” Sure, Stockie gave me a funny look, but that attitude of defiance helped keep me strong.

That’s not to say I never had low moments. There were many. But keeping a positive attitude kept me from sinking too deeply into the quicksand of depression and despair.
Unlike a container full of diarrhea, just how much my positive outlook aided in my recovery from cancer can’t be measured. But I know it kept me psychologically and emotionally fit to deal with the rollercoaster of setbacks and struggles. It helped keep me on track in terms of eating properly, getting enough sleep, taking my medications on time, following my doctors’ instructions and getting through treatment. There’s no question in my mind that all those factors played an essential role in my physical recovery.

Attitude is everything

Success involves the ability to laugh at yourself, shrug off difficult situations and stubbornly refuse to quit. The right attitude makes all the difference. Here are some tips for staying positive during tough times.

1. Nurture an attitude of gratitude
Remind yourself of all the good stuff in your life. Keep a journal and record all the little things that were good about that day—a tasty meal, sunshine, a visit from a friend. Or keep a jar in your bedroom with slips of paper next to it. Take a moment each night to write something you’re thankful for and add it to the jar. Read through your entries at the end of each month or so to help you stay positive and keep things in perspective.

2. Surround yourself with the good stuff
Post motivational quotes around your office or bedroom. Listen to uplifting music. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I asked my friend Royce to put together a collection of real-life stories of people from history who had persevered in the face of great challenges. The book was chock full of examples that included Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and other inspirational figures.

3. Share
Don’t keep your feelings bottled up. Sharing how you feel with loved ones can boost your spirits. Articulating your feelings also helps you get your head around your problem — and once you’ve done that, you’re ready to start tackling it.

4. Create a personal mantra
What’s your personal mantra? Identify key objectives and priorities in your life and attach a word or phrase to them. I had two: “Unconquerable,” and “I am healthy, I am strong.” Write your personal mantra out on a piece of paper and post it somewhere visible. Use it as a way to focus your attention and keep you on track. Take time every day to quietly repeat the words over and over again and meditate on their meaning. If you find yourself in a stressful situation, pull your mantra out of your bag of tricks as a way of calming down and taking control of the situation.
#5. Get outside
It’s amazing how a little fresh air and sunshine can improve your mood. Exercise is another important way to stay positive.

#6. Expose yourself to the lighter side of life
Watch funny movies and TV shows or go see a comedy act. Balance out the seriousness of life with a few laughs.
WHAT A MAN NAMED FRANK TAUGHT ME ABOUT LUCK

“I’ll see you when you get out,” I said, shaking Frank’s hand.

Part of me knew I was lying. I’m no doctor, but I had a strong hunch that I was shaking the hand of a dead man. I had lost a lot of weight following my bone marrow transplant. But Frank? Frank was positively skeletal.

It was a far cry from how he looked when I first met him a few months earlier. Our chemo schedules lined up, which meant we spent many, many, many hours in waiting rooms together. We didn’t chat much — I kept mostly to myself during treatment. But I became an expert people watcher, which helped me get to know Frank and his wife.

Given how loud Frank was, eavesdropping proved fairly simple. Not loud in a bad way. He was charismatic and quick with a joke, whether it was about his chest IV falling out in the shower or how his big belly made his subcutaneous injections a cinch. His brand of dark humour was right up my alley and helped the long days go faster.

I also learned that Frank would be receiving his bone marrow transplant a week before mine. I took selfish comfort in knowing that I’d have an ally in the trenches with me. Of course, between the strict rules around post-transplant isolation and the fact that most of the time I simply didn’t have the energy to get out of bed meant that we didn’t see much of each other.

The few times we did cross paths on the transplant ward, we’d be wheeling our IV pumps up and down the corridors for exercise. And each time I saw Frank, he looked worse. I’m sure I looked pretty beat up myself, but this was different: it was clear things were not going well.

A few weeks after my transplant, my new stem cells had engrafted and began producing healthy blood on their own. It was a tough go, but bit-by-bit my counts crept up. My transplant had been successful. Down the hall, Frank’s had not.
Shaking Frank’s hand before I left, I did my best to keep my face from betraying the concern I felt.

During a follow-up appointment not long after, I overheard a couple talking in the waiting room about a patient who had died on the 14th floor — the transplant ward. A quick Google search when I returned home yielded an online obituary that confirmed my suspicions.

Frank had died.

Living with Lady Luck

Although it takes more than luck to overcome life’s obstacles, it nonetheless plays a huge role in our lives. Two men walked into the hospital for bone marrow transplants. Both had leukemia. Both had the same doctors. One survived. One didn’t. Of course, there were a million-and-one other factors at play — Frank’s age, the complexity of his case, other underlying conditions. Still, it was a sobering reminder of how things could have easily ended up differently for me.

The idea of luck can be an unnerving one, especially for people like me who put a lot of stock in planning, budgeting and having control over situations. But the fact is, as much as we like to think we’re masters of our destinies, we’re often at the mercy of chance.

A rainy day can foil the weeks you put into organizing the company golf tournament. Unexpected traffic can make you late for a meeting, even if you gave yourself loads of time. Your hopes for a super productive week may be dashed when a flu bug hits.

The secret, I think, is accepting that luck and life are inseparable and finding ways to be ready for when misfortune strikes. That could mean having an emergency savings account, a backup wedding venue in case it pours or a roadside assistance membership in the off chance you get a flat on the way home.

And then there’s the bad luck you never see coming, like a sudden death in the family or a flash flood destroying your house. That’s where adaptability comes in. If you step on one of Lady Luck’s landmines, surround yourself with supportive people, remind yourself of the good things you still have in your life and start planning a new way forward.
Finally, I think it’s important to remind ourselves of all the good luck in our lives. After all, right now you’re sitting on a rock capable of supporting intelligent life, flying 109,000 km/hour through space. You’re the culmination of millions of years of evolution, and the sperm that helped make you had to outswim 500 million others.

On top of that, take a look at your family tree. If just one of your ancestors failed to meet their mate, you wouldn’t exist. One missed encounter, one decision not to have a second date, one bout of sniffles keeping your great-great-grandmother from going to the town dance, and POOF. No you. The fact that you are here is staggering in its unlikeness. Take a step back from time to time to marvel at that.

I’m grateful every day for how fortunate I am to be here. I wish Frank had the same luck I did. I think of him often and hope his family is doing OK. I don’t know why I got to live and he didn’t, but I hope I never forget the lessons he taught me about how precarious life can be, to accept that some things are out of my control and to not take what I’ve got for granted.
CONCLUSION: FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE

Slowly but surely, my new, Euro-chic stem cells found their way to their new home and started producing normal, healthy blood cells for me. Though I had cleared a major hurdle, I was by no means out of the woods. My doctors kept a watchful eye on me during the critical first 100 days post-transplant, giving me anti-rejection drugs to help my body and its European houseguest get along.

Protected by the equivalent of a newborn’s immune system, I was extremely susceptible to infection and still needed to avoid crowds or anyone with the sniffles. The house was dotted with hand sanitizer stations positioned in strategic locations. I even needed to get all my baby shots again. Measles, mumps, rubella: I was a 28-year-old infant. It was like they hit the reset button on me.

Day by day, though, the counts rose, eventually plateauing exactly where they should. I passed the 100-day mark with no relapse and no major fights inside my body. Before long, my new marrow was firing on all cylinders. And perhaps most mind-blowingly of all, my entire blood type switched to that of my donor’s — from A-Negative to O-Positive.

I celebrated St. Paddy’s Day 2009 by having the IV port in my chest removed. By the summer, I was able to do 10 push-ups without collapsing. And by my first transplant anniversary, I was given the thumbs up to return to work.

My immune system will always be less than spectacular, and I still need to go to Princess Margaret Hospital a couple times a year for blood work. In those regards, the bear hunt continues. But the trail’s gotten much smoother. And while I’m not naive enough to believe that I won’t encounter major obstacles in the future, I’m thrilled to have successfully overcome the ones I have.
It takes more than luck to navigate through the wilderneses of our lives. It’s not enough to flip a coin and hope for the best. A successful bear hunt depends on so much more. It requires teamwork, balance, flexibility, positive thinking and a whole lot of hard work.

Lady Luck played her part in my own hunt, no doubt. But more important, I think, was my decision to take charge and do everything in my power to surround myself with the right people and equip myself with the right tools to survive.

I wish you well with whatever obstacles you face on your own personal bear hunt. Just remember: It’s not the size of the obstacle that matters. It’s how you respond to it that really counts.
COMMUNITY RESOURCES

One of the most important lessons I learned from my health crisis is the importance of community. Whether it was accessing peer support programs, using the Cancer Society’s shuttle service to get to appointments or tapping into educational materials from the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, community resources played a big role in my success.

Whatever obstacle you face in life — personally, professionally or otherwise — be sure to consider the resources available in your community. To find obstacle-busting organizations and programs in your area, explore our Community pages at www.badgeofawesome.com.
HELPING OTHERS OVERCOME OBSTACLES:

Being equipped to overcome obstacles on your bear hunt is one thing. But what about when it’s a loved one facing a major life challenge? How can you help? Below are some ideas to get you started.

Pitch in.

During my time as an outpatient, Wednesdays were chemo days. I’d wake up at the crack of dawn and battle Toronto gridlock from the north end of the city to Princess Margaret Hospital, where I’d spend all day. Most of it was spent waiting. Waiting to get my number called for blood work. Waiting to see the doctor at the clinic. Waiting for my chemo to arrive. Waiting for the chemo to finish. Waiting for the nurse to stick a needle in my butt. Waiting for my prescriptions. And then, finally, waiting once again in bumper-to-bumper traffic to get home. By the time I dragged myself through my front door, I was exhausted and starting to feel the effects of the chemicals that had just been pumped into me.

In one of my email updates to friends and families, I happened to mention how Wednesdays were typically pizza nights because I was just too pooped to make food for myself. Shortly after, my friend Janele told me she had arranged to have meals dropped off at my place. Amazing. Having one less thing to worry about on Wednesdays was wonderful.
There are many ways you can pitch in when someone is going through a challenging or busy time. Whether it’s mowing their lawn, dropping off some soup, volunteering at their launch party or helping them assemble their wedding invitations, a little help can go a long way.

Be there.

“I don’t know what to say.” “I feel so helpless.” “I wish there was something I could do.” We’ve all been there. That awkward moment when you’re at a loss for words and feeling completely useless. But sometimes the thing people need most is a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on. You don’t have to come equipped with answers, pearls of wisdom or a magic bullet to solve the problem. Just be there. I heard a story about a friend of mine who worked as a hospital chaplain. One patient lashed out at her, questioning why she was even there. After all, there was nothing she could do to fix the patient’s terminal illness. Her response? I’m not here to fix you. I’m here to keep you company while you’re going through hell.

Give them space.

On the flip side, it’s easy to swing too far the other way—to smother a person in well-meaning attempts to help them. Like everything in life, it’s all about balance. When I was in the hospital, I had to learn to say no to people who wanted to visit. Not because I didn’t want to see them, but because otherwise I’d never have any time for myself. Be there for them, but respect the fact that they might want some alone time.

Connect them with the right people.

You might not be able to directly help, but do you know somebody who could? Leverage your connections. It was my friend’s mom who connected me with the doctors at Princess Margaret Hospital. And my brother who recommended a nutritionist friend to help me with my post-transplant diet. Whether you’re helping your friend’s struggling start-up business by introducing him to your industry contacts or telling a co-worker about a great physiotherapist who worked wonders on your shoulder, rack your brain for helpful people you know.

Stay positive.

People going through tough times are wrestling with all sorts of doubt, uncertainty and fear. Help them through that by being a positive influence. During my first month-long stay at Princess Margaret, I hit a wall and was feeling pretty low. Early one morning, before breakfast had even arrived, I got a knock at my door and a co-worker of mine
poked his head in the room. At first I was annoyed at the early morning and unscheduled pop-in. I was still in my gotchies after all.

But then we got chatting about his dad, who was also in the hospital undergoing a similar treatment as me. The nonchalant and positive way he talked about his dad’s procedures, and the confidence he had that everything was going to be all right, filled me with renewed hope and optimism about my own chances. It ended up being just the wake-up call I needed.

Enthusiasm and positive energy are contagious and can help keep your loved one from getting too low. That doesn’t mean being the “everything-is-sunshine-and-unicorns” person that people want to slap. It just means offering encouragement instead of discouragement, optimism instead of pessimism and constructive feedback instead of harsh criticism.

Get creative.

In the section above about coming up for air, I mentioned the human art show my friends and family performed for my birthday. Another uplifting and awesome thing they pulled together for me was a “Book of Encouragement.”

My sister Becky coordinated this project while I was in hospital for the bone marrow transplant. Becky went around to my aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, grandma and parents and invited each of them to create a page for the book, wishing me well on my recovery and health journey.

Like the birthday surprise, I didn’t know about the book until Becky delivered it to me in my hospital room. And like the birthday surprise, it gave my spirits such a great and much-needed boost. I laughed myself silly (a dangerous thing to do when dealing with the menace of ferocious diarrhoea) reading the many hilarious and creative entries and felt my resolve strengthen as I read the many inspirational and motivational notes.

If you’re looking for ways to help someone overcome an obstacle, get creative. Send a fun e-card. Film a video of friends giving encouraging shout-outs. Bake a good-luck cake. Plaster their bedroom with motivational quotes. Host a pasta dinner fundraiser.

Distract them.

Everybody needs to come up for air once in a while. It might seem counterintuitive, but taking a buddy out for a few beers when they’re completely buried with work may be the best thing for them. The poopy rainstorm I got caught in may have been crappy (pun intended), but it was exactly the distraction mom and I needed from the stress of the
situation. Just remember: It’s a fine line between distraction and disruption, so tread carefully.

Rally around a cause.

When someone you care about is going through a tough time — especially when it’s health-related — the feeling of helplessness can be overwhelming. After I was diagnosed, I told Dr. Lipton that my friends were eager to help and asked if he had any suggestions. “Tell them to donate blood,” he said.

Rallying around a cause for your loved one is a great way to make important contributions. It could be spearheading a blood drive or signing up for a charity fun run in honour of your friend with cancer. It could be writing your MP or raising awareness through the media about the mental illness your dad is dealing with. It could be volunteering at a women’s shelter to show your support for a co-worker getting out of an abusive relationship.

Of course, you don’t have to know someone to help them overcome obstacles. The world is full of challenges and people who could use a helping hand. Whether you’re volunteering with a community organization, donating to disaster relief overseas or simply offering your seat to the pregnant woman on the bus, there are always ways to help.
“I’ve heard there are troubles of more than one kind. Some come from ahead and some come from behind. But I’ve bought a big bat. I’m all ready you see. Now my troubles are going to have troubles with me!”

— Dr. Seuss