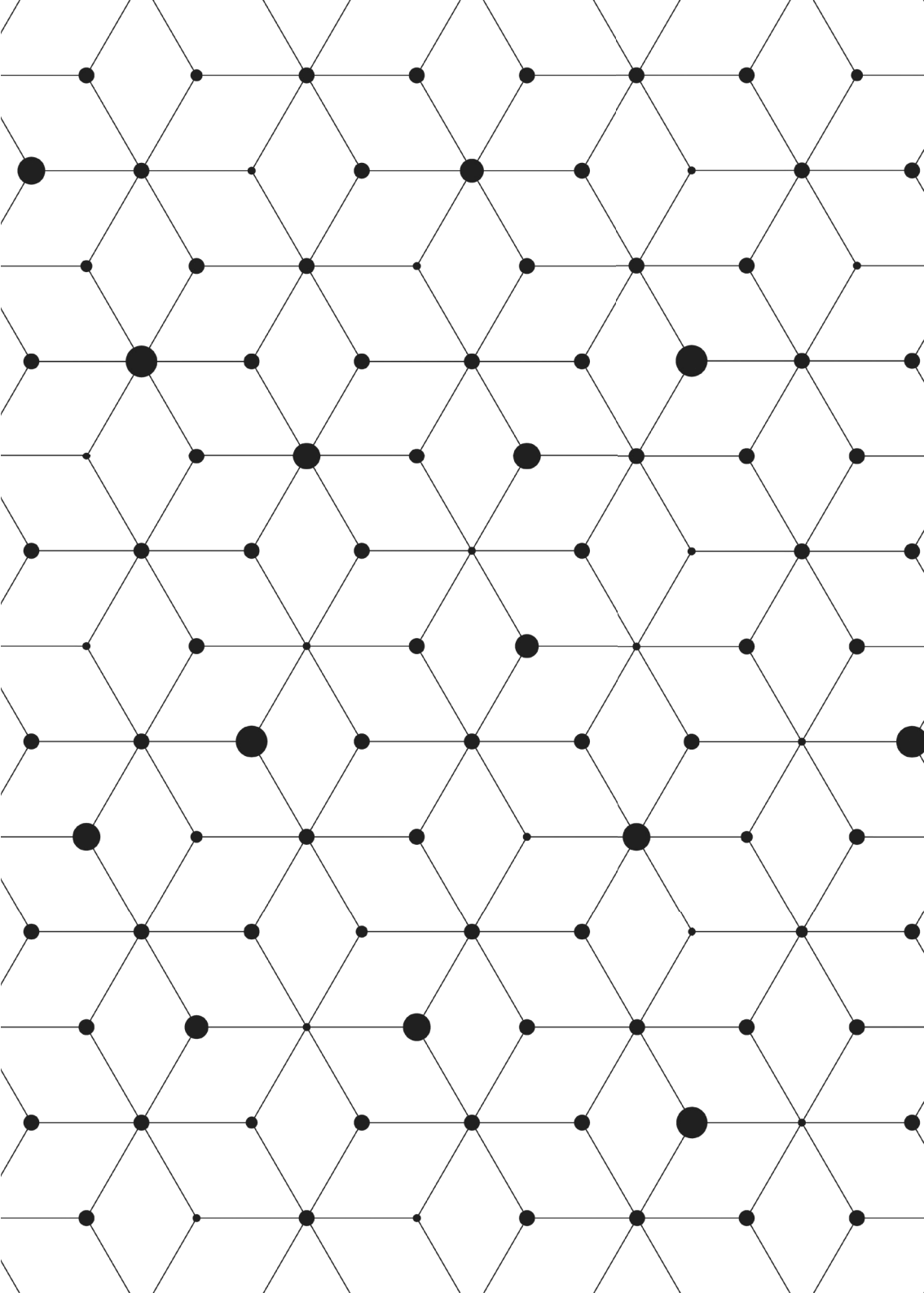


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When I embraced life (A hymn to hope)

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Ibán Bermúdez Betancor

WHEN I EMBRACED LIFE

(A HYMN TO HOPE)

PUNTO ROJO
libros



They say my name is Ibán Bermúdez Betancor. I am 36 years old and I have a degree in Tourism Studies from the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and also a subsequent specialization in system implementation and quality control. In addition, in 2004 I received the distinction "Outstanding Figure in Tourism" from the Government of Lanzarote for my work on behalf of the island's tourism sector, but I try not to identify with this award too much, because I want to continue to be a child who loves to play, travel and enjoy life.

I am thrilled to once again recognize this child in myself and I believe that he is the true author of this book; he is enthusiastic, fearless and eager to express in words what he has discovered to be his main priority: to be free and to love life.

Index

Prologue....9
Introduction....13
Chapter 1. Cancer, an opportunity....17
Chapter 2. The nurses' testimonials....111
Chapter 3. I keep remembering....119
Chapter 4. Gratitude, a source of nourishment....133
Chapter 5. Meditation, a door to the truth....143
Chapter 6. My idea of myself. Who do I think I am?....163
Chapter 7. Where magic happens....179
Chapter 8. The power of forgiveness....193
Chapter 9. The pillars of fear....199
Chapter 10. Life, a path....209
Chapter 11. And if it were all a dream?....217
Chapter 12. When he embraced life....225
Acknowledgements....231

Prologue

A few years ago a young man with a fearful look in his eyes came to my office and told me: I have cancer... To begin with he said hardly anything, but he was there because of his desire to be healthy. Like the thousands of other patients I have treated, all I did was lovingly ask him to open up to the possibility of the disease being a new opportunity to really live life. The crisis, a word related to the chrysalis a worm goes through, was offering him the opportunity to become a butterfly. Ibán decided to accept the proposal to go through this marvellous chrysalis called disease, and to be transformed. At that very moment his great change began. In about seven months, he had conquered a beautiful challenge called Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

Today it is a privilege and a pleasure, and quite moving, to find myself writing the prologue to my friend's first book (since I suspect, and I hope, that you will write many more). I don't even know where to begin to express my unconditional admiration for this extraordinary being. All I know is that life brought us together and allowed us to share this fascinating path towards healing.

Ibán had lived an ordinary life thus far, but he himself de-

cided to apply that 'edge' that inexorably led him to enter the extraordinary.

Unlike other patients I have treated, he also decided to share the process openly with others and even write a blog about it, becoming, without intending to, an example and a ray of hope for many others.

In my role as his companion on the journey, I proposed and he applied, he acted in consonance (love is always a proposal and when it is accepted, miracles happen). Meanwhile, it was easy to see how the fearful look in his eyes was transmuting into a look full of life and love, and into a huge smile that touched the heart of everyone who came across him in their daily activity. So much so that today he serves as a point of reference and is a great source of help to many other people and he even pays visits to cancer patients in the hospital to encourage them to heal the emotional causes and attitudes behind the symptom.

Some of these patients describe him as an angel or as a being from another world. My response is always that Ibán was not born this way: he, like the rest of us, was programmed in fear, in limitations and in need, until he decided to let go of that old way of thinking, to get rid of his past beliefs and reconnect with that infinite love that we all have within us; a place of true joy and happiness that is completely in love with you and is waiting patiently for the day you decide to give yourself over to it so you can dance this wonderful dance called life.

Before he faced the challenge of disease, Ibán had never felt any inclination toward alternative practices (meditation or other methods to achieve inner peace and calm). He simply decided one day to try them out, heeding the words that the great masters have been saying for thousands of years: "Don't believe it, find

out for yourself." And that is just what he did.

There is nothing in this world that love cannot heal. So Ibán is indeed from this world, but he is no longer from the world of fear. In consequence, his courage to change turned him into an everyday hero (at least for me and for all the beings that have felt inspired and motivated by him).

The book you are holding in your hands right now is a marvellous gift for you and for others, so I encourage you to share it and talk about it with people you believe might benefit from it; because in the world of love the more you give the more you receive, whereas in the world of fear whatever you give you lose.

I truly hope that you enjoy its contents with an open mind and heart, and that you allow yourself to put them into practice so that you can embrace life from a place in which you are truly free, since disease is just a call for you to return from a living death. If by chance you choose to criticize the book, due to your beliefs, I suggest that you at least lend it or give it to someone whose life it might, literally, save; it may be that this book is the opportunity other people are waiting for.

I have just one more thing to say as I write, my eyes filled with tears, the final lines of this prologue: thank you Ibán, not just for the great act of love that you have shown us in writing this gift full of wisdom, but also for being that loving light that helps wake up the inner consciousness of the people around you.

May the benefits you obtain from this book, dear reader, also be of benefit to all beings without exception.

JOSÉ ANTONIO MANCHADO
(Author of the books *Be happier than the Dalai Lama* and *Are you sick? Congratulations!)*

Introduction

They say that life is a continuous affirmation, that every new day brings a new opportunity and all you need to do is say yes to make the most of it. That's why I say yes; lately I have said yes to every proposal made to me that I find motivating. So, I dive into the unknown as if there was no tomorrow and I start writing this book, which was conceived by pure chance, although I have been told that chance is the pseudonym that God uses when He does not want to sign His name. Chance or not, here I am writing and, funnily enough, I have always been told that I wear my heart on my sleeve, that I am like an open book. What I never imagined is that I would end up writing a book about one of the toughest and most transformative experiences of my entire existence.

I received hope at one of the hardest times and that is what I want to convey to my readers: hope, because there is always an alternative. Although it may seem like all the streets around you are dead-ends, there is always a crack somewhere to let you out. Perhaps at first you can't see it, but if you look carefully, the solution to the enigma is there waiting for you. There is a reason for everything that happens and everything that happens is for

your maximum benefit. Even if a giant boulder falls on you and you collapse into total darkness, all you have to do is trust life. At first you might not understand, but you will later...

Yes, at the beginning I did not understand the gift that life was giving to me. I was scared, I cried, I resisted..., but with time I unwrapped the package and then I could not help but surrender to its beauty. Cancer came to pay me a visit and what I interpreted as a punishment turned out to be an opportunity, the occasion that life was giving me to change, thus switching off the belief that had marked me since I was a child.

You see, I grew up with the idea that people cannot change. I heard it said so often by the people around me that I suppose I ended up absorbing it until it became etched in the computer that is my brain. The belief had been successfully installed, so to speak. That is why I often felt frustrated, because I wanted to change, especially the many things that made me feel bad, but since I had been told that change was not possible, I resigned myself to being a slave to my increasingly reactionary personality. Now I can state with all confidence that it is possible to change. Yes, we can change. Everything is change and the opposite would be unnatural. Congratulations! If you set your mind to it you can change. If you set your mind to it you can modify your perception of what is around you. If you set your mind to it you can go from reaction to reflection. I am now more reflective and also more grateful. Being alive is the main motive for my gratitude. Yes, being alive is an opportunity and maybe I arrived at this truth because I felt death so near me. Yes, it is a blessing and not a chore. That is why I want to live, why I am learning how to live, to live more consciously, understanding life to be a true miracle. In the end, the miracle occurs when we deactivate

the limiting belief that tells us that something is impossible. Although some people really did think so in my case, because they were aware of the seriousness of my diagnosis (whereas I knew very little about the doctors' reports), they never went so far as to tell me it was not possible. And this turned out to be essential for me doing what I did, because otherwise I may have never even tried. And here I am, four years later, celebrating the miracle of life and finding motivation in everything that passes by my side and that I grasp as an opportunity to experience something, because experience is what marks the difference, it's what gives you wisdom. Knowledge is not the same as wisdom; wisdom consists of doing it. "Do not believe it, experience it for yourself." This is something else people have told me. People told me many things because I didn't know much, in fact I still don't know much. The only thing I know is that I put all of my senses into the experience. I did it; I did many things that people recommended I do in order to heal, and I am thankful I did.

A long time ago I heard that people are not afraid to die, what they are really afraid of is to live. Yes, it's true; I felt panic at the idea of living and having to struggle against all the things I interpreted as bad. I wanted my life to be *à la carte*, full of white keys and good news, not knowing that the black keys would also be necessary for me to reach a full comprehension of my existence. More than being afraid to live, I simply did not know how to live. Now I cannot conceive of life without everything I have learned and I give myself over to life, I let myself feel it in all its intensity and I let it take me wherever it wants me to go. Sometimes I still resist, but I love realizing it when this happens. Yes, we are educated to be controlling and letting go of that control can be difficult, but how wonderful it is to leave our comfort zone and

make the magic happen, even if just once. I enjoy every surprise that life sends my way, because I am life, I am life itself...

Now I also take responsibility, which literally means ability of response. Guilt ceased to form part of my vocabulary, making room only for responsibility. I assume total responsibility for my existence and I am prepared to paint the canvas of my life with the colours that I choose, knowing that I am the only person responsible for seeing in myself the aspects I must change, instead of trying to change my surroundings or the people around me. The change you need to go from conflict to peace is within you...

Not long ago I heard a writer say that literature is a life raft that can get us through all of life's storms, and that in order to heal we must release everything inside of us by reading and writing. Something about this resonated with me and made me think of the blog *(ibanconbb.blogspot.com)* that I started a few years ago because of the disease I had. Although it was not my intention, the blog ended up becoming a life raft for me, a place where I could -and still can- express what I have inside me, a refuge for connecting with what I really am. Yes, literature was very therapeutic. The blog was my life raft and with it I laid the foundations for my healing.

So, this is why I want to share with you a good part of the path travelled, a train that started to move a few years ago and on which I am still riding. I do not know when I will get off, because in this life we know nothing, except the here and now that presents itself as a great opportunity. Thank you, once again, for this opportunity, which I embrace without hesitation.

Chapter 1

Cancer, an opportunity

"Cancer is an opportunity that life gives you
to bring out the very best version of yourself"
(José Antonio Manchado)

With a backpack as my only companion, I went to the hospital one morning in August with the intention of spending one week there, to get a diagnosis. My most recent blood tests, performed as part of the routine check-up done at my place of work every year, had shown certain anomalies. The doctors recommended that I check into the hospital as soon as possible, so that all the necessary tests could be done at one time, thus avoiding waits between them.

That day they had me check in through the emergency room, because the hospital was very busy. I was there waiting for quite a while, until they finally assigned me a room. "You have been very nice," the staff told me in acknowledgement of the fact that even after such a long wait they had not heard a single complaint from

me. Yes, I had been nice, it's true, because I had not moved from the corner they had left me in, but I was also scared, very scared, especially after I had seen the doctor write on the admission form that the purpose of my visit was to rule out tumours. I read the words without him realizing it and I could barely conceal the anguish that silently arose within me and peeked out through my eyes. I was paralyzed, but I had made the decision to check into the hospital so that the horrendous guessing could come to an end as soon as possible.

When I got to the room I put on the hospital gown and there, as I looked in the mirror at my pale face and dark circles, I felt I couldn't take another minute. I was sure I would not be able to withstand being in that place so long. I was suffocating. Soon visitors started arriving. Every time I saw them leave, I felt crushed. I was terribly frightened, like a defenceless child in need of care and protection. I wanted them there, with me, so they could hold me and not leave me alone at night. I spent the nights thinking, thinking about how it had never occurred to me that I would find myself in this situation. It may have been then that I started to truly appreciate health for the first time.

What was supposed to be one week ended up being almost three, but I left the hospital whenever I could, because I felt fine. Leaving every weekend was a breath of fresh air. Returning was the hard part. Going back to the place where I felt so afraid. Someone from my family came every morning before the doctor arrived. I found it impossible to see him alone, I was too afraid. One day he had told me that certain things were not 'normal' and from then on I was petrified. Perhaps it was the way he talked, or that he did not show much empathy, but I know now that he could not do it any other way and that it was all the product of

my own fears. I represented pure fear, I was fear, and so no matter what he said or how he said it, it was going to create panic in me.

And finally the diagnosis arrived. After almost three weeks the dreaded diagnosis arrived. Yes, I had cancer, Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I didn't wait to find out any more about it. "Can I leave now?" I asked. It was the only thing that mattered to me. Although initially they had said I should stay another night so that the next day I could meet the specialist to whom my case would be assigned, in the end we were hastily introduced in the hallway that afternoon, and they let me leave. I bolted to my room to pick up my things and while I waited for the doctor to deliver my release papers, I put on headphones to listen to music and I started to dance. I was so happy to be leaving the place that not even cancer stopped me from dancing.

"And if you talk to another doctor? It's always good to get a second opinion," relatives said to me as soon as I arrived at my parents' house. But no, I did not want any more opinions. I did not want to go through the hospital experience again unnecessarily. I wanted to trust that the doctors had done their job right. I wanted to accept that I had cancer and start finding ways to heal... I was afraid to die, I wanted to live.

I had cancer, my God, I had cancer, something I never imagined that I could have. Or at least not at the age of 31. It is one of those rare things that you think can happen to anyone but you. But it was me, it had happened to me, although I certainly didn't want to obsess about having it. I just wanted to go out and clear my head. "Are you refusing to accept reality?" I asked myself, because the attitude I had that day was not one of crying in the corner but rather of going outside, taking a walk, getting some air.

And during the walk I took with my boyfriend I told him that I hoped my healing depended fully on me, because that way, if I did everything in my power to heal, I would get healthy again. "If only there was a list of things to do to become healthy again. I would be willing to climb up Lanzarote's famous Risco de Famara a hundred times if necessary; I would be willing to give up my favourite food; I would be willing to do… anything and everything in order to make myself healthy again." I asked God to help me because I wanted to heal, I asked for strength to make it to the very end. Today I know that this request bore fruit because, although I was not aware of it at the time, the next day everything started to change...

The next morning when I woke up the idea of getting to know a new doctor weighed heavily upon me. But what I found was a totally unexpected gift. From a doctor who made me fearful, I went to one who made me laugh. After a doctor who scared me, I found one that gave me hope. "The treatment will last six months," he said. I heard that and I swear to God the only thing I thought was that I still had six months to live. Had I thought that my death was imminent? My sister wanted to learn more details about the treatment and its effects, but the only thing I asked him was if I could make a trip that I had planned a few months ago. "Yes, as long as it does not coincide with the dates of your treatment," he responded. I didn't want to ask anything else; I didn't want to worry about things that were still to come. I had been given some good news, I had at least six more months to live and I wanted to make the most of them. Yes, I left the doctor's office feeling thankful for the time I had and for the doctor, who still makes me laugh, even today, and to whom I feel immense gratitude...

And soon came my first day of chemotherapy, my first ses-

sion. We were all expectant, concerned about how my body would react. Fever appeared shyly after a little while and a sheen of perspiration covered my forehead. Gradually the fever went down. Alone in the darkness, I wondered if the six months of treatment, those months I wanted to make the most of, would always be like this, with this constant sensation of gloom. "I don't know if I can take this," I said to myself.

But my body recovered. Four or five days later it came out into the light again and my radiance returned. I wanted to eat, to do things, to live... until the next session, which was not far off.

"Why don't you start a blog?" This was the proposal my boyfriend made because people were always asking me about my situation, sometimes even wanting to hear details that I myself didn't know. This took a lot out of me every day, since the questions either made me remember things that had already happened or focused on things that had not yet occurred. In short, they were taking me away from the present which was where I, without even trying, had begun to live. "Yes, that's the solution; if you write a blog you can use it to tell people when your next session is or about the test results that have come in, and they won't have to ask you directly," he suggested. I didn't know how to create a blog, but he set it all up for me, almost with wrapping paper and ribbon, a gift waiting to be opened. A username, a password and a quick class on how to post an entry and upload an image. Everything was set for me to start writing, writing to inform people about what they needed to know. Yes, that was my intention, and as I write this today the following saying comes to mind: "If you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plans." Well, God must have really chuckled when He heard my plan.

In any case, on Monday, September 24th I began to write...

My first time

(Monday, 24 September 2012)

I never would have thought that I'd end up having my own blog! The truth is people had made such a suggestion to me before, to keep a blog so I could talk about my travels or about recipes, although the content of the latter would be extremely limited. However, the circumstances prompting me to try my hand as a blogger now are very different. Almost a month ago I was diagnosed with cancer (what a horrible sounding word that is, unless of course you're talking about the zodiac), but keeping a blog might be a good way for me to express my emotions and sensations.

The first thing I want to say is that I must acknowledge what I have and not be afraid of it, because if anything is clear to me now, it is that I WANT TO KEEP LIVING more than anything else. So, I am going to do everything in my power to make the treatment as effective as possible. I would also like to say thanks, in this first post, for all the warm affection and words of support that I have received from everyone who loves me and hopes for my speedy recovery. You have no idea how much I have been helped by that little message, that text, or that hug when I least expected it. It will take me years to return to you all that I have received, so let's get started, moving forward without fear, like Rosana Arbelo says in one of her songs: "Without fear you feel that luck is on your side, as you play with the leprechauns watching over your path, you feel the best of life with every step you take, it is better to live without fear (...)".

Back at my house

(Tuesday, 25 September 2012)

Yesterday I left my parents' house and came back to my own pretty little house, with its walls of different colours, so cute and welcoming (everyone who visits it says so). I had not slept here since August 12th and even my downstairs neighbour was missing the usual noises. The truth is, I also missed hearing her shouts of exasperation when her daughter didn't do as she was told. The little things of everyday life!

The sensation I had when I walked through the door was very good. Coming home brought me peace and happiness, yes, great happiness at returning to my home and not being afraid of it, because during that long absence I had the feeling that being in my own house would have asphyxiated me. I could not stand being alone for even a minute, and my house was full of negativity and anguish due to the horrible period prior to the diagnosis. But it is important to stand up to feelings like these, so what I did when I arrived home was clean the whole place from top to bottom. That fresh smell that comes after a thorough cleaning changes everything. And I also needed to give the place some life, a lot of life, by filling up the fridge, putting a bowl of fresh fruit on the table. So last night I made peace with my house and it felt very good. The reason I came back here: my nephew, who lives at my parents' house. The poor little fellow has the flu and apparently right now my defences are at their lowest because of the treatment, so I have to avoid any chance of contagion. Of course, my mother did ask me to call her every night, and to go to see her often, because right now my parents treat me like a child, making sure I eat the right things, worrying about me... A mother's love knows no bounds.