

Southwest Michigan



Catholic

INSIDE:

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with your family



Welcome Christ this season

with *Posadas*



PLUS

LEARN HOW TO CREATE

a Family Prayer Cenacle

Cancer battles draw doctor

CLOSER
TO GOD

Cancer battles draw doctor

CLOSER TO GOD

BY VICTORIA
CESSNA

**“AS ODD AS IT SOUNDS,
CANCER WAS A GIFT FOR ME.”**

“

ift” isn’t the typical word used by many cancer survivors, but for pediatrician John Spitzer, a three-time cancer survivor, his illness was just the kick in the pants he needed to go searching for God. And it’s his decades-long journey of spending time with God that became the content for his recently published book, *“Finding God, Again and Again.”* (see sidebar)

John hopes his honest look at his own faith struggles, which he details in his spiritual memoir, serve as an inspiration for others. According to John, adding “author” to his list of accomplishments is just another way he can be God’s instrument.

“God has been very kind to me,” he explains. “I mean it would be easy for people to think, ‘You’re a cancer patient; you’ve had relapses; sounds horrible!’ but I would actually look at it as a positive. And I really feel one of the things God wanted me to do was share my experience and let people know this journey to being one with God is not an easy journey or a straight path — there’s ups and downs along the way. But it’s worth it.”



EARLY YEARS

Sitting across from John in a bustling coffee shop where's he's just come from his daily run, it's difficult to imagine him as someone who has tackled serious health crises.

"We get these opportunities where we can change and become closer to God."

For John those "opportunities" were three separate battles with cancer: an initial diagnosis in 1985 when he was a medical student and two subsequent relapses. And while his roots and upbringing were decidedly Catholic, it's his battles with cancer that he believes moved his faith from his head to his heart.

Like many Americans, John's background is a melting pot. His German-Irish father met his Colombian-native mother when she came to New York to visit her brother — who happened to be his dad's roommate at technical school. They married, settled in New Jersey and the following year welcomed the birth of John, the first of their three boys.

When John was 6 years old, his mother and his brothers went to live in his mother's hometown, Cali, Colombia.

He looks fondly on his upbringing in Colombia, honing his soccer skills and love of the game and becoming fluent in Spanish. He remembers going to Mass and participating in the cultural traditions, such as the annual Las Posadas in December, and praying daily throughout elementary and high school.

When John was finished with high school in Colombia, he returned to the United States to live with his father who had settled in the Chicago area.

"I was 16 turning 17 and took an extra year of high school to practice my English, which had become pretty rusty after living in Colombia for 11 years," he remembers.

John began looking at colleges, and his high school counselor mentioned Kalamazoo College. He visited, fell in love with the school and later would fall in love with a fellow intramural soccer team player, Anne, who would become his wife of 35 years. He had long dreamed of being a doctor. John decided on pediatrics, having been inspired by the care his mother gave his brother who suffered from asthma as well as the time he spent in high school volunteering at an orphanage. It wouldn't be long into his medical career that he would become a patient.



CANCER BATTLES

It was a routine self-exam during his second year of medical school that led to the diagnosis of testicular cancer.

"My first reaction was, wow — I have a problem, let's fix it. I was young — 24 at the time — and I just wanted to tackle it."

And tackle it he did. Over the course of three months, John underwent three surgeries as well as numerous rounds of chemotherapy. He dropped 50 pounds in a six-month period. But he wasn't quite ready to lean on God.

"I actually got mad at God a little bit," admits John. "When I first got diagnosed I had this fighting spirit and I couldn't understand why God would test me that way. I felt like God should have known I had faith in Him."

Grateful to be cancer free, John and Anne spent the next 12 years building their life together. He finished medical school and his residency, while Ann worked as a lawyer and later was elected a district court judge for Kalamazoo County. They settled in Kalamazoo and welcomed two children, son Tim and daughter Patty. They were busy juggling two careers along with two young children when they were thrown a curve-ball — John’s cancer had returned.

John admittedly was frightened. He didn’t want to face leaving his young family fatherless. Fearing the worst, he began to write about his life and faith as something to leave for his children in case he wasn’t around.

“The first relapse really scared me,” he explains.

Fortunately, the surgery to remove the four cancerous masses was successful and chemotherapy wasn’t required. In the months following, John, while grateful, found himself also feeling extremely unsettled. He describes his behavior as impatient and irritable. Anne suggested he might benefit from the wisdom of their dear friend, Pauline, a devout Christian Scientist.

“One evening we chatted for about 90 minutes,” remembers John, “and Pauline says, ‘John, I think I know what’s wrong with you.’ I laughed and said, ‘OK, what’s wrong with me?’”

Pauline responded, “You’re hanging on to life too tight, and you’re not letting God take care of you; you want to do it yourself, and you need to let God take care of you.”

Hearing those words, John recalls it was like the proverbial ton of bricks being lifted off his shoulders. It was at this time that he began to yearn for a closer relationship with God. He decided to act upon his friend’s advice of making time for prayer every day. And his first stop turned out to be his parish.

“Each morning I would drop Tim off for kindergarten and then head over to the church. At first I prayed a few Our Fathers/Hail Mary’s, and in 5 minutes I was done.”

But John was intrigued when he observed that when he arrived at Church, there were 20 people or so already praying.

“I finally figured out they were praying the rosary before Mass began at 8 a.m., and so I began doing that.”

John also expanded his bookshelf. One book he found extremely helpful was “The Soul of the Apostolate” by Fr. Jean-Baptiste Chautard.

“Fr. Jean-Baptiste Chautard helped me understand how people are at different levels of spiritual development, and he helped me identify where I was. I thought, there’s a path, so I hopped on stage one.”



Stage one for John included devouring spiritual writings. He began reading about the saints and was especially drawn to the writings of St. Therese of Avalon, St. Therese of Lisieux and St. John the Cross. It was just two years later that he would have another opportunity to confront cancer.

He was at his parish church praying when he envisioned a split-second bright image in his left pelvic side and a very strong sense that his cancer had returned. And his fears were soon confirmed.

“I wanted to get closer to God, but I just didn’t know how to get closer,” he explains. “In retrospect, the time after my first relapse, I was forcing it. I wanted it on my own terms, and I hit a wall.

“I joke that my second cancer relapse was a homework do-over — I wasn’t praying right the first time,” says John.

“This was going to be my opportunity to let go and to not be nervous or anxious. And I did. I let go.”

Immediately before his surgery John says he prayed the prayer of abandonment by Blessed Charles de Foucauld,

as he had been doing daily as part of his prayer time.

“When I woke up I thought, ‘Am I alive?’” he recalls. “I was moving my fingers and toes and was like, ‘I am alive!’”

Just as cancer as a gift may seem unusual, so does describing recovery from major cancer surgery as “a wonderful experience,” but that’s exactly how John describes it.



John’s favorite spiritual resources

- The Soul of the Apostolate
Fr. Jean-Baptiste Chautard
- Jesus: A Pilgrimage
Fr. James Martin
- The Interior Castle
St. Teresa of Avila
- Ascent of Mount Carmel
St. John of the Cross
- Sacred spaces
Irish Jesuits
www.sacredspace.ie



“During recovery I found myself praying on a regular basis; just adoring and contemplating God. I really felt it was God initiating that for me. That really changed things for me and opened the door for contemplative prayer.”

It’s been more than 20 years since that second relapse, and throughout the years, John’s spiritual journey has continued to grow. He kept praying and sought spiritual direction from Msgr. William “Fitz” Fitzgerald (for ten years until Msgr. Fitz’s passing in 2015) as well as Msgr. Thomas Martin. He continued his contemplative

prayer practice and along the way found time to write.

He’s quick to point out that the path he began in earnest after his second relapse hasn’t been without its bumps.

“You go through times where you feel really high and have this great connection with God,” he says. “There were times where I wanted that feeling back, and I was forcing it. I thought if I could pray harder or differently, it should happen, but then it wouldn’t happen. I had to let it go and I have to understand it’s in God’s time. So, I keep doing what I should as God’s messenger and try not to lean on the consolation.”

John readily admits that he struggles with being able to see God in all things and in everybody at all times, but it’s that very practice that he advises as step one.

“At the beginning it’s a conscientious effort — in this person or this moment or circumstance look for God. It’s a daily exercise, and you have to push yourself into doing that. At the end of the day can I look back where I saw God in moments and people; and where I failed to see God, can I do a little bit better tomorrow.

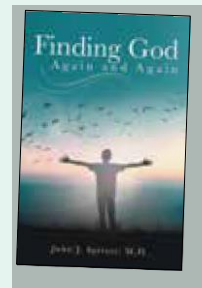
“It has to be a choice — I have to flip that switch and make a choice to follow God.”†

*“At the end of the day
can I look back where
I saw God in moments
and people; and
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bit better tomorrow.”*

Finding God Again and Again

BY JOHN J. SPITZER, M.D.

(Archway Publishing, 2021)



John Spitzer’s deeply personal spiritual memoir, more than 20 years in the making, takes the reader through his early life as a medical student and his three cancer battles and how they sent him in search of God. Raised in the Catholic faith, John regularly prayed and attended Mass; however, it was in confronting his own mortality that he yearned to be closer to God but didn’t know how.

His search for God leads him on a path filled with daily prayer, spiritual direction and reading about the lives of the saints. John doesn’t shy away from acknowledging his own spiritual frustrations, and most readers will see themselves mirrored in his struggles. Whether wrestling with professional challenges, waning soccer skills or energetic English Setter puppies, John strives to find God in all moments, people and experiences.

“It’s hard to know sometimes how God directs us in life,” writes John. “We often feel like we want to be in control of our lives, and this desire can permeate our prayer lives. We may even get used to a routine and become comfortable with it. It may be difficult to contemplate change, especially if we are not sensitive to what our hearts are telling us — that we need a change. But if we trust God and ask for guidance in this change, then God, in God’s own time, will grant us that favor. And usually, this change moves us closer to God. We just have to be patient and allow God to take control of the wheel.”

In “Finding God Again and Again” John provides an honest account of how elusive God can feel at times but how rewarding it is when we go searching for him in earnest. Readers will gain insight on how to begin their own search as well as inspiration from John’s journey.

— BY VICTORIA CESSNA



THE PRAYER OF ABANDONMENT

Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.

— Fr. Jean-Baptiste Chautard