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Showtime's 'The Big C' addresses real issues of chronic illness

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

I watched the first episode of Showtime's late summer offering on the Internet Movie Database. The original series was created by actress/writer/producer Darlene Hunt and Bill Condon, director of the 2004 film *Kinsey*, directs. The show premieres this Monday, August 16 (check local listings).

The Big C stars the thrice Oscar-nominated and Emmy-winning actress Laura Linney, (*The Truman Show*; *Kinsey*), as Cathy Jamison, a forty-ish wife, mother and high school teacher who learns she has terminal cancer with a year to live. Oliver Platt (*The West Wing*; *Pieces of April*) is her clueless, immature husband Paul and Gabourey Sidibe, who was nominated for an Oscar this year for her role in *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*, plays smart-alec Andrea, one of Cathy's students. Cynthia Nixon (*Sex and the City*) and Idris Elba (*The Wire*) also star.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D. proposes in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* that most people, when death comes close, process through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. While one cannot predict the themes the television show will deal with in future episodes, or what it will do with its one year timeline, the first episode seems to touch of all of these in one way or another ? with humor, dubious behavior, colorful language, wardrobe malfunctions, and determination to do something good before dying.

The Big C exposes something bland, banal, and unfulfilling about U.S. life and culture as well. I had to wonder if people in undeveloped or underdeveloped countries have the luxury to at least attempt to control their lives and destiny as Cathy does, or what people without insurance in our own country do when faced with certain death. The show is set in an upper middle-class neighborhood in middle-America ? a perch from which the whole universe seems safe. I bet things are about to change in Cathy's world.

Cathy seems to be responding to something Norman Cousins (1912-1990) once wrote: "Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live." She proclaims that she is going to spend this year getting "her weird back" and living the dream. Then, though it seems she is speaking to her dog, she utters a prayerful monologue at the end, opining that "it could just be gratitude" that she is feeling, yearning for, and experiencing. The poet Francis Thompson had an existential connection to the canine motif, too, as we know from his magnificent 1893 *The Hound of Heaven*.

If the series is as good as this first episode I think it will create a space for those with chronic illness, and those who care for them, to find meaning and common things to talk about. And maybe it will even help them change their lives a little ? while they still have the chance.

(The online version of this first episode seems longer than what will appear on television, running at almost 30 minutes.)

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