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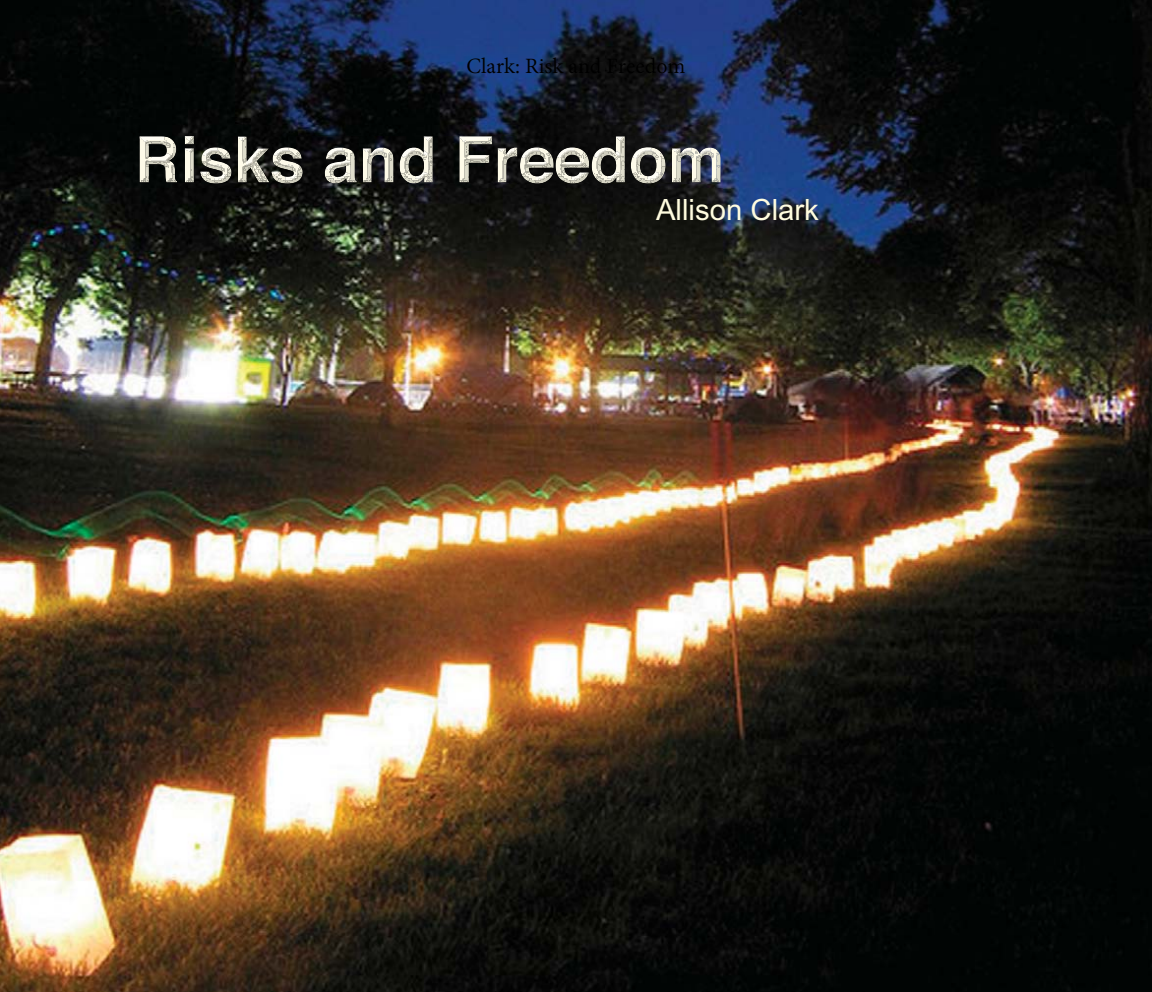
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Risks and Freedom

Allison Clark



On April 9, 2011, I set myself free. That was the day I decided to believe in the power of taking risks. Legs shaking, heart racing, and feeling severely nauseous, I walked sheepishly around the track in a purple shirt with people I never thought I would meet, letting two thousand college students know something I never thought I would reveal.

I am a cancer survivor, and until that day, I hid in the shadows.

For the past fifteen years, I had lived in

envy of the survivors who were proud of their condition, those who felt as though they could surmount any challenge. They'd gone under the knife and spent a year without hair. For me, just thinking about the disease I faced at age five made me want to cry. My family never talks about it. So I grew up with the impression that it was something to be ashamed of. I was anything but proud, and I rarely told anyone. I wanted to forget everything and many times, I did.

Every year from then on, I took the train

down to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for my check ups to be poked, X-rayed and stuck with needles, holding back tears the whole time.

But things began to change this fall when I met Heather, who—at the risk of sounding terribly cliché—changed my life. A freshman at SU, Heather was finishing her last months of treatment for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, with which she had been diagnosed at age sixteen. Unlike myself at the time, Heather had no inhibitions about the disease. She had decided to devote her life to the cause. As a communications and rhetorical studies major, she hoped to work for a nonprofit as a motivational speaker. She wanted to tell the world her story and let everyone know that any challenge can be overcome. I told her my (significantly less inspiring) story, and she encouraged me to get more involved with Relay For Life. I'd been doing Relay for years, but never felt passionate about it, and had never had the courage to walk the survivor lap. I left it up in the air but didn't think I'd really take the plunge. I was afraid that people would ask me questions or treat me differently—or awkwardly—if they knew.

Over the next months, I pondered the pros and cons of getting involved with Relay. By January, I still had yet to convince myself to make a decision. Until I learned that, after just one semester in college, Heather had relapsed, and would have to stay at home for the remainder of the year or more.

I couldn't believe it. She of all people did not deserve to go through this all over again. At that moment, I started to think seriously about participating in her honor. I came back to Syracuse for the second semester, signed up for Relay and became a captain for our APO team. I was going to “out” myself as a survivor. And I was absolutely terrified.

Flash forward to mid-April of that year, and I now felt like a completely different person compared to who I was in September.

I finally got it—the whole theory of “being proud of the challenges you've faced.” Getting up there in front of everyone to walk the survivor lap was one of the hardest things I've ever done. It scared me to death. And if I do it next year, it will still be a challenge. But I think I'm on my way.

Cancer sucks. And trying to think about it as a positive thing is nearly impossible. As it should be. But the lesson I'm trying to convey is something different. Yes, the challenges we face do have the potential to make us stronger, but only if we act upon them. I faced a challenge at age five. It took me fifteen years of being terrified of that challenge to realize how to deal with it. And on the night of Relay For Life, I finally set myself free of the secret that I had been keeping for so long.

Taking risks makes you grow. I'm not afraid of my past anymore, at least for the most part. I don't think the silence in my family will ever change, but I'm willing to live with that, at least for now. Like Heather, I now feel I have the right, duty, and privilege to use what happened to me to help others. She taught me to be proud, and I finally am. Coming out of my comfort zone for that night was one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. I don't know if people see me differently, and I don't really care. I just know that I feel a million times more confident about it, and I want to make a difference. And writing this is where I start. This is a testament to the fact that I am free.



Allison (right) with her friends at Relay For Life.