Each disease seems to have its own non-biological baggage, its special taboos, its fantasies, it degrees of social acceptance, its myths of origin, its apocryphal tales of inheritance.

Cancer, however, is no quirky myth. Sometime during their lifetimes, about one American in five will be afflicted with systemic cancer. It is conservatively estimated that 460,000 Americans die annually of the disease.

Cancer generally arrives unannounced, entering our body without first knocking. Often, a routine laboratory or X-ray procedure proclaims the sobering presence of an unwelcome aggressor almost extraterrestrial in character; it remains resolutely within the domain of abnormal biological activity and is ultimately solvable by rational interventions.

How pervasive is the mythology of cancer? How, in general, is this disease viewed? Certainly as a "taint" upon the family much as hemophilia and Huntington's disease are construed as genealogical missteps to be assigned to the family attic or closet. Cancer, curiously, is thought of as a middle-class disease although substantive epidemiological data would show that the highest frequencies of most cancers burden the poorest classes of citizens.

In the minds of many, cancer is not thought of as an intrinsic disease or even a metabolic failing but as an alien invader, a malignant stranger assaulting the citadel of our bodies, an unwelcome aggressor almost extraterrestrial in character infesting us, consuming us, an obscene predator with neither compassion nor feelings. Most people hear cancer not as a word but as a sentence, a death sentence.

How pervasive is the mythology of cancer? How, in general, is this disease viewed? Certainly as a "taint" upon the family much as hemophilia and Huntington's disease are construed as genealogical missteps to be assigned to the family attic or closet. Cancer, curiously, is thought of as a middle-class disease although substantive epidemiological data would show that the highest frequencies of most cancers burden the poorest classes of citizens.

Living with cancer sounds almost like "living with Sylvester" as though the cancer were a separate entity much like a boarder in a small boarding house, perhaps like an interloping stranger with his own identity card. It is astonishing, too, of the frequency with which military metaphors are employed when defining or describing cancer and its therapies: Nixon's war against cancer; it is often called an invasive disease, a malignant ailment requiring a crusade, a killer disease. We don't manage cancer the way we manage psoriasis or asthma; with cancer we attack it, which perhaps justifies heroic interventions. And when someone finally succumbs to cancer the obituary—if it mentions cancer at all—will note with sorrow that Mr. X "lost his battle with cancer" or "succumbed after a lengthy siege."