Through the Darkness

By

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Last month, Val gave me this blank writing journal. I thought it was a great idea, to put my thoughts and feelings on paper. I thought it might be even therapeutic, but I can’t get started.

How do I begin and where? I’m better now, stronger, physically and emotionally, but I know another series of chemo is just around the corner. I know I have to do this. I know I have to get through it. But four more months just seem unbearable!

I can do it. I must do it. My future depends on it! I’ll keep trying, one day at a time. I can’t worry about something a week away. I’ll get through today, and then there will be tomorrow!

Memories – March 1998

It’s been about two years since I was trained as a Chemo Coach. I read an ad in the Buffalo News about this new program that was looking to match cancer survivors who had gone through chemotherapy with newly diagnosed cancer patients, about to undergo chemo. Actually, I read this same advertisement several months earlier, but the program was looking for survivors, who had completed their chemo regimes and had remained cancer free for two years, or maybe it was for one year, but I had not met the time requirement. Anyway, when I finally called, it was just after a training session completed, and I had to wait, again.

Dad had just recently taken ill with a lung problem. I was at the hospital, alone, waiting for the doctor. I knew what he was going to tell me! Dad’s losing battle began in earnest that day.

Somehow, my need to begin working with cancer patients became more of a necessity to me.

The evening of my first training session was on the same day Dad had exploratory surgery. I was fine in the training session until we began a room-wide round-robin introduction. I had survived my cancer, but was devastated by my father’s prognosis. I wept.

Reliving Things; Hair Loss – Undated

I knew it was coming. I thought I was prepared. I was wrong…I was devastated. I let myself become surrounded by love’s embrace – close family, close friends. I didn’t want others to know what happened.

One friend picked me up in her limo and drove me into downtown Buffalo, so I could try on wigs. That task completed and the order placed, all I could do is wait for it to happen.

One thing overlaps another. I had a catheter surgically placed in my aorta to make the chemo easier to receive. And the sessions began.

Before long, on the dreaded day, shampoo washed out all my hair. It didn’t fall out slowly, it was just all gone, in one wash, it seemed.

I cried!

 I sobbed!

The wig arrived just in time for me to go back to work. Since I had been cut off for six weeks from the breast surgery, no one questioned my hairdo. The secret continued.

I was a closet victim. I couldn’t let it out. I think I was afraid what would happen to me when “friends” would withdraw from me, and not be willing to “touch” me, physically or emotionally. Those who knew were so special, and were sworn to secrecy! Those not “trusted” were kept out. No one saw me without something on my head! It wasn’t the wig, it was a turban. Never uncovered! Never!

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly – Undated

As I lay awake in bed last night, I was chock full of ideas for this journal. Never forget what you feel. Emotions are genuine – sincere. REAL! They are deserving of validation.

The Good –

No matter how bad it got for me, I still remember what a positive influence I was to others. I remember my boss telling me how bad I affected HIM!. Imagine that. I was the cause of change in other’s lives, because of how I was handling my own! Everything happens for a reason.

The Bad –

Being more and more ill after each chemo treatment, getting sicker, quicker, and it lasting longer, with each subsequent session. Not being able to eat – anything. Not even being able to keep down a drink of water. And then we tried cantaloupe. What a God send! It stayed down, and I had a bout of instant energy. Not being able to drive- especially to chemo sessions. Needing to rely on someone else, all the time…Fighting to recall a certain word in casual conversation –chemo brain…Pre-medicating before chemo sessions – then being unable to remember instructions…Swiss cheese memories –full of holes.

The Ugly –

The whole blasted situation! The depression! The terrible depression. Those were my darkest moments. I have never cried like that in all my life. But, one special friend was always there. How I looked forward to her calls. Those telephone visits helped me keep my sanity. She was my hero. I think she was the original chemo coach. Her cards and flowers were overwhelmingly appreciated.

And then the problems began with our 17 year old son, who was pulling farther and farther away. He seemed unable to stay in the same room with me. As a mother, another unbearable.

Anxiety?

I had just finished my last chemo session. Dr. E said there was no reason not to remove the catheter. I wasn’t really sure how they removed it. As it turned out, I wasn’t prepared for what followed. Although it was an incredibly simple procedure, I was horrified.

I visited the surgeon in his office. Bob took off from work, drove me there, and waited in the room with me. I lay on the examining table, listening to the doctor speak about what he was going to do.

Six months ago the catheter was surgically inserted into my aorta and was positioned to provide the proper directional flow. I had to flush the device three times a week, all done in a sterilized condition, before my reverse image in a mirror. My hands shook the first few time the visiting nurse made me do the required process. There were so many steps I taped it onto the bathroom mirror. This was about to be eliminated, and my body was going to revert to a more natural condition. This should be easy, right?

All the surgeon did was pull it out! He grabbed on, and yanked, really hard, until it was out! Blood - *my blood* – was splattering everywhere! On the wall, on my face, on the doctor! All he did was apply some pressure to the area the catheter had previously filled, and the bleeding stopped in short order. It was out! Thank God! The chemo was over, and now I would do more physical healing.

Bob took me home and I rested on the couch for a time. I began to be awful. I started having the most terrible chest pains I ever experienced. I think I was more scared at this time than at any other time during my treatment. I thought it was a heart attack!

Bob was beside himself. Our son was gone as usual. Our 12 year old daughter was somewhere in the house. And then the phone rang, only adding to the urgency of my attack.

Bob answered the call from my cousin. He didn’t know how to help me; he was really distraught. Betty offered to come over and try to help, and she seemed to get here really fast. She kept telling me she thought it was only anxiety, to try to calm myself. They both tried to help me get more comfortable, and after some time, an eternity to me, the pain and heaviness began passing. Finally, some relief!

Why did this happen? Why now? How was I able to get through the tests, exams, surgery, blood draws, bone scans, etc., etc., etc., without having experienced this anxiety? Was it from all the stress? I was afraid I’d feel this way again, but it never occurred. Once was more than enough!

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When I wrote these words, so many years ago, they were meant only to be read by me, but as time passes, and I able to re-examine that part of my life, I realize I may be of value to someone about to encounter this experience, or perhaps is already on this road. Or maybe a family member or dear friend will gain some insight into the isolation and fear I experienced. I hope sharing my emotions will help you to be there for your loved one. There are many roads a survivor must journey. But, there is always hope.

**Side Bar**

*Lights at the End of the Tunnel*

The odds of surviving breast cancer, as well as many other forms of cancer, have greatly improved over the years. However, receiving a cancer diagnosis will be life altering. As long-duration studies of diseases and cancer research have documented, many new drugs are available to help eliminate, alleviate or diminish some of the side effects of both the disease and chemo therapy. With the advent of the internet, much of this information is available in the total privacy of your home.

**KNOW THE FACTS?** Visit <http://thebreastcancersite.com> to see some real statistics:

Here are some additional links to resources you may want to consider.

The American Cancer Society (800-227-2345): <http://www.cancer.org>.

Cancer Wellness Center of Western New York: <http://www.cancerwellnesscenter.org>

Coping Magazine: <http://www.copingmag.com/>

Komen Race for the Cure: <http://www.komen.org>

National Breast Cancer Awareness Month: <http://nbcam.org>

National Cancer Institute (800-4-cancer) <http://www.nci.nih.gov\>

New York State: <http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/bcctp/bcctp.htm>

Roswell Park Cancer Institute (1-877-ASK-RPCI (1-877-275-7724)): http://

[www.rosellpark.org](http://www.rosellpark.org)

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