

A Cry for Cooperation

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The Journey

On a recent visit to Montreal to see my naturopath, my heart soared with the geese as the train's passing sparked their rise to the sky on their way north. Spring. New life, new hope – and a special lift in my heart as I had just received a cancer free diagnosis from my radiologist.



"Mind you", he said, "You have to be extra vigilant with your follow-ups for the coming five years" – me the you who did nothing with my axilla or left breast, both of which were suspect from the beginning. But I am one who looks for opportunities in risks, and the need for vigilance is well worth the risk.

It has been a year's journey.

In June of 2002 I was recovering from my second eye operation for glaucoma, wearing a patch and waiting for results of a recent mammogram. Before the trabeculectomy, I had visited my girl friend in England for her 50th birthday celebrations. On a walk one day with some girl friends, Sylvia was asked:

"So when do you have to go back to the hospital now?"

"Every 6 months," was the reply.

"Oh, yes," said I, "What was the problem?"

The words "Breast Cancer" jumped from her mouth to hit me in a place that pulled a cord for a neon light to go off in my brain. That night in my bed, I tentatively felt my breast in the way that I had been taught to look for abnormalities. And wouldn't you know – lump – upper right quadrant – lump – hard like a golf ball – lump – large – lump.

Now this was more than a surprise. Hadn't I been doing all the right healthy things for the last 30 years? I was a vegetarian meditating yogi – what more could one do for maintaining health?



More to wellness

I was to learn over the coming months that there is more to wellness than following one's concepts of health.

Eighteen months ago, had you asked me what course I would take if my body ever succumbed to cancer, I would have answered that all I knew was that I would never do chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. Nuke, cut and burn? Never. Such therapies went against all my beliefs of natural ways of living and healing.

I have since come to understand that cancer is a nasty, nasty physical aberration. It only takes one cell, and the rest becomes history – or herstory in my case, along with the other one in eight women who will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. Horrible statistics! It may well be that the mortality rate from the disease has decreased over the last 40 years, but the incidence has increased almost threefold.



At the time of diagnosis, one is catapulted into a very different state of consciousness. It is a state of stark opposites – life on one hand, death on the other. An often-invisible clarity comes. At the same time, there is enormous dithering over what to do, what to do. My instant illuminations told me to buy a juicer, stop eating sugar and dairy products, and switch from listening to Radio One to Radio Two. Insofar as treatment options were concerned, I spent one whole night phoning everyone I knew to ask their opinion, until it became very clear that I had to make some decision. I was intelligent enough to see that I had to change a few beliefs. The tumour was growing almost before my eyes, and I knew of the consequences of that kind of growth. Already my lymph nodes were starting to swell. Some radical action had to be taken and quickly. It was not a time for my normal, gentle, herbal approach to sickness.

One minute at a time

I opted for chemo. If I was to have it anyways after the surgery, why not have it before, and then maybe the surgery could be avoided. At every point, I found myself only committing to the very next step. My constant thought was "One step at a time, one day at a time, one minute at a time. Just deal with now what is before you. Everything else can wait. After all, isn't that what tomorrow is for – to take care of undone business from today?"

Thus began my journey into the world of hospitals and sickness. At the same time, I embraced, and fully incorporated into my life, my yoga practice, my vegan diet with juices, my acupuncturist and T'ai Chi, my homeopath, my naturopath, my healers, my angels (in the form of friends) and my guru. Nothing was left unattended, and all were brought together under the umbrella of cooperation. My approach has worked. In June of 2002, the prognosis was a bilateral mastectomy. Today, one year later, I have both my breasts, and feel and look (so everyone tells me) wonderful.

This method of course, does demand great effort on my part. But I have seen, over the last year, that I will do as much as it takes to stay alive – and after that, it is all in God's hands. At least I have done my best.

Too large an animal

Now, access to medical aid via the health care system has become progressively worse; complaints about the socialized medical system are a daily occurrence. I had a four-hour wait at the hospital last week on a follow-up call to my oncologist and that is only a part of it. The system has become too large an animal to allow for sufficient attention to be given to each patient by each doctor. There is too much waiting – not enough time for explanations or basic human relating. I go to my appointments with a list of questions and concerns, but I'm lucky if I get to address half of them, and leave feeling somewhat disappointed. At least my complementary doctors have the time – as much time as I wish to pay them, and that is OK – my questions get answered and I leave feeling empowered.

I'm not saying that we should do away with our health system – it can work miracles. I am the first to appreciate each of my allopathic doctors for their skill and patience. I am saying something more profound – more personal – more compelling.

For any lasting and radical change to our health system, there first of all has to be a lasting and radical change in the heads and hearts of each individual. We each have to take responsibility for our own state of wellness. This is a proactive state. It means that I become educated on the needs of the whole being, tackling issues such as diet, supplementation, exercise, emotional health, spiritual wealth, environmental issues – and of course, once begun, the list continues. What does it mean to be truly well? Why is that state not accessible to me now? What changes can be made in my life so that I can fulfill Jonathan Swift's wish for humanity: "May you live all the days of your life." Just what does it mean to be fully alive?

The goodness of every path

This approach includes accessing the expertise of all health care practitioners. There is room for both allopathic and complementary medicine in our lives. Let's start educating ourselves about diet, herbs, toxicity – fundamental understanding needs of the twenty first century. Let's really encompass the goodness of every path, every religion, every healing.

Access to medical information is increasing manifold. Let us do the research and reach our own conclusions: both extremely empowering and healing strategies. Chances are that we will be in accord with our doctor. More than likely, we will adopt some complementary approach. This can be something as basic as including certain fruits and vegetables in the diet, to more extreme measures such as exploring the location of our I, and its place in the scheme of things.



How to accomplish such acceptance and openness is through cooperation. Now this is a big word. It means collaborating with myself first and foremost - it means taking a pause before I jump into some conditioned response; it means listening to the other person – saying 'yes' before 'no' – allowing space into my life where anything is possible and all things probable. I meditate on goodness, on health, love and wisdom, so that in those moments of manifestation where two or more aspects come together to make a triptych, enormous potential for healing unfolds, and every day lived is a miracle.

My cry for cooperation extends to the health care system – both allopathic and complementary. But most of all, it is to each and every one of us, hopefully before the dance with cancer, or some blow from left field, brings us starkly into focus. Let us embrace all that comes before us – it is our true nature to do so. Then, when we are truly well informed, we know what has to be done. From knowledge, wisdom will come, and more. Knowing leads to understanding; understanding leads to appreciation; appreciation leads to love. Love, the basis of life, is the greatest of healers.

Now it is summer and timely that I finish this article, my first of many projects, thank the Lord. I am ecstatic to be excited about my life once again. That is a sure sign of healing.

Chop wood, carry water

It is with a tentative step that I leave my door in the mornings. But I am come to relish the warmth and bathe in its light. Things are different now. God has kept me alive, and we can move on. One big lesson – the basic message of the Bhagavad Gita: do not be attached to the fruits of the action. Just fight. Get up in the morning and deal with it – whatever comes before you - that's what it's all about. Like the (modified) Zen saying: Before cancer, chop wood and carry water. After cancer, chop wood and carry water.



Life accommodates all things, as I am the experiment and proof. Without all the complementary therapies that I undertook these last months, and I took a lot, I would not be feeling so well. Without the cutting, burning and nuking, I would, rather ironically, probably be dead. Not that there wasn't a death of some sorts. I had a dream in which the Hindu God of death, Yam, came to my house. As he was leaving by the gate, he turned and gave me a big smile. "Maybe not this time" is what it said, "but one day."

I am ready for that.

These days it is the turn of the humming birds to show me their wings, and I thank God for it all.

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