

Topic of Cancer

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Y

ou have cancer.” I could hardly believe the pretty young doctor’s hesitant words. “I’m sorry to have

to tell you this. The swelling in your abdomen is called ‘ascites,’ and it’s a bad sign. The CT scan showed that your left ovary is abnormally enlarged, which indicates probable ovarian cancer.” I sat and listened, my ear glued to the phone in the radiology office, tears rolling down my face. I had wondered why she’d taken so long to call me back with the results, but – this!

It took two weeks to line up a surgeon and book an operating room at the U of M. During that time I hit Google. I researched the different ways of disposing of one’s remains (donate to the medical school? Body Farm?) and wondered how I’d go about obtaining a plot or crematory space through the VA. Where on earth was my DD214 form?

I googled “ovarian cancer” and blanched at my reported chances of being alive in 5 years. Decided it might be better to emulate Han Solo: “Never tell me the odds!”

And then I thought of my 10-year-old grandson, who had lost his other grandmother just a year ago. Oh, no. I can’t lie down and die; I have to fight this, if only for him.

My handsome, cheerful new surgeon, Dr. Peter Argenta, had a great Google reputation and he was upbeat about my odds. He gave me hope, at a time I sorely needed it.

Getting rid of gallons of ascites and pounds of guts (most of my lady bits, and my omentum – the skin wrapping the intestines) gave me a slender new profile. The staples decorating my incision gave me a rakish, biker look.

And as for chemotherapy – oh, my goodness. Chemo melted away just about every ounce of body fat. It made the scale reading plummet steadily from week to week. It was so bizarre, looking down and seeing the body of an 11-year-old girl, only with boobs. Bariatric doctors really should study cancer chemotherapy because of its amazing ability to melt away the pounds. Just implement a few tweaks to make it more comfortable. It would be safer than surgery.

Chemo also made my hair fall out: head hair, eyebrows, eye lashes, even nasal hair. Nostril hair has an important function. I found it crucial to carry an accessible tissue at all times to avoid embarrassment.

I found that three-seamed turbans at headcovers.com look pretty good, and are soft and comfortable. Basic colors like cream and gray go with the most outfits, and are a better buy, since more vivid colors tend to look quite different in the meat world than on the computer.

I have to say, it was fun and rather hilarious to watch the hair fall out. It came out in handfuls – what a trip! How often do you get to see yourself bald as a cue

ball? I was told of someone who had a head of gorgeous hair, and when she got cancer, declared she'd never have chemo and risk losing it. Well, her hair is safely with her, in her coffin.

I went to Methodist Hospital, to the Frauentuch Cancer Center, and was happy with their level of care. (Except for the rock-hard recliners sized for the tall! Bring neck pillows.) Everyone was cheerful and welcoming. My surgeon, as I said, was Dr. Peter Argenta, and for chemotherapy I had Dr. Cathleen Chen, both of whom were kindly and competent. Each chemo day my husband Greg would pick up our lunches at the Muffin Man cafeteria, and they serve superb beef chili; I highly recommend it.

(Fantastic chili on chemo day almost made up for that Neulasta shot two days later, the joint pain of which required narcotics to dull. Don't be all 12-step. Take the pain pills if you need them.)

I may have mouthed the platitudes most of the public unthinkingly says before being faced with the experience. For example, like the lady with the beautiful hair (wonder if she broke any 10-year-olds' hearts?), I may have been adamant about the quality of life I'd require before agreeing to fight to survive. I now find that thinking impractical.

I saw my mother go into her cancer believing firmly in New Age Positive Thinking, determined to disbelieve her cancer out of existence; and for that reason, as well as its ugly reputation, refused chemo. That did not work well. In fact, I believe her own shame at her failure to do this made her passing more painful for her. We're not gods, and it's okay that we aren't.

I was in awe of Gloria Swanson's determination as she told her gynecologist, "I'm going to starve my tumor away!" I'm here to tell you that if there is any starving being done, it's of the patient, who is literally being eaten alive. Medical people gave vague answers when I asked about diet, and I soon realized why. Another truism is "listen to your body," and my body was crying – *screaming* – for calories; fat, sugar, animal foods, anything I'd been taught was Bad For You. And I literally could not force down the bleak array of bland foods that were Good For You. There were weeks I lived on potato chips and rich, high-fat dip.



This cancer had hit me right after two years of meticulous veganism; sorry, Robin Quivers, it didn't work.

Instead I learned a lot about interdependence and how we all prop each other up. My husband was amazing; he was my rock. My siblings rallied to my side. My son and daughter-in-law gave practical help. Friends and relatives called and mailed. Even though I wasn't a parishioner, Our Lady of Grace provided a Stephen Minister for me, a warm, lovely lady who listened to me talk/email her ear off. My grandson watched TV with me for hours and we talked about transgenerism and tree houses. All of these people kept me alive.

My theme song started out to be Blood, Sweat, and Tears' hit: "I'm not scared of dying, and I don't really care ... " But I found that I did care. At the very least, all during that grim February, the lyrics "and bundle up my coffin 'cause it's cold way down there!" spoke to me, because my newly emaciated body felt the "crazy cold" down to my bones! But winter turned into spring, and burst forth into summer.

Now the chemo is over. No more sleeping 24-hour stretches. My latest CT scan was clean – nothing going on in the problem areas, at least for now. I'm back to work.

Cancer sucks, but it's nothing to be terrified of. Yeah, that's my message.

