



Instructed by Courage

by Linda Posage

It was 4:27 a.m. at the end of June, and the first heat wave of the season was finally winding down on Cape Cod. Cooler air was circulating up the stairwell and into the stuffy bedroom where I lay listening to Joe's rhythmic snoring, the drone of the ceiling fan, and an enthusiastic bird solo announcing the break of dawn.

I had every reason to get out of bed: writing deadlines, a yoga class at 7:15, heck- I could throw a load of laundry in and get that out of the way. But most pressing was a task I was completely unfamiliar with and utterly intimidated by because it involved praying for a dear friend... a friend whose story could have been mine.

A month earlier, when I went for my annual mammogram, a growth was detected warranting a follow-up ultrasound. Confirming suspicions, the subsequent ultrasound showed a 2mm area of concern and I was scheduled for a needle aspiration of what my doctor assumed was a cyst.

For two weeks I toyed with the idea that maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was cancer. Maybe I was to join the ranks of millions of American women whose bodies self-destruct in the battle against abnormal cell growth.

Frightened, I arrived at the Breast Care Center, prepared for the needle aspiration and praying that the fluid from the cyst would be clear so I could walk out of the office and back into a life of health and well-being.

A nurse greeted me in the exam room with the shocking news that during the previous week, my doctor had studied the ultrasound images with a growing concern.

It was recommended that I agree to a hollow needle biopsy in order to be certain, through a pathology report, that the cells attaching the growth to my breast tissue were free of cancer. I signed papers, donned a cotton gown, and lay down on the exam table to wait.

All the fears I had tried on for size were beginning to fit, and my eyes let loose a flood of silent tears.

My doctor arrived, and although the lidocaine injections were painful, the biopsy proceeded without a hitch. After harvesting five slices of breast tissue, I was sent home with instructions for the care of the incision and the anticipation of a call within five days.

I spoke with no one but Joe about this concerning development. Without sufficient information, I couldn't justify calling family members or friends to tell them I didn't know yet whether I had breast cancer. I couldn't handle their worry or my need to assure them that everything would be all right.

But then Joe told me the news of our friend Grace, who had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and was scheduled for surgery and radiation. I imagined her level of fear - I knew her level of fear - and something shifted in me. I wanted to talk with her but I was hesitant. I wasn't sure I could be helpful.

In the days it took me to decide whether to call her, my doctor's office phoned to inform me that my pathology report was clear; no evidence of cancerous cells was found. Relieved, Joe and I hugged tightly, and the extending road as a vision of my future resumed. But I was nagged by the thought of Grace.

How could I call her now and tell her about my ordeal when I'd come out unscathed? Wouldn't that be cruel? And how could I speak with her about her condition without bringing up what had just happened with me?

The more I hesitated to call, the more uncomfortable I grew until I finally called her the following day without any script in mind. Though I hadn't spoken with Grace for at least two years, I decided to forgo desultory chitchat and get straight to the heart of the matter.

I told her about my ordeal and that I knew of her scheduled procedure. I offered my help to her in any way she needed. She was forthcoming with her fears but calm in the hope that her tumor had been detected early enough.

She was thrilled to learn that my pathology report was clear, granting me the permission to feel true relief rather than the twinge of guilt I felt in telling her I was cancer-free.

We spoke about metaphorical wake-up calls and prioritizing the important things in life; agreeing how we get caught up in the shuffle of daily routines, forgetting to appreciate the miraculous gifts of life and breath.

She expressed acceptance and gratitude that her diagnosis was a reminder of some sort, and I concurred because

although I couldn't know exactly what she was going through, I could come darn close.

When we spoke the following week, Grace told me about a new program at the hospital. In preparation for surgery, patients voluntarily meet with an alternative therapy practitioner for instruction in relaxation techniques, guided imagery and positive affirmations.

On the day of the surgery, the anesthesiologist is notified that the patient will be practicing these methods, who will in turn prompt the patient during pre-op.

Coordinating relaxation techniques with the administering of anesthesia is proving to be a successful formula for patient health and recovery, significantly reducing post-surgical pain.

She continued to explain that nurses and assistants would speak affirmations to her during surgery such as your body is healing quickly and your body is healthy and strong, and she could opt to listen to guided imagery and meditation suggestions via a headset while under anesthesia.

In keeping with this messaging of health and vitality, she was encouraged to enlist the efforts of loved ones by asking them to participate in a type of prayerful exercise during the exact time of her surgery.

Utilizing the same visualization techniques used by the patient, loved ones send images of white light and blankets of comfort to assist the patient during surgery and recovery.

I woke up early to practice my prayerful exercise in the cool of the early morning. Later in the day, while the afternoon sun sizzled overhead, Grace called with the exact time of her surgery, scheduled for the following day. Now, gratefully, I would be one of many who, at the appointed hour, could help a friend whose courage had become my instructor.

¹Wiener-Kronish JP (2008). Overview of anesthesia. In L Goldman, D Ausiello, eds., *Cecil Medicine*, 23rd ed., pp. 2904–2907. Philadelphia: Saunders Elsevier



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