

Feature Article

Cancer, from the other side

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Chapter One: And so it began

To Rita,

Where did the tears come from?

I know the scientific reason. Tears form from lacrimal glands and wash over your eyes. Some drain out of your eyes through tear ducts and trickle, yes, that day I would say trickle, down your cheeks and I could not stop them.

I felt like I was outside of myself looking in.

“Should we phone your husband?” Well... No ... That doesn't make sense; he would be working all night.

My eyes kept wandering to the huge poster of exercises recommended for staff.

“How often do you actually do the stretches suggested on this poster?”

“Never... We don't have time.”

In this small examining room where you have just told me that I have breast cancer.

I was sure the air was going to choke me.

Chapter Two: The order of things

To Marguerite (I will try to be orderly),

1. Retire May 1.
2. Plan one-month holiday in June
 - a. Drive to Ontario with husband
 - b. Niece's wedding
 - c. Drive back with sister (maybe brother).
3. Health check
 - a. Mammogram one week before the trip
 - b. General yearly exam complete with Pap test and breast exam.
4. Back to the GP because
 - a. Failed my mammogram
 - b. Need a repeat
 - c. Happens all the time.
5. Repeat mammogram
 - a. To ultrasound
 - b. Radiologist escorts me into a small room. “I am 98% sure you have cancer and we will do a biopsy today for confirmation.”
6. Note: Do not go to a repeat mammogram alone. See [chapter one](#).

Chapter Three: A rock

To Peter,



This is a picture of my rock. They come in all different shapes and sizes. As you can see, I totally lucked out.

It takes four to five days to actually receive a diagnosis. These days can be a bit like a dream (let's stay positive). I tried to make use of different compartments of my brain.

At this point you just don't know what you don't know so, thank a higher being for the technology we have and let them worry about the diagnosis. Your job is to laugh, plan things, and do them; hopefully, with your rock. Oh, and when picking your rock, make sure:

1. They love you.
2. They are not too emotional, maybe a little concrete, and a good planner helps. (I would probably not make a good rock because I am way too emotional. But please, call me for the *I Love Lucy* reruns).

In my case we were on holiday, so we just continued with plan B in our back pocket. We ended up camping in our tent out of cell range, laughing through the downpour and wishing we had invested in a few more tarps. I remember the moon one night as we sat in a river valley and I let that compartment in my brain open for a moment.

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“Can I pour you another glass of wine?” says my rock. It was not time to go there yet. So we sat and tried to find faces made in the riverbed.



Chapter Four: Where is the guidebook to advise you how to tell your children you have cancer?

To Jamie, Jillian, Erinn and Cayte,

We are on the side of the road, now in cell range and the person on the end of the phone confirms the diagnosis we already knew.

First thoughts: How do I tell my four adult children their mom has a life-threatening disease?

First response: Don't. Hide. Pretend all is good. Our family has perfected the “All is Great!” persona.

Second: This is where you open the compartment of your brain and bawl your eyeballs out. Put those lacrimal glands in supercharge. Run away for a day, or two

Third: Get a grip. You are not dying ... well... I mean we all are. But you, today, now, on this planet ...are not.

We made our way home and first stop was to see our third-born, Erinn. Only you know your kids. How to say those words gently when there is so much terror around them. I knew it would have to come from me, and how did I tell her? Just like Erinn. Straight up. “I failed my mammogram, I had a biopsy, I have breast cancer and we are going to beat it. Together.” Her response was “Ok, what's next?”

Now this is where I needed *her* advice. How do I tell everyone else? My children lived in various places in the province. On the phone?

“Yes,” she said, “and phone now. Like a Band-Aid. Give it a good swift rip.”

I don't know if this was the best way to handle this news. I will have to ask them one day. But they are a great support to

each other and I knew they would get through it. What choice do we have?

I have a confession to make. I am a radiation therapist and have treated cancer patients for 40 years. But the lens is now very different and confusing on the other side.

Knowing I would be in to see my colleagues at some point in this peregrination, (see [next chapter](#)), I drafted the letter below:

To my dear colleagues,

Ok I will get right to it, I have a bit of bad news and would like to be the one to let you know... I was diagnosed with ductal carcinoma two weeks ago. Very small, 1.2 cm caught on a routine mammogram. I may be back to check up on you. My surgical date is Thursday June 18th. I am feeling well and have a lot of great support so no worries, I just wanted you to know.

We all know the drill.

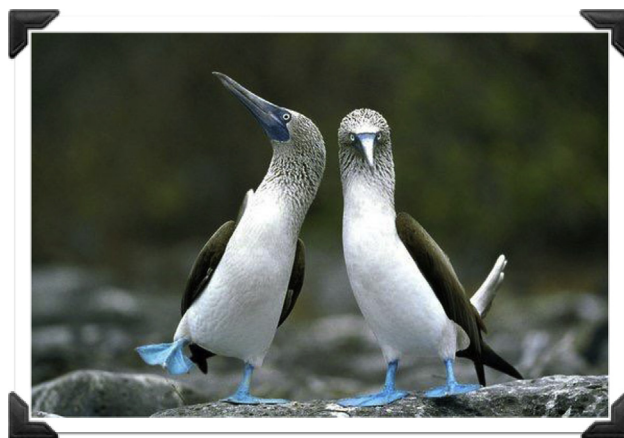
Send good vibes on Thursday, have a glass of wine for me and I will be in to see you in a few weeks.

Love,

Jan

Chapter Five: Peregrinate: to wander, travel by foot

To: My sister Val and brother Greg and morning chats, -
People talk about their cancer journey. Sorry, but a “journey”



to me is trekking through South East Asia, or walking the wall of China, or saying hello to the blue-footed booby duck on the Galapagos Islands. So I found the word peregrinate. I think it is appropriate. When undergoing cancer treatment you need to do just that. This is a deliberate battle, which is taken one day, one step at a time. Sometimes by yourself, but mostly, holding hands with those that need to help you just as much as you need them.

Chapter Six: The Biopsy Report

To Dr. Kolkind (aptly named),

The biopsy report is confusing, scary, and why do they need to use such incredible vocabulary? I think it justifies

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