

Body's Way of Knowing

**Everything in our lives and our history reminds us...that we humans live
in the hope of discovering some meaning, if not necessarily in the
vast world out there, then in our own lives, down here.
(*Sehdev Kumar*)**

PART II

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PART II

When we reflect on the nature of suffering, and inquire about compassion and love, and about meaning and purpose...and about grace and forgiveness, no answers leap from under the electron microscope. These answers are sought if they are sought at all, in the words of James Joyce, “in the smithy of one’s own soul” (Kumar). In our bodies’ day to day existence, we carry on our lives, meeting people, working, reading, playing, sleeping, doing so without taking much heed of the vessel that allows us to do all those things, our bodies. It is only when our bodies/mind/spirits suffer, that we start to pay attention to the “more” that exists beyond our selves.

It would be nice to consider that our lives here on earth are nothing more than social or mythical constructs. That our growth and experience are only a small part of a much bigger plan. But we are mortal and fearful and for some time it is in our best psychological interests to believe that we are all there is and that our selves and our experiences are monumentally important. Otherwise, what the heck are we doing here?

In the early stages of “having cancer”, one is consumed with diagnosis, new research, treatment options, doctors, nurses, and all things medical. A person who was once a woman, wife, mother, sister, and daughter is now considered simply a patient: female, white, 33 with a T1 N0 M0 carcinoma of the left breast treated with a lumpectomy and postoperative radiation. But these orthodox diagnostic categories are simply not broad enough to encompass the astonishing range of experiences inherent with the full human potential, which includes mystical and transcendent states of consciousness (Nelson, 14). One is more than a tumor, more than a

cancer or radiation patient. When the crisis of cancer is over, the treatments complete, the patient sent home to be seen in three months, then who are you now? And the crisis of soul begins.

By exploring the synergy of experience, one tries to comprehend the new bodily experience that has visited and what it now means to the old body. Surely, many things remain the same after a diagnosis of cancer. You eat, you sleep, dress, dream, you work and play, you meet colleagues and friends but now everything that was the same is now different. The process is the same but the meaning, the feel, the colour is different. Everyone around is carrying on with their lives like before and you try to do the same but it is not the same. Cultural rites of passage occur during crisis situations in the life cycle of an individual. They are periods of transition in cultural expectations, in social roles and status, in interpersonal relations, in psychological state and way of being in the world (Peters, 39). What is this? Am I losing my mind? No, it is something that I learned to call, *the new normal*.

*If a seed in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses,
what might not the heart of man become in its long journey toward the stars?*

G.K. Chesterton

During my five weeks of radiation treatments, I explored the potential causality of my cancer. Was it seasonal change, evil spirits, poison or habit and behavior (Clifford, 120)? Unfortunately, I could pretty well find a potential cause in each of those areas. But what was done was done and the cancer, I was assured was no longer in my body. But I was not so sure and I learned later that the psychological basis of insanity is the same basis for enlightenment (Clifford, 123). Prior to understanding which road I was actually on madness or salvation, I was convinced I was going insane.

It had been a month since my radiation treatments had finished, life was getting back to normal. My family and friends had breathed a collective sigh of relief and I was supposed to be happy to “have it all over with.” Standing in line at a grocery store, a woman said “Hello, Annis”. I looked around into her face and recognized her but could not remember her name. Instead of admitting my lapse of memory, I carried on a general, “Oh, hi” conversation while panic began to build up in my body. I paid for my groceries and left as quickly as I could weeping the whole way home. Such a simple encounter but it left me weeping for over a week. How ridiculous is this I wondered? All I could think of was that my mind was going and maybe the cancer was now in my brain. Unable to stop crying, I polled some friends and found a therapist who patiently listened to my story. At the end she said, “It is not that you are crying that causes me concern. From everything you have told me you have an absolute reason to cry long and hard. The real question is, why *you* don’t feel you should be crying?” The light bulb went on and I saw that my body’s biggest problem was that it’s texture was made of “ignorance” (Satprem, 132). If one can not cry after a cancer diagnosis (and also the death of my beloved grandfather), well then when can one cry?

I left the office feeling lighter and with the understanding that my body could cry as long as it needed and that it would never know in the same way it knew before (Satprem, 142). The old body, the pre-cancer “I”, was a giver, a doer for others, a good Christian who put others before self, a good patient with a brave face, a good girl. Mythically, the breasts are symbolized as overflowing with nourishment for all creatures (Walker, 303). Could it be possible to over nourish others while depleting the nourishment of self opening the potential for, perhaps, an untimely demise? It was then I realized that the old way would no longer work and I would have to create my own *new normal*.

The *new normal* is the new life. The loss of faith in physical body moves one to finding a place of faith in spirit or soul. Sometimes it is religion, although for me, it did not work. I felt sad in church and empty. I could no longer conform to the injunctions of church and share in its rites (Nelson, 17). I needed to look further into the “higher power” I felt resided within. (Nelson, 18)

If a cell is to function purely, that is without any adjunct or intrusion of factors foreign to its substance, the body must be first completely emptied of all its old habits, its old coatings; it means going through all the layers, the intellectual mind, then the emotional, then the sensory mind and finally, the physical mind (Satprem, 130).

I began to meditate, to think deeply. I listened to beautiful music and brought flowers into my environment on a regular basis. I gardened and read inspirational work. I gave up friends who were no longer capable of feeding my soul and the chores that no longer brought me happiness. I spent many hours alone by myself, sometimes I sat and thought and sometimes I just sat*. I tried to work with the unconscious and listen to my body as experience (Chodorow, 40). Some days it told me it was tired. *And he who does arrive collapses as in sleep, for all he knew before now seems a lowly thing* (Saint John of the Cross). And so I slept and slept.

I found the experience of cancer a powerful catalyst for spiritual development and hoping to eventually lead to some sort of enlightenment, I tried to make it an opportunity to purify my mind and realize impermanence, a chance to release ignorance and attachment; to relinquish pride and practice compassion; and to restore balance to my life and my relationship with the cosmos (Aronoff, 82). And I did that first and foremost by starting to breath again.

* An variation on Satchel Paige’s quote “Sometimes I sits and thinks and sometimes I just sits”.

It is remarkable but when one is in crisis or pain, the instinct to hold one's breath is astonishing. It is like an attempt to stop forward movement, to stop the crisis from plummeting out of control. If I hold my breath then this moment in time can not get to the next moment. I would catch myself not breathing, only taking in minute breaths, tiny breaths, fearful that breathing would in some way make me lose control. I had to consciously tell myself to breath deep and down into my belly. To fill my being with air. To give up control.

I also learned to close my eyes and to sit quiet. In every case, if one keeps really quiet, if one succeeds in remaining really calm, there always comes a little light, a warm light, very bright and extraordinarily quiet, behind which seems to say, "You only have to will it" (Satprem, 132). And I knew I could will my body to be well even if perhaps, it could not be cancer free.

It is now ten and one half years later. I have been cancer free. I am feel free in knowing that I have experienced and survived two of the four primary sufferings, birth and sickness (Clifford, 113). As a result, I now have at my disposal, some powerful tools for my continued well being and health. If I need to use them to utilize in any further illness or the last of the four primary sufferings, old age and death, I can. Over the ten years I have come to understand the singularity of self. We have to face each moment of transition *Transitio*, (Peters, 40) to the next plane of existence, isolated and alone (Reader, 12) and it's alright.

*Our inner being which we call ourself,
no eye nor touch of man or angel has ever pierced.
It is more hidden than the caves of the gnome;
the sacred adytum of the oracle;
the hidden chamber of Eleusinian mystery,
for to it only omniscience is permitted to enter.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton*

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