

My Journey With Cancer

Evelyne Accad

I decided to hold a journal on my journey through cancer. I need to do it for myself (to exorcise the pain) and for the other women who are going through the same calvary, or for those who will in the future. I also write for those who must become aware of the dangers we face in our post-modern era. I feel I have been made to pay the price for modern civilization. Someone has to pay the price for all the pollutants and chemicals that are thrown into the atmosphere, which affect us through the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the sun our skin receives, the contaminants dumped into the rivers and seas, the pesticides sprayed on the fruits and vegetables, and the hormones fed to animals.

And I became one out of seven women who get breast cancer in their lifetime (these are the latest statistics for the States and Canada, I don't have those for Lebanon, but from my little experience of talking to people around here, I believe it must also be quite high). Yes the figures are frightening and cancer is on the increase, especially breast cancer. I did ask: "Why me?" Yes, I did ask this question. I am not like one of my friends who reversed it and said: "Why not me?" Later, I learned to ask myself: "What can I learn through this ordeal?" But when it hit me (I was diagnosed with lobular carcinoma on March the 2nd, 1994), I was too shell shocked. I was not prepared to live

through that hell. I never thought it would happen to me. I had not been informed, or I had ignored the articles on the topic. If I can help someone through these lines, my suffering would not have been in vain. Here are a few excerpts from my journal:

March 8th 1994:

When life is threatened by death, everything takes on such intensity. I met Caryl who invited me to give a conference and reading of my novels at her University in Mobile, Alabama. I decided not to cancel this trip. My life must go on. I did not want to stop my activities just because I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Caryl told me she had gone

through thyroid cancer several years before (I would most probably not have known about it had I not been hit myself. Because of my illness, many people open up to me and tell me about their experiences. I discovered that the disease was much more prevalent than I thought and that many more people than one could imagine suffer from it). Caryl helped me a lot with her stories of how she overcame it and struggled against the odds. Her stories were so lively. She advised me to be aggressive and not to fall into despair. She warned me against putting myself at the mercy of the medical establishment, which attempts to dominate the situation, neglects to do certain things if one is not cautious, and prevents the patient from taking charge of her own body. Caryl has a friend who recently underwent a bilateral mastectomy and went through immediate reconstruction, asking for her nipples to be made into the shape of hearts. She celebrated by inviting all her friends to look at her new breasts with hearts. The story makes me laugh. I need to hear such stories instead of having people break into tears when they see me, pity me, or act as if I had the plague or a curse. I need to see women like Caryl and her friends, who struggle for their lives and the lives of others. Women

who maintain positive and constructive values, like Caryl who works to revive the memory of forgotten women, Caryl who believes that anger is necessary sometimes and that it helps one be in charge of one's life.

March 12th: I went to see my oncologist today with two of my friends who were taking notes. I liked Dr. Pat Johnson. She reminded me of Huguette, my sister-in-law: direct, full of humor, and humane. She asked a lot of questions about my health and my life. She took notes. Then, she wrote down the diagnosis and treatment: four sessions of chemotherapy, an operation (lumpectomy or mastectomy depending on the reduction of the size of the tumor), and six weeks of daily radiation. It is the usual "poison, cut and burn" treatment that breast cancer patients know only too well. I burst into tears. I suddenly realized I will no longer be able to do the things I usually do like traveling between Paris, Tunis and Beirut, visiting my aging and dying parents in Beirut, seeing my friends everywhere, but specially in Tunisia, writing, and being with my loved ones in Paris. I suddenly felt my life was coming to an end. I was entering a zone of illness, hospitals, doctors. How will my body respond? How will my mind and spirit react? I hoped that this experience would teach me new things about myself and others and that it would help me grow. I stopped crying. Peace settled down deep within me. I must cross this dark valley. There is hope at the end of it, I know.

June 16th: I woke up on the operating table and put my hand on my left chest which was completely bandaged. I immediately realized my breast was gone. I did not cry the way I did three months earlier following the biopsy, when I found out it was cancer. This



time I felt at peace. I knew the surgeon did the best he could to save my breast. It is safer this way. From now on, I belonged to all my sisters who have been mutilated, subjected to a mastectomy, hysterectomy, clitoridectomy, i.e. all the ectomies, the Amazons crossing the Amazon, one breast cut, the other flowing freely in the wind! I felt physical pain. They gave me pain "killers." I noticed that all the treatments had aggressive warlike names and connotations. Chemotherapy was discovered during Second World War with nerve gas. I wish there were softer cures for cancer. My whole body, mind and spirit rebelled against this particular aspect of the treatment since I am a pacifist and hate violence. One of my friends noticed how Barbaric these prac-

tices are. He is so right! The future will look back upon us with contempt and horror as we look upon the way past centuries treated some diseases.

August 4th: I spent a bad night. There was a storm and I could not sleep. I had just read Re-

ynolds Price's book about his own cancer, *A Whole New Life*. When he talks about radiation, it is frightening. And since I was going through radiation myself, I shouldn't read disturbing things about it before sleeping. I learnt not to read anything about cancer before going to bed. It is too upsetting. Otherwise this book is very well written. Reynolds Price is an English professor at Duke University who made a name for himself through creative writing. He was diagnosed with a tumor on his spinal cord at 56. He became paralyzed but instead of mourning his condition, he decided to learn and grow out of it. He became more spiritual, discovered faith and a "whole new life." His creativity increased in spite of continuous pain in his back. He says that he

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wrote more meaningful books during his illness than in his whole career. He deepened relationships with the significant people in his life, and, profoundly, addressed important, relevant issues we all need to confront. Price is indeed an inspiration, but that evening, I should not have read about how he mistrusts the medical establishment and his lack of faith in radiation which he believes does more harm than good. In the morning, I had a headache.

Perhaps my mood was also affected by the lecture that Dr. Pat Johnson, my oncologist, gave at the Cancer Center of Urbana Illinois for a conference on women's cancers. I attended it with my friend Nina Rubel who was also treated for breast cancer several years ago. Dr. Johnson started by discussing some statistics: breast cancer is the most prevalent cancer in women but it is also the most treatable. There are 182,000 new cases of breast cancer in the United States every year, and in the year 2,000, there will be 1 million new cases every year. She said it in a very matter of fact tone, but I am shocked and appalled. How can one accept these statistics so coldly?! Of these 182,000 cases, 49,000 end in death, a rate that is higher than the casualties of road accidents. And nobody talks about it!! Nobody does anything about it!! In the case of road accidents,

the law forces people to wear seat belts and speed limits are strictly enforced. But what do they do about breast cancer? Nothing! Only 5% of all cancer research funds are allocated to breast cancer!! (I learned this not through Dr. Johnson's lecture but through a TV show on breast cancer.) I feel very depressed. Dr. Johnson spoke of the risks. She said that women living in North America and Europe are at greater risk, and



then added: "Yes, but the quality of life is so much superior here, who would want to live anywhere else?" I was shocked. I quietly whispered inside myself: "What quality of life is this with breast cancer and other kinds of cancers on the rise? What quality of life is this that has a treatment, which I consider to be twentieth century torture?" When I repeated Dr. Johnson's words to some of my friends, they consoled me that she probably meant it in an ironic way, that she could not have been serious. But no, she was serious. Even the friend who accompanied me agreed she was serious! America is the best country in the world for most Americans,

and they are not willing to change their way of life even when they see it destroying the environment and causing diseases unheard of before. I am tired from thinking and from the radiation.

August 26th, 1994:

Today was my last day of radiotherapy. I couldn't take it anymore. I looked at my chest. On the right side, I still had a soft, tender breast, on the other, my skin was red and burnt. I was angry! I should not have taken these estrogen, the Premarin, my doctor had prescribed for me even though I did not have menopause symptoms yet. She prescribed them because my hormone level was low and because my mother has osteoporosis. These hormones inflamed and proliferated what good and bad cells lay dormant in my body. Doctors in France told me that they do not prescribe Premarin in their country anymore because it is too strong (I found out it is sold all over the Third World, Lebanon included, at a very low price and without prescription. Women take it because they are told it will keep them young, without wrinkles and vaginal dryness, and that it will reduce their chances of heart disease and osteoporosis. They are not told it increases their risk for breast cancer. If only they would read about the side effects on the instruction sheet that comes

in the box.) Doctors in France also said it should be monitored very closely because the hormone level of a woman my age (I am 50) can fluctuate from month to month. I could have lost my life, and I did lose confidence in my body. But is it a bad thing? What can I learn from this experience? Why must I go through this journey? I had a dream I was buying money market shares for a tunnel under the Mont Blanc. I was worried it would be a bad investment and the

mountain would collapse on the tunnel before its completion. I analyzed my dream with a friend, Cindy and my brother, Philippe. The tunnel was my journey through cancer under a high mountain covered with eternal snows. This was my desire for transcendence, for spirituality, for rising above this illness that keeps me down, oppressed and in darkness. I am afraid my desires will crush me but there is light at the end of the tunnel. My friend Cindy

has another interesting explanation: My wanting to buy shares meant I want to own my sickness rather than letting it own me. I want to appropriate this illness leading me to a beautiful sun! As for my brother, more practical, he asked me if I slept well in spite of my dream!

— *Dr. Accad is a Professor of French Literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and a feminist writer*

Cancer Registries in Lebanon (*)

National epidemiological registries are not available in Lebanon; neither for cancer nor for any other disease. The only source of data are medical records. Attempts to gather such records in hospitals failed due to disruptions from the civil war and the immigration of a large number of medical researchers. But since the cessation of the war, efforts in setting up these registries have been resumed in large hospitals inside and outside Beirut.

Cancer data from Lebanon published to date reveal that the most frequently reported cancers in Lebanese men are lung and bladder cancers. These cancers are largely attributable to risk factors

such as cigarette smoking and environmental pollutants. Breast cancer has been highly prevalent among women in Lebanon since the thirties. Along with cervical cancer it remains the most prevalent cancer of women in the world today.

The problems surrounding cancer treatment in Lebanon fall within the government's facilities and policies to address these issues and needs. So far, the Ministry of Public Health has concentrated on hospitalization, building new hospitals and designing administrative laws to protect patients, hospitals and medical staff, all of which accumulating more administrative red tape rather than efficient services and especially health awareness. Thus, cancer patients are di-

agnosed and treated medically. An overall policy for preserving a healthy environment between the respective Ministries (Health, Environment, Social Affairs, Water and Electrical Resources, etc..) does not seem to exist although each ministry is attending to its own affairs. Dr. Salim Adib feels the need for health care centers is greater than that for hospitals. He fears that Lebanon is at the verge of a cancer epidemic with the younger generation as the most susceptible, since 40% of the population is below 20 years.

(*) Exerts from a paper by Dr. Salim Adib, Assistant Professor of Epidemiology, Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut. The complete text appears in *Sci-Quest*, Number 4, 1994, an Alumni publication by the Science Sub-Committee.

*"Why me?"
Yes, I did
ask this
question. I
am not like
one of my
friends who
reversed it
and said:
"Why not
me?" Later,
I learned to
ask myself:
"What can I
learn from
this
ordeal?"*