

Insights from a Cancer Survivor

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Cancer is a unique journey. No two cancer patients are alike. Multilayered factors prompt cancers. Multilayered factors enhance survival. As an Asian Bodywork therapist I have been able to transform my experience of metastatic breast cancer into teaching tools and Continuing Education workshops offering a variety of *qi* exercises and protocols for acupuncturists and Asian Bodywork Therapists, MDs, RNs, NPs, physical and occupational therapists working with cancer patients and their families.

My outreach work never ceases. This has been hugely educational and healing for me, and an eye opener for my students, especially those who tiptoe around the topic. While waiting at Victoria Station in London for a train to Gatwick airport recently, I noticed a woman struggling with her luggage and could tell from her body language (one limp arm and raised shoulder) she was post- mastectomy. "Come and sit with me," I called out to her from the train window, as a porter lifted her bags on board. When she joined me she confirmed my observations and said she had troubles regaining strength after her surgery. I immediately offered to teach her exercises I developed after my own mastectomy that facilitated movement, a sense of symmetry and strength and also prevented lymphodema. For the next 30 minutes we practiced gracefully slow *qi* circles with our arms. Fellow travelers were magnetized. Some even joined in because they found the spectacle so relaxing.

Cancer Theories?

As a cancer survivor I have heard the full gamut of "theories" about "causes" or "reasons" - New Age and mainstream. I've been told cancer is a "disease of the soul" and my "punishment for not having children." I've also been blamed for jogging along the banks of New York's polluted Hudson river.

In the July issue of AT, Darren Starwynn OMD, L.Ac described the mind-body connection and quoted various leading research studies on the "emotional imbalances leading to the formation of cancerous tumors." While, yes, it's true that emotional factors, stress and depression all suppress the immune system, it would be unwise for those just diagnosed with cancer to believe all they require is psychotherapy and meditation.

What about environmental factors in cancer clusters? How about those folks experiencing abnormally high cancer rates after Chernobyl? Or cancer rates among "atomic veterans" exposed to the atomic experiments after WW2? Or those exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam? My own uncle, a retired US Army General, is one of many veterans who developed prostate cancer that the VA has linked to Agent Orange. Also, what about the role played by genetics in cancer families? Though not a major factor, family patterns can't just be ignored. My paternal grandmother and paternal cousin both died of metastatic breast cancer. I count my blessings as a survivor with a wonderful support network.

Our role as Survivors

Those of us in the healing profession who experience cancer owe it to our colleagues, clients and students, to share our respective journeys and insights. It's up to us to dispel myths about cancer and/or a "standard" treatment - whether in conventional or complementary medicine.

My background in Asian Medicine, my athleticism and years as a health nut vegetarian did not prevent my metastatic breast cancer. But all those factors played a huge role in my survival, helped me make informed decisions within a solidly integrative approach, and be very selective in a choice of therapies - and physicians.

My own input was vital. My checklist included diet, exercise, *Qigong*, creative visualization in meditation, xeriscape gardening, authoring books, teaching, and strong life goals. Ah yes, and a great sense of humor!

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