

My cancer, your cancer, and how it's different

By **Katy Yoder**
Columnist

I struggle sometimes when I'm told one story after another about people who are suffering or who have lost their battle with cancer. It brings back memories and it reminds me that there's a chance I might have a reoccurrence and have to go through it again. Not to mention the chance I might die from it.

Enough time has passed for me to reflect on the difference between being the cancer patient and the cancer caregiver. From my early 20s on, several family members were diagnosed and for each person, I played a different role in supporting their journey.

My grandfather had colon cancer, and I was able to visit him and try to help him and my grandmother deal with the ups and downs of treatment. My grandmother was always the talker of the two, and it wasn't until my grandfather was facing death that he began to tell stories from his childhood and really let us in. Listening to him talk about growing up poor in rural California and the adventures he had as a boy were precious moments I'll never forget.

I felt deep sorrow watching him change from a broad-shouldered, unstoppable force to a slender man whose strength remained only in his big calloused hands. I was powerless to stop the progression of his disease. All I could do was listen to him and try to soften the harsh reality of his situation with stories from my own unfolding life.

Then in the early '90s,

when my daughter was 3 years old, my grandmother and my cousin were both diagnosed with cancer. I made many trips to California to help my aunt, who was dealing with both her mother and her daughter facing cancer. I felt less powerless that time because there was more to do. We took turns caring for each woman, never losing hope that somehow they would both overcome their disease. In the end they both were taken.

Then, in the late '90s, my father was diagnosed and we began the treatment steps all over again. This time there weren't 500 miles separating me from my family member, so I was able to be present on a regular basis. In that situation, I spent time supporting my Mom, who wanted to take on the biggest share of Dad's care. Being able to share Dad's remaining time gave us the opportunity to wash past issues away and focus on the happy memories we made together. Mom and I took turns keeping an eye on Dad, trying to manage his indomitable spirit that kept him trying to do more than his body would allow.

It was hard to watch his slow disintegration, and we all knew it didn't look like he'd recover. But Dad never gave up hope and he never stopped looking for ways to heal his battered body. I struggled with the desire to see things as they were versus his will to keep fighting to the very end. I had to accept that it was his battle to wage as he saw fit and it was my job to support him in any way I could.

That's just a few of the family members who had

cancer. After walking with them through their cancer battles, I thought I was pretty well-educated in what cancer entailed. I'd witnessed so much and was able to recall many of each person's words about what they went through.

From those experiences, I was terrified of cancer and even more frightened of the treatments offered to cure it. But I also felt well-versed and better prepared if it happened to me. I knew already what I would do and what I would not do if I got that terrible call from a doctor.

Then it happened, and I was suddenly in the hot seat. All the memories I had of loved ones struggling with the disease roared through my mind, leaving me shell-shocked. I felt like I had to put on my battle gear and

fight not only the disease, but the doctors who were going to try and make me do things I didn't want to do. I'd seen my father suffer so much from radiation and I'd seen my cousin grow weak and gaunt from chemotherapy. I was more afraid of the treatments killing me than the disease itself.

There really is no way to prepare for cancer. How I responded was uniquely tied to my circumstances at the time — my age, my marital status, where I lived, my job and the age of my child. Other variables played a part as well, so unless your crystal ball works better than mine, I suggest not wasting time, like I did, thinking I knew what I'd do if I got cancer.

I know two of the things that benefited me

considerably were my faith and my family. I knew I was on solid ground with both and I knew regardless of the outcome, I was in good hands. If either of those pieces had been missing, the story could have unfolded very differently.

Going through it required the strength to allow weakness and the courage to allow help. I learned that I didn't want to fight cancer as much as I wanted to find peace in the process of healing. Cancer isn't the enemy, it's the messenger. The gifts from the experience are unfolding every day. The parts of my life I had ignored have taken center stage. My life is richer, more interesting and rewarding. I'm more in tune with my inner voice, and I'm working on turning up the volume every day.

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