

*Cancer Medicine*¹ © Pat Irwin Lycett (wk.pi.lycett@sympatico.ca)

Winter Ice 1994 Chapter 2

Popping into my MD's² office for an allergy shot I casually mention the evidence – my slightly misshapen right breast – am whisked in for an examination, and leave with an appointment to see Bowmanville's new young surgeon, Paul Hardie M.D.

Walking home from Orono's medical centre I spy one of my favourite wise-women, Mary Rutherford, in the tea-room. I rush in, order tea and ask her opinion. "I think you're doing the right thing, Pat, exploring everything, including the medical approach."

The following morning in Port Hope for tai chi, I go over my plans with my aging teacher, Thelma Van Alstyne, a Buddhist/Christian. She agrees. "It's also very important," they both caution, "to see this as an opportunity for growth."

"Not crazy about that *word*," I say, "but there's definitely a learning curve here."

I question nurse friends, who say nice things about my new doctor. A few days later I discover that Paul looks a lot like my sons – tall with dark curly hair – is the soul of kindness and gentlemanly behaviour, and gives me the feeling that he is almost as stricken as I, at the looming possibility of a tumour in my breast. After palpating my chest and underarms, he says, "We need to biopsy this as soon as possible, Pat," then smiles at my unusual request to meet the pathologist. But I am adamant, "I want my face before him when he looks at my slides."

Many people advise a Toronto hospital, more cutting-edge (pardon the pun), but I want to stay close to my husband, Kay, and need my friends to help me through this nightmare. Mountains of support flood in from everywhere. "Cancer only happens to lonely people. You don't fit the criteria," comes a frequent comment. Nice to know, but I wonder – is there something hidden deep down? *You Can Heal Your Life* comes to mind, and I search my book shelves – 'cancer can be caused by long-held resentment'³ stares me in the face. I read this as if for the first time – could it possibly apply to me? Am I still grappling with my father's absence? How much did this affect my first marriage? A scorching thought!

A neighbour arrives with a jar of Essiac.⁴ "Thank you so much," I say, inviting her in. "I read about this – I'm going to take some right now – how does it work?"

¹ - Interactive Medicine, healing therapies, and Hippocratic science; "I swear....to abstain from whatever is deleterious (first – do no harm)." Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary, p.902

² - M. Angl MD

³ - Louise L. Hay, *You Can Heal Your life*, 1984, p. 12

⁴ - Essiac –An Ojibway remedy, popularized by nurse Renee Caisse (Essiac spelled backwards), who learned of it from her Native patients. Ingredients: sheep sorrel, turkish rhubarb, slippery elm bark (sold only under the counter), and burdock root.

"In 1938, Premier Mitchell Hepburn attempted to license Caisse's work. 55,000 doctors and citizens supported the bill, which failed to pass because it was made the focus of an ugly struggle for ownership and power." *Could Essiac Halt Cancer* – Sheila Snow – *World Copyright – Homemaker's Magazine*, 1977.

“Seems to clean the blood,” she says, offering the recipe.

I purchase huge stainless steel pots, search out the herbs in health food stores and start the 24-hour brewing process. The literature is riveting: Simply put – lymphatic clean-up vessels (which are *not* driven by a pump) run alongside our blood-circulating arteries and veins. Essiac assists in de-clogging the lymph glands; the blood and liver help carry away waste, through kidneys and bowel, leaving our cells free to absorb nutrients. Swollen lymph nodes (way-stations of a sort) signal a burdened, sludge-filled system. Tonsils, for instance, swell up and we yank them out, instead of trying dietary changes.

On Valentine’s Day, I arrive at the E.R. in Bowmanville for a biopsy. Despite local freezing, the behind-the-nipple location of the lump makes the procedure painful and bruising.

Driving home from the hospital my thoughts turn to my 57th birthday the following day, wondering if I’ll see 58. Kay has suffered depression in the past. I’m very concerned about him, so I stop to buy him a red rose. He takes me for dinner on my birthday, and we try to carry on our normal lives. Ten days later Paul apologizes as he calls to report ‘infiltrating ductal carcinoma, the tumour blocking the nipple ducts.’

Kay holds my hand while I cry, feeling as if I’m drowning under the accumulated shit of a lifetime. *Am I bogged down by resentment? Growing up, we never really talked about our dad leaving, British stiff-upper-lip, I suppose. I’ve never thought of myself as a sick person, but have had ‘things so wrong’ as far back as I can remember. Jeez – those old, undealt-with dregs – how much has this attitude affected my dear boys?* I scramble to keep my spirits up.

An astrologer friend calls to advise the best day for chest surgery, reduced blood loss the objective. From Hippocrates: “Touch not with iron that part of the body ruled by the sign the moon is transiting,”⁵ and I ask my doctor to book March 2nd. We set out to deliver the news to our Irwin sons and their families living in the Toronto area, and phone our Lycett kids and all family and friends. Many people tell me I’m included in their prayers and my closest book club buddies⁶ write me into their daytimers – they, and Kay, will send healing from the hospital waiting room. Can’t remember the last time I actually prayed, and I’m grateful for all ministrations.

On March 2nd, the day after grand-daughter Cassie’s second birthday party, Kay drives me to Bowmanville Memorial for a modified radical mastectomy. Two students wheel me to the O.R.; the nurse covers me with a warm blanket and asks, “Is it the right side?”

“Can’t miss it,” I laugh, feeling jittery, “it’s all bruised.”

Then – nothingness.

⁵- Linda Goodman, *Star Signs*, 1988.

⁶- K. McDonell, S. Parker, B. Walker, W. Pratt, P. Bandola, R. Tuma, including S. DaCosta.

Post-surgery I have a drain in my chest, but there's very little pain; best of all, my lymph nodes are clear.

Everyone visits; kids and cousins come from afar, and son Jed joins me in my stroll around the ward. Huge racks are brought to house the flowers lining the hall outside my room. I'm touched when friend, Elva Reid, brings a small, classy tea tray holding a green linen napkin (for our shared Irish background); and am uplifted by the constant flood of cards, books, crystals, amulets and teddy bears.

In my morning calls to Kay, I say, "Hi dear, time to get up, shower, have breakfast, and go to the office."

"Guess I'd better," he says, trying to sound *up*. "See you later."