

THE JOY OF CANCER

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I am a 21st century lung cancer patient. When my cancer was diagnosed in April 2000, it had already advanced to Stage Four. I was told by my doctor at the Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai that, if I did not respond to the chemotherapy treatment, I had only four months to live. In a short period of about a month my life had taken an about turn. Several about turns. The new job in the Gulf that I had negotiated, and had been my dream for the last 15 years, had slowly but surely disintegrated. I was educated and unemployed. Innumerable number of trips had been made to hospitals in Delhi and Mumbai for an unending series of tests that had confirmed the cancer diagnosis. I had undergone an unnecessary surgery with nothing but a 35 cm scar to show for all the discomfort, pain and delay in treatment that it had caused. And finally in June 2000, I was all set for a long and arduous chemotherapy treatment in which the chances of the disease being brought under control were as low as 30-40% and being cured was only 10%.

The only bright side was that, for some inexplicable reasons, the symptoms of my cancer had not yet surfaced.

What had I done to deserve this? Even though I was confronted with the inevitable 'Why me' syndrome, I fought hard to ensure that it was not allowed to overtake me. I convinced myself that there was no difference between the man across the street and me. The rest of the world and me. And that there was nothing special about me that my lungs could not be afflicted with cancer. Would I have wished that my best friend had cancer instead of me? Or any of my near and dear ones? Or my worst enemy? In each case my answer was 'No'. I came to the conclusion that I was the chosen one. Cancer had selected me from amongst the many options available. I had to find the answers to save myself and fight cancer. I had to find ways in which the medical treatment would support my efforts. I had to anticipate and be prepared for all the changes that would enter my life. I had to harness my inner strength to cope with what the future

promised. In a somewhat strange manner, it was a nice feeling on being confronted with the final diagnosis, howsoever painful that diagnosis might have been. There was an odd comfort in finally knowing the truth. At least I knew where I stood.

There was little time to look back in anger. No turning around to see my life crumble before me. I was a cancer patient and there was nothing in the world that could alter that fact. No amount of rage or grief could change things around. I soon realized that the treatment, control or cure, were as much in my hands as they were in the hands of the doctors. I had to learn how to navigate my ship in a manner that was totally alien to me. I had to change the way I saw and did most things in my life. I could not worry about trivial things like being unemployed. These things would change automatically as and when it was time for them to change. I was fighting a war against cancer. A war of many battles, deep inside my own territory. A terrain that I was not totally familiar with. It was a war that I could not afford to lose.

In a short span of time, I had changed dramatically. In my attitude towards myself and everything and everyone who were near and dear to me. I prepared myself to live my life with a single-minded purpose. For the next six to eight months. Or much longer, if I survived beyond that period. To my doctors, statistics were what mattered. To them I was a Stage Four lung cancer patient. In other words, I was as good as dead. I had no option but to blast those statistics.

For me, the first stage of my cancer treatment began with the acceptance of cancer. Not hesitant acceptance, but total acceptance. I didn't expect my doctors to help me with this, they had far too much else to deal with. However, they did agree that if and when I was cured, it was because both my mind and body were in a state of acceptance. I just could not wish my cancer away. No amount of remorse or prayers could have changed the medical diagnosis. And as soon as I accepted this harsh reality, I was able to cope better with my cancer.

I began to take charge. The manner in which I communicated with the world was the way the world communicated with me. And my communication started from within. How could I reject a part of

my own being? The bad cells were an integral part of me. Rejecting them was like rejecting myself. And I could not turn away from the truth, since if I did, the more the malignancy would begin to gain the upper hand. I had very little time to lose. Each day wasted was an opportunity for the cells to gain advantage. I went into deep introspection. Long moments of solitude. Till I had succeeded in re-living 50 years of my life. Till I had found the answers to how and when and why I had become a cancer patient. And it was then that I was able to finalize my battle plan. Total acceptance to start with, backed by a positive attitude and the will to lead from the front by participating in the treatment at all times.

Having accepted my cancer, I was in the happy position of being able to notice its benefits. So many emerged suddenly. The desire for tobacco disappeared instantly and there were no withdrawal symptoms either. I was flooded with telephone calls, visitors and 'get well soon' messages from all corners of the world. From old friends whom I had very little to do with in decades. I learnt who my real friends were. I suddenly felt wanted and had a strong desire to win the war. Coming into the treatment mode, I was freed from the vicious cycle of workaholism. I changed dramatically as an individual and began to like myself far more than ever before. Simple things began to give me joy. Things that I had not noticed in years. It was ironical that in the face of death, I began, for the first time, to really live.

The diagnosis was devastating. It brought about a wide variety of emotions and reactions, including fear, shock, anger, disbelief and panic. Initially the fact that I had been singled out as a cancer patient was difficult to comprehend. I felt that my body, or at least some part of it, had let me down. One moment life was normal and the next everything had changed. Instead of meetings at offices, there were endless trips to hospitals. Innumerable restrictions were imposed on me. The future too did not appear so bright. The days were never the same again. Priorities were redefined. There was little time to be lost. My life had been turned upside down.

An aspect that was critical was choosing the team of doctors who would work with me on my treatment. It was not just enough to

talk to the doctors. Nor was it enough to understand what they had to say. I also talked to their patients. Share their experiences. How much confidence did the doctors inspire? How long could the togetherness be sustained? There were bound to be differences in opinions as my battle plan unfolded. For me, the 'me doctor, you patient' formula just did not work. Partnership was the key. Though the doctors knew much more than I did about medicine, it was my life that I was putting in their hands. I had a right to know all the whys and the wherefores. What was being done to me and why. The 'doctor is the boss' syndrome just did not work.

As far as attitudes went, I had to remember that doctors too were as human as I was. Uppermost in their minds was my well-being and recovery. Yet being human, they were as fallible as I was. They too could make mistakes. Like my not-so-necessary surgery. Today's medical delivery system, especially in large and busy hospitals, allowed less and less time for doctors to spend with their patients. Yet the amount of time spent was not significant, as was the quality of time that was shared. The traditional role of diagnosing and treating the my cancer had to give way to making me more and more aware of my health status and being more sensitive to my needs. And on my part, I had to understand how valuable time was for my doctors.

As time progressed, the partnership grew, I was able to treat minor setbacks in the treatment without bothering my doctors. Though I was extremely vulnerable, I never forgot who was in command. Whose health and life was at stake. I was always in command and, with time, learnt to help myself as much as possible. I never allowed myself to get intimidated by my doctors. Communication was of utmost importance. I told them all they wanted to know. Sometimes even more than what I thought they would want to know. Unless I communicated, they would never know what my health status was. I participated in my treatment. I took the lead. I thought of ways and means to stay ahead of my cancer. It was up to me to build the partnership. And not worry about how my grandparents found their solutions. It was my body. It was my mind. It was my cancer. It was my battle. Only I had the answers to how I could win.

I was in the ICU after surgery, heavily drugged. There was excruciating pain in the right side of my chest. I could hear people talking in hushed voices. For the life of me I couldn't make out what they were saying. I opened my eyes and the world was a blur. Someone was trying to hold my hand. The pain was unbearable. I drifted back to sleep and then woke up again. Both the surgeon and my wife were leaning over me, trying to say something. From her face I could make out that all was not right.

I began to feel cheated. I felt anger. I felt deep remorse. All sorts of equipment were still attached to me to help me with my breathing. I felt trapped. I couldn't speak. I couldn't ask questions. It was a nightmare. My wife stayed by my bed the entire night, simply stroking my head, hushing me up gently every time I made an effort to speak. Though she said nothing, the expression on her face told me everything. The cancer had spread. None of this had emerged in the innumerable tests that were done prior to the surgery. And of course, the huge 35 cm scar would remain, like a deep gash dividing my body into two, an eternal reminder of the fallibility of medical treatment. My mind rebelled. I was furious.

I had decided to sustain the war in an organized manner. Confuse the malignant cells with my inner strength. Beat them by being least affected by their presence. I had heard stories about how the treatment for cancer was far worse than cancer itself. It was clear to me that all mental and physical reserves would be required in order to stay ahead at all times. I had to be positive. I had to think positive. Even when the worst side-effects of chemotherapy surfaced to bring down my defenses. Shatter my reinforcements.

Those were the war games I played and the tactics that I employed, as the first drops of Taxotere flowed into my system through the intravenous drip. And another chemotherapy drug the next day. And during the subsequent cycles that followed. My immunity levels dropped to alarmingly low levels. My nausea became more and more uncontrollable. My appetite and food intake decreased and there were days when I couldn't keep down even a sip of water. I continued to lose weight. As the chemotherapy treatment progressed, friends and family around me started to despair. But my resolve

remained. Some of my worst moments I overcame by thinking about how cancer had benefited me. I relived the good and joyous moments in my life. I stayed positive. Filled my mind with strong creative thoughts and desires that would bring me joy. It wasn't easy. At times, it was almost impossible. As the days went by, I discovered an unimaginable reservoir of energy that existed somewhere deep inside. Something that I thought I never had in me. Something that just came together.

I started living in an ivory tower filled with only positive energies. Positive thoughts. This wasn't easy on my wife. On my children. On my relatives and friends. At times everything around seemed so unreal. I was grateful for all the support and encouragement that I received. Some people called me selfish. Others said I was running away from reality. But I too was carrying a heavy burden. All my energies were focused at the task at hand. And the task was gigantic. At times it appeared insurmountable. I was convinced that living with a positive attitude was the only way that I could succeed. Change my karma. So that the generations that followed did not have to go through what I was going through.

The truth, I realized, was that cancer, at most times, was self-inflicted and occurred when the human immune system breaks down. When the mind and body are no longer in sync. And to overcome cancer, the mind and body must fight in unison. A holistic approach was essential. Every mind has its own unique body. Every body also has a unique mind. The body, we can see, feel and touch. The mind, something we only sense. But deep down, in our subconscious, we could relate to them together as one single entity. When the body is afflicted, the mind alone cannot ever undo the damage. Together they must fight back to win control.

And it was this leap into my subconscious that was crucial. There were greater chances of success if all my forces were united. The complex laws of duality governed nature. One without the other and all was lost. In the war against cancer, my mind-body continuum had to obey the principle of duality, especially since the cancer cells proliferated and survived in a haphazard manner. As the treatment progressed, it became more and more difficult to bring together the

mind-body connection. Meditation helped. So did introspection. But most of all, being positive, even during the worst moments of the treatment, was what mattered.

Most cancer patients that I spoke to did not realize the importance of this holistic approach. The togetherness of the mind and body. The hazardous journey into the subconscious. Hazardous since it required vast amounts of positive energy. Positive thinking. The most important aspect of cancer treatment and cure. On most of the earlier crises in my life, I had not focused on my inner being, my mind-body continuum, and used its true potential. My hidden strengths that needed to be activated. In most of such cases, I was quick to blame the outside world for the state I was in. It was easy to take credit for good fortune, but extremely difficult to accept complete blame for any ills. As long as the going was good and all was well, the mind-body continuum never came into play.

As a cancer patient, I too had my own story to tell. How cancer had changed my life. I always dwelt on the bright side. It went a long way towards total cure. It changed the way I looked at myself. At my cancer. It gave me courage and energy to do things that I had never done before. To do the same things, but do them differently. And in so doing, it built on my positive attitudes. Sustained them over longer periods. And gave me the will to outlive my cancer. At most times, my mind was activated and involved with things that were closely connected with my cancer. As time passed I began to realize that there were other things which were equally important. I did not even for a moment allow my cancer to overtake me. I fought hard to postpone any bout of negativity that attempted to enter the environment. Anything that could have affected me adversely. In these moments, I just reminded myself of the thousands of reasons why I had to continue to live. And fight.

News of my cancer spreads like wildfire, amongst family and friends. As soon as I returned from Mumbai, I had a stream of visitors, some that I had not set my eyes on since childhood. All meaning well. All with some advice to offer. Each had his or her story to tell. Their own brush with cancer. A friend who had recovered. A relative who was under treatment. They wanted to know what I was going

through. How I would cope. What my thoughts were. And soon enough, though visitors were always welcome, I began to get tired. Exhausted with the never-ending stories. Tired of making polite conversation when actually I wanted to hide from everyone. From the entire world around me. I felt I had been disfigured. I felt it would take a long time for me to contribute significantly to society. Seeing them, meeting them, I started feeling low. How could they continue with their lives as if nothing had happened? For me, life would never be the same again.

People are different. People change. They react differently when a friend or a relative has a serious health problem. Some are warm and show endless care and concern. Others find it difficult to accept, but manage to build up just about sufficient strength and courage to show concern. And then there are those who just shy away from any form of adversity. For me, all this was extremely difficult to accept.

On most days, my life began and ended only with my health status. Some found this to be extremely selfish, but only I knew how much strength was needed to think beyond my own health condition. Especially beyond cancer. What I communicated was what others communicated with me. When I projected positive vibrations all around, everyone was positive. And when I succumbed to the agonies and the trials and tribulations of the treatment, my friends also conveyed misery and agony. The best thing for me and for them was to spread good cheer all around. And from the good cheer I received, I derived more joy and happiness. The strength that I needed to keep my mind and body together to win the war that I had set out to win. I was in command of how others around me reacted to my joys and pain, to my treatment, to my winning the war.

I tried to share the grief of my family and friends. It wasn't easy considering what I was going through myself. It was extremely important that all lines of communications were kept open at all times. The best way to achieve this was to act normal and natural. However, that was easier said than done. I was the one fighting for my life, so how could I behave normally? How could I behave in the same manner as I did before? I just could not overlook the presence of cancer

cells in my body. But when I thought rationally, I concluded that why should the presence of some malignant cells change everyone's life, torment a whole family? Have such a drastic influence on everyone? In order to come to terms with cancer, the first thing was to accept its presence, which I had already done. This was the period that had been charged with emotion and many of the feelings had not seemed appropriate or acceptable. At times there had been anger. And a strong desire to run far away from it all. My feelings had fluctuated from one end of the spectrum to the other. I had gone through great swings of moods. I had experienced fear, anger, self-pity, remorse, and joy ... all in a matter of minutes. The emotional ups and downs had been frightening. There were no right or wrong feelings. None that are mature or immature. They are all just feelings. I had to ensure that the people around learnt to cope with such variable moods. I did my best to not give my cancer too much importance.

There was a great tendency for family and friends to be most loving, supportive and caring when I was weak and helpless. And needed all the looking after that was required. As soon as I felt a bit better, I was being left to my own devices. For me, it was imperative that I acted in as independent a manner as was physically possible when I was in a weak and vulnerable condition. I was convinced that my self-healing and my own initiatives in improving my health would weaken if all the love and caring was showered on me when I was vulnerable. I did my best not to glorify the disease, the discomfort and the pain. Never were they rewarded with external help and support. During these moments, I focussed on my own initiatives to improve my health. I encouraged myself to become as self-sufficient as possible. This built my reserves of positive energy. My own self-esteem. I coped with adversity to the best of my ability. It was easy for me to succumb to the support of people around me in my moments of weakness. Thereby, virtually denying myself the opportunity of learning to take care of myself. I realized that the best way to emerge from a vulnerable position was to use my energies, my strength. Initially, this zapped a lot of my energy, but ultimately I found my own reserves of energy increasing. And each such attempt was construed as a sign of my own inner strength and a bold step towards the improvement of my health.

For me, cancer was easier to live with and accept if everyone was as constructive as possible. In my moments of vulnerability, people around me always had the desire to 'do something' and it was this very desire that I did my best to curtail. And made each day count for what we had put into it together.

One night I just couldn't sleep. A deep resentment was setting in since the feeling that the doctors had experimented with my body was getting stronger day by day. How could different doctors have such different interpretations of the same set of data? The doctors in Mumbai had ruled out surgery at the eleventh hour. Two sets of doctors in Delhi had independently suggested that surgery was the better option. As I lay in bed, with some amount of discomfort in the right side of my chest, my mind wandered. It dwelt on various incidents in my life that had been of great significance. But now what lay ahead? That was the question that kept coming back to me over and over again. There was so much that I still wanted to do. There was so much that I still wanted to see. So many things whizzed past my mind. Things I had not accomplished but had always wanted to. Some of them were simple things. Some were dreams that I knew would never be fulfilled. Some I just had to accomplish. That night I decided that I wouldn't let cancer destroy my capacity to dream. That night I decided that at the start of each day I would set myself a goal, an objective, for that day. And ensure that more often than not it was achieved. I began with daily objectives, and soon there were objectives for the week, the month, the year. And also for the many years of life that I had promised myself.

What was so simple and taken for granted before the diagnosis meant so much to me now. A greater effort was required in living each day, and each passing day had so much more meaning. Earlier I had taken life for granted. On a daily basis, I didn't even bother to speculate about what lay ahead. Tomorrow. Or the next week. Or a year from now. Maybe five years ahead. Yet now faced with a life-threatening disease like cancer, I found myself contemplating about the times that lay ahead. Cancer had changed the course of my life. My goals in life had changed. I could no longer take my life for granted. Time was not in my hands any more. Planning for five years ahead, which I could have done so easily earlier, no longer has the same relevance.

Setting daily goals and objectives within the overall longer-term plan helped. Especially when the treatment for control and cure had become a major part of my daily life. Goals and objectives had to be redefined. My will to live was stronger since now I always had something to look forward to and live for. A greater effort had to be made to achieve things that I wanted from life. Setting goals and attempting to achieve those goals helped in channelizing my energies. It gave a sharper focus to all my activities. Accepting my cancer and coping with its treatment became that much easier. I was, in all respects, in charge of my own life. And this raised my self-esteem. At the end of a day, I felt proud at having achieved what I set out to. In little ways it all added up. Made me more confident. Prepared my mental, physical and emotional faculties to work together for the daily assaults. Brought the mind and body together. Made each passing day a joyous one. Built my reserves to achieve my ultimate goal. I rediscovered the joys of accomplishment. Of achieving simple objectives which in turn could lead to harnessing the more difficult ones.

There were days when my objectives were not achieved. Sometimes, this led to a state of depression. I felt like a non-achiever. However, the fear of failure only strengthened my resolve further. Life was never meant to be easy, and now more so as a cancer patient. In moments like this I had to remember that striving to meet my goals was as important as actually achieving them. After all, my goals and objectives were just another method of ensuring that I was not led astray from a single-minded resolve. And this was of greater significance than if a few of my daily goals were left unfulfilled.

My goals got altered as my priorities changed. New ones constantly got added, others dropped. Only I understood my needs and requirements for the day. If some of my objectives were not being fulfilled, then I concluded that either I was striving too high or not enough effort was being made on my part. While it was important for my self-esteem that my objectives were met, it was equally important that I continued to work towards achieving my goals. The results of my daily efforts brought a great amount of satisfaction, since unless I remained focused, my energies I knew would get dissipated.

Living through one difficult day of the treatment seemed much longer than even six months of life without cancer. An hour of the first chemotherapy session was for me the longest span of time possible. But then each moment had to pass. And soon each chemotherapy session became a routine. Why did the first session of chemotherapy seem much longer to me than the sixty minutes it took for the drug to flow? Apart from the fear and anxiety, I didn't have my goals clearly defined. The same experience however, was never repeated. In the subsequent sessions, I was prepared. There was less fear and anxiety. And above all, a well-defined objective that helped the mind-body continuum to accept the drugs faster. And better. Even before the drugs began to flow, efforts towards achieving the established objectives had already been initiated. I was in full control, having gained knowledge and wisdom from the previous experience. The mind-body continuum too was more receptive, more accommodating of the drugs.

For me, identifying priorities and setting goals, both short-term as well as long-term, played a vital role. They not only focused all energies on a particular path but also added a new meaning and excitement to life as each day passed. It was the short-term goals that were more important. Focusing on them, achieving them, winning in the short-term brought the mind and body together, sharpened my skills, hardened my resolve. The winning habit was critical, it uplifted me. It built my inner strength for the ultimate goal. It made me believe that even my long-term goals are as easily achievable. I wasn't too concerned with the end result. That would take care of itself in due course at the right moment. I concentrated my energies on the tasks at hand. Thought about winning the smaller issues every day. Ensured that the goals that I had set for myself for that moment were being achieved. And each achievement added to my determination to win the final war.

Nearly six months had passed since my war against cancer began. I had fought and won many battles, emerged victorious in many of the skirmishes. Every three weeks, I had religiously spent at least two days in hospital and undergone over 15 hours of treatment. By the end of the fourth cycle, some damage to my hearing had been noticed. I was also suffering from peripheral neuropathy, a condition

that meant that my lower limbs had been adversely affected by the drugs, resulting in wobbly knees whenever I stood or walked. I was given electric shocks and the electro-physiological study showed damage that only time could possibly heal. At the same time I developed postural hypotension that meant that my blood pressure readings varied depending on whether I was lying down, sitting or standing. And my hearing had begun to show the first signs of being adversely affected. Again and again I was rushed to the hospital, and kept under observation of the cardiologists and other specialists. A point came when I became too weak to even understand what was going on. The chemo-port was working overtime with intravenous fluids, antibiotic injections and blood transfusions. Towards the end new drugs were administered to reduce the side-effects of the treatment.

Right from the very beginning, I had guided the path the drugs had taken in my system. I had visualized each drop, each molecule of the chemotherapy drugs. Combined they formed an army of many trillions of fighting-fit soldiers. They entered through the chemo-port on the left side of my chest, were welcomed into my blood stream, and traveled through the heart to the right side of my lungs. Here they had stayed, unloaded their ammunition, and fought the enemy. Ensured that the enemy was being destroyed. Gradually, in a planned and organized manner. And towards the end, when there was a minor change in the battle plan, and one of the drugs, Cisplatin, had been replaced by another from the same family so as to reduce the side-effects, a pleasant surprise awaited the enemy. My role became that much more critical. I had to ensure that all my forces were properly guided to the war zone. And that they succeeded in the final assault. The enemy within had to be vanquished.

Guiding the path of the chemotherapy drugs during each cycle and visualizing the healing taking place in the body led to a greater understanding of how the war was being won. A vast army of white blood cells. Each armed with the anti-cancer drugs. Each strong and aggressive. Each ready for battle. Each destroying the weak and disorganized cancer cells. Flushing them out of the system, through the liver and the kidneys. Eliminating them finally through the urine and the stool. The shrinking tumor as each battle progressed, till it

finally disappeared. With minimum damage to the normal cells. A simple battle plan. Vividly pictured and stored and saved in my memory forever. Repeated in similar or marginally different forms in each chemotherapy cycle.

Visualization of the destruction of the cancer cells was not necessarily restricted to fighting a war. The shrinking of the tumor was pictured in many ways. Like a big fish, the white blood cells powered with the chemotherapy drugs, eating the small fish, the weak and disorganized cancer cells. Or like an overflowing river, gushing through the colony of the cancer cells, creating destruction and havoc, carrying the dead cancer cells as it flowed out of the system. At one stage I remember, I pictured the cancer cells as small, black and ugly rats moving haphazardly in my lungs and the chemotherapy drugs like rat poison left in their path. Cancer cells were pictured like small boats out in the middle of the ocean amidst a bad storm. Or like objects in the path of an avalanche or a hurricane, in full cry and fury, unmindful of the destruction caused. The drugs were like pesticides being sprayed to save the crops. In whichever manner or form the treatment was visualized, havoc and destruction certainly played an important part in the entire process. The drugs not only destroyed the cancer cells; they affected all cells in the body, even the good cells that multiply at a fast rate.

How did I benefit from this visualization? For one, I understood how my treatment was working. I began to participate in improving my health and actually 'see' the benefits. As an active participant in my health, it helped me understand my condition better. It built on my internal resources to fight the disease. It helped me to increase my belief in myself. Belief that I could and would eventually win. As the treatment progressed, I gained confidence and actually felt the tumor shrinking. And the cancer cells being flushed out. This enhanced the whole process of self-realization and self-discovery. It brought the mind and body together since mental images of the various activities inside the body were being conjured up at all times.

Mental imagery also helped me in the reduction of fear, anxiety and anger that I felt towards my cancer as well as the treatment. Fear arose from the belief that I was not in control and that the fast-

growing cancer cells were causing further deterioration in the body. The images that were being generated visualized the orderly destruction of the weak and disorganized cancer cells and removed any negativity that may have existed. They highlighted and enhanced my role in regaining my health. They strengthened my will to live. They help me communicate with my subconscious, reaching out to all parts of my mind and body. And most importantly they kept the mind active, not allowing it to become weak as a result of the side effects of the disease and the treatment.

In order to enhance my positive attitudes, I also began to visualize all that I would do once the war is over. Or even picture what I would do once the worst moments of the side-effects of the treatment were over. Positive images could only further my cause. At times I was overtaken by negative imagery. At moments of great despair when everything around me was not working to my satisfaction. When I was losing my grip on the treatment. Losing control over a length of time I knew was dangerous. And this happened when the mind got flooded with negative images. Pictures that made me feel that the tumor was not shrinking. Pictures that gave me the feeling that I was going round and round in deep concentric circles and was not being able to come out of them. Images of sinking deeper and deeper in a large pit of quicksand.

Mental images were like the surface of large ocean, full of waves, sometimes big, sometimes small. The attempt was not to stop the waves so that the water would be flat, peaceful, and tranquil. The stopping of the waves was beyond my control. They were governed by laws that I did and did not understand. However, I could harness their energies. I could ride the waves. I could surf. I focused my attention fully on that moment and was forever in tune with all the mental images that were being conjured. By being aware, by developing an open mind and a more accepting attitude, the psychological and emotional causes of pain and suffering got relieved. And with this release, there was a decrease in the stress and the pressures, removing all the unwanted blocks to the healing that was taking place within. Mental images provided an understanding of my inner self and the healing process within. After all, a picture was worth more than a

thousand words.

My experience with cancer also showed me the dire importance of healthy living. This was a judicious combination of proper food and regular physical exercise and helped not only in building up my energy and internal strength, but also kept my mind-body active, even in the most adverse situations. Healthy living made significant contributions to my war effort. According to the series of tests that were regularly being conducted, my progress had been encouraging. I was always eagerly waiting for the final outcome. The final assault, hoping that the long ordeal would soon be over.

After the first set of results, the chemotherapy protocol was made even more aggressive. The maximum permissible dosage of the two drugs was being administered and the oncologists were beginning to see signs of total cure. But at the same time the side-effects of the treatment were taking their toll. The last time I left the hospital it was on a wheel chair. I could hardly hold my head up. But I was alive. And the treacherous patch in my lungs was gone.

I still remember the day when the last of the series of tests confirmed that there was no sign of malignancy in my lungs. On the x-rays and CT scans the patch appeared like a scar, a tell-tale sign that at some stage in the past there had been something wrong with my lungs. I realized that I would have to live with this abnormality, the same way as I would have to live with the scar of my surgery. But the fact was that I was in remission.

The quiet that followed the completion of my cancer treatment was sometimes more difficult to cope with than what had gone before. I was no longer the centre of attention. No longer did my family treat me with the same consideration as they did when I was undergoing treatment. Or my friends for that matter. They didn't come and visit me as often as they had earlier. Or inquired about my health status. I was left coping with the 'new' me. Left to my devices as a cancer survivor, only I knew what I was going through. What was happening inside. Others around me didn't. And this added a big strain on all my relationships. With people. With family. With friends. Others around me had remained the same. I had changed forever. And all my relationships had a new meaning. A different form.

Surviving cancer is about living a day at a time. It's about having the best quality of life that is possible. One of my new friends, a breast cancer patient, told me that the only difference between life before and after cancer was that earlier she could plan her future with some amount of certainty. As a cancer survivor her future had shrunk, and it was becoming more and more difficult to plan more than three or four months at a time. There is no way she could plan her life even one year ahead, though she knew she had been in remission for over five years.

Cancer is totally unpredictable. Before cancer, most of my life had been spent never thinking about cancer. Or even if I had, I never thought that some day I would become a cancer patient. Just the knowledge that it could, and has, happened had changed everything. As a cancer survivor, I tried to reach out and grasp each day as if I had only that day to live. I began to enjoy and experience every moment of my life. After all, I only had one life to live. I too had my own individual goals. I rose far above all that I considered trivial in my life, in my environment. Looked back at the memories of my life without cancer. The days that had gone by when if I felt the need to do something, I just did it. The same still held true now as it did earlier. I do not allow anybody to put me down. Or let them discriminate against me because of my cancer.

If I have a dream, then I act on it. I try harder, work longer, and achieve more. My life is being lived with a new kind of passion. With zest. With a sense of joy, creativity and spontaneity. Enthusiasm, excitement and fulfillment. Through cancer I have received a new gift of life. The joy of cancer is not about what cancer did to me. To my mind. To my body. The joy is about how I perceive what had happened to me. And what is happening to me. It was about finding a positive for every negative. A good in every bad. And converting all my setbacks into new challenges to be faced. New wars to be fought and won. I learnt the art of making the mind and body work together. In perfect harmony. The cancer had developed my mind-body continuum and taken it to another level. A higher plane. A new balance, which in many ways was superior to what existed before. I had learnt to confront my worst fears.

Living with cancer the second time was a totally different experience. I was due for my six-monthly check-up that included a CT scan of the chest, a bone scan and an ultrasound of the abdomen. When the results came, the latter two were clear, but the results of the CT scan showed a significant growth in the patch area as compared to the earlier report. I was thunderstruck and once again hoped against hope that there had been some human error in the scan report. But that was not to be. A new chemotherapy protocol was devised. A new set of drugs, was prescribed. I rushed the scan results to my at the Tata Memorial for a second opinion. He agreed with my oncologists at local Hospital and soon, within a week, my chemo-port was working overtime. Each cycle was of three weeks duration, with both drugs repeated on day 1 and day 8 of the cycle. A far more difficult protocol to endure.

The recurrence of cancer was perhaps as frightening as the first time when I faced the diagnosis. The 'Why me?' syndrome had changed to 'Oh no! not again.' But strangely, and in a somewhat convoluted manner, undergoing treatment gave me a sense of security. The fact that something was being done made me feel safe from cancer. During my remission, the absence of any medication or treatment to prevent recurrence had worried me. I felt that nothing was being done to protect me. Now under treatment I felt confident once again and my earlier victory gave me sufficient courage, strength and hope to feel that I would be successful once again.

I was positive. I was tough. I had a single-minded resolve. I thought of the millions of people around the world who are cancer patients, survived and made significant contributions to society. I integrated the cancer experience into my life. I never visualized cancer as my enemy. If I did, I knew I would never be able to coexist with it. And be at peace. We all have to deal with our experiences differently and in our own manner. Cancer gave me a new meaning to courage, hope, joy and faith. Cancer transformed and changed my life. It has redefined aspects of my personality, my career, my goals and the direction the rest of my life will take. It has made me a more complete human being. It has taught me how to cope with the unexpected. It has made me a human being that I am beginning to like.

About the author:

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