

Carol Jeanotilla, the creative mastermind behind this amazing site, has graciously asked me to share my story with "The Hope Tree's" readership and visitors. My story is about cancer. I'd like to tell you that I see it as a great gift. I don't. It sucks. But, I have learned a lot and am very happy to still be around to share some of those lessons with you.

First of all, let me tell you what happened. At my yearly physical, I would always tell the doctor that I "am healthy as a horse". Not sure why I thought horses were all that healthy, but the phrase served me well. I did have these intermittent growths, most notably in my breasts, that were always benign but did necessitate a trip to the "crusher" just to make sure.

In March, 2010 my geriatric cat found what would be my sixth lump. Like many men I know, he has this thing with boobs and while napping one day, he started to knead my left breast. He was VERY adamant about this breast and so I did a self exam in the shower the next day. To make a short story shorter, I had a benign lump in my left breast and they found what they thought was Ductal Carcinoma in Situ in my right breast. DCIS was not even termed "cancer" until recently when they found that there was a good reason to deal with it early. Mine had moved out of "Situ" and so was termed Invasive Breast Cancer stage 1 and I was to have radiation and take Tomoxifen for a while. Not a big deal. I was one of the lucky ones.

Soon after my lumpectomies - one on either side - I started having some simple symptoms that I was sure were related to the fact that I just had surgery on my chest. I was coughing up a little blood and had some pain in my chest. Truly, had I not just had surgery, it would not have been something that would have led to a trip to the doctor's. However, my surgeon wanted to be safe and so ordered a chest X-ray. (Yes, they used to be standard procedure before any surgery but not any more due to insurance "concerns".)

My surgeon, Dr. Cathy Graham, asked that I come in to see her on a Monday afternoon at 4:30. I sat down in front of her and she asked again what my symptoms were. I was sure that she was going to tell me that I was fine, but instead she looked me straight in the eye and said, "Liz, you have a big honkin' mass in your right lung. I mean big, like 7 cm big".

I'm not sure that I remember much else about that appointment save the fact that she said she thought it was cancer, a separate cancer - not metastasized from the breast. It had to come out. We had to move fast and she would be with me every step of the way.

The rest, as they say, is history. I had a thoracotomy to remove 2/3 of my right lung. It was to have been a simple 45 minute surgery which turned into an extensive 2 and 1/2 hour surgery with pain like I have never known. I have nonsmall cell lung cancer - adenocarcinoma. It had spread to my lymph nodes. Since my original diagnosis, I have had chemo, Gamma Knife Surgery and whole brain radiation for metastases to the brain

and more chemo and radiation as the cancer has spread to the bone and other lymph nodes. I am currently staged as 4B or chronic, recurring cancer. There is no stage 5. I always was an overachiever. In other words, it is something that you live with....there is no such thing as "remission".

However, and this is where the good news starts, I was diagnosed with Breast Cancer in March and Lung Cancer in April of 2010. As of this writing, I have been alive - obviously - for 19 months. That is WAY longer than the statistics say I am supposed to be here. So, first lesson. Don't believe the hype. It is **your** story and you will write it in **your** own unique way. Don't let anyone tell you how long you have to live. They don't know! AND you can live every day until you die, or you can be about dying every day you live. That is a choice that cancer can't take away from you.

I've always been intrigued by American Indian tradition and spirituality. Going through cancer, I've built my own personal totem pole in my mind hundreds of times with each animal representing a part of my own journey. It would probably look pretty strange but imagine with me *Liz's totem*.

At the bottom, holding up the pack is a donkey. His story is pivotal. He was walking along one day with his person not really paying much attention to where they were going and he fell, feet first, into a hole just big enough for him to fit in. Hard as the person tried, he could not free his life-long friend. Finally, he gave up and believing that the end was near, began to throw shovels of dirt on top of the donkey. The donkey, however, was not finished. He shook the dirt off his back and stepped up. The man, realizing what was happening, began furiously throwing dirt on his friend and with each shovel full the donkey would "shake it off and step up" until he was at a point that he could just step out of the hole. Literally, what was to be his grave had become the source of his freedom. That, ladies and gentlemen, is exactly what cancer is for me. What was to spell my demise has become the source of my freedom and a new life.



Next up the totem is a wolf. This comes directly from a story from the American Indian Tradition. An old chief was talking to and teaching his grandson about life and said that within each one of us are two wolves. One is kind, loving, optimistic and caring. The other is mean, cruel, pessimistic and depressed. The little boy asked his grandfather, "Which one wins?" to which the wise old man replied,

“depends on which one you feed”. Throughout this journey, I have been faced with a choice of where I will spend my waning physical and emotional energy and I continue to try to make sure I am feeding the good wolf. Sometimes that means taking a break from the news, from toxic people, from doctors. If you are more comfortable with sports analogies, they work as well. If you are a race car driver, professionals say that your car goes where your eyes go. If you play golf, the pros will tell you that ball goes where you imagine it going. All of the best sports psychologists will say that you have to see it before it happens and then it will happen. It’s impossible to think, “I’m going to miss this putt” and then to make the putt. Keep your head in the game!



At the top of the totem is a bald eagle. The eagle doesn't have a lot of predators but it does have a couple of animals that really are a bother. One is the crow. But instead of going after the crow, the eagle simply does what it does best. It flies. And it flies so high that no other bird or predator can follow. It doesn't have to engage in the “fray” it simply rises above it. When you are closer to death than many, you really understand from a very different place that there is no reason to take people's crap or to sweat the small stuff. You simply have to fly higher. It might be lonely,

in fact it is, but it is much better than engaging in meaningless dialogue. See how they love one another IS the only thing that matters and sometimes the most loving thing to do is to walk away.

What I have learned is that the power, energy, healing spirit (or God's grace) of the totem is only available in the NOW. It cannot be accessed while we are obsessed with the past or worried about the future. A radio serves as the best analogy. You can't get the music from 102.1 FM if your radio is tuned to 107.3. If my life is filled with worry (defined as “tormenting oneself”) or regret, it is impossible to tap into the power of the now which is where God resides. My responsibility in life is to find strategies for staying in the moment before the past and the future eat it up. It is at that point that my freedom can ride on the donkey's back, my focus will be as true as wolf's and my hope and spirit will soar on eagles wings.

Cancer has taken much from me. It has taken relationships - both short term like my boyfriend and long term - folks I have known for years. It has taken many activities that I loved - riding my scooter, golf, spinning, my work and my play. But it can't take me. The person that I am remains untouched and it is that energy that goes on, merging back into the universe, to be used again in the creative mastery of life. Loosing some relationships means appreciating those that are left all the more. Losing the ability to do many things make doing this like writing this piece all the more precious. So... in the end...I am still enjoying the ride. As Martin Luther King said, “We must accept finite disappointments but never lose infinite hope”.

What I know to be true is that I am meant to share hope. In fact, I believe that that is the reason I am still alive. I am alive so that I could write this to you and hopefully you will take what is helpful and leave the rest. My hope for you is that you thrive whether you have cancer or some other form of physical, emotional, or spiritual malignancy. This road is too hard to simply survive. Do what it takes to live until you die.

“My greatest hope is to laugh as much as I cry; to get my work done and to try to love somebody and have the courage to accept love in return.” Maya Angelou