



Seeing Cancer

When a friend took me along recently to the reading of a play, she was later asked, “Was your friend sitting next to you at the theater the one with cancer?” As Victoria has many friends likely to accompany her to a play, I wondered what it was about me that had given the impression I was “the one with cancer.” And then I remembered: I had gone to the play wearing a hat with no hair showing — the universal sign of membership in the Chemo Club.

I see members of the Chemo Club quite often these days. Dropping by a friend’s school the other day, I saw her young student with leukemia wearing a baseball cap at the lunch table. At my weekly acupuncture appointment, I catch sight of the young man who has just undergone chemotherapy for colon cancer wearing a green cotton camping hat pulled down past his ears. One of my close friends recently lost most of her hair to chemotherapy and some days shows up wearing one of the many hats given her by the sister of a woman who died last year from breast cancer. In the grocery store, at the post office, and in restaurants, I notice more and more caps, hats, scarves, and wigs worn by members of the Chemo Club, signs of hefty membership dues paid by enduring painful body demolition.

But I am not a member of the Chemo Club, and as someone said to me recently, “You aren’t wearing your cancer.” I still have all my hair, and when I am hatless, which is most of the time, there are no visible signs pointing to the fact that I have lung cancer. The man at the video store was told recently by someone in the neighborhood I have cancer, but he is so

confused by the contrast between how I look and my diagnosis that he can't stop asking others, "Is it really true she is dying?"

I, too, look at myself and see no outward evidence of disease. Instead, I see what others see — a 58-year-old woman with cropped graying hair, freckles spreading into aging spots, and smile lines heading out to far shores of my cheek bones. Looking healthy, having all one's hair still in place, walking and talking, and doing the daily business of living is a great camouflage for a deadly disease growing deep inside.

And sometimes I try to see beyond the mirror into what is happening inside my body. Once, while I was a college student, I got myself so high on Bach that I was sure I could see the blood flowing inside my veins as clearly as I could see the Bach sonata traveling round and round on the Fidelity Hi-Fi. I had taken no mind-altering drugs to get to that state, but even today I can remember the vividness of red variegated cells rushing their way from finger to wrist, wrist to shoulder, shoulder to heart.

Now I see red inside again. Only this time the red is at the center of my left lung and, rather than being a well defined form or solid substance, this blaze has thousands of soft tentacles spreading out in every direction. All along I have been eagerly examining this cancer in the X-Ray and CT scan images shown me by doctors. But none of these images reveal cancer's colors. None of the tests show the pigmentation of the smoldering flame slowly but surely burning the house down.

Because this is stage IV cancer, I see other colors inside my body as well. I imagine the tumors on my back and pelvic bones to be a pale yellow. As they are outposts of the blaze, their distance from the heat causes them to blossom and not burn, to open like a sunflower in an ever widening reach towards the radiating warmth above.

I know there are people with cancer who feel betrayed by their own bodies; they feel their physiology has strayed from the path of expected faithfulness and trust. But I have yet to feel that way. For 58 years this body of mine has treated me with kindness and generosity. As a small child, I climbed farmyard fences and leaped off hay wagons. As a teenager, I didn't miss a single day of Latin class or Shakespeare due to illness. Once

I was an adult, I enjoyed all the advantages of feeling strong and able to do whatever I desired. Two healthy live births, plenty of gardening and traveling, long bike rides, and many years of yoga later, I continue to enjoy the gift of my own body.

A diagnosis of terminal metastatic adenocarcinoma of the lungs doesn't mean that my body has gone bad — it simply means that I know better what is most likely going to kill it. My blood still pulses on, my heart and kidneys pump and process. Even my left lung with its fiery occupant persists in pressing air through its tissues.

But having said all this, I must admit there are people who can and do see cancer when they look at me. These are not the strangers who might quickly avert their eyes or stare too long. Instead these seers are the people I know and love. And in their eyes I often catch sight of something I have never encountered before. Like sweet and sour sauce, their eyes mix together pity and grief, love, and the desire to do something to help me.

Over the years I have had only one recurring minor impairment — laryngitis. As a college teacher, it meant days and sometimes weeks of wheeling in the overhead computer projector and keeping the class going by typing in my side of the dialog. At an airport in Philadelphia once, I found myself voiceless and trying to convince the lost luggage agent that the one black suitcase riding around on the carousel like an abandoned orphan was not mine. “I’m looking for a green Eagle Creek canvas bag with wheels,” I wrote a second time on a piece of paper. The agent continued to point at the hard-shelled orphan, insisting it was mine. It was 11:30 p.m. and before I turned away to find a place to spend the night, I wrote back, “I have lost my voice, but lucky for you I have not yet lost my sense of humor.” Only then did he look me in the eye and catch on to the fact that I had lost my voice, not the intelligence needed to spot the obvious differences between a black Samsonite and a green Eagle Creek.

Now my friends and loved ones find themselves having to look at me again to see I am still the person I once was. We all know I have cancer, that everything has changed, and yet most things remain the same. “I may be dying,” I gently told my walking partner, as she once again jumped

ahead of me to open a door, “but I am not yet diminished.”

It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that a person with cancer needs help at every turn. We are bombarded with images of cancer victims lying incapacitated in beds, thin and gaunt from invasive treatments, confined to their houses or hospitals. And while films, TV, magazines, and novels may be good at teaching us valuable lessons about cancer, they too often rely on the same cancer storyline. Our images often lack the flexibility to include both the cancers that move in like a hurricane and the ones ambling along the coastline before moving inland. One person with cancer is sick and in great pain. Another person, one like me, takes off riding her bicycle on a sunny afternoon quietly carrying a ticking time bomb within.

That my friends and loved ones see I have cancer is a good thing. They call me on the telephone, send cards and letters, bring bouquets of flowers, and sneak jars of homemade soup into my refrigerator while I’m at the movies. Everyone I know expresses sorrow at hearing I have cancer. And everyone who knows I have cancer has the same struggle — finding the balance between letting me know I am cared about, while fighting the reflex to see and treat me as disabled. “You’ll wear yourselves out,” I tell my women’s group members as they bring in yet more bags of frozen veggie burgers and fresh bread. I am concerned that, by the time I am really sick, they will be exhausted from all their earlier kindnesses. “We’re just practicing,” they reassure me.

I am so fortunate to know that I have family and friends practicing to be here for me when and if the day comes I need all the help they are able and willing to give. None of us can know what lies ahead, and so we are learning together how to take each day as it comes. And, of course, I know there may yet come a day when strangers as well as friends will be able to see I have cancer. And then, no more words will be needed to explain what seeing cancer is all about.