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Cancer Turned My Life Right Side Up

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Five years ago I won the reverse lottery. Ovarian cancer is rare and I was diagnosed with an Ovarian Cancer Sarcoma, rarest of the rare. In a busy crowded emergency room, after briefly chatting about the Buffalo Sabres, the ER physician announced "You have a large ovarian tumor that looks like it has spread to your liver." That abruptly began my cancer journey."



Dr. Susan Schultz

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Five years ago I won the reverse lottery. Ovarian cancer is rare and I was diagnosed with an Ovarian Cancer Sarcoma, rarest of the rare. In a busy crowded emergency room, after briefly chatting about the Buffalo Sabres, the ER physician announced “You have a large ovarian tumor that looks like it has spread to your liver.” That abruptly began my cancer journey.

I’ve often heard people say that having cancer changes who you are. I would have to agree that. From a physical standpoint I became fatigued and lost my strength. For example, when I was in chemo I went to the post office to mail some thank you cards. I got to the door at the same time as a young man who politely opened the doors for me. I purchased my stamps and then took the time to put them on all of my cards just as the window closed. I walked out through the first door, and much to my dismay found I wasn’t strong enough to open the outer door. I was stuck in the vestibule! There were no customers left in the post office. I stood there a moment and a car drove up. What luck! Someone would come to my rescue! An elderly gentleman and his walker got out of the car. Five minutes later, he had taken the twelve steps to the door. I believe he thought “What luck! Someone to open the door for me.” Between the two of us, we managed to get the door open, and then I was able to hold it for him, so he could get inside. I was so glad to get out of my vestibule prison that it wasn’t until sometime later, I wondered how he managed to get out.

My muscle tone never completely bounced back, and a cancer reoccurrence five years ago resulted in me having 24 months of chemotherapy over a three year period. Neuropathy caused my hands and feet to become numb causing this clumsy person to become even clumsier. It has thrown my balance off. My husband refers to my unusual gait as my “monster walk.” My students know to keep their beverages capped since I have a tendency to kick them over or knock them down. In fact, one day I ran over my own foot with the vacuum cleaner, and then fell over the vacuum cleaner!

My brain got foggy. I had a tremendously difficult time with simple math facts and word recall. I couldn’t remember the name of something and would talk my way around it. “Can you hand me the thing that you spread butter with?” It was very frustrating because you know what you don’t know. I developed the bad habit of interrupting people. If I knew what I wanted to say, I wanted to say it before it

was gone! My recall skills have returned, but I'm still working on correcting the interrupting. People who know me and about my experiences are patient with this. People who don't see it as rude and are more often than not, rude back to me.

My physical appearance changed too. My first set of chemo left me looking like Brittany Spears sans hair. I used to refer to myself as star trek mom. Before my cancer diagnosis I used to constantly complain about having bad hair days, but I've found bad hair days are better than no hair days. I never thought I was a vain person, so I didn't think that losing my hair would bother me. Surprise! It did. I think what was troublesome about it, was that it was a constant reminder of having cancer. A hat or scarf or wig is a reminder. Catching a glimpse of your new self in the mirror is a reminder.

To get my mind off of all I was going through, my sister and brother-in-law invited my husband and I down to Lake Chautauqua for a ride on their boat. I put on the necessary sunscreen so that I would not burn and carefully wrapped my head in a scarf. One quick look in the mirror to make sure my head was completely covered, and off to the boat we went. It was a glorious sunny day and I enjoyed myself more than I had in months! Upon arriving back at their house, I went into the bathroom. I looked in the mirror and much to my astonishment, found out that I no longer had eyebrows! Apparently they had blown off while I was on the boat ride. Some people leave their hearts in San Francisco. I left my eyebrows in Lake Chautauqua!

I was glad that I had an upcoming appointment at an American Cancer Society Look Good Feel Good program. The women there were so patient. They provided each of us with our own make up kit, and showed us how to apply the makeup to accent our features. I learned how to draw my eyebrows back on. When your artistic ability equates to drawing stick figures, drawing your eyebrows on can take some practice. One day, I was in a bit of a hurry. After completing several errands I caught sight of myself in the car mirror. I noticed I drew my eyebrows on a bit too high. I had been looking surprised all day! After a good laugh, I called my daughter and told her. She said, "Look at all the energy you can save. You won't have to go through the trouble of feeling emotions. If you're angry, just draw on angry eyebrows."

I continued to draw on my eyebrows, put on my hat or scarf and go about town. One day, I was helping out at our community fair. It was a good feeling to do something for others, especially at a time when others were constantly supporting me. On my way out I came across this little girl who was about three or four. She had on an elaborate hat made from balloons provided to her by a nearby clown. I said "Nice hat!" Without missing a beat, she looked up at my scarf covered head and said "You too!"

While it is important to keep your sense of humor when you are dealing with a difficult situation, having cancer was nothing to laugh about. I met many wonderful people who have subsequently lost their fight with cancer. Cancer turned my life upside down. But it also turned it right side up. I've learned to appreciate what really matters. No matter when we leave this earth, life is too short. So here is my advice to you.

Create a bucket list and little by little do what's on it. Don't get caught up in the little piddling stuff that in the long run isn't important. Focus on people, not things, and keep in contact with the people who matter to you. Hearing that I had cancer, old friends, previous students, all sort of people from my past contacted me. I commented to one of them that I thought I'd lost many of my old friends, being so

busy and losing touch with them. She said, “You haven’t lost us, we’ve been waiting for you.” Who is waiting for you?

Embrace your inner child! Be a puddle jumper! Make snow angels! Read books for fun! Ask a million questions! Wonder!

Most importantly when your circumstances beat you down don’t lose sight of hope, even if people tell you otherwise. My hope for you is that you never become a cancer statistic.

Celebrate your birthdays. The thought of growing old excites me. Look at each birthday as a gift. It is.

