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IN SIGHT

for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

CANCER TAUGHT ME TO LIVE IN THE PRESENT

I feel like a fraud walking through the halls of the cancer clinic. Cancer means sickness and death and hair falling out. That's not me. I'm young and healthy. I have all my hair. I don't look like a cancer patient should look or feel like a cancer patient should feel.

Notes from my journal, January 2007

I can't remember the exact day I felt the lump in my breast. I was not a vigilant lump checker. On that morning, I found a lump while I was in the shower. I wasn't scared, but I thought perhaps I should have a doctor look at it. First, I would wait and see if it went away. Over the next few days the lump did not go away, but I wasn't alarmed. I didn't worry that it was cancer, but I finally decided to have it checked out by a doctor.

As I waited in the exam room, I felt again to see whether the lump was there. I remembered all the times I had felt lumps before only to have them disappear within days. It was still there, and I was still not worried. I had biopsy surgery, but I didn't stress about it because I figured there wasn't much I could do. Funny thing, though, I somehow knew the biopsy would be positive.

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By the time I first felt the lump, I had experienced six months of my own personal hell. I became the person my friends used as a yardstick to measure their own problems. Work, finances, unhealthy relationships, single-parenting, and a custody battle had brought me to a point of desperation, making cancer seem small and manageable in comparison.

After working for a bankruptcy attorney, I had opened my own firm and built a successful practice, only to experience a dramatic decline in business after the overhaul of the federal bankruptcy statutes. Saying my life changed after the law changed is a huge understatement. I moved my office to my home to save on overhead. I cut expenses to the bare minimum.

I did everything I could to stretch every last dollar, but it wasn't enough.

I was unemployed for nine months before I was hired as an executive assistant at an Internet marketing company. Three months later I was laid off for lack of work. An attorney friend offered me part-time paralegal work. It wasn't much and didn't provide health insurance, but it was something. The flexible schedule allowed me to work around child care and medical appointments.

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Right after I started radiation, my previous firm offered me a job again. The pay was not good, but it was better than I had been earning as a part-time paralegal. I knew how to do the work, so there wasn't a huge learning curve.

I was shocked by how tired I was during the treatments. In retrospect, however, my exhaustion was completely understandable. In addition to my new job, my relationship problems continued to be a huge drain on my energy. After work, I would pick up my daughter from school, drive home in a fog, walk directly to my room, and collapse on my bed, without even bothering to take off my coat or shoes. I slept long and deeply, and on waking, I would sometimes have absolutely no recollection of who or where I was.

Thankfully, my daughter was understanding and cooperative, but she was still a young girl who needed her mother. By the end of the seven weeks of intensive treatments, she was tired of my being tired all the time and frustrated that I never wanted to do anything or go anywhere. She called my best friend and asked her if radiation would go on forever.

Before I began radiation, I had asked for help – from friends, from my sister, and from my daughter's teacher. Play dates were scheduled for my daughter,

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and meals were arranged for the two of us. Accepting help gave me a little breathing room to deal with my treatment, making cancer easier to manage than the rest of my life.

Even with the fatigue, even with my relationship troubles and daunting financial situation, I realize that it still could have been worse. No one gets to choose how their life is when they are diagnosed. Whatever is going on is what you have to deal with – you just get cancer thrown into the mix. Going through surgery and radiation wasn't fun, but I made it. Who knows what would have happened had I not checked for lumps. At the very least, my early detection spared me from chemotherapy and more drastic surgery. I wish all women could be so lucky. I am alive today and my cancer is cured.

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It feels as if the world has shifted, but really it's only my point of view that has changed. I realize now that we each have a purpose. We came here to do something and to learn something. When you understand this, so much that previously seemed significant now seems unimportant. Obstacles that before appeared overwhelming are now put into perspective, because everything that is thrown at you can offer a lesson if you are open to receiving it. There is a point to it all, if you are willing to see it.

So why did I get cancer? Why did life deal me this particular deck of cards? Maybe it's just part of being human. Maybe it was to teach me not to sweat the small stuff. Maybe it was so I could help others not to be afraid.

I have seen many people go to great lengths to avoid cancer screenings because they fear what it *might* show. It is my hope that one woman will read my story and decide not to wait to get a mammogram. I want women to know that cancer doesn't always end in heartbreak and doom. If caught early, cancer doesn't have to be a painful, debilitating, or terminal disease.

The biggest lesson I learned is that all we have is this moment. If we worry about what has already happened, it is wasted energy because that moment is already over. And if we worry about what could happen, that is also wasted energy because that moment is not yet here, and the thing we fear might or might not come

to pass. When we agonize over the past or fret about the future, we squander the present. Simply being is very difficult for most people. I don't know what the future holds for me, but I do know that cancer has taught me to live in the moment.

Lara Gardner

Editor's note: We have included the author's name at her preference.

Resources for Cancer Patients and Their Families

- **American Cancer Society**
www.cancer.org
1-800-ACS-2345
- **Association of Online Cancer Resources**
www.acor.org
- **Cancer Care Resources of Oregon**
www.cancercareresources.org
503-528-5236
1-866-528-5236
- **National Cancer Institute**
www.cancer.gov
1-800-4-CANCER
1-800-422-6237
- **Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation**
www.komen.org
1-877-GO-KOMEN
1-877-465-6636