

Janey's Story

Janey was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) in 2002

BEFORE my diagnosis with cancer, I had been working less than a year in my new career as a registered massage therapist. After conquering a serious phobia, I had learned how to drive at the age of 38. My husband and I had recently bought a house and were attempting to have our first child. We had been fortunate enough to travel some of the world. Life seemed to be unfolding exactly how we had envisioned it.

Exactly one year after 9-11, I was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL). I was not shocked that I had cancer by the time that day came but I was confused by the type. I had known from ultrasound results that I had lesions on my liver so I had already suspected the worst-case scenario. However, in the wee hours of the morning, when the Emergency resident finally told me it was leukemia, I was definitely taken aback. I thought, "Wasn't that a childhood disease that I had seen on TV telethons?" It took awhile to process the information and I had time alone to wait until a few hours later to tell my husband, Karl. I quietly whispered to him that our worst fear had come true. The dreaded "C" word was said.

The treatment protocol for ALL takes an extremely long time so my new career came to a grinding halt to undergo chemotherapy and cranial radiation. Treatment became my new full-time job. I spent my time hospitalized or receiving chemo or radiation at outpatient clinics. After each bout of chemo I developed a complication so I was hospitalized each time. My social life was interacting with fellow patients or the hospital staff. Everyone who worked at each of those three hospitals was absolutely wonderful. Surely they are all angels here on earth sent to make our lives a little easier.

My friends and family visited and /or telephoned me often, which was one of the fringe benefits of not working. I joked that I had always wanted to live in my pyjamas with plenty of time to read or listen to music. My husband worked to pay the mortgage and bills and keep the house while I contributed my paltry CPP disability cheques. I felt useless but not guilty that I could not equally contribute or help at home. I had had my turn at supporting us when my husband had a serious illness back in 1993. We had learned what "in sickness and in health" truly means in marriage vows.

My husband and I are even closer than ever since this experience. All of my relationships with family and friends have deepened and intensified in my life. I share my feelings about people more easily. I hug more, kiss more and think about others a lot more. I rarely used to cry. Now, I allow myself the catharsis to cry with tears of sadness or joy. I used to be a shy person. Now, I take more risks. I had been afraid to truly live

Treatment became my new full-time job. I joked that I had always wanted to live in my pyjamas with plenty of time to read or listen to music.

My husband and I are even closer than ever since this experience.

All of my relationships with family and friends have deepened and intensified in my life.

The support was overwhelmingly humbling. I actually had a lot of fun when I wasn't in pain. Laughter really was the best medicine.

and this diagnosis enabled me to try new things or things that I had feared. Our time on earth is precious and I am not going to waste it anymore being afraid.

Strangely, I did not fear death, only the separation from my husband. I have seen many people succumb to cancer especially to leukemia. One day they are sitting beside you, the next they are gone in what seems like a blink of an eye. Being a cancer survivor means that I now have a mission here on earth because I was one of the few left behind... a mission to be the best human being that I can be, to act in a way that gives meaning to my life, to share compassionate love with all those that I meet, and to not let fear stop me from doing the things I have always wanted to do.

During my illness I had endured pain I never knew existed. Although I prefer not to feel pain, when I do, I am grateful. Pain is a warning system. It tells you that there is something wrong in your mind and/or body that you should not ignore. Without pain, we cannot protect and care for ourselves. The most difficult challenge about having cancer is not the pain that you feel or the terrifyingly invasive treatments, it's looking into the eyes of your loved ones who are mentally tortured and who feel helpless because they can only watch you endure it.

After learning of my remission, another challenge was the constant anxiety about relapse. It began with daily thoughts for a long time but over time has lessened. However there are still things that can trigger these thoughts. A child in a newspaper in need of a bone marrow donor, an ad for a run for cancer, a check-up at the hematologist, opening blood test results, and the list goes on. These all bring to mind there is always a chance for relapse. However, they no longer upset me. Rather, they help me to focus on my loved ones and on living life in the present moment as much as possible.

My husband, my friends, my siblings, and my colleagues have been very supportive and loving of me right from the start. I think everyone I know was shocked at first. I was the person who didn't smoke or have a microwave, who avoided artificial sweeteners, who tried to eat healthy, who took vitamins... At first, no one wanted to hear my thoughts and feelings about dying. Everyone desperately wanted to believe I would survive. I had friends, family and congregations in churches and Buddhist monks all

After learning of my remission, another challenge was the constant anxiety about relapse. It began with daily thoughts for a long time but over time has lessened.

The most difficult challenge about having cancer is not the pain, it's looking into the eyes of your loved ones who are mentally tortured and who feel helpless because they can only watch you endure it.

praying or meditating for me. The support was overwhelmingly humbling. Initially many people visited me day and night. I was truly fortunate and I actually had a lot of fun when I wasn't in pain. Laughter really was the best medicine.

My elderly neighbours were upset about the bad news but I think they are more philosophical about life being in their 90s. They have seen many people come into this world and many leave at all different ages. One would assume that someone nearing the end of his or her life would find a cancer diagnosis easier to accept, having lived a long life but this isn't always a rule of thumb. When you are in the early years of life I would think you would think having cancer is incredibly unfair. You may never experience the wonders of the different stages of life. However, sometimes youth is far more accepting and adaptive. In mid-life when I was diagnosed, I had not had the joyous experience of my own child but I had spent many wonderful years with my soul mate that I met at the age of four. I think the perspective may be different for different ages but the feelings are probably the same. Depending on age and personality, men may not show as much emotion in their personal reactions. However, that does not seem to hold as true during this age of Metrosexual Men. It is painful for anyone to think of the physical separation from loved ones. Cancer seems to break down the seemingly most impenetrable of emotional walls.

The hardest thing for me was letting go of my vision of my Life. We all expect our lives to travel a certain path – you are born, you grow up, get a good job, buy a house, travel, have your own family, retire, grow old and finally die. When I had to let go of the vision that possibly my soul mate and I would be separated in mid-life, I was very reluctant to do that. Meditation helped me to find peace by gaining the knowledge that we can never be separated even though our physical bodies will die. Our souls are eternally connected. The essence of every sentient being will be reunited in what I call the Next Dimension. I no longer fear the loss anymore. This is a tremendous comfort to me, which brings me the peace to accept death



**I have
learned since I
got cancer that one
must start to live the Life
one has always envisioned
immediately – right
this moment.**

at any age. However, to be honest, my Ego still dreads that physical separation when it comes.

Since my cancer diagnosis, the sun shines a little brighter, the grass is a little greener, and the flowers smell a little sweeter. I literally stop very often to smell the roses. Everything on Earth is truly a wonder of the World. So, what I have learned since I got cancer is that one must start to live the Life one has always envisioned immediately – right this moment. There are many wise people throughout the ages who have imparted similar insights in such sayings as “Carpe Diem!”, “Nothing is more important than this day”, “The power of Now”, and “Don’t wait. The time will never be just right.”

My personal favourite is a wonderful Tibetan proverb – “It is better to live one day as a tiger, than a thousand years as a sheep.”

Before cancer I was consumed with fear and in a sense embraced Death. Now I have fully embraced Life.

**Before
cancer I was
consumed with
fear and in a sense
embraced Death.
Now I have fully
embraced Life.**