

# Friendship and the Fickleness of Cancer

By Brenda Denzler

I was standing at my kitchen window the other day, gazing out aimlessly at my garden, now overgrown with grass and red clover that the local rabbits are finding delightful to munch on. I was contemplating, with surprise, the hesitation I felt at the prospect of getting to know another IBC sister better.

As I stood there wondering at my reaction, I realized the cause: this growing friendship was with a woman with Stage IV (terminal) disease. “My heart can’t take this again,” I thought. “I don’t know if I can bear the pain of losing a close friend to cancer one more time.”

My friend Kate died last March. We had become very close in the years since we met in an online support group for IBC patients, but we were really unlikely friends. Kate was an exercise buff, keenly interested in photography, a sharp “what not to wear” kind of dresser with two homes worthy of being featured in Better Homes and Gardens, and a disability/retirement portfolio that enabled her to travel anytime and anywhere if she felt well enough.

I am an inveterate couch potato who’d rather have a book in her hands than a camera, a “comfort first” dresser with a little modular home that is overstuffed with books, furniture my dad made and pets, and a financial portfolio that enables me to live literally hand-to-mouth and travel to the grocery store and back.

Socioeconomically speaking, we were very unevenly matched. The force that drew us together was cancer...and the glue that held us together, at first, was Janet’s death.

Kate, Janet and I had been diagnosed at about the same time and were thus going through our cancer treatments at about the same pace. By the time we connected in the support group, we were starting radiation, so we called ourselves the Fry Gals. (Get it? Because we were being “fried” to a crisp with rads!)

Kate had been diagnosed at Stage IV from the outset, so she was always going to be in treatment. But when Janet and I finished our treatments, the three of us met at Janet’s house in the summer of 2010. Her place, though more

casually furnished, was also Better-Homes-and-Gardens-worthy. In addition, she was outdoors-y, a photography buff, and financially set. Given all this, Kate and Janet really hit it off. Among Janet’s outdoor enthusiasms was kayaking, which I’d always wanted to try, so the three of us agreed that the following summer we would go kayaking down the James River.

We did take that trip—but only to honor Janet’s memory. Within four months of finishing her treatment, the cancer returned, spreading like wildfire through her lungs. Two months after that, she was dead.

Cancer is a funny beast. Since Kate had a terminal diagnosis from the outset, we all presumed that she would die before Janet and me, who had been diagnosed “early” at Stage IIIB. Naturally, we hoped that it would be years in the future before that happened, but Kate was fully aware that she was terminal. She would talk frankly about dying, but make plans for tomorrow anyway. As for Janet and me, we knew we could recur, but then again, we might not. And if we did, we were hoping it would be years before it happened. When all was said and done, though, it was Janet who died first.... Who could have known?

Kate and I grew closer after Janet died, as we consoled one another and processed the fickleness of cancer. Despite our superficial differences, we found common ground at a deeper level: We were both rather intellectually oriented; we both had adult children and, later, grandchildren; we were politically in sync; and we had a strong interest in religion. Through texts, phone calls and in-person visits, we came to share the ordinary, daily details of our lives (past and present)—which is where you find the real glue that binds human beings to one another.

Kate and I had many thoughtful conversations about religion. At one point, though, we got into tall weeds. Several years ago, one of our IBC sisters—a young woman in her 30s with two small children—died after a long and painful struggle to live. Kate was both

devastated and outraged. Where is this all-wise and benevolent God? she wanted to know. How could he let this happen?

Although my degree is in religious studies, I was out of my depth. Kate was an adamantly lapsed Catholic who was trying to use that framework to get answers to age-old questions about the justice of God. So I tapped an old grad school chum to help us find our way.

Maureen was on the theological faculty at a Catholic university in NYC, and, based on her personal history, I knew that she had to have confronted this question, herself. As I expected, she gave our conversation a richer texture with her insightful comments. Ironically enough (cancer being the fickle beast that it is), Maureen got pancreatic cancer two years later and died early last year.

At that point, Kate was not far behind. As one treatment after another failed her, as her body wore out, and as the cancer spread, Kate and I talked more and more often about death—not just in the abstract, but as a reality she would have to face soon. I tried to be calm and supportive, even though I was raging inside.

Finally, one day, it happened. “I’m actively dying,” she texted. “I can’t take any more. I think I’m going to call hospice.”

She was weak and in constant pain that was only relieved by powerful narcotics that put her to sleep. When awake, she couldn’t hold her head

up anymore; a growing tumor was pushing it to one side. She had no quality of life left.

“I know,” I wrote back, a lump in my throat and tears welling up in my eyes. “I don’t think it’s a bad decision, if you’re ready to make it.”

This is the cost of friendship in Cancer Land: having the ability and will to help a friend as they approach death. Putting your own feelings aside to nurture someone as best you can while they take that often-difficult journey from one life into what I sincerely hope is another.

Becoming good friends with someone in Cancer Land is not a bad decision. It has its lasting rewards. But it can be hard, because cancer is fickle. You may have a Stage III friend for decades, or she may recur and die suddenly next month. A friend with a terminal diagnosis may struggle for a bit and then die, or she may hold on with a reasonable quality of life and be a boon companion for years. For that matter, a friend who has never had cancer may wind up dying from it tomorrow....

I guess you can’t pick your friends according to the stage of their diagnosis—or lack of it. You can only pick them according to the quality of their soul and how it resonates with your own. As Kate’s did with mine.

*Brenda Denzler was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2009. She became a cancer survivor on the very day she was diagnosed.*

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