

Because of...

by Brenda Denzler

One of the toughest things about cancer is that when you think it's behind you, later you find out that it wasn't rooted out at all. It was just lying dormant, waiting for a chance to return. And then—voila! It pops up again. It's very discouraging when that happens. Very.

The first time cancer overcomes the mechanisms your body has for protecting itself against renegade cells, there is some hope that it can be defeated. But when it comes back again, you realize that the many diverse cells in your body—which were designed to work cooperatively to keep the whole body alive—are becoming confused. They are heeding the siren call of cells that want to re-shape the body to be just one thing: their own kind, and no other. When there is no room for diversity, that is cancer.

In the "logic" of cancer cells, the whole does (or should) look just like them, and they use every trick in their power to make it so—including gaining the cooperation of non-cancerous cells that get fooled into thinking they are supporting some system that is important to the body, unaware that they are supporting a cancer that will kill the body.

There are some oncologists who suggest that we shouldn't try to root out cancer. Instead, we should just try to contain it. Let the cancer have its little corner of the body where it can survive. Respect its need to be a part of the body. Trouble is, that respect is not mutual. It only flows one way. Cancerous cells won't return the favor. They don't want to be a part of the body—they want to take over the body and remake it in their own narrow image. To hell with diversity.

I have woken up to find a cancer in my

life again, and I have been distressed almost beyond words.

I was a couple of years shy of 30 at the time, and I had been a fundamentalist Christian since my conversion at the age of 14. A visit to a church friend's house introduced me to a radical right-wing newspaper. I found the points of view expressed in this newspaper new and interesting. It was a conservative voice, like what I was used to hearing, but it was also different somehow. I was intrigued.

When I returned home, I ordered my own copy of the paper and read avidly. It carried ads for pamphlets, magazines and books that I could buy, which I eventually did. One time I was surprised when something appeared in my mailbox in a plain brown wrapper with no return address. I was even more surprised when I opened the wrapper and saw that it was one of the pamphlets I'd ordered—and the sender was the American Nazi Party. I was surprised, but not deterred. I kept reading.

After a couple of years exploring the radical right, I wondered what the radical left had to say. So I began reading the literature of the communists. (My FBI file must be a real scream!) I soon learned two things. First, the far right and the far left identified what's wrong with the world in different ways that didn't seem to me to intersect a lot. Second, despite this, they pretty much sounded alike. Oh, sure, they chose different bogey men to blame for everything they saw as wrong. But if you looked past that, it sounded pretty much the same. In choosing between them, I realized, I would only be choosing which bogeymen to believe in. Not between different ways of behaving, but only between different justifications of and targets for that behavior.

So I decided to explore a third path: I had spent my adolescence and early adulthood emmeshed in right-wing and, more recently, left-wing thought worlds. Why not see what

mainstream America was really like—on its own terms, not the terms mediated to me by the right or the left? I enrolled in a night class in political science at our local college.

Today, to my very liberal friends I appear pretty darned conservative; to my very conservative friends, I'm way too liberal. So I guess I'm in an OK place. Which is why the election in November is so upsetting to me. While I am in an OK place, America most definitely is not. It's like waking up one day to find out that a cancer you thought you'd put behind you has returned.

The social and political—and religious—mechanisms that have honored diversity in our body politic and kept hate speech and violence more or less in check have been breached, just as cancer cells override the mechanisms that are designed to regulate and protect the diversity of cells in our bodies. And just as the normal cells in the liver and lungs and bone and brain are fooled into lending their support to cancer cells metastasizing to those locations, normal, hard-working, conservative Americans have been fooled into thinking they are supporting something that is important to the body politic, unaware that they are supporting a cancer that will kill the body if allowed to grow.

For me, this is a recurrence, and it drives a spike of bitterly cold fear into my soul, because I learned two things from my engagement with the radical right. I learned the power of loving your country passionately. And I learned the value of taking pride in my race. But what is happening in my country right now, and among members of my race, do justice to the best qualities of neither of them.

I am scared—really, really afraid. It would be so easy to just try to keep my head down, lose myself in the masses and hope I survive it all. But I can't do that.

I can't do that because when I was a very

sick 5-year-old left by the white nurses to go hungry and pee myself in my hospital bed because they wouldn't come help me because they were afraid of catching what I had, it was a young black nurse who wound up taking over my care and helping me survive my illness—despite the fact that she was afraid, too.

I can't do that because of my son's closest friends, when he was younger—Cyrus, a Muslim and Josh, a Jew—and the night we three mothers and our sons shared food and laughter at Manaja's house.

I can't do that because of the woman who helped me realize early-on that I might have IBC—the first person to save my life. She is a lesbian.

I can't do that because of Jan and Herman and Julian and Don, who despite being terrifying (to me) doctors nevertheless saved me from dying—all Jewish.

I can't do that because of Alice, a Jewish friend who fixed my sobbing helplessness as I faced chemo-induced baldness by taking me out and buying a wig for me, then organized my care when I had surgery.

I can't do that because in my old age, my extended Anglo-Saxon family has become multi-hued with Vietnamese and Mexican and Japanese mixed in—and most recently, someone who is black.

I can't do that because of my nephew Jason—a veteran and a cop who puts his life on the line every day. He is brave, and I have to be brave, too, no matter how scared I am.

I can't do that, because I want my body, the bodies of my friends and family, and the body politic of my nation to be cancer free. We are facing an ugly metastasis, but if the "normal cells" of our nation mobilize, it may not be too late, yet, to prevent the death of the patient.

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

SISTER

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that Julie was intrigued with our story. Most people go to the records office to find marriage licenses, but this..... This was an exciting story, a real research project! Julie, researcher extraordinaire, knew where to look.

With the help of Ancestry.com and her other inside genealogy services within the records office, she discovered.... Lesley.

If this was the right information, Lesley is my sister. She has two children, now in their 30s, and one of them has two young sons. The trail kept growing and changing with new discoveries of Marjorie's and Lesley's moves, marriages, divorces and...deaths. Uh oh. Turns out Marjorie and her husband both died in the late 90s. Sadly, our original quest had come to an end. But perhaps there was another reason to continue. Lesley.

The next morning, Saturday 30 December, Julie called me at home. She said she hoped I didn't mind, but she was fascinated by my story and had continued the research on her own time. What joy! She thought she had found Lesley, living in Stratford (Yep, my birthplace; what an amazing coincidence). Julie cautioned me that it could be the wrong trail, a different Lesley, since she'd had to make assumptions. She wisely advised me to "Tread carefully if you contact her; she may not know about you."

My husband, Mike, didn't waste time. He searched for her on Facebook and sent a message. We waited at least an hour for a response. Nothing happened. Wait a minute! She lives in Stratford, which is only 20 minutes down the road.

Mike wrote a letter stating he was an American, married to an English lady whose mother was Marjorie Jacques and we believe she, Lesley, is her other daughter. He hoped this didn't come as too much of a shock, as we didn't know if she even knew about me. We were going to be in England until January 4, but would understand if this was too much and too soon for her to contact us. We included Mum's address and telephone number, just in case.

Lesley wasn't home, her house was dark and mail was already stuffed in the letterbox. Mike's letter sat squished between the electric bill and the newspaper.

Would we hear from her?

Mum, Mike and I had a wonderful New Year's Eve celebrating together.

On the afternoon of January 1, 2013, I was visiting a neighbor and Mike came running over, saying "Come quickly, your sister is on the phone!!!"

With trepidation, excitement and a racing heart, I picked up the phone.

Lesley and I talked for an hour. We cried, we laughed, and we kept saying, "Is this real, we hardly believe it." Apparently, she'd been looking for me since her own first daughter was born, which was the time when Marjorie told her about me. Lesley was sad. "You gave away my sister?" she questioned her mother.

Lesley had posted on bulletin boards, FriendsReunited.com, GenesReunited.com, and tried to research on her own, but couldn't get the information because the office wouldn't give her my adopted name of Judith Mary Sherman. Sherry Jacques didn't exist anymore.

When Lesley opened Mike's letter, after returning from a Christmas trip, she couldn't believe it. "Oh my God, oh my God, look my sister found me," she cried out.

Lesley and I spent two days together, chatting, laughing, and learning about our backgrounds. We don't really look alike although noses and mouths have some similarities. I heard about her daughters and grandsons. So now I'm an Aunt and Great Aunt too! Lesley adored Mum and got along magnificently with Mike. We have had many happy times.

That was nearly four years ago. We talk on the phone, we email, Skype, and visit every time I get back to England. I've had wonderful visits with her daughters and we get along very well. When Mum celebrated her 100th birthday they joined us, along with Julie, who had been so instrumental in connecting us.

I don't know what 2017 will bring, and hope it's just as wonderful as the events of January 2013.

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