

## When “Giving Up Hope” is the right thing to do

by Brenda Denzler

You might think that with my cancer diagnosis I learned a lot about holding onto hope, the power of “positive thinking” to effect a cure, and all of the other popular rhetoric that surrounds having cancer. The truth is I have learned a lot more about hope from the examples of my mother and my friends in Cancer Land.

My mother fell into her first “black hole” shortly after I had received my diagnosis. She’d had severe back pain for a long time that couldn’t be traced and was not well controlled, so Mom’s new back specialist in a big-city clinic decided she needed a more powerful pain pill.

This new doctor apparently didn’t consult Mom’s medical history. At least, that’s what I choose to believe; the thought that she might have deliberately ignored it would make me too angry. The medication being prescribed (my family now knows) is not supposed to be used on people with compromised liver function or those who are over 65. Mom was both.

Within days of beginning the new pain control regimen, Mom lapsed into a coma late one night. Fortunately, my father chanced to check on her before he went to bed, and he found her unresponsive. Excellent care at their local, small-town hospital saved her. The diagnosis: hepatic encephalopathy, which is a fancy way of saying that her liver was failing. The liver was not cleaning her blood properly, leading to a build-up of ammonia, which in turn led to disorientation, progressing to coma and, if untreated, resulting in death.

The worst news was that her liver had

been irreparably damaged by the pain pills. There was no turning back the clock. From now on, she would have to take a medication that would help clear the ammonia from her system. Unfortunately, its major side effect is to make you more or less incontinent. This was to be her “new normal,” and it was, to put it mildly, no fun.

For the next four years Mom was tied to this drug. At first it was worth the trouble. It kept her lucid and able to participate in life, and the incontinence was somewhat manageable.

However, the medication was a band aid, not a cure. The times when Mom would slip into another black hole came closer and closer together as the years passed. My father learned to recognize the signs and take steps to pull her back from the brink. A couple of times, though, she still lapsed into a coma so deep that the doctor thought she wouldn’t emerge.

Each time she came out of it, it was to a quality of life that was even more diminished than before. It took more and more medication to try to clean her blood, which caused more intense side effects, which thus narrowed the range of daily life activities that she could do.

In the last year of her life, she and Dad visited me here in NC. Dad always sleeps in, so Mom and I had chances to talk just between us in the morning over our coffee. She confessed that she was tired and wanted to quit taking the drug that was keeping her alive. She was becoming a burden to my father, she said in a choked voice, and she was tired of not being able to go places and do things if she took her medicine because of the need to stay

within a few feet of a bathroom. If she didn’t take the medicine, so that she could go to the grocery store or my brother’s house or maybe even to NC, it was sure to result in another black hole incident—and that was difficult and scary for both of them. She was ready to die, she said. She was tired of fighting. I told her I’d support her in whatever she chose to do, but for a time she kept on trying to live. It seemed like that’s what everyone expected her to do, and so she did.

Then they found a mass in her liver, and it didn’t look good. It was about this time of year in 2013 when she finally made the choice. Mom decided to go into hospice. She gave up hope, and we all gave up hope with her.

Now, the hospice literature is big on saying that choosing hospice is not about giving up hope. This has always rankled me. It strikes me as disingenuous, at best, and a slimy public relations ploy at worst.

Of course entering hospice is about giving up hope! It’s about giving up hope that is no longer realistic to hold onto and embracing an alternative hope that is more realistic. It’s about facing reality with dignity and compassion.

My mother and my family gave up the hope that she could live well and comfortably into an indefinite future. We gave up the hope that she would live to see the birth of her eighth great-grandchild. We gave up the hope that we could keep on delaying her death.

In place of these unrealistic hopes, we embraced a hope that was far more reasonable: that Mom could have a good and peaceful death at home, surrounded by people who loved and cared about her. The folks at hospice

helped us make sure that this hope was not in vain. She died three or four months later, just three weeks before my grandson was born. Still, it was a good death, insofar as any death can be considered good. We have no regrets.

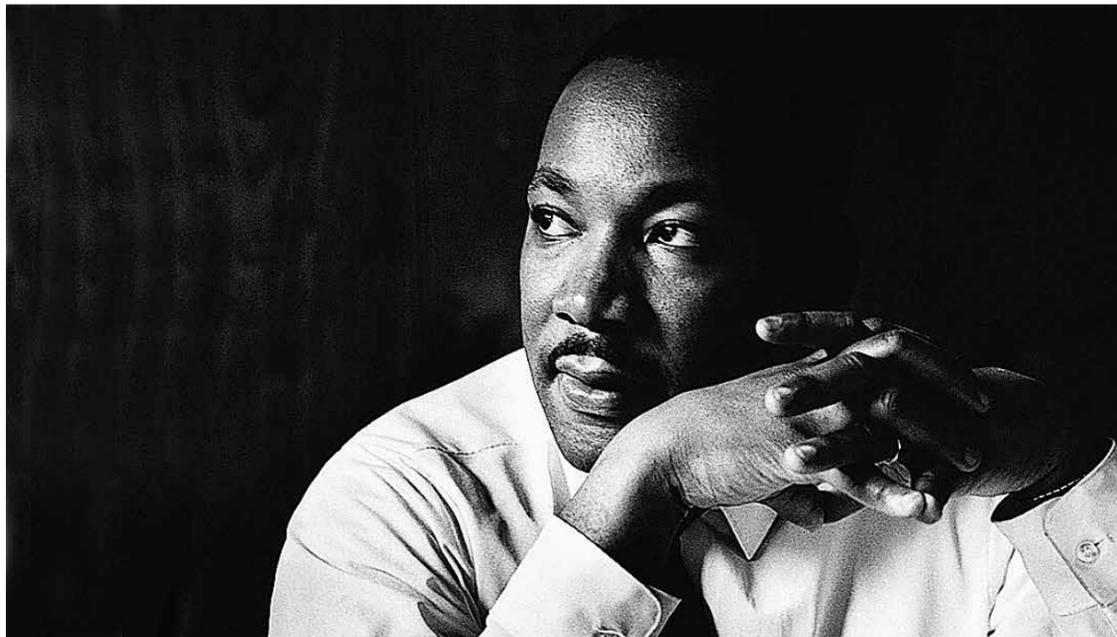
Yesterday I had brunch with a friend. Her Stage IV inflammatory breast cancer is winning its battle against her healthy cells, and modern medicine has run out of options for her. She has decided to stop treatment and prepare to enter hospice.

You might think this means she is just lying down and dying, but that is not the case. Before she becomes too ill, she is going through some of her personal effects and trying to clear out some things, she’s visiting her beloved wildcat refuge again, she’s planning to go to the beach with her sister one more time, and she’s preparing her car for sale. After she passes, she’s decided that her body will go to the UNC School of Medicine so students can learn about human anatomy.

You might think this was a maudlin and weepy brunch, but it was not. It was sober at times, sure. But we also chatted lightheartedly, we laughed a bit, we reflected....

THIS, my friends, is hope. This is what hope looks like when it has feet—when it gets traction in a person’s life. My mother knew it. My friend knows it. I hope, when my time comes, that I will know it, too.

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



## Remarks observing MLK Day and Black History Month

by James Crawford

Dr. Martin Luther King wanted America to understand itself. He knew that it was tormented by something more powerful and pernicious than simple racism—the personal prejudice against people whose skin, eyes, and hair were different than one’s own.

King battled white supremacy.

He knew it had to be removed from our lives, root and branch. But the roots run deep into our history, and little progress would be made unless all Americans understood how fundamental white supremacy was in the foundation of American society.

In 1609, English ecclesiastical and common law forbade the enslavement of Christians. It also held that the condition of slavery was not a heritable condition, residing in the parent but not the child.

The colonial legislature and court of Virginia changed the law so that 1) Christians could be enslaved; and 2) a child inherited the legal status of slave from its mother. This is a very important change: White slaveholders who forced slave women to bear their children

held and sold their own blood as slaves. We need to think about this. Hold that notion in your mind for a minute. Understand its monstrous moral implications.

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence listed the institution of slavery as one of the abuses of the British Crown. His generation saw the moral failing, but white supremacy was already too strong. He was forced to cut the denunciation out of our foundational document. But he understood.

Eight decades later, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged that the Civil War was divine punishment for the injustice of slavery. His second inaugural address confronted the moral dilemma squarely, and he regarded north and south equally responsible. He understood.

Lincoln’s generation amended the Constitution three times with the explicit purpose of correcting the injustice of white supremacy. However, white supremacists cleverly crafted Jim Crow laws, poll tax and literacy requirements for voting, and grandfather clauses to lock out black citizens. Justice John Marshall Harlan, himself a former Kentucky slave-holder, dissented when the Plessy and Civil Rights cases came before the Supreme

Court. He understood that white supremacy created an unfree condition for millions.

In the twentieth century, the NAACP and allied groups struggled mightily to undo the legal injustices, and they were largely successful under leaders like Dr. King. They understood.

But here in the twenty-first century, much remains to be done. Equal employment, education, health care, criminal justice — all social issues before us still bear the mark of white supremacy and its ongoing legacy of pain and alienation.

My goal in saying these things is not to foster white guilt, but to promote understanding of our past. Only an accurate diagnosis of the problem will give us the wisdom and moral clarity for grasping and holding the solution. We must understand white supremacy, so that we can undo its generational damage.

Peace be upon you. Work for justice.

*James Crawford, Chair, Chatham County Board of Commissioners, delivered these remarks at Jordan-Matthews High School.*