

Medical PTSD

by Brenda Denzler

I was sitting in the hospital's basement, waiting for the radioactive tracer the nurse had injected into my veins to make its way through my body. Then, I'd be taken to a room down the dimly lit hallway, where I would be laid out on a hard table and an enormous camera would take innumerable pictures, creating images from the radioactive glow emanating from cancerous sites where the tracer had accumulated. Two weeks and an eternity earlier, I had been diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer—IBC. We were trying to see how far it had progressed.

As I sat there with my thoughts and my fears, trying to keep a stiff upper lip and do what had to be done, I heard a murmur of voices coming from one of the rooms, then a child's voice, tired and pleading.

"No more! Please! I don't want any more!" the child wailed. More murmuring adult voices. "No! No!" whimpered the child. And the door was closed.

My eyes welled with tears as my throat tightened and I fought for self-control, my stiff upper lip hopelessly compromised. I knew exactly what that child was feeling, because a child just like him lived within me. I had met her only a few days earlier. It had been all I could do, since then, to find a way to live as both a 56-year-old woman and that little girl whose voice I could no longer fail to hear.

It used to be such a short, easy story to tell.

"When I was 5 years old, I got infectious hepatitis. I was in the hospital in isolation for six weeks. The nursing staff was afraid of me because I was so infectious. When my parents found out how badly I was being neglected, they threw a fit, and it got better after that.

"At one point my liver and kidneys were shutting down and fluid was accumulating in my abdomen. The doctor said I was drowning in my own body fluids and would die overnight if something wasn't done. He took me down the hall and 'tapped' my stomach to drain the fluid. Miraculously enough, I survived, even though the doctor hadn't thought I would."

For 51 years, this breezy, dispassionate little narrative was the only story I knew—or at least, the only one I knew consciously.

I had gotten my first unmistakable hint that there was more to the story 20 years earlier, when I had to have surgery. Fear and anxieties so intense that they bordered on hysteria emerged from caverns of my soul that I didn't know existed. As soon as the surgery was behind me, I was able to push all of them back into those dark recesses, where I did my best to ignore them.

Until cancer.

Most people are terrified when they hear they have cancer, and I was certainly no different. My terror, however, was almost literally overwhelming because it was doubled. I was 100 percent afraid of the cancer. Unlike most other cancer patients, I was almost as afraid of my doctors—the people I knew I had to rely on if I hoped to live. I was 99 percent afraid of them. The cancer was more terrifying—but not by much!

To most normal people, this doesn't make sense. If I was relying on doctors to save me, how could I be terrified and mistrustful of them at the same time? In my rational mind, I know this, and I agree. It makes no sense. What I have learned is that your rational mind doesn't call the shots when you have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and I have it big-time when it comes to medical care.

We're used to thinking about military veterans having PTSD (a/k/a "shell shock"). But we've learned that victims of other kinds of violence can also suffer from PTSD. Violent, potentially life-threatening events like assaults or even hurricanes are easily characterized as "evil." It's not very hard to understand how those on the receiving end of them could be permanently traumatized in some way.

The idea that people can suffer from PTSD after being patients is a bit harder to grasp. After all, the medical system's intent is not violence but healing—doing good and not evil. Right? Still, it happens.

Much of what we know about medical PTSD comes from studies of a new breed of patient: adult survivors of childhood cancers. From 12 to 20 percent of these long-term survivors have some sort of ongoing stress disorder due to their treatment, according to research done at the University of Pennsylvania. Often the emotions associated with these experiences go unrecognized, even for decades. But they do not vanish. Instead, they grow stronger with time and tend to erupt unexpectedly. Just as they did for me.

Note that I am talking about "disorder" here. Medical PTSD is not the same as being

anxious or stressed-out.

"Anxious" is when I have to get a root canal or even just a filling. I don't look forward to it, but I can force myself to do it if I have to, and other than a bit of white-knuckling the armrests on the dentist's chair, I'm more or less in control of myself.

"Disorder" is when you become a sobbing, hysterical mess when your doctor says you need an endoscopy. You are so distraught at the thought of having it done (not what it might show, but just the doing of the test itself and the vulnerability it requires) that they shut down the clinic for two hours while you try to compose yourself. To be safe, they call in emergency back-up in case you totally lose touch with reality and become a danger to yourself or others.

Back in 1959, children in hospitals were treated pretty much like inconveniently small adults rather than like the children that we were. Some of us with life-threatening illnesses who survived as a result of the care we received have lived our whole lives with the psychological fall-out from those experiences. It's the price we have paid for being alive at all.

Given the alternative, I suppose it's a price worth paying (knowingly or not) every day for half a century...but it is a steep, steep price, and I find myself wearying of it all. Like the little boy who was crying in the imaging room down the hall, I don't want any more. Please, no more.

I don't know where all the rest of you are, out there, but I suspect I am not alone.

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

DREAMS

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and channelizing were not bad enough, until the passage of the Clean Water Act, it was generally regarded that the solution to pollution was dilution, so we purposely dumped our harmful toxins straight into the rivers and

added chlorine to our waste water treatment systems to kill off pathogens and in the process have killed off most of our native mussel fauna.

So, taking my love of Nature and paddling and my concern for what I have learned that we are doing to the planet, I started my first canoe and kayak company. I am not a business person even though I own two nature-oriented businesses, one in North Carolina and one in Alaska. Actually, I used to dislike the idea of being a business person, but then I realized it was not about making money. A business can be all about who you are, what you value and how you want to spend your

time. It is really an art form because it takes your creative energy and envisioning to make it work. It builds character and can make you a better person. It demands that you are trusting of others and have a can-do attitude. It also demands that you forgive others when they do not meet your expectations, and yourself when you fall short.

Being a successful business person is a lot different than starting a business. Perhaps the hardest thing to realize is that even though you are passionate about what you offer, it is not about you. It is all about what your customer wants. I used to think people wanted to

go canoeing or kayaking. Some do; however, most just want to get out into Nature doing something that appears to be fun. So, I see it as my responsibility to share what I have learned in the hope that others will want to make the earth a healthier, better place both now and for those not yet born.

Joe Jacob, a Chatham resident for more than 30 years and a marine biologist by training, is president The Haw River Canoe & Kayak Co., www.hawrivercanoe.com, 336.260.6465. He worked for The Nature Conservancy for 20 years and served as Director of Science for TNC's Southeast Region.

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