

A Little Deception

It's that time of year to get into the giving mode. Have you made a list of all the contributions you made this year? Have you categorized them? Do you find that you have favorite categories? Are they SPCA, the environment, a special disease, children, the aged? I'm a sucker for any appeal with the word "cancer" in it. They get my money. Almost any cancer, especially those hitting children gets an immediate check. I am a breast cancer survivor. I have come face to face with my mortality and I am humbled.

A friend asked me for help for a friend who had just had a mastectomy and was really upset. Would I send her an e-mail that might get her through the next stage of breast cancer? She was shopping for a doctor to give her the necessary chemotherapy. Why was she shopping? Didn't she have a surgeon who would refer her to a good oncologist? Where was her family? Did she have no one to support her during this trying time? How was she to go through the process without the deepening depression, the denial, the revelation that she truly had cancer?

Breast cancer awareness has risen exponentially in the last 10 years. Mention to women that you're a survivor and 3 out of 10 of them will say, "So am I". Most often we just smile at each other. We do need to say the words out loud so that we don't forget. This has to be tempered with not dwelling on survivorship but going on with life. People mean well and react in different ways. There is the sad look, the one you don't want to see. Women, especially, will give you a "thumbs up" and that's the encouragement you need.

I come from a family of five girls, no brothers. One sister died at age 37, in 1970. She had breast cancer and its metastases for five years. In those days, science didn't handle women's medical problems too well including cancer.

In 1972, another sister was diagnosed with another form of breast cancer, an encapsulated one. She has survived for 30 years, one breasted, scarred from surgery, using this scarring as her badge of courage.

In 1998, I was diagnosed with breast cancer after having religiously attending to mammograms and twice a year visits to a breast surgeon. Two previous biopsies on two breasts showed atypical cells. The last biopsy was a sort of "Bingo". It finally arrived. What a surprise! The rest is sort of mundane.

The common practice among the survivors I've met is to ask the polite questions about chemo and radiation, Tamoxifen or another drug, and how long has it been. I've never been to a support group because I don't want to hear that someone is near the end of her life. I have to save my tears for another day. It takes a lot of energy on a daily basis to stay on an even keel. I am so afraid that I'll meet my sister in the guise of another 30-ish woman and my heart will break for both of them

My first AVON Walk for Breast Cancer was in the year 2000. My two daughters were there to support me through the training and the walk for the three day 60 miles. We were going to make an effort for the Cause. During the training I met other survivors. Two in particular, friends, diagnosed within a month of each other, survivors together for five years, close to my age.

I had been on Tamoxifen for 8 months and feeling the annoyance of hot flashes and focusing on these because I was still in some form of shock and so afraid. These women asked about my surgery, the chemo, the meds I was taking and then, like beneficent older sisters, quietly told me that it would get better. There was more in what they didn't say. I don't know why this affected me so much. Since that day I have used them as my model. Each time someone comes up to me to ask about my AVON walk, I become those women, assuring, confident. I saw one of them at the Komen Race for the Cure. We didn't have a long conversation.

It's been five years since my life took a 180 degree turn. In the last 7 months, two new cases of breast cancer have come to my attention; my sister-in-law and my sister's friend, both over fifty. They'll have different reactions to becoming a statistic. Their post-mastectomy course of treatment will be different. Most of all, what goes on in their heads will be highly

personal. However we react to this new role, it will be a reflection of who we've always been, just magnified a little. Outgoing or introspective, self-contained or whining, we are what we are.

Now, at the point I thought I had nothing else to say, I met an almost 50 year old woman at the hairdresser's. She's a recent statistic, still hyper, shocky, after having problems with Tamoxifen (a rare reaction). She was delighted to have a listener who understood what she was saying. I had a sense that she needed to feel special, even with the cancer. We have the same wonderful oncologist. That fact bonded us and we will see each other again. It's times like this that my own fear pops up. I recognize them and neatly tuck them away.

A recent e-mail from my friend told me that her friend, the one who was to start chemo, had selected a doctor and was to undergo aggressive chemotherapy and by the end of the second treatment would lose all her hair. Was there nothing else to say or was something lost in translation? I wonder about her. I wonder about the energy expended by the "survivors" to keep going. I wonder at the stamina of our medical caregivers as they see us go through our processes of endurance. We are all compact bundles tied securely in our protective shells. There are setbacks. We handle them the best we can. We rebuild the cocoon and go on.