By: Linda Crill

Like many people who have been though a difficult, life-altering experience, I thought my cancer story was over. Seven years ago my husband Bill was diagnosed with a late-stage cancer from asbestos exposure that is always fatal. In our last eleven months together, we grew closer, bonded by our shared mission of his survival. A lot of healing happened, but we couldn't cure the cancer.

I discovered many valuable lessons about the meaning of life, death, healing and love. Most importantly, I learned to never take life for granted, look for sunshine in the darkest moments and live life fully. This new attitude spurred me to re-invent myself. I learned to motorcycle, downhill ski, ballroom dance and even fly on a trapeze.

For the past three years I have been writing my memoir titled, Blind Curves. I was preparing to publish it this fall, but those plans were disrupted. This past spring, I discovered a lump the size a gumball in my breast. My doctor's office reassured me, stating that 85% of lumps are benign. Dutifully I headed off for a mammography followed several days later with sonogram and stereotactic tissue biopsy.

On May 16th, I awaited the biopsy news in my doctor's office. When the physician's assistant walked into the exam room, I noted her somber expression. "Give me the bottom line," I said. "It's cancer," she replied. "But there is also encouraging news. The cancer appears to be in an early stage, and it's hormone receptive."

My 26-year old daughter Lindsey was waiting in the lobby. She already had lost her father to cancer. How was I going to tell her I now had cancer too? I dreaded hurting my children and family with this news more than having the cancer.

When I explained my diagnosis to Lindsey, I was amazed by her response. "Mom, breast cancer isn't like mesothelioma or ovarian cancer. It's well researched and treatment protocols are well defined. You'll be fine six months from now." I had forgotten that she had formerly worked for the National Alliance of Ovarian Cancer. She was right. The word "cancer" scares most of us, but not all cancers are alike.

As I reviewed my options for surgery and treatment, I realized my good fortune. First, we live in an area with world-famous hospitals, cancer research facilities and doctors. Secondly, my health insurance would pick up most expenses after the deductibles and co-pays reach their maximums. Many people have no insurance and in some areas of the world there is little or no medical help for people with limited means. After seeking a second opinion and comparing options, I chose Johns Hopkins Avon Foundation Breast Center in Baltimore because I preferred their integrated approach and focus on client service. During my first visit with Dr. Tsangaris and the Administrative Director, Lillie Shockney, I was relieved to replace my fear of this disease with knowledge.

I was surprised to learn that:

- **This cancer had probably been in my body for 2-10 years.**
- **Even though I had annual mammographies, cancer cells don't show up on these digital images until they become a dense mass.**
- **My body had decided that if it couldn't eliminate the cancer cells that it would encapsulate them inside a tumor.**
- **The tumor may have been formed in as little as 1-2 weeks.**
- **There are many kinds of breast cancer and mine was non-aggressive.**
- **Researched indicates that a lumpectomy is as effective as a mastectomy for my kind of cancer.**

I wanted the surgery scheduled as quickly as possible, but the surgeon reassured me that we could wait until fall and not change my chances of survival. Somehow, I had envisioned these cancer cells multiplying rapidly and spreading throughout my body. It was clear I had a lot to learn.

As I shared my news with family and friends, I was deeply touched by the many offers of help and support. I realized this is not a journey I needed to do alone.

In June, I had breast cancer surgery. Fortunately the postsurgical biopsy verified that the cancer been contained and removed with safe margins. Since no cancer had been found in the sentinel lymph node, no chemotherapy would be required. I breathed my first real sigh of relief. My cancer remained Stage I. In August, I completed 16 radiation treatments and met with a medical oncologist about next steps.

All of us experience an "Endless Waiting Game" on our cancer journey. First it's waiting for results of the mammography, then the sonogram, followed by the pathology report from a needle biopsy. There's the surgery and waiting for the post-surgery biopsy. And now, even though I'm told I am cancer free, there's the significance of each cancer-free anniversary: 1 year, 5 years, and 7 years with their associated meanings. Cancer survivors never get completely free of this "Endless Wait Game." There is no guarantee of safety to erase our fears. Our only choice is how we choose to live each day.

I have seen cancer at its scariest, when there is no medical solution that's effective and a miracle is the only hope. And now I've experienced my own cancer story that holds promise for a long healthy life. Everyone's cancer journey is different. What we share is that we all have been reminded of the preciousness of life and appreciating it.

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