FINDING THE LIGHT IN CANCER'S SHADOW

Lynn Eib

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Finding the Light in Cancer's Shadow

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Note from the author: To protect the privacy of certain patients and their family members, some names and other details have been altered.

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"If you or someone you love is struggling with the fear and uncertainty of living in cancer's shadow, here's your flashlight."

DAVE DRAVECKY (desmoid cancer survivor since 1988)
Dave Dravecky's Outreach of Hope Ministry
Colorado Springs, Colorado

"Our life was forever changed when we each received a cancer diagnosis, but this change has not necessarily been for the worse. Both of us have experienced the necessity of reordering our lives around new priorities. The stories in *Finding the Light in Cancer's Shadow* are *our* stories. Relying on a faith community for support, finding joy in each day, believing that we are 'survivors,' and trusting God in all things are hallmarks of the experience of living in cancer's shadow. We commend Lynn Eib for her powerful collection of witnesses to hope."

GEORGE GALLUP (prostate cancer survivor since 1993)
KINGSLEY GALLUP (breast cancer survivor since 1999)
The George H. Gallup International Institute
Princeton, New Jersey

"Anxieties about cancer don't end after treatment. No one knows that better than cancer survivor and patient advocate Lynn Eib. She has written a much-needed resource for those living in the shadow of this life-threatening disease."

HAROLD G. KOENIG, MD
Professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences
Founder and co-director, Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

"As a family physician who has cared for and walked alongside cancer patients for almost thirty years, I am always on the lookout for resources that bring hope and increase faith in the midst of the despair of this devastating diagnosis. This book is not only one that brought me peace and comfort to read but will be one I can enthusiastically recommend to my patients—and to you."

WALT LARIMORE, MD
***Family physician, medical journalist, and best-selling author of* God's Design for the Highly Healthy Person**

"This extraordinary book is inspirational, uplifting, and comforting to anyone facing a cancer diagnosis and to those ministering to them. Lynn remains steadfast and faithful as she shares her gift of bonding with humanity, while always trusting God's will."

JANE E. RICE (breast cancer survivor since 1990)
Vice president, public relations
Utz Quality Foods, Inc.
Hanover, Pennsylvania

"Lynn Eib brings her unique blend of credibility, personal vulnerability, and clinical perspective to help patients and caregivers struggling to find meaning and hope in the midst of cancer. Her book addresses the practical questions that cancer brings and discusses the issues plainly and without jargon. Yet *Finding the Light in Cancer's Shadow* is much more than a practical manual of how to deal with this disease. Lynn points the way out of the trap of 'cured vs. not-cured' to a freedom and peace based on faith in the One who is finally bigger than cancer."

PETER G. RUEHLMAN, MD
Medical oncologist
Cincinnati, Ohio

DEDICATION

This book is lovingly dedicated
to my parents,
Robert and Gaynor Yoxtheimer,
with much thanks
for first showing me the light;
and to my brother,
Jim,
with much joy
for our walk together in the light.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I used to say "I could never write a book," and here you are holding a copy of my *second* book. I will never cease to be amazed at God's ability to do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20, NIV).

I would like to say THANK YOU:

To the love of my life, my husband, Ralph, whose encouragement and prayers keep enabling me to be all that God meant me to be.

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INTRODUCTION: SLIDING ON BLACK ICE

Have you ever been driving down the road when all of a sudden you hit a patch of "black ice"? If you live in a climate that experiences true winter, you know exactly what I mean.

You're cruising merrily along on bare pavement one minute and sliding down the road the next instant. You're on black ice—a covering of ice so thin that the dark pavement still shows through. If you apply the brakes, they do nothing to stop your vehicle. Instead you just keep sliding, maybe even sideways, until you find something *bigger* than you to stop your slide!

When I was diagnosed with metastatic colon cancer in 1990 at the age of thirty-six, I felt as if I had hit a huge patch of black ice. I had been going merrily along in life—happily married to my pastor-husband and enjoying our three daughters, then eight, ten, and twelve. I loved my career as a newspaper reporter and even found time to exercise regularly at the local Y.

I consider myself an organized, well-prepared person, but . . . I never saw the black ice of cancer ahead of me.

It took me so by surprise that I couldn't even think how to react.

I tapped the brakes and nothing happened. I still had cancer.

I pressed a little harder on the brakes, and I found out the cancer had spread to my lymph nodes.

> I slammed on the brakes only to learn that the odds I would survive were less than the odds I wouldn't.

I was sliding sideways, out of control, and it was the scariest time of my life. Thankfully, I didn't crash, but I did find something bigger than me to stop my slide.

Actually Someone.

I slid right into the big, open arms of a loving God, and He assured me that He had seen the black ice coming and was waiting all along to stop my slide. I prayed He would just make the black ice disappear so I could be carefree once again, but He didn't. So I continued riding on the thin layer of black ice through surgery and six months of weekly chemotherapy, which included having to endure a drug to which I was allergic.

Eventually the ice melted and I started driving along again, although it wasn't quite as merrily, because once you've hit a really big, really bad patch of black ice, you never forget it. You're a little afraid you're going to hit another patch and pretty paranoid that every black shadow on the road just *might* be some more ice—even if it's summer!

Once I finished my treatments, I was relieved not to be on black ice anymore, but now it seemed as if the disease was a shadow hanging over my life as I wondered and worried when and if it might return. I felt a little like the Peanuts cartoon character Pigpen—you know, the poor guy who always had a big cloud of black dust following him wherever he went!

That's what this book is about: living in the shadow of cancer. I've written it for the nearly *10 million of us* (and our families) who have heard the words "you have cancer," have finished our recommended treatment, and now must try to return to life-after-a-cancer-

diagnosis. Some of us have been told the cancer is gone; others may be in a remission wondering how long it will last. Still others may know the illness is a chronic condition that will require treatment again.

Whatever kind of shadow we're under, I believe it is possible to find the light. And I don't think we have to wait until we've reached the "magic five-year mark" or until we are pronounced officially cured or until we get a durable remission. I believe we can find the light every single day, hour, and minute we live as cancer survivors.

To me, being a cancer survivor can mean living cancer-free, living in remission, or living with the disease. The common factor is that we are *living* and therefore are survivors!

One of the strange things about a cancer diagnosis is that often it can be *more* difficult to live as a cancer survivor *after* treatment than during it—not the physical part of dealing with cancer, but the emotional and spiritual sides of it.

I was definitely not prepared for this in my cancer journey. I thought when I finished surgery and chemo, I would be deliriously happy and cancer would be a distant memory. I was pretty joyful—until I saw the shadow lurking over me. My oncologist told me that even though my cancer had been successfully removed through surgery, there was a high probability it would recur because it had spread to several lymph nodes. At the time I completed chemo in early 1991, there was no approved drug regimen for colon cancer other than the one I already had used. There were absolutely no approved drugs for recurrent colon cancer, and procedures such as liver and lung resections for spread colon cancer were extremely rare. I had had my one and only shot at being cured.

"If the cancer does comes back, it probably will come back within two years and you will die very quickly," my doctor told me.

Now that's one nasty shadow.

I tried various methods to get rid of cancer's shadow. I closed my eyes very tightly: *I don't see any shadow.* But it was very hard to go through a normal day with my eyes closed.

I got very busy. *The shadow won't be able to catch up with me*. But shadows are much faster than I realized.

I thought positive. *That's not a shadow. It's a big, happy, black balloon!* But it sure was dark under there.

I had so many questions swirling around my mind, and each one made the shadow seem more menacing: *When do I know I'm a survivor? How do I turn off that little voice of fear? Do I positively have to stay positive?* And the really big one: *Will the cancer come back?*

What I've learned over the years is that there are answers to those hard questions, and when we know those answers, we can find the light in cancer's shadow. I've experienced it in my own life and have seen hundreds of other cancer survivors and their loved ones discover it too.

That's because in 1996 my cancer journey took another turn. My oncologist, Dr. Marc Hirsh, offered me a job as a patient advocate, providing emotional and spiritual support to his cancer patients and their caregivers. I now look at my job as getting in the car with *other* people who are driving and sliding on black ice.

You're probably thinking: *Who would want a job like that?* That's what I would have said too, six years earlier when I was first diagnosed with cancer. But in those intervening years, God slowly had given me a desire to reach out to those with cancer. Actually, I had been praying I could quit my public-relations job and *volunteer* to work with cancer patients, but I knew that wasn't financially feasible with college looming for our daughters.

As you can imagine, I was pretty excited when Marc offered to

pay me for something I had been praying about doing for free! He and his wife, Elizabeth, had become close friends of ours in the years since my diagnosis, and he often sent his patients to the prayer support group for cancer patients that I had founded in the fall of 1991. Marc said he offered me the job as patient advocate because he could see the calling of God on my life.

Now that's a scary phrase: "the calling of God."

I just wanted to encourage cancer patients and help them believe God could meet their deepest needs. I hadn't thought about actually getting into the car with them while they were sliding on black ice!

But that's what I do every workday in Marc's office. It's a really unusual arrangement—perhaps even unique in this country—to have someone like me right in the office to listen, talk, pray, and encourage those facing cancer. Marc, a Messianic Jew, and I have spoken about faith and medicine at medical conferences all around the country and have yet to meet another physician who employs someone with a job like mine.

As I write this, I have met nearly 1,500 newly diagnosed cancer patients in our office. I've had hundreds more attend my biweekly support group (which I've discovered is one of the oldest—if not *the* oldest—continuously meeting faith-based cancer support group in the country). Through e-mails, calls, and letters, I've also "met" scores of cancer patients who read my first book, *When God & Cancer Meet*. If there were an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records for having the most friends and acquaintances with cancer, I would definitely be in the running!

Chances are that you and I probably will never meet, but I'd like to offer to get in the car with you as you anxiously survey the shadows on the road for black ice or furtively glance in your rearview mirror to see what's following you. Don't worry, I'm not going to try to

drive. I'll just buckle up as we ride together, and I'll help you hear from the One who does know how to navigate on this often treacherous journey.

Just the other day my youngest daughter, Lindsey, told me that she was driving in a snowstorm with a friend. She started sliding on some ice and was really frightened. Her natural reaction was to slam on the brakes or jerk the steering wheel the other way. But her friend kept calmly reminding her of truths like "turn into the skid" and "just tap the brakes." They arrived at their destination safely, and she was so thankful he was in the car with her.

I don't know exactly where you or your loved one is along your cancer journey. Maybe you've been blindsided fairly recently by the black ice of cancer. Maybe you're still slamming on the brakes trying to believe it isn't so. Perhaps you're scared because you can't steer the way you want to go. Maybe you're waiting for the crash and are half-afraid to open your eyes. Perhaps you see shadows of black ice down every road.

I don't care how big the cancer was, how small your cure odds are, how little time a doctor says you or your loved one has, I have a message for you: God is bigger than cancer and His light is brighter than cancer's shadow.

This book is full of true stories about cancer survivors I know and how I have seen them not only survive, but thrive in the weeks, months, and years since their cancer diagnoses. Nearly all are cancer-free, but all of them are *free-of-cancer.* That's an important distinction.

While there are many things we can do to improve our chances of being cured of cancer, I do not believe there is any way to *guarantee* that outcome. I do, however, believe that all of us living in the shadow of cancer—whether the disease has struck us or a loved

one—can be free of the icy grip it can have over our minds and spirits. Our lives can be filled with peace and hope: free-of-cancer.

I don't think we can ever hear that message too many times. The people I know facing cancer never tire of hearing true, hope-filled stories about others facing this life-threatening disease. I've used their stories to try to answer the questions we cancer survivors most often ask. Hearing their stories reminds us that others have walked a similar path, felt similar emotions, and endured similar sufferings. And most of all, their stories remind us that we don't have to fear the black ice of cancer in our rearview mirror because God wants desperately to show us His power, peace, and presence in the midst of our journeys.

If you already have enough hope and healing in your life, don't bother to read this book. But if you've got questions and would like to find the light in cancer's shadow, then unlock the car door, let me hop in, and keep reading!

CHAPTER 1

So, How Do I Know When I'm a Survivor?

This is a not a book for B.C. (Before Cancer).
And it's not really a book for A.D. (After Diagnosis).
It's a book for A.C.T. (After Cancer Treatment).

It's hope for life after cancer treatment. You or your loved one has survived surgery or chemotherapy or radiation or maybe all three. What do you do now?

You may have been told that the cancer is gone or in remission. You may know what the specific odds are that it will or won't recur. You may even be dealing with a kind of cancer that doctors say probably *will* come back.

So when do you know that you or your loved one is a survivor?

I was diagnosed June 26, 1990, with stage III colon cancer. I still am cancer-free and count myself as a very blessed survivor. Even if the cancer had returned, I would still count myself as a survivor because I agree with the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship when it labels cancer patients as survivors "from the moment of diagnosis and for the balance of life."[1]

I didn't always think that way.

I used to think that you had to live five years after a diagnosis to be called a cancer survivor.

I remember going in for my five-year oncology checkup in the summer of 1995 (before I started working in Marc's office) and gleefully announcing to Marc that I wouldn't be seeing him professionally anymore. (I'm not quite sure how I got that notion, but I hear many others say the same kind of thing. We've probably made that association because statisticians often give data on five-year survival rates for different types of cancer.)

"Where did you get that idea?" Marc responded.

"It's five years; I'm cured!" I told him, surprised that he didn't realize it was such a momentous day.

"Well, the chance the cancer will return has diminished greatly, but you still need to be checked for the rest of your life," Marc soberly explained.

Talk about bursting someone's bubble!

I waited five years to be proclaimed a survivor and there was going to be no such official announcement.

Thankfully, a short time after that day, I read the above-mentioned survivorship definition from the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship and proclaimed myself a survivor. (The National Cancer Institute Office of Cancer Survivorship also says that "an individual is considered a cancer survivor from the time of diagnosis through the balance of his or her life."[2])

So I hope you're not waiting for some mythical five-year mark to earn the label of cancer survivor. If you have survived even one minute since diagnosis, you already are a survivor!

But this hard-earned label of cancer survivor brings with it a sobering reality: We have come face-to-face with a life-threatening disease. And as long as we wear that cancer survivor label, there will be checkups and blood tests and reminders that we are living in cancer's shadow. I believe that we can find the light even in cancer's dark

shadow, but I don't believe it's a once-and-for-all experience that enables us to quickly move out from under this shadow. Rather it's something that we commit ourselves to continue doing for weeks, months, and usually years.

Did you ever sleep with a night-light when you were a little kid? (Maybe you still do as an adult—you don't have to tell me.) Our middle daughter, Bethany, had an insatiable need to sleep with a night-light until she was about eight or nine. She needed that light to reassure her that there were no scary shadows in her bedroom. Her dependence was so strong that when she was a toddler, if the night-light bulb burned out during the night, she would wake up crying. I never figured out how someone with her eyes closed could tell that the night-light wasn't on, but Bethany always could. We joked that she would need to take a night-light on her honeymoon, but eventually she learned to sleep in the dark.

I think cancer survivors are a lot like Bethany was as a little girl. We need constant reassurance that the dark shadows we see—or think we see—aren't going to get us. We want to know that our paranoia is normal, that our fears can be conquered, that it's okay to cry once in a while, and that there isn't any more black ice ahead.

We need to know the night-light is on.

The people you'll meet throughout this book are really quite average cancer survivors. They haven't won seven Tour de France races or accomplished another spectacular feat. They were all amazed when I said I wanted to interview them for this book, and most protested that they don't have it all together. And that's exactly why I picked them. They are real people with real feelings, and you'll be encouraged that if they can find the light, you can too. I met them all through my job as a patient advocate, and most also belong to my Cancer Prayer Support Group. Some have beaten the odds; others

are planning for the future despite the odds. All have found a new appreciation for life.

One of these survivors is my friend Claude. According to statistics, he didn't have much of a chance to survive his cancer diagnosis. The survival statistics on lung cancer are pretty dismal—especially when the tumor is inoperable, which his was.

The grim news came around Memorial Day 2000. Claude had finally kicked a fifty-year addiction to cigarettes and was looking forward to retiring in a few years from his job with a large utilities firm. Like most of us, he was shocked to get the pathology report.

"I felt dead inside," Claude recalls. "I remember the first doctor who said 'lung cancer' to me—it was like he was talking and I could hear his words, but it was as if he were talking to someone else."

Claude, then sixty, looked and felt quite fine. But there it was in black-and-white. The walnut-sized tumor was "poorly differentiated" and too near the heart and aorta for surgery. He agreed to try some chemo and radiation in hopes of shrinking the tumor and buying more time.

"Three different doctors told me to expect to live a year—two years if the treatment went really well," Claude says. "There was no prognosis of a future. They advised me to get my affairs in order."

Claude found himself with extra time after his employer decided he was permanently disabled several months after his diagnosis—despite the fact that Claude had continued to work throughout his "pretty rough" treatments.

The decision turned out to be a blessing in disguise, Claude says, because it allowed him to "retire" three years early. Instead of work-

ing at his job, Claude became a full-time volunteer, participating in community-service projects, organizing ministries at his church, and even traveling to Russia with his wife for a two-week mission trip to share his culture and his faith in the Russian schools.

"My wife and I have had the freedom to come and go and enjoy the things we always wanted to do," Claude explains.

Despite being told initially that he didn't have long to live, Claude says he thought of himself "as a survivor from the very beginning."

He says that his confidence as a survivor was bolstered after a large group of friends gathered around him and prayed for him at his church the week after his diagnosis. He didn't hear an audible voice or see any flash in the sky, but several phrases kept going through his head even as a peace settled in his heart.

"The words I heard in my mind were: 'Trust Me. I am able. Nothing is too difficult for Me,'" Claude says. "I knew in the very depth of my being that God had touched me and I didn't have anything to worry about.

"I just began to walk as a healed man, a healthy man," he adds.

Claude says he moved ahead with his planned medical treatments because he believed God was going to use them to bring about his cure, even though doctors had told him they didn't think a cure was medically possible.

Four years later, his lung cancer has not returned, and Claude insists that his life after lung cancer is "better than my life before."

He credits "good doctors and the good Lord" for healing the lung cancer.

"I have gotten physically stronger day after day and have been spiritually strengthened too," he says. "I appreciate everything around me more every day."

Still, Claude admits that he feels "a little apprehension" at each checkup.

"I never walk in [my oncologist's] office that my blood pressure doesn't go up a little," he says with a laugh. "It's like another moment of truth is here."

My friend Blaine has had a few of his own moments of truth since his diagnosis of stage III esophageal cancer at the age of forty-two in March 2001.

Blaine is one of the healthiest-looking cancer patients I've ever met. He owns his own remodeling company and is an avid golfer. When diagnosed, he could scarcely believe he had cancer.

"I never knew anyone with cancer—I hardly knew what cancer was," he says.

Doctors decided to do neoadjuvant treatment—chemo and radiation before surgery—in hopes of greatly shrinking the tumor in his esophagus, which already had spread to the lymph nodes. Blaine had a continuous infusion pump implanted and got radiation every weekday while chemo pushed silently through his veins.

Many people with similar cancers are forced to get a feeding tube while receiving both chemo and radiation because swallowing can become very difficult. But a month after starting treatment, Blaine had lost only a few pounds and even sampled bowls of spicy beans at a chili cook-off at the nearby county fairgrounds.

In July the surgeon went in to remove the tumor—except there wasn't much of anything to remove. The treatment had worked so well that there was "only a small amount of residual disease," according to the surgeon's notes.

"When I woke up in intensive care, I knew I was a survivor," Blaine recalls.

The successful surgery increased his chances of a cure from about 30 percent to 70 percent, the surgeon told Blaine.

Given a second chance at life, Blaine and his wife, Becky, began to think more about their spiritual life together. "For fourteen years [of marriage] my wife and I discussed whether we should go to this church or that one, but we never did anything about it," Blaine explains. After the cancer diagnosis, they accepted a couple's invitation to a nearby church, became members, and even joined the choir just two months after Blaine's surgery.

Blaine still shakes his head in amazement as he considers how he, who never sang before his esophageal cancer, now looks forward to singing at his church. And despite the fact that every few months he has to have his throat dilated (a stretching procedure to keep it from becoming too tight), he even sings solos at his church. On the first Christmas Eve after his surgery, he sang "O Holy Night" and has sung a solo every year since on that sacred night. He even sings occasionally for our support group parties, and all who listen enjoy the heartfelt enthusiasm he conveys for each song's message.

Every time I read Psalm 40 I think of Blaine:

I waited patiently for the LORD to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.
He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.
He has given me a ***NEW SONG*** *to sing,*
a hymn of praise to our God.

> *Many will see what he has done and be amazed.*
> *They will put their trust in the* LORD.
> PSALM 40:1-3 (emphasis mine)

Instead of dwelling under the shadow of cancer, Blaine has allowed God to put a new song in his heart.

Bill and Jakoba (or "Jake" as her friends call her) know a thing or two about being under the shadow of cancer—this husband and wife were diagnosed with cancer just six weeks apart.

Jake got the dreaded news first in February 2002 when she was diagnosed at the age of sixty with breast cancer that had spread to the lymph nodes. After surgery to remove the lump, the couple decided to keep their plans for a short Florida vacation the next month.

"My whole goal was to be her nurse and help her recuperate," Bill recalls. "But on March 18 the world changed a bit."

That's the day an episode of bleeding sent Bill, then sixty-one, to a Florida emergency room where doctors discovered a cancerous tumor in his colon.

Doctors wanted him to remain in the Sunshine State and have immediate surgery, but Bill wanted to get back to Pennsylvania for his wife's first scheduled chemo treatment.

"My focus wasn't on my cancer; it was on Jake," he says.

So they took a flight headed back home, even though the emergency-room doctor had predicted Bill would die in flight. He immediately saw a local surgeon and was operated on for stage III colorectal cancer.

They aren't the first husband-wife duo to have chemo together in our office, but they probably are the one with the most positive attitudes.

When they finished their respective treatments, both felt very optimistic that "we really beat this thing," Bill says.

More than three years later, Jake continued to be cancer-free, but about a year after finishing treatment, Bill's routine blood work showed his CEA tumor marker (a blood test that may indicate a recurrence of colon cancer) was elevated, and subsequent scans indicated the cancer had spread to the liver.

The three of us talked in my office after they got the news. Both were quite shaken and had a big concern: In a few months Bill was running for an international position with the Lions Club, the world's largest service organization dedicated especially to helping the blind and visually impaired.

As we talked, Bill said he thought it probably would be best to turn down the nomination because the high-level position would require extensive traveling in and out of the country. They also were scheduled to leave in eleven days for a Lions Club meeting in Portland, Oregon, and decided to forgo that trip.

But in the ensuing days as they talked and prayed about their future, both felt a peace about Bill continuing to campaign and run for the office.

"I told her I was going to run—whatever happened [with the cancer] was going to happen, so why should I just sit back and wait for it?" Bill recalls.

"We talked it through," Jake adds, "and we decided we're not going to let this take over our lives."

And that is just how they've handled this big shadow. Bill started back on chemotherapy, but not long ago the couple returned from Detroit where Bill fulfilled a longtime dream and was elected to a two-year term as director of Lions Clubs International.

He admits the experience was a little tiring, but he managed to

campaign from 5 a.m. to midnight most days! Bill and Jake's three grown children and spouses joined them in Detroit and celebrated together when their dad's election became official.

The family plans to meet in New Orleans and ride the Delta Queen paddleboat together when Bill completes his two-year term. Bill also scheduled speaking engagements as a Lions' director for at least eight states, as well as Canada, India, and Hong Kong—where he really hopes he can take a quick excursion to China and walk a little of the Great Wall.

And beyond the Great Wall, Bill has an even higher goal: to be alive in 2007 and see his wife cancer-free at her five-year mark.

That's how my friend Bill has faced living under the shadow of cancer—by seeing the disease as a curve in the road rather than a blockade.

"I'm conscious that I have it, but I don't worry about it," he says. "Although I know what's going on inside, I'm feeling well. I'm very fortunate because I have an agenda each day."

"We're very busy and we don't have time to think about it," Jake adds.

Bill acknowledges that the recurrence of the cancer has been harder to deal with than the initial diagnosis.

"You keep thinking and praying that the next treatment's going to work," he says. "If it doesn't, I look forward to a new treatment rather than concentrating on the old treatment not working."

He copes with these ups and downs by having faith in his doctor and by constant prayer.

"We don't wear our faith on our sleeves," he says, "but I trust that God is going to give me the ability to handle this new challenge. I don't actually pray so much for [my cancer] to be healed as I pray for the other people [I know with cancer] to be given some peace and comfort as they deal with their own cancer."

The bottom line is that Bill and Jake have no regrets about the decision they've made to pursue life and their dreams to the fullest in spite of cancer's shadow.

"Regardless of what happens, we've made the right decision," Bill says.

Actually, they do have one regret: "We wish we hadn't canceled the trip to Portland when we first found out the cancer was back," he says. "We realize now we could have done it, and I hear I missed a great barbecue salmon dinner!"

While Bill is a survivor who's often too busy to think about cancer, my friend Genie is very cognizant of her disease—in fact she's lived with it so long she's decided to "make friends" with it.

Now don't get too excited—Genie's not advocating creating a comfortable home for this terrible disease, but for many people nowadays, cancer has become a chronic condition—something more akin to diabetes that people learn to live with for years. Even if your cancer is gone, never to return, I think you'll still appreciate Genie's great attitude, which has helped her cope as a survivor for the past seven years.

You have to know a little about Genie to understand how she came to terms with cancer. The dark-haired, dimpled woman is a native of Puerto Rico where she met the love of her life, a Navy man named Art whom she married and moved with to the United States. They enjoyed decades of marriage before he was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder some fifteen years after successful treatment for bladder cancer. Then in May 1997 Genie was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and underwent chemotherapy.

Genie's disease was in and out of remission until the fall of 2001 when Art's syndrome went into its final stage at nearly the same time her lymphoma returned. In fact, she had to beg to be discharged from a Maryland hospital where she was receiving in-patient chemo so that she could go home and be with her husband.

Art managed to hang on until Genie arrived, and they had one last day to savor their nearly half century of love.

But there was little if any time for self-pity as Genie faced her own cancer battle. She switched her treatments from Maryland to our office so she would be closer to home. I remember the cold December morning when she first came for a consult. I usually don't come in before eight or eight thirty, but I was worried about this new widow. We met in the parking lot just before seven and watched the sunrise together for a few brief, glorious moments before she headed into the office and the jolting reality of scheduling more chemo.

That December sunrise morning was nearly three years ago, and Genie has had several rounds of chemo and monoclonal antibodies (nonchemo treatments that target only the tumor) since then. Both she and Marc are amazed that her cancer has gone into remission several times, once for an entire year.

One day at our morning support group I asked her how she was coping with her ever-present illness. That's when she introduced me to her "friends."

"This is El Niño," she said in her thick Puerto Rican accent while tapping her left shoulder blade where one tumor is located. "And this is La Niña," she said while gently patting her left side where her second mass is. "That's my little boy and that's my little girl. I named them because they are parts of my body and I think of them as my little babies."

Genie's approach gives new meaning to the phrase "if you can't beat them, join them," doesn't it?

At seventy she relishes being a survivor, and she continues to be active in her church, her community, and with her grandchildren and friends. She recently traveled to Florida and hopes to return again soon.

Don't let her "friendship" with her tumors fool you. "I don't let the cancer win the fight each day," Genie says. "I have a lot of faith and think positive and don't let the cancer get me down."

One of the best things to help her deal with constantly living in cancer's shadow is our support group, she says.

"My advice for those living with chronic cancer is to join a support group and talk about it," she says. "It really helps a lot."

Now you know how some of my friends are living as survivors: They're volunteering to help others; they're singing new songs; they're taking risks; they're making plans; they're making peace with their circumstances. You can too.

There *is* life after cancer.
(There's even life *with* cancer!)
Life is meant to be savored.

Congratulations! You've survived a cancer diagnosis and treatment for it. God obviously has plans for your life, or you wouldn't still be here. Ask Him to shine His light on your path and then don't be afraid to follow where He leads.

ENDNOTES

[1] You can learn more about the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship at http://www.cansearch.org.

[2] The National Cancer Institute Office of Cancer Survivorship can be accessed at http://dccps.nci.nih.gov/ocs/definitions.html.

[3] *Webster's Seventh Collegiate*, s.v. "paranoid."

[4] Actually 64% of adult cancer patients are still alive five years after diagnosis, according to a June 2004 report released by the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Statistics for childhood cancers are even more encouraging.

[5] William Backus and Marie Chapian, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2000), 21, italics in original.

[6] M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 23.

[7] Florence Ditlow, "The Missing Element in Health Care: Humor as a Form of Creativity," *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 11, no. 1, 66–79 (1993). See abstract at http://jhn.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/11/1/66.

[8] *The Encourager* newsletter, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 1999, "Laughter Calisthenics," 5.

[9] Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 202.

[10] Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 73–74.

[11] Jimmie Holland and Sheldon Lewis, *The Human Side of Cancer: Living with Hope, Coping with Uncertainty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 14.

[12] Ibid., 30–31.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Joni Eareckson Tada, "A List of Tears" in *More Precious Than Silver* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), April 24. Thanks to Joni for encouraging me and other readers of this devotional to consider the many reasons we've shed tears over the years.

[15] Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 202.

[16] Larry Keefauver, *When God Doesn't Heal Now* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 103.

[17] Read more about why feathers and Psalm 91:4 meant so much to Carollynn at http://www.featherfund.org/the_story.htm.