

CANCER SURVIVAL - A PERSONAL JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT
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Throughout all of my Master of Education courses at the University of Lethbridge my focus has been Technology in Education and Second Language Teaching (both ESL and FSL). I have written several major academic papers in many of my courses which demonstrate my academic writing ability and express the learning and experience I have had in these two areas.

However, during my last course, Education 5300 which I completed in the Fall Semester of 1997, it was discovered that I was gravely ill. In this project I describe and discuss the onset, diagnosis, and living reality of my current illness. When I completed the first thirty pages of this document in June of 1998, I was under the impression that I had survived cancer and was on the road to recovery. I completed this section on June 23, 1998 at which time I had appointments in Vancouver for a routine ultrasound and CAT scan. I had spent four months cancer-free and was living back at my home in Fernie, B.C. Sadly, my disease has recurred and I now must go through chemotherapy, major surgery, hair loss, nausea, and other side affects all over again. I was informed of this new diagnosis on June 29, 1998.

Therefore, I have added to the first section of this project a description of my new diagnosis, and my living reality for the month of July, 1998. This is not a typical academic paper. Because it is of a personal nature, it is written in the first person and includes thoughts of how my illness has changed the way I think about life in general and

about teaching. The mere exercise of writing in this autobiographical manner was a challenge. It helped me to discover how I really felt and what aspects of my life are truly important.

Virtually all of the wisdom traditions of the world suggest that suffering has a deeply pedagogical aspect. The following account is, quite simply, my story and the effects my illness has had on my feelings about life in general, relationships with others, and how I now feel about teaching.

From the moment I felt the pain, my life changed. Since October 19, 1997 my life has never been the same.

I had been feeling fairly content with my life up until that day. I had moved to Fernie BC from Vancouver Island in the summer of 1995 to take on a temporary teaching assignment at Sparwood Secondary School. At that time I joined the Fernie cohort in taking the Master of Education program at the University of Lethbridge. This was an excellent opportunity for me to finally achieve my MEd. I had already gone through all the course work of an MEd program at UBC in 1986-87 as a full-time student with a specialty in English Language Instruction (ESL), but sadly had never completed my final project as a result of personal complications. By the time I could afford the tuition again, the five-year maximum had elapsed, so I was not permitted credit from any of my course work at UBC when I entered the University of Lethbridge. However, I was happy to have a group to work with and enjoyed my courses much more this time. In fact I truly believed that perhaps the reason I ended up in southeastern British Columbia was so that

I could be given a second chance at completing my MEd which I had always wanted to do.

Over my three years in Fernie I had been re-hired for various temporary teaching assignments in School District #5 (Southeast Kootenay) and was slowly building up some seniority in the district. I had taught everything from Western Civilizations 12, English Literature 12, Career and Personal Planning 11, to Social Studies 8 and Information Management 8. These had all been temporary teaching assignments and mostly involved courses which I had not ever taught before. Needless to say, the first two years here (1995-1997) had been stressful, but I was grateful to have the jobs. The fall of 1997 I had finally attained a teaching assignment (although temporary) which involved teaching only French (FSL) at the Secondary School level, which in BC is from Grades 8 to 12. I was pleased with this assignment as my original BA major had been French with minors in Linguistics and Psychology. This was the first time in twenty years of teaching that I was actually teaching solely in my major area of study. I had even attended a French Immersion program for teachers at UBC during the summer of 1997 in order to prepare myself for this assignment. Since September of 1995 I had been enrolled in the Master of Education program at the University of Lethbridge with the Fernie cohort.

By the fall of 1997, I was still enrolled in Education 5300. This was the last of my core courses required in the program. Looking back, I now recognize that miracles were occurring in my life even then. Our final paper for that course was not due until November 15, 1997 but I had decided to spend Thanksgiving weekend finishing my entire

paper more than a month early. This was amazing for me as I generally procrastinate right up until deadlines. However, by Monday, October 13, I had completed my final draft and was ready to hand it in the following weekend when our group met in Fernie.

I taught my regular French classes on the Tuesday and Wednesday of that week. (Oct. 14 & 15) and the weather was beginning to change. On Wednesday after work I came home and put my snow tires in the trunk of my car with the intention of having them installed sometime that week. Since it was sunny, I decided that would also be a good day to plant the two hundred spring bulbs I had ordered in September. For at least two hours I was crouched over in my flower beds digging and planting bulbs. I was not looking forward to winter in the mountains as I am from the West Coast, but I had visions of the beauty of spring blossoms as I worked.

Later that evening I felt an unfamiliar cramp in my lower right abdominal area. Of course, having never been seriously ill, I ignored it and decided I had probably just pulled a muscle or something while crawling around on my haunches in the garden. It would probably be gone by the following morning. The next day at work the cramp was still bothering me to the point where I went and bought some painkillers at lunch time. That was Thursday and I seriously considered taking a sick day the following day to see a doctor about this weird pain. I wondered if it might be my appendix. Perhaps it was just some new menopausal symptom since I was at that age. However, I was not sufficiently prepared (I thought) to have a T.O.C. come in that Friday, so I worked again that day. I also continued to take painkillers on Friday. I had discovered that it did not hurt as much

sitting as standing, so I tried to do more sitting that day than usual. By the end of the work day, I spoke to my administrator and requested that she get a T.O.C. in for me on Monday so that I could see a doctor about it. I still was not seriously concerned as I had had a complete physical in August and had been pronounced healthy. I had had all the usual tests including a pap smear and a mammogram both of which had had negative results, so there were no worries about "that", I thought.

That evening and the following day, Saturday, was our Ed. 5300 class in Fernie. My classmates were incredulous that I had actually already completed my final paper. I handed it in to our instructor, Dr. Andrew Blair, and as it turned out, it was a good thing I had done so, because I never saw him again and never attended that class again.

On Saturday evening, October 18, I kept a dinner engagement with girlfriends and as long as I remained sitting, felt fine. I mentioned this cramp to them and one of them suggested that perhaps I might have an ovarian cyst. Silently I promised myself that if the pain had not abated by Sunday morning, I would go to Emergency and find out what was wrong with me. I did not sleep well that night and made the decision to call the hospital. Fernie is such a small town that there were no doctors on duty that day, but the hospital staff arranged to have the doctor on call come in to see me.

As it turned out I ended up seeing one of the better doctors in town. After describing my symptoms to him, he examined me and informed me that I had a large mass down there and was astonished that it had not been discovered during my physical exam a month and a half earlier. The doctor who had given me my first exam had been older and

very gentle but obviously not very thorough. This doctor in Emergency told me that I would definitely need an ultrasound and most likely surgery as the mass was supposedly "the size of a four or five month fetus". He told me that I must have a very high tolerance for pain and that I would need to take at least two or three weeks off work. He would try to schedule an ultrasound for me as soon as possible in Cranbrook, BC.

I was stunned! How could I not have known that something was growing inside of me? How could that other doctor not have discovered this "growth" in August? Why hadn't I gained weight or noticed any protrusions in my body? Admittedly I was not as thin as I might like, but I certainly was not so heavy that I would not have noticed something this huge in my abdominal area! Was I? He did explain however that it seemed to have formed posteriorly and was pushing against my lower backbone. Aha! Perhaps that explained the pain I had been having months earlier when I actually had gone to a chiropractor for a pain in my right back hip. He had manipulated and crunched these bones to the point that the pain didn't bother me anymore. But if the real reason for the pain had been this mass, how long had this "growth" actually been inside of me? The doctor said there was no way of knowing. This "thing" could have been growing inside me for years, or it could have been a very aggressive thing that had just started in the last few months. I had all kinds of visions at that point. I remembered a violent incident ten years earlier with my ex-husband which had resulted in a similar abdominal pain. Had this thing been growing inside of me even then? Perhaps it had, but I would never know. I do believe that God waited until I was strong enough mentally, emotionally and

spiritually to deal with this problem and its contingencies.

Still, on that particular Sunday afternoon, my first concerns were of a more administrative nature. How could I possibly take two or three weeks off work? What about my dog? What about my condo? What about my Ed. 5300 course? Where would I have to go for this surgery? This health problem, whatever it was, couldn't have arrived at a more inconvenient time! Later I realized that the main emotion I was feeling that day was fear. Intellectually, I had blocked out the possibility that this mass could be anything really serious. Everything was surreal.

I could not allow myself to think of what this "thing" inside of me might be. It was a separate entity that would soon be removed from my body.

(At this point in my story I had to stop writing. I was experiencing physical pain in the area where this "thing" had been. The pain lasted all night and I was worried that perhaps it had come back to haunt me. This having been the first time I've ever written about this medical problem, other than to fill out medical forms, makes me realize that I have been writing from my body and physically re-living the experience of my flesh. The actual process of writing about this life experience has shown me the power of mind and body. My life is really lived through my body, possibly even on a deeper level than my mind. I literally felt that same physical pain again for the first time in nine months!)

Fortunately, I had learned over the past several years to accept life on life's terms. Having lived through divorce, bankruptcy (financial and spiritual), alcoholism, and unemployment in the late 1980's, I had already developed a new way of living in the early

1990's and was now in the habit of praying, meditating and reflecting upon my life on a daily basis. I had learned not to be overwhelmed by life, but rather to accept and try to understand my life as it unfolded. This must be happening to me for a reason. Although I do not understand the big scheme of things, I believe that God has a plan for all of us and this was simply a part of this plan--God's will for me so to speak. I was no longer in control of what was going on in my body, so there was no point in becoming too upset about it.

Very calmly, I drove home and my first reaction was to call my vice-principal to inform her that I would be needing more than just one day off work. At the time I still thought that it would amount to maybe two or three weeks. Next I called the teacher-on-call who was already coming in for me the next day and informed her that I would be away much longer than a day. She was happy to have the extra work and offered to come over to my place to pick up my daybook, keys, and get a general idea of what each class was doing. The administrative taken care of, I decided to call my parents in West Vancouver.

As a bit of background I will mention that my parents were both 73 years old at the time. My father, a retired physician had reluctantly retired at age 70. He had always been the caregiver and enabler in my family. My mother had addiction problems with alcohol and prescription drugs and was still in denial that she had any kind of problem. As the oldest of six children, I had often been the one who ended up taking over the role of nurturer, housekeeper, cook, or babysitter during my teens as my mother was often

"indisposed". But that was something we never talked about. She had instructed us always to "act normal" (whatever that means) and under no circumstances to ever suggest that anything else was wrong in our home. That had been the way I grew up. We were "the perfect family", always loving, close, and supportive of one another no matter what. I can remember deciding as a teenager never to have children because I did not want to be a mother.

In any case, I called my parents and, as expected, my father answered the phone and explained that my mother was "sleeping". I knew by the way he said "sleeping" that she was actually probably passed out. Impatience with my mother had always been one of my principal failings. Even though I knew that she was a sick person and that her addictions were actual illnesses, I had always resented her behaviour toward my father. He was the giver; she was the taker--or so I thought. If I could abstain from alcohol and drugs, why couldn't she?

I explained to him what I had just found out at the local hospital. He must have known when he heard my symptoms, that I was dangerously ill, but he did not say so on the telephone. He simply appealed to me over and over to please come to Vancouver right away. He said not to wait and go to Cranbrook but to fly down, that day if possible, and he would get me into Lion's Gate Hospital where he knew all the appropriate doctors and had worked for over thirty-five years. I told him I would think about it and check with the airlines to see if I could even get a flight. I still felt very calm and serene inside while my outside motions were robotic. Thank God I had a father who

loved me and always knew the right way to comfort me. After all, I thought, how many forty-six year old women can actually call their fathers to find out what to do about a medical problem? How many women my age even have a father? I had not lived with my parents for well over twenty-five years. Although it was going to be strange and sometimes difficult, I was lucky to have a place to go.

During the time that I was booking a flight my father had called both my sisters. My middle sister, Nancy (43) lives on Vancouver Island where I used to live and my youngest sister, Beth (38) lives in West Vancouver and also works at Lion's Gate Hospital as an ECG Technician. I also have three younger brothers, one of whom lives in North Vancouver. Within half an hour both sisters called me and both basically said "Meredith, get down here right away! Forget about your job, your course, your dog, whatever. Just get on a plane as soon as you can." Again, nobody mentioned the "C" word, but the possibility that I had it began to sink in.

I booked a flight out of Cranbrook to Vancouver for the following day, Monday, October 20. I made arrangements for my dog to go into a kennel and I packed a small bag. In my mind, I was still only going away for a couple of weeks, most of which would be spent in the hospital, so I didn't think I would need many clothes. That night in bed my negative and insecure thinking began to spiral out of control. The more absorbed I became in my upsetting news, the worse I felt. I was literally rehearsing the probable outcome of my journey. Perhaps I would never sleep in this bed again. Maybe this was the beginning of the end of my life. I had to force myself to stop thinking that way. God

was in control of my life even if I wasn't. I had to notice what was happening in my head before my thoughts had a chance to build up any momentum. I had learned from my past that the sooner I catch myself in the act of building my mental snowball, the easier it is to stop. Instead of obsessing on my upcoming day I was able to consciously "nip it in the bud" I could then focus on the fact that although I was overwhelmed I could accept it and be grateful that I had a family who cared about me. I was not alone!

The following day, Monday I drove to Cranbrook and waited for my flight. I had left my car in the parking lot with my snow tires still in the trunk thinking that I would probably need them by the time I returned. I had bought an open return ticket as I was not sure of the date that I would be returning. I was very calm and serene during the flight and upon arrival took a cab over to my parents' apartment. They had moved to this waterfront West Vancouver apartment in 1988 when they had sold the big family house up the hill. The location is beautiful, but it is a very small two-bedroom apartment. The second bedroom is their den so my hide-a-bed was out on their closed-in deck off the living room, facing west and overlooking Burrard Inlet, Georgia Strait, Lighthouse Park, and the mountains of Vancouver Island--the best view in the house. This little deck which was about six feet by ten feet in area was later to become what I called "my healing room".

My mother was up and had prepared dinner. My father did not look well. In the past couple of years he had continued doing locums on the North Shore of Vancouver, but had developed late-onset diabetes at age 70. He had been working up until the end of

September, 1997 but had developed "diabetic neuropathy" in his left leg which now forced him to use a walker to get around. The last time I had seen him he had started using a cane, but was still mobile. The sight of him now was a shock to me. He had lost weight due to his diabetic diet and was now physically disabled and in a lot of pain. He regretted the fact that he would probably not be able to work again for a few months even though he was already booked for several locums in November and December. However, he was still optimistic that with physical therapy his leg would get better. Both my parents were very concerned about my illness and offered to take me to emergency right away.

I was still in a lot of pain, but having already endured it for five days, chose to wait until the following morning before checking in to the hospital. My sister Beth had found out which doctors were on call in Emergency and that the following day there would be a woman gynaecologist who was apparently very compassionate and competent. If I went in right away, I would end up with an older male gynaecologist. Once again I was eternally grateful that both my sister and my father knew the doctors at Lion's Gate Hospital and could recommend them to me.

(I stopped writing here and couldn't get back to it for two days! I had developed "writer's block". In that time I went to see a doctor and had more blood tests. The mere thought of putting my diagnosis in writing was frightening! I was beginning to feel as if it had come back and it really scared me!)

The following morning, Tuesday, Oct. 21, we all got up and slowly got ready to go to the hospital. My mother was now doing all the driving since my father's leg was not functioning, and I sat tensely in the back seat thinking "This is NOT really happening!" We arrived at Emergency and I checked in explaining that I was in a lot of pain and that I knew I had some kind of a "mass" in my pelvic area. The hospital was very busy that morning and I was left lying on a stretcher in the hallway for several hours. My parents went up to the cafeteria for coffee, but waited patiently. I was finally given an ultrasound. When I looked at the screen, I saw a dark black shape which the technician was measuring using electronic devices. At first I thought I was looking at my stomach. It was the shape of an eggplant and nothing else was really visible. Although the technician did not say anything, I could tell from her expression that she was looking at something serious. She left the room several times and brought back various doctors and nurses to have a look at the screen while I was lying there waiting apprehensively. Eventually, my bed was wheeled back out to the hallway of the emergency ward and it seemed like hours that I waited there.

Finally Dr. Schoulls, the gynaecologist on call came to talk to me. She brought a consent form for a complete hysterectomy which she asked me to sign. She mentioned the word "cancer" but I hardly heard her. My life stood still. I heard her say something about the gray shading on the ultrasound being an indicator of malignancy, but it wasn't really sinking in. I knew that surgery was necessary, but I had somehow thought "the thing" could be removed without having to remove all my organs. This was to be more

than a regular hysterectomy which usually just includes the uterus and cervix. This was called an oophorectomy and was to include the ovaries, omentum, and fallopian tubes! I foolishly asked her that if the mass turned out not to be cancerous, could she cancel the procedure? She just looked at me almost pityingly and didn't say a word. I signed the consent form.

After waiting in the hallway with the blankets over my head for a few more hours, I was brought to a room on the surgical ward which I shared with three other women. My parents, sisters, and one brother came to see me. When I told them it was cancer, my sisters cried. My father looked grim. The next two days I was put on a liquid diet and required to take medication to "clean me out". I was scheduled for surgery the morning of Thursday, October 23. Many miracles occurred in those two days that I lay waiting. I silently said the Serenity Prayer hundreds of times in those two days. " God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference!" It worked.

I remembered the fear I felt after being diagnosed with cancer. I had also learned that 70 percent of ovarian cancer cases go undiscovered and are fatal. Ovarian cancer is known as the "hidden killer". I learned that it occurs most often in women who have never been pregnant and that nuns in convents often die of it. My reality had been total panic and fear. In despair, I asked God to help me. I asked Him to speak through me, and be present with me in everything I said or did. In this manner, I began to feel the presence of God's help at every moment of my life. Within those two days of waiting for

surgery, I felt a sense of protection, safety and comfort that surpassed anything I had ever felt before. A confidence began to permeate my being, the confidence of innocence and trust, a true belief in myself.

(The process of writing about this experience came to a halt here. I have been feeling intrepidation and fear for a couple of days as I work up the courage to write about my surgery)

My surgery took place on Thursday morning, October 23, 1997. My father whispered a prayer into my ear as I was wheeled to the operating room. When I woke up from the anaesthetic later that afternoon, my parents, my sisters and my brother were there to see me. I felt good. I had made it! I had a huge incision over a foot long, but everything had been surgically removed. Dr Schoulls told me that I had been very fortunate in that the actual tumour had been attached only to my left ovary, but had extended through my pelvic cavity with the largest portion of the mass on my right side. Fortunately it had not attached itself to any other organs. This apparently often can occur with this "silent killer". She told me the tumour had been the size of a "large cantaloupe". I would, however, require chemotherapy and possible radiation because the tumour had actually ruptured inside of me, causing carcinogenic fluid to "leak" into my pelvic area and chest cavity. Although the cancer had been surgically removed and there was a ninety percent chance of it not recurring, there was a possibility that the microorganisms in the fluid could continue to grow and attach themselves to other organs. It had been a blessing that I had decided to work in my garden on October 15 as that

activity had, evidently, caused this tumour to rupture.

I was not afraid of the thought of chemotherapy, but was concerned about the possible side effects--especially hair loss. She told me I would have to talk to my oncologist, Dr. Klimo, about that as her job as a gynaecologist was basically finished. In the meantime I was to remain on the surgical ward of the hospital for about a week to recover from the major surgery I had just undergone. I still felt a persistent calmness and was convinced that everything would be all right.

Other miraculous events took place in those first few days after my surgery. For one thing, cards, flowers and phone calls came pouring in. I was truly moved at how many friends and relatives already knew of my illness and had taken the time to show me they cared. Within two days I had at least two dozen flower arrangements, not to mention cards and phone calls. One of my nurses commented that I "must have lots of boyfriends." When I told her I didn't have a man in my life she said I sure had a lot of wonderful friends. It was true. People from Vancouver Island, Fernie, Sparwood, Lethbridge, Vancouver and other areas had all contacted me with well wishes. Once again I had that incredibly grateful feeling that I was not alone. There were many people out there who cared about me.

My brother, Chris who is next in age to me even offered to fly up to Cranbrook and get my car and drive it back to Vancouver for me. That was the nicest thing he had ever done for me. That Saturday he used my return ticket, flew up early in the morning and drove all night. He had spent his entire weekend doing me a favour. What a great

brother!

There were several side effects from my surgery, but none of these symptoms seemed life-threatening. I was not able to walk for a few days nor could I attend to the many physical daily routines I had taken for granted such as bathing myself. The nurses had to help me do everything. My eyesight had also been affected by the anaesthetic in such a way that everything was flashing like a strobe light and large "floaters" were blocking my vision. I could not read or focus on a page. This would eventually improve I was told.

Probably the worst symptom was my reaction to morphine on the second night after my surgery. Once the anaesthetic had subsided the pain of the surgery had increased. The nurses set up a machine beside my bed which would automatically administer morphine in small doses as required. Supposedly this machine could not malfunction and would never cause an overdose. I was reluctant to even use it, but that night I needed it. I only squeezed the hand control once, but once was apparently one too many times. I had a violent allergic reaction to the drug and almost died from it.

The first thing I remember was a German doctor with small round glasses shaking me and saying, "Meredith, you must wake up!" I had been in a beautiful bright place and had been completely at peace prior to this intrusion. I was soaking wet and they were stripping my gown from me and wrapping me in warm blankets. They were inserting needles, IVs, oxygen masks and taking my blood pressure. All I could think of was that I wanted to go back to sleep, back to that beautiful place. This doctor with the heavy

German accent reminded me of a character in a sitcom from the 1960's. "You vill vake up und you vill like it!"

The following morning I woke up with all this equipment attached to me and learned that I had apparently "flat-lined" at two in the morning. This meant that all my vital signs had stopped. I had had literally no blood pressure, no heart beat and had stopped breathing. Miraculously the woman in the bed next to me who had also just had a hysterectomy had been awake at that hour of the morning and had heard me gurgling. She had buzzed the nurses' station and they had initiated an immediate Code Blue. That German doctor had been the Emergency doctor on call the previous night! I had almost died. She had saved my life. I had experienced death. How ironic, I thought, that after having survived cancer, an anaesthetic, and surgery, my life almost ended as a result of an unknown allergy to morphine! Needless to say, I was never given morphine again and am now aware of my severe allergy to it.

That day was most definitely a day of reckoning for me. For some reason God had chosen to keep me alive. That woman in the bed next to me had been my guardian angel. I felt very emotional that day and experienced everything from euphoria to depression. I understood that in order to save my life and prevent the deadly spread of cancer, the surgeon was forced to remove important organs from my body. Though I comprehended the reasoning behind this action, it was still a shock to be living in my changed body. Cancer had forced major organs to be cut away--it felt as if a close friend or relative had died. I had a deep sense of primal loss. I felt bereft and depressed, as if

the root of my womanhood and femininity had suddenly been stripped away. Family and friends cheered me up though. Within a few days I was thinking, "Oh well, I wasn't using those organs anyway! At least I'm alive."

I had learned from my doctor that when a woman has a hysterectomy whether for cancer or not, it can take months for the physical scars to heal and even more months for normal energy levels to return. I was also now facing the disturbing symptoms of instant menopause. This, however, could be dealt with later, after my chemotherapy treatments were complete.

After a week of recovery in the surgical ward, I was moved to the cancer ward. Every patient was dealing with cancer and many knew that their illness was terminal. However, most of them were friendly and positive about their futures and seemed to have accepted their lots in life. I can recall one young Iranian woman in her early twenties who was dying of brain cancer. She barely spoke any English but had a very cheerful and grateful disposition. In addition to sincere compassion, the ESL teacher came out in me and I found myself thoroughly enjoying speaking English with her. She also seemed happy to have somebody to help her with her English. There were people there with liver cancer, bone cancer, lymphoma, leukaemia and breast cancer. I was impressed with the "one day at a time" attitudes of most of them. Their courage and dignity helped me to bear the burden of treatment, to persevere. I learned about cancer support groups and many other self-help strategies such as visual imagery, music therapy, touch therapy and the "Look Good, Feel Better" program offered by the Cancer Society.

My chemotherapy treatments were to involve two very powerful chemicals, Etoposide and Cisplatin, the latter of which has several serious side effects. Hair loss would be definite but it was the least of my worries. It was also explained to me that most of the drugs used to kill malignant cells would also end up destroying healthy and normal cells in the process. The unpleasant side effects of this drug could leave some permanent damage to my kidneys, constipation, possible hearing loss, and numbness of the hands and feet as a result of nerve damage. The nerve damage might not be evident until months after completion of treatment and it would be impossible to predict how long this neuropathy would last or if it would ever go away at all. At this point I was still having vision problems so the thought of all those other possible side effects was so overwhelming that I don't think I really even realized what I was facing. I just knew I had to have the chemotherapy because the alternative was unthinkable. My six treatments were to occur every three weeks with three days of chemotherapy, four days of anti-nausea drugs and steroids and two weeks off in between. I was to have my first treatment "in house" while I was still in the hospital. The successive treatments would be at the outpatient chemotherapy clinic and would go on until March of 1998. I was still in a bit of a daze about what I was about to go through. I would also require another minor surgical procedure to insert an Intravenous port with a tube going directly to my main artery, as the veins in my arms and hands are too small to take the massive infusions of chemicals I was about to receive. This procedure was also done at the time with only a local anaesthetic and it was a very invasive feeling to have a plastic tube travelling through

my chest to my heart. I now have a permanent scar on my upper left breast to remind me of my cancer treatments.

(At this stage I also stopped writing. I was reliving those days of chemo...the profound fatigue, the endless vomiting, not being able to taste my food, anaemia and continual blood tests to measure my tumour level. The telephone rang this afternoon and it was my local Fernie doctor with the results of my most recent blood tests. My Ca125 (tumour level) has gone up since my last test. I am afraid now. I have to leave for Vancouver tomorrow to have another ultrasound and visit with my oncologist and my nephrologist. It's almost as if the actual writing about my cancer has brought it back. However, I remain hopeful. This may not mean anything serious.)

On November 4, 1997 I had finished my first chemo treatment which had involved three days of intravenous injections of chemicals. I was ready to go "home" to my parents' apartment and my "healing room". I actually felt quite good.

Somehow I was under the illusion that I would come out of surgery and chemotherapy and be back on my feet the following week. Little did I realize that those three days on intravenous drip would cause spasms which ripped through my insides, sending me retching to the bathroom for hours and leaving me so weak that I could barely make it back to my bed. All along I'd thought I was in control. Now I knew it was cancer that held the reins.

I will always remember Remembrance Day of 1997. That was the day my hair started falling out in clumps. After showering that morning the drain was practically

plugged with long red curly hair. I could barely brush the tangles out of it without having my brush fill with hair. The next day I immediately went out and had my hair cut short. At least if I was going to lose it, the length lost would not be so traumatic. The hairdresser braided my long hair first and cut off the braid in one dramatic gesture. I still have that braid today. For a few days there was hair everywhere...on my pillow, my clothing, and throughout the apartment. By November 15 I went and had what little hair remained shaved off and bought a wig. Later I ended up wearing a hat or turban more often than the wig which was very itchy. My head was always cold and I had to sleep with a turban on my head at night. By December of 1997 I had learned to "paint on" eyebrows and eyelashes with makeup. I had lost every hair on my body.

During those first days at home with my parents I was forever grateful to have them there and to have a place to be. Although my mother was still practising her addiction habits, they did lessen eventually. In all fairness to her, I can imagine how difficult it must have been for her to suddenly have a sick adult daughter living under her roof and taking up her space. In addition to my father's health, which was deteriorating from his diabetes, she now had two sick people to worry about. I began to keep a gratitude journal which I had learned about in one of my support groups. Each day I would think of at least five things for which I was grateful. Some days it was as simple as "the sun was shining" or "my eyesight has improved". Other days it included items such as "my mother stayed sober" or "my pain from surgery isn't as bad today". In many ways I established a new relationship with my parents which was one of the many gifts I

received from having been so ill. We were all there for each other. I would drive my father to his doctors' appointments or to the lab at Lion's Gate Hospital to have blood work done at the same time as I was having mine. Often he would go to the Diabetes Clinic while I would go to the Chemo Clinic, both at LGH. He was happy that I was there to keep them company and also that my mother seemed to be taking more control of her own life after seeing my example. I learned to grieve my life before cancer and actually came to see a beneficial side to my illness. Although I felt shell-shocked those first few weeks, this illness had actually brought my family closer together. My parents, sisters and brother rallied around me and were generally all very loving and concerned. I had to learn to pace myself and slow down. Even the smallest task seemed to take forever and things seemed to move in slow motion.

Generally speaking, I would feel deathly ill the first week after chemotherapy and then begin to feel normal the second week, just on time to go back for another round of treatment. By the time Christmas rolled around I had had three treatments. This time the nausea lasted two whole weeks. I can recall getting up from the table at my sister's Christmas dinner and having to run to the bathroom. I also was suffering from severe headaches and pernicious anaemia as a result of the chemo damaging my kidneys and immune system and raising my blood pressure. I ended up needing a blood transfusion at the end of December. One miracle that occurred at Christmas time though was that my mother actually stopped drinking, on her own. To my knowledge, she has not had a drink since.

In January I continued with chemotherapy and was scheduled for radiation on February 13, 1998. However, it turned out that my kidneys were so severely damaged that the radiation was cancelled. My kidneys were functioning at only 30 percent and this damage, it turned out was permanent. I was referred to a nephrologist and will have to take special medication for the rest of my life. I also required cat scans, ultrasounds and nuclear medicine tests. In addition, I now suffer from permanent nerve damage in my hands and feet. This numbness still persists today and may never return to normal. I was referred to a neurologist for this problem where I endured several other neurological tests and must return to him every three months as well. At this critical juncture I truly learned just how serious my illness really was. My treatments ended in February and my hair began to grow back.

In some ways there was a sense of ambivalence and confusion: on the one hand, I felt joy that my cancer had been stopped, yet I also felt fear of distancing myself from the health care team that had helped me reach this point in my survival. While it was frustrating not to be able to jump right back into life again, I knew that trying to do too much could also compromise my already depressed immune system. However, it was actually a thrill to start having to shave my legs and underarms again. The fact that there was "peach-fuzz" on my head signalled the beginning of my rebirth. I had lost my innocence, and in the fullest sense I realized how very close I'd come to my own mortality. I would be ready to return to my own home in Fernie, B.C by the end of March where I would require only monthly blood tests (instead of weekly) and visits

every three months to my oncologist and nephrologist in Vancouver. It was a scary thought...actually going back to my "real world", no longer under the protective roof of my parents' home. I compared it to the Stockholm syndrome that prisoners apparently feel when they are released from jail.

My father asked me if I would stay until the middle of April since my mother was scheduled for some bladder surgery at Vancouver General Hospital on March 25, 1998 and would be recovering from that for several weeks. I was happy to do so as it would delay my having to leave and be on my own. I took her to the hospital on March 24 and visited her a couple of times in the next few days. My father was no longer going out much as his leg had become worse. During those last three days alone with him, I brought him most of his meals in bed as he thought he had a touch of the flu and had no appetite. I was really worried about him and called my sister Beth often to ask her if I should be doing anything special. He did not want to go to the hospital, nor did he want me to call his doctor. He just wanted to stay in bed. Beth felt that as long as he was not experiencing any chest pains or shortness of breath, he would probably be feeling better in a few days. Strangely enough, he decided that day to show me all his important papers, his will, and his life insurance policies.

That Friday night, March 27, 1998, my sister Nancy came over from Vancouver Island. We were planning on going together the next day to visit our mother at VGH. When I met Nancy at the ferry at Horseshoe Bay I told her how worried I had been about our father those last few days. Once she saw him and how sick he looked, she managed

to convince him that he really ought to get to the hospital. I called an ambulance and my sister Beth and brother Chris met us at Lion's Gate Emergency. It turned out that Beth was the one who gave him his ECG because the other technician was busy. From the grave look on her face I knew that something was seriously wrong. He was having a massive heart attack which had probably been going on for hours or even days! We later learned that the reason even he, a physician did not know he was experiencing this was that apparently diabetes disguises the pain of angina so that the patient is not aware of it. All he knew was that he was feeling a little bit stiff and had lost his appetite. The miracle that night was that for some amazing reason, even though it was a Friday night, the emergency ward was quiet and only one other bed was taken. Apparently that never happens!

Since he was a well-known doctor at that hospital, the medical attendants, doctors and nurses rallied around him. As soon as they gave him oxygen and nitroglycerin, the colour came back to his face and he was sitting up in bed talking to all of us and looking healthy. We stayed until after midnight when he was sent up to ICU. Everything seemed all right and he kissed us each goodnight and told us to go home and get some sleep. That night he also told me that I had had the best positive attitude of any cancer patient he had ever met. "Tell your mother I'll be home in a few days" , he said.

At 2:15 a.m. the telephone rang at my parents' apartment. My father's heart attack was extending. Nancy and I rushed to ICU after phoning Chris and Beth. Doctors were working hard on him. They had tried to insert a pacemaker along with several other

devices. They were pumping his chest! We were all allowed to go into ICU since it was mostly empty that night. We watched them working on him, silently praying. My sister also requested that a priest be brought in. Sadly, there was nothing they could do to revive him. His time of death was 2:50 a.m. on March 28, 1998. He was given his last rites and my sister placed a rosary in his hand. We all stood around his bed with hands joined and said "The Lord's Prayer" with the priest. We dressed him in his pyjamas and socks and stayed with him all night. My loving father, who had always been there for all of us was gone. It was almost as if he had waited until we were all on the road to recovery, particularly myself and my mother. Four of his six children were with him when he passed away. That, in itself was a miracle.

The next hours were surreal. We had been awake all night at Lion's Gate Hospital and then had to head over to Vancouver General Hospital to inform our mother that our father (her husband of 48 years) had passed away. On the drive over things were strangely peaceful. The sun was shining and all the spring flowers were in full bloom. The trees were blossoming and the birds were singing. It did not seem at all like a crowded city full of traffic. I could feel my father's spirit.

My mother who could barely walk with her catheters and surgical wounds was brought to a private room to see us. At first she wondered why we were all visiting her at 8:00 a.m., but one look at our faces told the story. She guessed right away that something had happened to Dad. She was surprisingly calm and started instructing us on who to call, which funeral home to go to, and what to do. She was not due to come home until

Monday, March 30. Having never had to deal with anything of this nature before, we were all quite upset, but on our way back to the apartment, stopped at the funeral home and made arrangements. The phone calls began and within a day the phone didn't stop ringing with condolence calls from friends, patients, colleagues and relatives.

The actual funeral would have to wait for about two weeks until April 9, Holy Thursday, as my mother was not physically capable of being there any sooner. In those two weeks other miracles occurred. Both my brothers, Pat from California and Keith from Ottawa flew to Vancouver. Other friends from Ontario and Quebec arrived as well. We were all amazingly organized with accommodations, the obituary published in several papers, and a reception arranged for after the service. Those two weeks were probably the saddest of my life. Losing my father was worse than having cancer. I ended up being the one to go through all his papers, visit lawyers, banks, and get his income tax papers filed. My father had been the most wonderful man I'd ever known.

I could write pages about the impact of my father's death on me, but that is not the purpose of this project. I do know that I actually became grateful that I had become ill this year because I was given the opportunity to spend the last five months of my father's life with him. How many 46 year old women are given that gift?

After all the arrangements had been made, the funeral over, and my mother was mobile and driving again it was time for me to leave--time to start trying to live whatever life I had left on my own. I left the Lower Mainland and returned to Fernie on April 28, 1998, exactly one month after my father's death. Those spring bulbs which I'd planted a

lifetime ago were in full bloom upon my return. I even managed to attend the University of Lethbridge Convocation on May 22, 1998 in which four of my colleagues from the Fernie cohort were graduands. Since that time I have been back to Vancouver once for medical tests and am leaving again tomorrow for more. I am worried about the fact that my tumour level has risen considerably since my last blood tests. I am also worried about my mother being on her own for the first time in her life. She has become very forgetful these days.

What do I think about how my illness has changed the way I think about life generally, about myself and about how I think of teaching? It is almost impossible to come up with an answer to this question. After cancer things are never quite the same. Having cancer changed me as an individual in a multitude of ways--some so intangible that it is impossible to articulate them, others are visible and apparent by the scars and other physical damage that is left behind. My hair is now about one and a half inches long and I have eyebrows and eyelashes again. I believe that everything happens for a reason and that perhaps it is God's plan to have me spend some time with my mother in West Vancouver.

As a cancer survivor I am facing rocky, uncharted territory. Oncology is not an exact science. I am realizing that my body does not look, feel, or function the way it did prior to my illness. I find myself reevaluating my relationships, my career, my goals and even my sense of purpose. On top of this is the ever-present threat of recurrence, a fear that stalks me on a regular basis. I suppose that there is joy in beginning again with a sort

of excitement that makes every minute count. For one thing, I do hope that my own story of survival will act as a catalyst for honest conversations about the cancer experience, not only among survivors, but also between friends, spouses, mothers and daughters, colleagues, women and their caregivers. Although each survivor will have to struggle in her own way to regain the parts of the woman she was, and work to accept her altered version as victor over the disease, she should not have to suffer in isolation.

Another thing I have learned is that if anybody I know ever suffers from cancer or another life-threatening illness, I will be there for him or her. I now know how important it is to have the love and support of family and friends and to be able to talk about this devastating illness openly.

I also know that I must work through my feelings of sadness and loneliness, isolation and fears, in my own private way. One day may bring feelings of confidence, the next day despair. The truth is that I am not over it. I have just begun to face up to what I've lived through. I have the rest of my life ahead of me but all my options have changed.

I want to continue teaching and to further my education. I also am very concerned about whether I will be well enough to return to teaching this fall. At this point in time my hands and feet are still numb and my kidneys are not functioning properly. I worry too about what will happen when my long-term disability runs out this fall and whether or not I will even have medical insurance. Right now I do not even have a guaranteed job in September as my last posting was temporary and the incumbent is returning in

September 1998.

Will I stay in the Elk Valley of BC or move back to the West Coast where I have more access to medical care? I have applied for jobs in both areas, but it is more likely I will be hired Back here because of my seniority. I know that if I ever end up teaching English or Writing again I will encourage my students to write honestly and openly about their experiences, both good and bad. The exercise of writing this account of my illness has taught me that writing can allow students to explore what they are living, what may be important to them, and what really matters in their lives. Those things evolved for me in a way I wouldn't have known possible. I did not really know how I felt until I went through the process of typing one word after another. Although it is not a typical academic paper, and is written in the first person, this exercise has broadened my understanding of myself and the world around me. I still really have no idea of what the future holds for me.

Perhaps I should move back to the West Coast to be closer to my mother and my sisters and brothers. I just don't know. After all, my mother is now on her own at 74 years of age and I am the only one of her children who does not have a family of my own. I actually learned to love my mother a lot more this winter and she has even stopped taking pills since my father's death. I am proud of her. She is a very strong person. Now I know that she loves me too. My father made that happen.

I have also learned that taking care of myself physically, mentally, and spiritually - must become my number one priority. Daily medication, fatigue and other

lasting side effects are a way of life for me now. I know that staying alive is just the initial challenge; living with the consequences of the disease and therapy will be a lifelong responsibility.

I have learned to appreciate the life I still have, not what is lost. Dealing with life after cancer has become like a job. Some days I show up even though I'd rather be in bed, but I am learning to give it my best shot, no matter what. Now that I've had cancer I have to close the door and look straight ahead, putting one foot in front of the other. Whether "straight ahead" turns out to be two years or twenty-five years and counting, life is a precious and magical gift to be lived to its fullest sense each and every day. Even though there are dark moments when I lose confidence and begin to despair, I am learning to take pleasure in the smaller, more common moments of life--not just the memorable occasions--and have found a sense of purpose and enjoyment to my life, however long it might last. I also feel hopeful that my energy level will eventually improve. I am learning to practise acceptance of all circumstances in my life so that I may enjoy peace of mind. Fear has often caused me suffering when I could have had more faith. There are times when fear tears me apart, just when I'm experiencing joy, happiness and lightness of heart. I know that faith and a feeling of self-worth will help me to endure both tragedy and ecstasy. To become ready for change, I try to no longer fight or control, but simply to believe that with the help of God I will face each day as it comes. I try to empty myself to be filled with awareness, light, and love. I am ready to face each day with hope and believe that I have now learned the true meaning of living one day at a time.

"Yesterday's history.

Tomorrow's a mystery.

But today is a gift.

That's why we call it the present."

(This section of my project was completed on June 22,1998. I left for Vancouver on
Tuesday, June 23, 1998)

Evidently, my life has been turned upside down once more. Within a week everything has changed again. Although I felt a pang of fear after the results of my last blood tests, I was sure that everything would be all right. Perhaps, as my doctor in Fernie had suggested, the result was a higher number because of the fact that the tests had been done in a different laboratory. My Ca125 (tumour marker) blood level had gone up from about six to thirty-one. This was apparently still within the "normal" range and even non-cancer patients can have a level of anywhere from five to thirty-five. Apparently nobody has a zero level.

I drove for twelve hours straight to Vancouver on June 23, 1998 and arrived at my mother's place just as the sun was setting over the ocean. It was a beautiful clear evening. As far as I was concerned, I was simply here for a few days to keep appointments for my ultrasound on June 24 and my three-month check-up with my oncologist on June 29. All cancer survivors apparently have three-month check-ups for at least five years after their disease is "arrested". Oncologists never use the word "cured". I went to the hospital for routine blood tests on the Wednesday, June 24, so that the latest results would be available for my oncologist the following Monday. In the meantime I visited with my sister and my mother and enjoyed being back on the West Coast for a few days.

The next day I actually sent in a curricula vitae and application for a teaching job at an Independent School in West Vancouver. I still had not heard from my own school district (Southeast Kootenay) as to whether or not I had a job back there for September. On the Friday morning (June 26) after having fasted for my ultrasound overnight, I was

just on my way out the door when my principal from Sparwood Secondary School called to offer me a one-year position teaching Computer Education with one French class.

This would be an ideal position for me, and had been my first choice when I applied for jobs in that district, so I accepted the offer. Normally I would be very excited about this job as I have taught Business Education in the past and happen to know that this position will probably become a continuing one next year as I am acquainted with the incumbent who has no intention of returning after her leave of absence.

In the past, I would have been preparing and planning for my job all summer and looking forward to the actual teaching of my courses. My thoughts would have been on the teaching methods, strategies, ideas and approaches I would use with my students. Interestingly enough, the first thought that went through my mind after accepting this offer was that now at least now I knew I had a position this year and would continue to have BC Medical Insurance and Extended Health Care coverage in case I needed it again. That is one of the many ways that my feelings about teaching have changed. Although I still enjoy the work, it is now more important to me to have the security of medical coverage provided with that teaching position. How would I have managed to get through this past year without it?

Of course when I accepted that position, I did not yet know that my cancer had recurred. I still believed that I would be finishing my MEd this summer and returning to work this September. All of that was about to change the very day I accepted the job. This is another one of those ironic miracles that keep happening in my life lately. Had I

already known how ill I was, would I still have accepted the job? Perhaps I would have blurted out my dilemma and the offer would have been rescinded! Would I even have been offered the job? I had seen my principal a few times in May and June and he had seen how well I seemed to be. It would be nice to think that I will be well enough to return to work in September of 1998, but that doesn't appear possible now. I am very concerned about how I am going to inform my principal that I am currently very ill again after having been so grateful to be given this teaching assignment.

In any case, immediately after accepting the offer for my teaching job, I went to Lion's Gate Hospital for an ultrasound. Normally it takes about half an hour to have one. This one took two and a half hours. They were very concerned because of the fact that my tumour level had risen. The doctor explained to me that he thought there was something there, but it might just be scar tissue on my damaged kidneys. He explained that sometimes they looked too hard and thought they found things which really weren't there. He suggested I have a CAT scan as soon as possible.

Once again, the fact that my sister, Beth worked at that hospital was a blessing. It often takes weeks to get in for a CAT scan, but because she knew the right people, I was scheduled for Monday, June 29, 1998. I only had to wait for one weekend.

I did quite a bit of praying and soul-searching that weekend. Somehow I still believed that my cancer couldn't possibly be back since I had been so well for the past three months. There must be some kind of mistake.

(I had to stop here because I am once again experiencing the side affects of my chemotherapy. I had my first "round" for twelve straight hours of infusion on Thursday, July 2, 1998. My oncologist decided to use an aggressive approach this time. It is brutal. My skin is itchy and "crawling" and I have severe nausea. I cannot keep any food down today. My joints are aching. I am having several severe allergic reactions to these powerful chemicals. My hair loss will probably start by the middle of July. Here we go again! Obviously, those fearful feelings of recurrence that I was having while writing the first part of this account back in Fernie were not psychosomatic. My cancer was actually really growing while I was writing.)

Sunday, June 28, 1998 was the three-month anniversary of my father's death. It was a sad day for me and my family. For the first time, the thought crossed my mind [that day] that I might be the next one in my family to join him. Throughout my first bout with cancer I had never felt fatalistic or depressed, but with the knowledge of possible recurrence perhaps this would be God's plan for me after all.

I had to get these depressing thoughts out of my head. From past experience I knew that when I feel uncomfortable, irritated or depressed, it is generally fear that is controlling me. I know that God would not want me to live in fear, so I prayed and asked him to relieve me of that fear. My prayer worked. By the end of that day I realized that no matter what the outcome of my CAT scan was, I would face it with open-mindedness and a newfound determination to let go of my fears. Even if my diagnosis was positive, at least I would not be facing an unknown entity. I had lived through it once and I would

do so again.

The next day I had my CAT scan in the morning. The results were rushed to my oncologist as I had an appointment with him that afternoon. My sister, Beth, offered to come with me. As we waited in that waiting room I had a feeling of peacefulness and acceptance. Whatever was meant to be would be. I was not in control and had no say in the outcome. The doctor informed me that my disease had returned. This time I had a tumour somewhere between my right kidney and my liver. It was growing rapidly and would require immediate chemotherapy and surgery as soon as possible. Apparently, even with all those brutal chemicals, at least one micro-organism (and possibly more) had managed to survive in my abdominal cavity. Although it is not attached to any organ (yet), it is of vital importance to arrest it with more chemicals immediately.

From the results of my recent blood tests it was noted that my Ca125 (tumour level) had gone from thirty-one to sixty-four within one week. In other words, the tumour had grown from the size of a walnut to the size of a small lime in seven days. I was scheduled for a twelve-hour infusion of Taxol on July 2, 1998. This would be aggressive treatment which would now occur every two weeks rather than every three and would be infused in one long dose rather than three four-hour doses. Because the previous chemotherapy had damaged my kidneys so badly a different kind of chemotherapy, Taxol, would be used this time. Although it will not damage my kidneys any further, it may damage my liver, which is now healthy, and has several other more severe side effects. The dreaded hair loss is inevitable. I cried a little and asked several

questions about my future. It was good to have my sister there with me.

The first thing I said to her when we left Dr. Klimo's office was, "Well, at least Dad isn't around to know this." Thankfully, he died thinking I was well and recovering from this insidious disease. Maybe God's timing was good after all. Also, I now know that I will still have medical coverage this year, thanks to that job offer in Sparwood that came just before my diagnosis. If I surrender to my fears and look at this as God's will rather than my own, I know that I can find peace, gratitude, and spiritual security. I still truly believe that peace will be possible for me only when I let go of expectations.

When I returned to my mother's apartment that afternoon it was difficult to tell her what was happening to me. I worried that I would, once again, be intruding on her life by asking to stay with her for the duration of my treatment. Of course my fears were laid to rest the moment I told her my news. She welcomed the idea and said that it would be good for her to have me here. She is having difficulty dealing with living alone, taking responsibility for legal and administrative affairs, and loss of appetite after my father's death. She has developed anaemia and is constantly fatigued. She is having difficulty sorting things out, getting rid of my father's things and simply facing life alone on a daily basis. So, in a strange way it is a blessing that my illness has recurred. We are able to help each other and deepen our relationship as mother and daughter. I would never have ended up living with my mother if my cancer had not returned.

On the Tuesday, June 30, 1998 I actually was called to come in for a job interview for the teaching job I had applied for at an Independent School in West Vancouver. I

decided to go for the interview even though I know I will probably not be able to work in September. That interview was scheduled for Friday afternoon, July 3, 1998, directly after my release from the hospital. I did not tell the principal that I was sick. Whether or not I am offered the job remains to be seen.

In preparation for my chemotherapy on Thursday, I was required to take several medications on July 1. For some of them I had to set an alarm clock for 3 am and 5 am. The required pre-chemo drugs must be taken exactly as instructed by the oncologist. These included anti-allergen, anti-inflammatory, anti-nausea and corticosteroids. Although I detest having to take pills, I now have no choice in the matter. This will be my regular routine every two weeks for the next few months. Needless to say, I am not looking forward to it.

The following morning I checked into the hospital where I was to stay overnight. I was placed on an intravenous drip of chemotherapy from 11 a.m. to 11p.m. I was warned that side affects such as nausea, vomiting, skin rash, swelling, itching, sore joints, fatigue and mouth sores would probably begin within two or three days. The needles were very painful. I had now already had my IV port removed after my last treatment so this time it had to be administered through a vein in my left wrist. That wrist is still painful.

Immediately after checking out on the morning of Friday, July 3, 1998 I went and dressed for my job interview that afternoon. The interview seemed to go well although I have not yet heard anything. The following morning, July 4, I woke up very early and

drove home to Fernie for twelve straight hours. I had to get back there and get my things, dismantle my computer, and make arrangements with the University of Lethbridge before my side effects started to kick in. I barely managed to do so. Somehow this all seemed so familiar. There was a definite sense of déjà vu. The same thing had happened last October when I thought I'd only be in Vancouver for a week or two. This time I had thought I would only be here for a only few days and that I would spend the month of July between Fernie BC and Lethbridge working on my Education 6000 project.

I returned to Vancouver on July 8, 1998 with a full load in my car in preparation for the next several months. Most important in this load were my computer and my University of Lethbridge materials. This time the drive took about fourteen hours and I was beginning to experience nausea and a terribly itchy skin. By the time I arrived back in West Vancouver that night I was covered in itchy red spots and hives from head to toe. I had to go to Emergency where I was given an injection of benadryl. This rash has lasted for a week and I am now also taking antihistamines which cause drowsiness and dizziness. This dependence on a medical regimen is difficult to become used to, but I have painfully discovered that if I forget to take a certain medication at a certain time, I suffer the consequences.

(I was unable to write for two days at this point due to nausea, itching, fatigue and vomiting. After more blood tests it was found that my tumour level had still risen even after a round of very aggressive chemotherapy. That level is now up to ninety-seven this week from sixty-four last week and thirty-one the week before. This is a rapidly-growing

aggressive tumour and will require even more brutal chemotherapy this time.)

As I read what I have written in the past week I can see that my entire life focus has been narrowed down to my illness and its treatment. My thoughts have become more and more microscopic and other things that were once very important no longer seem to matter much. There were minutes of absolute terror while I waited for the results of my blood tests. Having frequent, if not daily contact with my doctors and medical professionals has become "the norm" once more. I have become so busy being sick and trying to get well, that it is difficult to consider what the rest of my life will be like once-- and if--I reach remission again. I am consumed with getting through the next hurdle, the next round of chemotherapy, the next blood tests. First, there were to be nine chemotherapy treatments. Now, there are seven left. If my tumour level does not go down after the next round of chemo, I will require major surgery in August.

I am attempting to keep a gratitude journal again and each day I try to remember all the things I have to be grateful for. As long as I can maintain the humility to be grateful for what I have, I believe that God will continue to provide for me.

Today is July 18, 1998. I have just completed my second round of chemotherapy at Lion's Gate Hospital. This time they administered a forty-eight hour infusion of Taxol and kept me there for three days and two nights. I just returned to my mother's apartment last night and am exhausted and aching. My hair is falling out again. This is very depressing. My hands and feet are numb and tingling, so it is difficult for me to type. I feel "shell-shocked" that this is happening all over again. Even though I've been

through it once before, it does not seem to be any easier this time. I will not be able to continue with this account much longer. I am trying to remain philosophical about the whole thing, but must eliminate some of the stress from my life at this point.

I know that I am very fortunate compared to some cancer patients. During and after cancer, every woman experiences days when her patience and emotions are tried to the limit. Often survivors must face the continuing demands of work, of raising children, and of keeping house while balancing concerns about their health and the possibility of recurrent illness. Others may fight off feelings of isolation and depression as they cope with a battered self-image, altered relationships, or circumstances that force them to face recovery alone. At least I am not completely alone and do not have to worry about working or raising children at the moment.

Throughout my life, and particularly throughout my Master of Education program at the University of Lethbridge, education has been very important to me. I long to continue learning and growing. Relationships with other human beings are now more important to me than ever before. Whether that relationship is with family and friends or with my colleagues and students, I remain hopeful that in some small way my part in that relationship can be of some benefit to others. I do know that if ever a student or a colleague of mine is facing a serious illness, I will be much more understanding of his or her feelings. Perhaps it really is true that we never know how it feels until we've actually been there ourselves. I must be positive about my recovery from this illness and believe that I will be back in the classroom, perhaps by second semester, February, 1999.

The process of writing about my experience, particularly after my cancer recurred at the end of June, 1998 has helped me to reflect upon my life, first as a human being and second as an educator. Where do I go from here? For the time being I must attend to my illness and learn to pace myself, take care of myself physically, mentally and spiritually, and be grateful for the excellent medical care that is available to me.

As a teacher, where do I as a human being belong? In posing that question I acknowledge my own need for integration, for a drawing together of the strands of my existence, and for a sense of wholeness rather than compartmentalization. What do I do when I teach and why do I do it? If I reflect critically on my own practice as a teacher it is simultaneously elating and frightening. It takes me into a terrain which is ever-changing in which I struggle to articulate what I believe to be true. While as a teacher I have always been a designated leader, I realize that I do not always know the way; nor do I know where my students and I will eventually arrive. I often have to rely on my students' good sense as well as my own. We are journeying together. The uncertainty is comforting while at the same time uncomfortable.

Writing this account involved struggle, more than I can adequately convey. I began to ask questions about my future in education as well as simply my personal future, and at times I was afraid of what I might discover. But the writing left me with a dawning of what felt like a new insight; that this, too, shall pass and there seems to be a reason for everything, although I may not understand what it is. With regard to teaching, I believe that my teaching is integral to my sense of community. What will keep me in

teaching when I am well is my desire to be more human, to involve myself with the humanity of others. I am no longer a teacher only; I am a teacher/student in the school of life.