



MY CANCER IS ME

*THE JOURNEY FROM
ILLNESS TO WHOLENESS*

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A New Mountain to Climb

'I'm going to die,' was my very first thought when the doctor calmly announced my cancer diagnosis on a cold and dark day in December 2001.

Simultaneously, I experienced a strange disorientation. Time seemed to slow down, and the doctor's words came and went as though they were emerging from a warped record. I felt a choking sensation in my throat as if all the air had been sucked out, and I could not breathe.

'What's going to happen to my family, who will look after them?' I asked myself, but no answers were forthcoming. It was all a blank. 'Why me ... what have I done to deserve this?' surfaced soon after. In a trembling voice, I called Nilima and asked her to rush to the hospital. Then, in that tiny, windowless waiting room, I broke down and howled, with rage, anguish and hopelessness all rolled into one. I felt as if I had been brutally attacked, fundamentally violated and even betrayed in some way, even though it wasn't clear how or by whom.

Every individual who receives a cancer diagnosis knows what I am talking about; many people have recounted similar experiences. Irrespective of age, gender, socio-economic background or nationality, cancer comes as a shock. It punches a hole through your sense of self, your very identity, leaving you in a very fragile and vulnerable place. Think back to the moment when you first heard your own diagnosis: what happened within you?

My cancer diagnosis was so sudden that I was very disoriented, and desperate to regain some semblance of safety and security in my life. Therefore, I did what comes naturally in moments of crisis: I externalized the illness. To face this life-threatening situation, my instinctive coping strategy was to distance myself from the threat. Besides, as far as I knew, all my previous illnesses, whether minor ones like a common cold or a stomach bug, or something more serious like malaria, jaundice or chickenpox, had been caused by

external agents like bacteria and viruses that are 'out there' in the environment. How was I to even suspect that my cancer was any different?

My sense of disorientation continued after my surgery. I had never been hospitalized before, and even though I was being looked after very well in a good London hospital, I felt as if the real 'me' had disappeared behind my hospital gown, the machines and medicines. Everyone's attention was focused on removing my diseased colon and the tumours therein as quickly and as efficiently as possible, which they accomplished. Fortunately, Nilima was by my side throughout the ordeal and various relatives, colleagues and friends came to visit and spend quality time with me. Their warmth and presence were a welcome reminder to me that I was still a real and complete person and not just a hospital number!

The doctors gave me the choice of taking chemotherapy as a precautionary measure. They did not mandate it as the medical statistics were inconclusive in my case: I had two tumours that were localized in the large intestine; they had not affected any lymph nodes or spread to other parts of the body. Consequently, I was told that with chemotherapy, my cancer had a 28% chance of recurrence and without it, a 30% chance of recurrence. Considering this tiny 2% gap between the two options, and keeping in mind all that I knew about the debilitating side effects of chemotherapy, I decided against it. However, the fear of a recurrence persisted; I'm sure every cancer patient will recognize this lurking fear within. To give myself the best chance of remaining free of cancer, I tried

various alternative healing therapies and treatments; these were a great help. (We will talk about these techniques in detail later in the book.)

My Cancer Is Me

After the surgery, as I slowly regained my strength, I was keen to get back to work and to resume my regular life; in fact, my doctors encouraged me to do so. At work, though all my colleagues and clients were warm and welcoming, I felt quite disconnected from this familiar environment. Something had changed for me, even though my external circumstances at work remained the same. I began to realize that I had changed.

Initially, I thought it was a typical post-traumatic depression that would soon pass. I know now that what I was experiencing at the time was actually very significant. A painful and traumatic experience like cancer completely redefines normalcy; once you are diagnosed with such an illness, there is no going back to life as you have known it. If every aspect of life - physical, personal, social, professional - is shaken to the core, nothing can remain normal anymore! After my cancer diagnosis, I felt like Rip Van Winkle, the storybook character who lay asleep for 20 years and woke up to a totally new reality. The dissonance within me began to affect how I viewed my life, where I was in my life and who I was as a person.

I went through a gradual process of introspection; I also threw myself into the fields of holistic health and integrated medicine. I came to understand that in order to truly be healed of my cancer, I had to stop viewing it as external and separate from myself. The cancer was not something outside me but a part of me, occurring within my cells when one single cell went awry (see chapter 3 for more on this). But, as I comprehended the cellular beginnings of cancer, I also sensed that cancer was not just a biological process. In fact, the biological process was pointing to something much deeper and larger ... it was pointing to me, Vijay Bhat, with my thoughts, feelings, behaviour, relationships and ... my very soul. This was an epiphanic moment for me: I saw and acknowledged that at an existential level, my cancer was about myself.

I was reading a great deal at this time, and I learnt about people who had successfully overcome their cancer experience by working on themselves (along with addressing their cancer at the physical level). For example, some people had resolved childhood traumas, some had healed broken relationships, others had adopted entirely new lifestyles and still others had started to actively pursue their dreams. I began to see that by addressing the challenges in their lives or by seizing new opportunities, people seemed to have actually healed their cancers. I began to examine myself and my life and wondered if my cancer was a reflection of the life I had lived and the person I had been (and still was). If this was indeed true, then it led me to the inescapable conclusion that since my life was

about me, my cancer was also about me. With this insight, the truth finally dawned on me that all my questions lay within; and so did all my answers. I had turned a full 180 degrees from my initial instinctive reaction of externalizing my illness.

As my perception of myself, both past and present, began to change, so did my sense of the future. I saw that the life I had to live from this time onwards would have to be quite different from the life that I had known so far. This was a real turning point for me, and, from here on, my journey became more inward and reflective. I went through a painful process of 'deconstructing' myself within, at all levels - physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and systemic, in order to analyze myself and understand what had really happened to me. This was followed by a process of 'reconstruction,' where I had to develop a new sense of self and new ways of functioning at all levels. I will explain this process at length later in the book. 'My cancer is me' is not an easy concept to accept or internalize, but I believe it is central to the cancer journey and ultimately, the most important and empowering step you can take in your transition from illness to healing. That is why we will explore it in depth and return to it many times in this book.

Cancer: An Opportunity for Self-transcendence

What is self-transcendence? Is it just about facing setbacks in life and bouncing back from them? Not quite.

Self-transcendence actually means to grow beyond the self. Think of your normal life as operating at level zero, your base level. You experience minor ups and downs but broadly, your life maintains a stable equilibrium. Suddenly, you face a traumatic event. For example, a close family member may unexpectedly pass away or you may lose your job without warning. As you go into shock, the equilibrium in your life goes down to, say, minus five, which is a situation where you are deeply shaken and far from a state of equilibrium. But you are made of sterner stuff. You face the music; you gather all your resources and deal with the situation you are in. In a few weeks or months, you come to terms with your loss and with determined effort, you claw your way back to 'normal,' that is, you bring your life back to base level, as it was before the event. You have coped with the setback admirably, but this is not self-transcendence.

Self-transcendence means going well beyond base level. Self-transcendence can only take place in an inner environment where, faced with a similar situation, returning to base level no longer satisfies you and you have the urge to go beyond mere coping, beyond your previous benchmark of normalcy, to find and settle at a newer and higher equilibrium. What would you have to do and how would you have to grow if that newer and higher equilibrium was pegged at level five? To go from minus five to plus five is a huge stretch. You will need a completely different mindset and a new set of resources to significantly raise your game. In fact, you have to use the trauma as the springboard to reach this higher level.

When you approach your situation with the purpose of such growth, you will notice that the trauma becomes a mirror in which you can see yourself more clearly, and that same trauma will give you access to inner resources that you didn't know you had within. With this deeper self-awareness and the application of your newly discovered resources, you can grow beyond your previously set boundaries: you transcend yourself. Self-transcendence is hard because you have to set a higher vision for yourself at a time when you are very vulnerable and when getting back to normal itself is difficult to accomplish.

I have reached the conclusion that cancer created an opportunity for me to transcend my normal, egocentric self, the person I had been all this while. It became the impetus for me to move into a totally new realm of who I could be. That ability to transcend the self did not come from facing all the trials and tribulations of daily life; it came because my very existence was threatened and because I had to - and chose to - confront my own mortality.

First, I took responsibility for my illness; and this was a crucial step. I hasten to add that taking responsibility does not mean blaming oneself or feeling victimized. On the contrary, taking responsibility means making choices with awareness and taking the onus for the consequences of these choices. For example, I decided to value 'life' over 'lifestyle' and feel OK with this choice, without being bogged down or crowded in by all the different points of view from the external world. Taking responsibility also meant that I accepted every possible

outcome of my illness including an early death, a cancer recurrence, the inability to be a productive worker, a likely loss of income, a significant downsizing of lifestyle and not being able to provide my children a world-class education. After all, how could I take responsibility for my healing if I could not take responsibility for my illness?

The idea of taking responsibility for one's illness is not a popular one at all. Human nature is such that most people tend to do exactly the opposite, that is, avoid taking responsibility for themselves and, instead, hold external causes or circumstances responsible for their illness. It is easier to blame someone or something else for one's troubles rather than take responsibility for one's own reactions; it is easier to be a victim than to be in charge of one's life. Further, taking responsibility also requires confronting and accepting yourself at the deepest and darkest levels of your being. It is extremely difficult, at least in the early days, to own up to one's own role in creating or even contributing to one's experience. But when you stay connected to these deep and dark aspects of yourself, and work through the natural feelings of guilt, despondency and even depression that set in, you will find an extraordinary release of positive feeling and a new state of freedom and empowerment that is capable of taking you to a newer and higher level of equilibrium than ever before. This is what we call self-transcendence.

My own journey will unfold for you over the next few chapters, but for the moment, I'd like to share the key stages of my transition from 'trauma' to 'transcendence' with you:

- Stage 1: Experiencing cancer and its accompanying trauma.
- Stage 2: Recognizing that I am not the only person who has been affected by cancer.
- Stage 3: Accepting cancer as a part of my life.
- Stage 4: Finding the motivation and determination to manage my cancer experience in the best ways possible.
- Stage 5: Redefining myself and my priorities by using cancer as a springboard.
- Stage 6: 'Making' meaning and accepting the cancer experience as an opportunity for my growth.
- Stage 7: Cultivating the resources to walk on a new path.
- Stage 8: Using my experience and growth to benefit others.

Once Nilima and I stopped viewing cancer as a rude interruption to our comfortable lives, we came to accept that our experience was not only about us: we felt we were being called to play a larger role in the world. In this existential exploration, my intrinsic gift revealed itself to me: a clarity of thought and expression that made me an effective communicator and coach. This insight gave a new direction and momentum to my life. My first career, in advertising, was a personal passion and very fulfilling, but after over 20 years in the business, I had a sense that it was ending. Cancer only accelerated this transition. However, it took me a second surgery (to repair an intestinal perforation caused by scar tissue left behind after the first surgery) a couple of years later, to make the big move: I left my comfortable corporate career, returned to India and started afresh as an independent

leadership consultant to corporate clients, as well as a cancer coach to support other people battling with cancer.

To begin with, individuals and families began to approach us informally, simply to learn from our experience. Slowly, we started organizing workshops with small groups to share our insights and experiences in a more structured manner. Then, we began to conduct week-long intensive residential retreats where participants were given a full and deep experience of our approach to cancer and its healing, as outlined in this book. Now, we have set up an organization to increase the scope of our work with cancer so that more people can benefit.

As we explored the field of cancer more actively, we were delighted to see that my journey of self-transcendence was neither a fluke nor a rarity. It is not just the famous celebrity survivors or well-known authors who inspire us but also the many ordinary people around the world, affected by different types of cancers and in different stages of the illness, who have not only survived but have actually grown from their experience. We invite you to do the same. Don't lose hope; instead, grow in confidence!

The cornerstone of this book is that with cancer, you can run but you can't hide. While your natural instinct may lead you to externalize your cancer, we urge you to go beyond this and to see your cancer in a new light. Of course, it won't be easy. You will not only push against centuries of fear-based social conditioning but you will also ask uncomfortable questions of yourself and the current paradigm of mainstream medicine.

We believe it is well worth it because what awaits you on the other side is priceless: your healing, growth and a better quality of life.

A New Language, a New Mindset

I discovered two things very early in my cancer experience. First, the need for statistics: everyone threw statistics at me. It seems that statistics are a defence mechanism to depersonalize and objectify a really painful experience; nobody really wants to dwell on the human aspect of the suffering. And, the statistics are so overwhelming and chilling that they ignore the 'survivors,' the people who live beyond five years of their cancer diagnosis and are considered cured by Western medical standards. In fact, statistics serve to bury thousands of success stories. These are life-affirming and empowering stories of people who we call 'anecdotes,' rare folks who overcome the odds and actually grow from their cancer experience. Relative to the statistics, they may be small in number, but in absolute terms there are literally thousands of people around the world who have successfully transcended their cancer, and are inspiring many others to do the same.

Second, the existing language around cancer is not only limiting but actually defeatist. Terms such as the 'big C,' 'cancer monster,' 'scourge of mankind' and 'internal terrorist' are often used to describe cancer, and they imply that cancer is bigger and stronger than the people who get it. This kind of

language reflects a collective mindset filled with such deep-rooted fear and insecurity that it imprisons people in a cage of their own making.

In the same way, the terms used to describe someone affected by cancer are also restrictive. I don't like being called a 'survivor'; instead, I call myself a 'thriver.' Survivorship suggests that I am barely treading water and somehow staying afloat until the next wave comes along to give me another dunking. By contrast, my 'thrivership' has made me a better person and given a new meaning to my life. Who I am and the work I do today is more fulfilling than who I was and what I did in my international corporate career. I also don't like to be called a cancer 'patient'; I prefer to be called a cancer 'impatient': I am eager to get past my cancer experience and get on with the rest of my life, rather than wallow in self-pity as a victim. What if one could change this limiting language, focusing on the person instead of the disease in a way that is positive and empowering? This change would actually result in a crucial shift in perception. Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) postulates that the language one uses has a direct impact on one's neurology (how the brain works) and is ultimately expressed in one's behaviour. So, if you use language with negative tones or meanings, it will have a disabling effect and conversely, positive language will have an enabling effect. We believe that the human spirit is far bigger, stronger and more optimistic than anything cancer can throw at you; and your language needs to reflect this. That's why I

don't want to be just a 'statistic' and die on schedule; I want to be an 'anecdote' who lives long and well. I hope you do too.

Becoming an Anecdote, a Thriver and an Impatient

Over the years, we have met and worked with many people who we can truly call thrivers, anecdotes and impatient. Based on some common characteristics that all of them seem to possess, we give you some guidelines that will help you become such an empowered person.

- Reclaim your power. Cancer makes you feel vulnerable, fragile and powerless. The doctors, your family members and even your priest seem to have the power in your situation and tell you what to do and what not to do, albeit with the best intent. While this may be fine in the early days, it is unfortunate that most people who get cancer never really reclaim their power. But at some point, irrespective of the prognosis, you must reclaim your power. It is only when you take responsibility for yourself and your actions that your 'new' life can unfold; otherwise, you will be living on someone else's terms, not yours.
- Take the fork in the road. Unlike most other illnesses, cancer is not a 'bump,' a minor hurdle you can go over, but a 'fork' in the road. Cancer means not only changing your

priorities and the intensity with which you live but actually taking a new direction, something that life is pushing you towards. However tempting it may be to go back to your life as it was, this option is likely to be unrealistic. You need to be strong enough, both physically and emotionally, to look inwards and discover that new and purposeful path. In fact, research shows that people who take the fork in the road have a better chance of being an anecdote than a statistic.

- Access inner resources. Cancer is a mysterious disease and most people feel unprepared and under-resourced in responding to it. While your natural tendency is to look for external resources, the real wisdom is to be found in your inner resources. I learnt this first-hand as I explored every level and aspect of myself. I was fortunate to have excellent guides and, with their help, found myself in contact with a deeper part of me that I had never been in touch with before. This contact with my inner self was extremely empowering because it provided access to resources within me - equilibrium, equanimity, resilience, discernment and confidence - that have a sweeter and richer quality than anything that is available in the external world. Paradoxically, I also learnt that accessing my inner resources first gave me insights that showed me how to best use my external resources. There is no dearth of information on cancer, but it is either too clinical or technical to absorb, or it consists of diverse and unproven theories that are difficult to synthesize. This can be a real challenge for individuals and families, so it

is far better to find your inner compass first and then use it to sift, sort and select the most appropriate external resources.

- Focus on the quality of life. Modern society is preoccupied with extending one's life as much as possible. This often becomes an obsession when it comes to cancer because the statistics nudge you to measure life in terms of weeks, months or even years rather than in decades. Thrivers and anecdotes march to a different drumbeat. They pay attention to how well they can live rather than how long they should live. The focus is on living positively, creatively and spontaneously, enjoying each moment rather than living for the next birthday. Interestingly, studies show that improving your quality of life can indirectly increase your quantity of life.

- Offer your insights and experience to help others. Because cancer gets to the root of the universal fear of death, it naturally puts one in touch with one's own humanity and arouses profound compassion for the suffering of others. Anecdotes not only experience this compassion within but also turn it into action so that other people can benefit; for instance, they volunteer their time, effort, and money (if they can afford it) to support groups and awareness-creating or advocacy-based activities such as arranging cancer screening camps or raising funds for needy patients and families. Modern medicine now accepts that compassionate service is a positive and therapeutic activity that nourishes and revitalizes the giver as much as it does the receiver; reaching out to help others contributes to one's own healing. Buddhist and

Christian traditions have known this for millennia. From my own experience, I know this to be a fact. This book is one small initiative to share what Nilima and I have learnt; when you read, internalize and benefit from this book, my cancer experience will not have been in vain as it serves a larger purpose and a greater good. In this way, you are helping me to heal as well. Thank you, I am very grateful!

Notes and references

1. Lawrence LeShan, *Cancer as a Turning Point* (first published 1990, revised edition 1994), New York, Plume/Penguin Putnam, pp. 30-73.
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