

CHAPTER 10

GETTING THE NEWS



I never thought I would write a book about my spiritual transformation, nor did I think I would get diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor at the age of fifty-one. Then again, it is only because of the tumor that I now awaken daily to the depth of my connection to God. Just as daily what is unnecessary falls away.

Lately, even my sense of priorities has shifted. Only a while ago my ‘terminal’ story was about holding on to whatever I could of the physical, emotional, and personal me. I wanted longevity and vitality. I wanted continued association with my peers. I wanted to continue being a mother. There was a sense of unfinished business that burned in me. Now, the affairs and concerns of life are nowhere near as intriguing or inviting.

This transition began several years before I knew I had cancer. The symptoms of illness first showed up in the way I interacted with others. Inexplicably my behavior began to change. I morphed from this competent, energetic, intelligent adult into someone subject to waves of

anxiety and odd compulsions. I went from being steady and reliable to someone constantly knocked off her stride.

I started seeking help from psychiatrists and using psychotropic drugs to alleviate the worst of the apprehension and compulsiveness. Nothing brought me back to balance. Nothing stopped the downward spiral. I became more and more forgetful and out of touch with reality until just being around me became unnerving for everyone, including me.

By the end of 2009, I was subject to mild seizures. Even so, it was not until May 2010 that a housemate who is also a nurse witnessed one of my seizures as we sat together in our living room. She insisted that I see a neurologist immediately. Within a week, I had an MRI and soon thereafter, a biopsy. Within no time I was back in the doctor's office to receive 'the news.'

I was told that I had an aggressive form of cancer in both frontal lobes of the brain known as an oligodendroglioma. It was too large and too close to my speech center to be surgically removed. I was told that the tumor might have been growing in my brain for up to ten years. It was the cause of my odd behavior and soon might affect my speech and other brain functions. It was Grade Three (out of Four), malignant and invasive. If not dealt with aggressively, the cancer could kill me within a short period of time.

My first reaction was shocked disbelief. Right after receiving this terrible news, I went to lunch with J.M. and several other close friends. My stomach was in my throat. I was speechless and couldn't even cry. I just kept hearing the words "huge" and "Stage Three" echoing in my ears.

As soon as the food was ordered, I started to apologize for my behavior. In the middle of this apology, one of my friends (who is also a doctor) warned me not to identify with this monster of guilt that had me judging myself about how I had behaved when there was no choice in the matter. He recommended I find acceptance and said no one was to blame. Yes,

I had a horrible disease; yes, it was natural to be overwhelmed by dread; and yes, it was also treatable even if it was not curable.

It took days for the initial panic to wear off. Once it did, I got to work. I was determined to make my life and environment conducive to spiritual consciousness and healing. This meant taking care of business, everything completed and in its place, nothing unfinished and nothing blocking my connection with God.

The surgeon who did my biopsy introduced me to a well known oncologist, Dr. Ed Arenson, the head of the Hematology/Oncology Department at the Swedish Medical Center in Englewood, Colorado. As I quickly learned, once I was in his care, Dr. Arenson is a man of great compassion, a wise man, a holy man. He is also an artist. The walls of his office are filled with his colorful, free-flowing art.

Swedish Medical Center offers support groups for Dr. Arenson's patients, followed by healing services that Dr. A leads himself. The services include live musicians, poetry readings and an altar representing many religions. That his altar is so like Kalindi's altar in its embrace of all world religions made me feel so welcome and comfortable in the good doctor's presence.

At the core of Dr. A's practice lies a passionate belief that God's hand is involved in everything Dr. A does, from painting to the love and care of those afflicted with brain and spinal tumors. In my case, Dr. A proposed a very aggressive treatment program.

When I first entered Dr. A's care, I was less engaged in preparing for the end and more optimistic that chemotherapy and radiation would destroy the tumor and I would go on about my life. I should have known better. As they say, the writing was on the wall. From the beginning, I was warned that I would never return to my former state of normal brain function and thereby regain full mental acuity. No matter what, my intellectual capacity would continue to diminish, and who I thought I was before my diagnosis would never be me again.

Dr. A mapped out a year-long treatment program. All told, I had eight rounds of chemotherapy over a ten-month period. Because the chemo ‘cocktail’ I took caused my platelets to drop precipitately, I received seven platelet transfusions all told and, ultimately, had to end the program early.

I felt such a letdown when forced to stop this course of treatment. I wanted the chemotherapy to do its job and then to be done with it. After ten months, my sense of optimism took a blow. Even so, my MRIs suggested that the treatment had been relatively successful. It had done what it was supposed to do; the tumor had shrunk considerably.

Now I had to build my immune system back before beginning radiation. It took six weeks before Dr. A gave me the go-ahead. For the next seven weeks I received radiation every day five days a week. I was told that radiation would be a piece of cake compared to chemotherapy. I found it harder. I was tired most of the time and had frequent headaches. Then I began to isolate myself when my hair started falling out.



**Getting my head shaved by Gina,
my caregiver, in June 2011**



Bald and beautiful

Both chemo and radiation made me feel sick. I was queasy practically all the time. Smoking marijuana was the only thing that helped to settle the waves of nausea. I tried to smoke only when necessary, and eventually caught on to using a vaporizer instead of a pipe to spare my lungs. Although the chemo was physically challenging, it was not until I started radiation that I began to lose my hair. It came out in clumps, leaving bald spots here and there. I couldn't stand to watch it. So, like many cancer patients before me, I shaved my head.

During this time the nausea caused by radiation wasn't the only thing that churned me up inside. On one level, losing my hair was small potatoes. Even the thought of death was not so terrible when set beside loss of brain function. To lose my mind was utterly appalling.

My first reaction after hearing what might happen to my mind was to think, "Oh, shit! I'm going to be a mentally-challenged person who eventually turns into a vegetable." How can I break free without that mental sharpness Kalindi refers to on so many of her talks? Isn't mental acuity a prerequisite for breaking the cycle of birth and death? And yes,

beneath it all skulked this belief that a big part of my self-worth was tied up in my superior intelligence.

Brainpower was one of my greatest attributes. I was born bright. “Be sharp!” “Wake up!” Kalindi would often say to us. What was my fate if I became dull-witted?

These fears washed over me completely after Kalindi died. When I turned to The Lady to ask if losing my mind would destroy all chance of making it Home, she assured me that one’s spiritual awareness operates outside the confines of the mind. On a phone call in December 2010, she told me that a brain tumor may affect my ability to function in the material world, but it wouldn’t impair my connection to God. Her exact words were:

If your consciousness is fully immersed in Home and desire, even while this [brain tumor] goes on in the material body, you have your connection. That’s what you’re striving for.

Even as I was afraid for my mind, I was also aware that somehow I was less afraid in general. I can’t say when this began. I do know that it began soon after the diagnosis, and it came as a completely unexpected blessing. None of the diagnoses or treatments frightened me, not even when I needed platelet transfusions to bolster my depleted bone marrow. For me this response was very strange. Fear had been such a close companion throughout my life. Where once I’d regularly chanted Kalindi’s warning, “Don’t let the fear stop you,” now I realized there is practically nothing left for me to fear.

It feels like the presence of God now fills those spaces once controlled by fear. As an added benefit, there is much less struggle around what I must give up. For example, during my cancer treatment, I gave up driving because of the potential side effects. I was subject to seizures and bouts of exhaustion. At the same time, I gave up virtually all social interaction because of my depleted immune system. During those days

I felt particularly unwell, I gave up spending time with my daughter. Even though I had found a feeling of peace about dying, I was still determined to give it my best shot to beat this thing. Why else would I fly to Brazil to see John of God thirty-six hours after my last radiation treatment?

John of God and Giving Up Hope



John of God, February 2012

João de Deus or John of God has a worldwide reputation as one of the most powerful mediums alive. He may well be the most famous healer presently on earth. João is a humble man with no formal medical

training. According to him, he gives over his consciousness to the spirits of former doctors and known saints. These entities present teachings, give talks, and examine the thousands who line up to receive their counsel. When called for, the entities conduct visible and invisible (i.e., energetic rather than hands-on) operations that are scheduled three days a week at the Casa. Since João discovered his gift as a teenager more than half a century ago, some fifteen million people have been treated at the Casa. John claims on his website:

I do not cure anybody. God heals, and in His infinite goodness permits the Entities to heal and console my brothers. I am merely an instrument in God's divine hands.

On the second day of my trip, The Lady called me, not knowing that I had flown to Brazil. Her reaction and guidance were clear. On our phone call of August 2, 2011, she said:

If you are going [to see John of God] searching for miraculous healing, you are making a spiritual mistake. Ultimately you have to give up hope. . . . This state is paramount to achieving a high state of God consciousness before death. Everything must be given up, except your hope in God. God must become your only solace. . . . This is a serious juncture for you.

In my response to The Lady, I said I would meditate on her guidance, and that I wasn't sure if I should have come to Brazil at all. I even wavered about what to do that afternoon when I was scheduled to have a 'spiritual surgery' (energetic, rather than physical). Having already come to Brazil with a friend who would have had to leave with me, I chose to stay and keep the appointment. It was a very difficult decision for me, but in a way I had no choice. I didn't have the strength at that point to fly back to the U.S., especially not on my own.

After the procedure I went into a twenty-four-hour recovery period during which there were to be no distractions. During that post-operative period, I was brought my meals in bed and otherwise instructed to do nothing but sleep, pray, and meditate. My prayer was:

Father, please purify me of all illusion before I stand before you at the time of my death.

I prayed that prayer continuously. Even during the sixteen hours that I slept the prayer stayed with me. During sleep I also revisited scenes from my life. It felt as though I made a return trip to Varanasi, India, a holy place of pilgrimage for Hindus who come to purify themselves in the sacred waters of the Ganges. Everything goes on in that river: laundry is washed, children are bathed, people die and are cremated, and in my dream, I bathed as one of the multitude who came for healing and purification.

Later, I floated in and out of my childhood. The scenes came and went. In one of them, I was sledding in Central Park with my older brother. In another, I was splashing water over my baby brother's body, bathing him as I had bathed myself in the Ganges.

I even saw myself in that bed in my hotel room in Brazil. Only now, instead of a clean and airy compartment, all around me was piss and shit on the floor. If I got off the bed, I would have to step in it. The stench was horrible. I thought I would suffocate. And then it was over, and I was being picked up by the 'Light Beings' who came *en masse* to gather me up in their company. Somehow, I knew that each of those dreams was directly related to my purification.

When I awoke, I thought about what The Lady had said, that "God must become my only solace." There were no more treatments for me to follow. Neither the conventional nor the unconventional could keep me alive. Everything I'd been doing with an eye to recovery was driven by

my desire to live. And now, at the end of that twenty-four hours, I had come to a much different perspective.

For me to achieve ultimate freedom, I must change my consciousness. The way I'd held myself inside was no longer appropriate. It was this The Lady was addressing. I wrote The Lady the following response:

Friday, August 5, 2011

Dearest Lady,

The guidance you gave me when we spoke a few days ago made me look long and hard at the gravity of my predicament once again. I have been asking myself some questions I hadn't asked before:

- Did I come to Brazil to see John of God for miraculous healing?*
- Do I maintain hope that healing from the cancer at this stage is even possible?*
- Am I approaching my life and my treatment from the highest God consciousness I possibly can?*

After we spoke, I spent the next twenty-four hours in prayer and meditation, seeking answers. Even though I do not believe I will ever be completely free from this cancer, I understand now that I will not advance as fast as I need to spiritually to break free in this lifetime if I continue to allow the mechanism of denial and false hope to go on.

The truth is that I have sought to prolong my life through whatever healing modalities I have chosen over the past year, which is not wrong in and of itself, but the serious mistake I have made is to not pursue the highest consciousness you are directing me toward: that is, to put all of my hope in God and have Him be "my only solace." This seems to be the main teaching I return to again and again: Find comfort in Him and Him alone.

The Lady offered me so much help from the beginning of this journey. She implored me not to waste time looking for a miraculous cure, but to focus instead on my desire for the Lord. Because of her guidance, I came to understand how much time I have wasted hanging on to false hopes based on my expectations of how life should be. I also realized how often I open the door to negative thoughts, judgments and discouragement. None of these belongs in the repertoire of someone dying. Kalindi says that at the time of death, “The only thing that matters is the love of God.” The Lady suggested that, in my current state, now would be a good time to let go of everything but my desire for Home.

As always, my daughter, Kaya, stood by me even when she did not understand where I was going and what I must do to get there. Kaya and I have a history of facing things together. Two years ago, it was a breast cancer scare. One year later, I had cysts in my uterus that precipitated a hysterectomy. Then came the wrongly diagnosed anxiety/depression as being psychologically based. At the end, when it was discovered that I had Stage Three brain cancer, Kaya was there, yet again my bravest advocate. This snapshot of my illnesses added up to a lot of demands on a child who had not yet turned twelve.

Kaya has experienced more than her fair share of grief. She knows that even the boundless depth of my love for her cannot create a large enough crucible to hold all of her feelings about my dying and her having to carry on without me. She and I both know that in all likelihood, I will not be here as she grows into womanhood. At first, this disturbed her deeply and broke my heart. Now it is this fact of life that we both accept. Kaya also knows that even in my mothering of her, God takes precedence.

Sometimes her feelings boil over into anger and she turns on me. When things get really bad, she likes to bait me into fighting, and then gets angrier still because I have neither the energy nor the desire to fight. She wants me to fight with her – and for life – and I just don’t feel drawn to fighting about anything anymore.

Everyone's experience when facing illness is uniquely personal. There is little about my path that can be described as universal. Each of us is as unique in our dying as we are in living. For some, terminal illness is a sacred time; for others it is dreaded and bleak. In facing death, I have had to confront the fact that I have been asleep for who knows how many lifetimes, and now I have the chance to wake up. It's time to recognize that God is the only reality. There is nothing but God, and my longing for God is the one desire I can count on as pure.

One morning recently, I woke up from a sound sleep, turned on my recorder, and said, "I hate this disease. I want out of this body." I begged Him, "Please Lord, give me the courage to face whatever I must. Please put Your arms around me. Please help me to know and follow Your will, not mine."

In October 2011, The Lady told me:

You can help people by how you go through this. This period is even more important than your birth. You are contributing to conscious departure.

A good friend who also faces terminal illness wrote to me recently to share about her own suffering. She wrote,

Suffering is a paradox for someone searching for God. On a spiritual level, it is a benediction that drives you deeper into a serious, quiet and disciplined lifestyle otherwise not found so easily.

The paradox came into play, she went on to say, when emotional and physical suffering deplete the body, and sometimes we have no choice but to bend to the limitations brought on by illness. Sometimes there is nothing to do but rest. It is while resting that we can choose to go deeper into a conscious connection to God or disappear into the suffering in

the body. Bottom line, what is required is practice. Illness allows such a practice to blossom. In this practice, the suffering becomes a gift that allows God to take over body, mind, heart and soul. Rather than wonder why I am ill or combating how it feels, I now experience the gift that illness brings as I become less involved in all that I once believed was real.

Did I even know such desire before the cancer? I don't think so, not even when I felt trapped with nowhere to turn. I have come to believe that this tumor is my great liberator. It is like my 'Bodhi Tree.'¹ The cancer allows me to see that it is possible for me to achieve ultimate freedom in this lifetime, just as it is possible that I might not.

In our phone conversation on January 1, 2011, The Lady told me that everyone has to be so open-minded at the time of death. They cannot assume anything. She said,

You have to be so open-minded. . . . Even [though] you might take birth again . . . your meditation should be about not taking birth again. We all may take birth again, but the emphasis . . . for you, because you have strong desire to break the cycle of birth and death, [comes in] turning to Him and bringing Him to you.

It still shocks me when The Lady includes herself as someone who must never stop endeavoring to break free. This, in spite of the fact that Kalindi told us that The Lady is already free. It makes me recognize that there are no limits to the humility one must have with God because God *is* Humility. The Lady carries that kind of humility. It seems to be the most natural, innate part of her being. It has not been like that for me. I have to pray every day of my life for humility. It is not so easily attainable.

¹ The Bodhi Tree is a large, very old sacred fig tree under which Siddhartha achieved enlightenment, or 'Bodhi,' after which he became known as Gautama Buddha.

Kalindi also said that everything we do toward breaking free becomes part of our ‘spiritual bank account’ that only increases in value. From life to life, it is always there for the soul to draw upon. This gives me some reassurance that every effort I make counts, even if I think it doesn’t matter if I do not break free this time around.

For the first fifty years of my life, I was like most people, frittering away time in distracting pursuits. I was all about, “Eat, drink and be merry . . .” I had not thought about, “. . . for tomorrow we may die.” Even after I was diagnosed with cancer, I hung onto my distractions. The ultimate example of this took place in November 2010. While receiving chemotherapy, I went on Match.com in search of male companionship. At the same time, I went on several skiing excursions, priding myself on being able to engage in challenging physical activities just like I’d done when I was healthy.

When The Lady heard about these pursuits, she suggested a course correction. She gave me guidance to stop both on-line dating and engaging in other ‘material pastimes.’ She made me realize I was choosing playthings over God. As this realization sank in, I wrote to The Lady saying I would:

- *Disengage from material pleasures that bind me to the flesh*
- *Turn my back on the world by entering into a quieter, deeper and more purposeful lifestyle*
- *Seek forgiveness in my heart from people in my life that I’ve transgressed and offended*
- *Reach out to and associate with people in the Mission in a loving way*
- *Work diligently on this monograph as promised*

Once doors like these began to open, I realized that I was now facing the ‘Grand Illusion.’ In one of her teachings, Kalindi talks about the Grand Illusion as being this shared conviction that everyone believes: I am not going to die.

Because even the longest life is over in a flash, Kalindi warns us that neither past nor future has value. Only the here and now matters. Even so, the Grand Illusion seduces us with memories from the past and hopes for the future while creating the feeling that somehow we can rewrite the former, control the latter and, as an encore, live each day as though we have forever.

I venture that this is how 99.9 percent of the people on earth treat death. It may happen to others, just not to me, just not today and not right now. Kalindi guides us to wake up to the fact that death comes for everyone. It comes when we are ready and when we are not.

According to Kalindi, next in line behind the Grand Illusion is ‘illusory love.’ The world over, people of every culture and nationality try to find completion outside the self. We seek for it with another person. We believe it can be found at work or through some belief system. We look to attain fulfillment in moment-to-moment experience that never completes us. Unlike the love of God, this form of love is temporary. It is filled with expectation. We believe it will go on forever, but it never does. One or the other person changes or dies. The business closes. The belief system breaks down. We pass through a dark night of the soul and all bets are off. At the end, we realize that nothing of this earth can last. Only God is eternal, and to the eternal we must turn if we are to end the cycle of reincarnation.

My illness brought this teaching into focus; with it came a greater seriousness that made me both more conscious and conscientious. Even when all I wanted was to escape, I had no choice but to face my death. Until I did, the feelings of dread would only get worse.

My relationship to physical suffering has also dramatically changed. From early childhood I have a history of avoiding suffering. After the cancer diagnosis, I had to make a choice to either go into greater denial or face the suffering head on. I chose the latter. Now when my physical symptoms are at their worst and the pain threatens to consume me,

God brings me to stillness and silence. In this place, I can best hear His whispers. This listening helps to fuel my faith and deepen my trust. In this state, I feel worthy of His Love and grateful that my soul's purpose is fulfilled. At these times, there is no guilt or shame and no room for ego. Truly, there is grace in a suffering that brings with it fulfillment.