

The Juggernaut
by Anne Nehoda

On December 7, 2006 at about 10:00am I was told that I had rectal cancer and it was advanced. I was hoping that the biopsies would prove the Doctor's words to be wrong but he did not hold out any hope. Before the day was out I had been CAT scanned and the tumor was confirmed.

Being a tax researcher by profession I immediately went on the net and visited every site that would give me information. After days of reading and researching I came to one conclusion. The information I had found all pointed to one thing-a colostomy bag for the rest of my life. This was not a future I was going to accept.

When the doctor who found the cancer called me later that week confirm the biopsy was cancer. I told him how I felt about the bag. He then outlined the treatment he would recommend that might change the outcome. I would have radiation and chemotherapy to shrink the tumor before my surgery. He had already arranged an appointment with a noted surgeon at Cleveland Clinic on December 18, 2006.

Thus began the most intense learning experience of my life. Cancer treatment is like a juggernaut. You just get swept along. It is like going to war, with the enemy buried deep in your body. You know you will have to hurt innocent parts into order to defeat this invader. The cancer is in control not you. .

I went to see the surgeon at Cleveland Clinic and he outlined the plan. I would have chemo continually for 5 weeks and radiation every weekday for the same time. He sent me to an oncologist.

Early in January I was having surgery to have a port put into my chest. I didn't even know what the port was for, I just showed up when and where I was told.

Next I had to go to the radiologist to set up a model where to focus the radiation. Once again I just showed up and did what I was told. This was such a contradiction to my personality but it was all I could manage.

Later that day I found out the reason for my port. I was set up with a pump that would dole out the chemotherapy constantly for the next five weeks. The only time it would be off my body would be when it was being refilled every week. My husband drove me every weekday to the center to have my radiation. At times we went out for breakfast on the way home. It was like watching a movie. And the most amazing part is that I was in the center of this and had no way out. I just had to show up and be poked and prodded and treated.

The radiation team actually made the radiation seem like a normal part of my day. They were bouncy and cheerful and we had some interesting conversations. The only scary part was the fact that they ran out of the room when the rays were going into my body. I actually got used to the pump and hung it on a hook as I took my shower. I learned that the human mind and body could adjust to anything. There is no ego; it is the treatment and your body's reaction against the cancer.

I also learned that denial is not such a bad thing.

I went to work since it was tax season and got lost in trying to solve other people's tax problems. When the radiation and chemo were completed I went back to work full time. In April I took time off before my surgery to get back in shape before the surgery. I made rash and extravagant promises to God if only I would survive.

Then the day of the surgery came. We had a humorous moment on the way to the Clinic. I wanted my husband to be ready if anything happened. I said to him "If I die young, here are procedures to follow". He looked at me and said, "Honey, at 65 I think that ship has sailed." We were able to laugh.

After they asked me for my birth date I was wheeled into the surgery. I idly wondered why anyone would lie to take my place on the table.

I was told that after the surgery if the colostomy bag was on my right side it was probably temporary. When I woke up the first thing I checked was the position of the bag-on the right, what a relief. By then I had decided that I wanted to live even with a bag.

After a surgery the nurse makes you get up the next day and walk around the ward. I thought at first that it was just some sadistic joke but it wasn't. I learned that I could do it although every atom of my body protested.

The biopsy was negative for cancer in my lymph nodes. I felt like I had won the lottery.

There were nurses and doctors at the Clinic who could make you laugh until you had to clutch your stitches. The one promise I kept is to value the doctors and nurses who took care of me. They are special people.

When I got home a week later just the sight of buds on a tree in the yard was a joy. I had the bag for twelve weeks and had some embarrassing and hilariously funny incidences with that contraption. I even wrote "an ode to my ostomy bag" and my surgeon posted it on his bulletin board.

So far I am 3 years since my diagnosis but every 6 months I have to go back for a check-up. I still make the same promises to God and I know He listens and forgives my failures. He keeps giving me the time to correct them.