

## **My Precious Opportunity**

**By Tracy Morgan**

*Tracy is a long-time supporter and volunteer at Sravasti Abbey. On her way to recovering from cancer, she gave the following talk at a fund-raiser for Cancer Patient Care.*

Life suddenly became very precious to me one year ago. I was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of breast cancer which had spread to the lymphatic system. The word “cancer” throws you into an adrenaline spell of fear, panic and overload. The word alone is almost enough to frighten you to death! The medical staff mentioned something about stages and blah blah blah—the terminology sounded like Swahili to me. Regardless, suddenly, I was faced with having to accept the truth. “Yes, me. I have a life threatening disease.” If left untreated, this would be the end. Death was looking my way.

I was petrified and in disbelief. While still in deep denial I began to listen to what the team at Providence Cancer Center was trying to tell me: that the treatments could work very well. Cancer is not a death sentence. However, the treatment matches the severity of the disease; fight fire with fire after all! I reluctantly started the long process of chemo, surgery, and drug therapy which would last nearly a year. As the chemo began, my concentration left and I became unable to do my highly technical work. It was difficult to remember the year I graduated let alone which algorithm I should use. My job and I soon parted.

Then, the realities of living crept back into my awareness... My family lives far away. Who would take care of me when I was too sick to dress myself or cook? How would I pay my bills? Can I burden my friends? The treatments progressed. I suffered from side effects and got shingles as well. Not to mention the worst winter of the century! And the usual mishaps of life still show up whether you have an illness or not: a snow plow hit my vehicle and then ran! The power went out at 5 below. I can laugh now— kinda. As my well-being began to spiral, so did my career and finances. What followed was the Morgan financial crash of ‘09.

Miraculously and simultaneously, dozens, if not hundreds of professionals, volunteers, friends, and family soon rallied to my aid. Insurance came from the Breast and Cervical Health Screening program. My family was extraordinary and lovingly provided emotional support. My friends made heroic efforts, often driving for hours to provide reiki treatments and home care. They brought homemade meals and hats. But most of all they brought love and affection. The medical professionals were and are tireless in their dedication and efforts. The list is long—I cannot thank these people enough.

Important help came from my spiritual community which is my true refuge. They provided the internal tools to rebound and restore my attitude. They advised me, “Look for the kindness in others and be kind. That’s all you need to do.” Opening my eyes to this one simple practice was a huge revelation. This was lifesaving advice. I don’t mean in the sense that it saved my life, but it made my life, while I was sick, an exploration of kindness.

For example, out of deep empathy the oncologists kept showing up, even though they knew they would make the patient uncomfortable and that the patient may even hate them for it. One very angelic nurse, a bodhisattva, even wrote to my elderly mother to keep her informed the entire time I was in treatment.

I began to see just how much I had taken for granted: my health, my family, my friends, and my spiritual friends. Even those countless strangers who try to show sympathy and support with a smile or a hug or some help with the door, I had hardly noticed when lost in my own problems.

Prayers from friends and strangers blossomed forth—I was even included in a prayer circle in a church in the Carolinas somewhere. Prayers from India and other countries too—such kindness. Where there is someone with cancer there is also someone with a big open heart praying for all cancer patients. And I, too, could authentically pray for cancer patients—now knowing what it is like. We could support each other.

While well-supported in so many ways, bills, transportation, and food continued to be very serious issues for me. I still needed more help. Fear and depression often bubbled up as well as feeling overwhelmed at all the challenges. Sometimes I had the irrational need to find someone or something to blame. Absurd doubts came too, “Was I a bad person—had I done something wrong?” Fear can surface in so many ways. I had to continuously return to the practice of looking for the kindness of others...

One particular place I looked and found much kindness and generosity is right here in Spokane. We have a very, very special champion, one who is available to the neediest: Cancer Patient Care. Their mission is to make sure cancer patients can make ends meet with groceries, gas to get to the doctor, and other resources. This was real, practical help for my crisis.

I made my way down to their office to see if I qualified. There, I met Katie, who would become my social worker. Approachable and with a good sense of humor, she came immediately to my assistance. CPC does so much more than I had imagined. They not only helped keep me warm during the blizzards with money for the power bill but also provided more personal items, such as fuzzy hats and cozy blankets knit by volunteers. They warmed my heart with hours of advice, moral support, and old-fashioned listening.

And then shopping sprees to the resource room for wigs, bandannas, and yes, more hats! As I tried on the different personas—blonde, brunette, red-head—my spirits continued to lift. The support group they led also helped to dispel the feelings of loneliness and isolation. It was easy to see the kindness of the staff—all they want more than anything is to be of help and brighten a cancer patient's day.

As the treatment progressed, the tumors shrank, and the cancer was almost gone by the end of chemotherapy. This improved my prognosis quite a bit. Surgery removed the rest and with the help of friends, I actually attended that surgery (believe me I had many flimsy excuses to be elsewhere)! Drug therapy, physical therapy, and group therapy all helped restore my health. I can now see the wisdom of the different treatments and feel much confidence in the outcome.

Cancer Patient Care stayed with me beyond the most difficult times. Once I was well enough, they helped sponsor an exercise program for me. They sponsored other services like restorative retreats and foot massages. The annual picnic at Manito Park keeps the Cancer Patient Care community in touch. They let you know you are not alone, attending to both body and mind. As the months went by, I felt I always had someone to turn to who understood my experience. I feel I have joined a large, warm extended family!

As I continue this voyage, I realize I am not alone in yet another way. So many of you here understand personally the cancer experience—I am so sorry for your battles too. It's probably not difficult to imagine the anxiety of those in our community who are unable to make ends meet during treatment. In my neighborhood alone, I know of two single moms facing cancer, who have only state income are in a desperate struggle to keep the household fed while trying to recover. This is a tragic situation. But there is help for them and so many others through Cancer Patient Care.

On the way to recovery, I am very fortunate and grateful. I have the precious opportunity now to live on and to practice generosity and kindness. As long as we are alive—sick or well, rich or poor—we can do something very rewarding and joyful. We can be kind, giving, and caring.

You can participate in the amazing generosity that is Cancer Patient Care. Seeing how they help the sick and poor is so very comforting, now that I personally know what that is like. I hope you can sense part of the impact Cancer Patient Care has in our community through my story. You can be assured they do their work with open hearts. Now you know where your donations go. Whether it is funding, time, or critical items, any gift is welcome. Please give generously to Cancer Patient Care so others in our city are cared for and supported during their lonely cancer journey.

*(At the conclusion of this talk, the audience gave Tracy a standing ovation, and many people crowded around her afterwards, saying how much they benefited from what she said. Tracy had indeed made her opportunity precious.)*