

Journaling Through Cancer

by Deborah Ludwig

I picked up my pen and wrote, *It is said that life is unpredictable. Well, that is an understatement. I have leukemia – cancer. Never in my life did I imagine the word “cancer” could, or would, be associated with me.*

That’s how I started my journal entry on December 21, 2003. It was a sunny yet bitter cold day, and there I sat in a hospital bed. Three days earlier, I had been diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia, and I was still reeling from the news.

I’d discovered how powerful and healing the act of writing was throughout my eleven years of journaling, so I knew that during cancer treatment my journal would be a constant companion. It would be an essential weapon in my healing arsenal, especially emotionally and spiritually. My journal was a place to record all the medical information the doctors provided me regarding chemotherapy protocols, medications, blood counts, bone marrow transplant, and total



fully I was living in the present and how aware I was of my actions, reactions, and environment. When I found inspirational quotes that were particularly meaningful to me, I would write my interpretation of them.

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body irradiation. These notes served as a reference point when I had questions or concerns about my treatment.

In addition to recording information, journaling helped process the intense emotional life that accompanied my cancer diagnosis. I struggled with fear, anger, and sadness, yet there was great joy and hope. I was forced to face my mortality and the fact that I might not be alive to see my 14-month-old nephew, whom I adored, grow up. It was agonizing to think he may never know how deeply I loved him. Then there were moments of pure joy when I’d visit friends in the city and go out salsa dancing, feeling beautiful and graceful despite my baldness.

To help create emotional balance, I meditated, practiced guided imagery, and repeated affirmations. I chronicled my experiences using these healing techniques, writing about how much more

However, the most important exploration I endeavored was into my past. Reading the various books on healing I’d been given, I was learning how biography can become biology, how clinging to past hurts and resentments can create illness. I wasn’t sure I believed it, but for someone who was a self-professed control freak, this was an extremely appealing idea. I thought, *If I made myself sick, then I can make myself well.*

I then delved into my past. I wrote about how others’ hurtful comments and actions – some decades ago – contributed to insecurities and feelings of not being good enough, particularly in the realm of physical beauty. I examined my romantic relationships, which were truly revelatory. I discovered that not only did I need to forgive those who harmed me – consciously or unconsciously – but I also needed to forgive and have greater compassion

for myself. All of these explorations proved to be healing.

Numerous studies have confirmed that expressive writing produces health benefits, such as a strengthened immune system, increased lung and liver function, increased cognitive function, reduced stress and blood pressure, improved mood, decreased symptoms of arthritis and asthma, and increased well-being in cancer survivors. Furthermore, it doesn’t matter if the writing topic is positive or negative. Healing benefits are derived as long as you involve the emotions. Therefore, journaling is a wonderful self-therapy tool, though not a substitute for professional help, if necessary.

All you need to start writing is a journal or notebook. Typing entries and storing the files on your computer works well, too, or you may want to consider an online journal, or blog. Audio or video recorders are options for the more verbally inclined person. Those who are artistic can add another layer of creativity to journaling by drawing, painting, making collages, or inserting into their journal photos or images that are meaningful to them.

A cancer diagnosis is devastating. Life feels so out of control when going through cancer treatments. But two things you can control are when you write and what you write about. Writing can help transform your cancer experience into a journey of healing and self-awareness. You will be writing not only for your health, but also for your life.



Deborah Ludwig

Editor’s Note: Deborah Ludwig is the author of *Rebirth: A Leukemia Survivor’s Journal of Healing during Chemotherapy, Bone Marrow Transplant, and Recovery*, creator of the *Writing for Your Life* journaling workshop for cancer survivors, a volunteer with the *Leukemia & Lymphoma Society*, and actor with credits in film, TV, and theatre. She will be conducting a *Creative Writing Workshop* on April 17 in New York City during the *4th Annual Cancer Summit for Young Adults* (www.omg2011.org). For more information about Deborah, visit www.deborahludwig.com. ■