



The Road Less Traveled

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This summer I began a journey that will change my life and the lives of those close to me forever. In June I was diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer that had locally advanced to the mediastinal lymph nodes. The diagnosis brought me to my knees. Nothing in my twenty-year professional career in oncology prepared me for the phone call from my pulmonologist with that pathology report. I was especially shocked because I had spent the last fifteen years creating a lifestyle designed to ward off illness. Daily regimens of aerobic exercise and a low-fat, nutritionally balanced diet supplemented by antioxidants had not been enough.

In addition to the physical insult to my body was the equally insidious blow to my psyche. Being a private person, I have struggled with whether to address the matter in this format; however, because many of you asked, I will chronicle my journey here.

Hippocrates once said he would rather know what sort of person has a disease than what sort of disease a person has. Fortunately my internal medicine physician understood this when she shared with me the following observation: "Remember, when you're reviewing all the data and looking at survival charts, you are an "n" of one. If "n" equals 372, you will not see 372 Diane's in the data. Only you can decide how you are going to approach this diagnosis."

The day after I was diagnosed the following quote from an anonymous source leapt off the page of a magazine I was reading. "Do not follow where the path may lead. Go where there is no path and leave a trail." Little did I know how prophetic these words would be.

Next, a friend and colleague who is in her ninth year of treatment for breast cancer wrote me. "As I hear of your diagnosis, my thoughts and spirit are with you. May you embark upon this adventure with vigor and positive thinking." Is it any wonder she has defied the survival statistics by many years?

The combination of insightful people who fill my life and several other synchronous encounters led me to the conclusion that I must confront this invader with all the ingenuity I can muster. As you know, the conventional medical arsenal for my diagnosis leaves much to be desired. In fact, when I actually started researching databases on the treatments for lung cancer, I was shocked to realize how little we actually know about treating the disease. We know even less about the application of some of the newer disciplines in the treatment of the patient with this kind of cancer. New breakthroughs in the field of psychoneuroimmunology are astounding even the neuroscientists involved in studying the interactions among the brain, the endocrine system,

and the immune system. For example, a simple blood test can now determine antioxidant levels in the body and may have consequential implications for patients with cancer and even greater significance in the area of prevention.

Adjuvant nutritional research is now being recognized for the important role it plays in the healing of cancer and other diseases. Alternative therapies including some of the Eastern medical practices are slowly being incorporated into traditional Western practices because of the wealth of new research supporting their positive role in healing. Could this be the foundation of the famous admonition by Hippocrates: "Honor the healing power of nature" (*Vis medicatrix naturae*)?

Dr. Alvan Barach noted in reference to the art of healing, "Remember to cure the patient as well as the disease." Despite the insights of giants in the field of biology such as Louis Pasteur and Claude Bernard, traditional Western medicine continues to focus on disease or the "germ" instead of the "soil" or the human body. Although I have been a holistic health advocate for many years, confronted with my own cancer diagnosis I have discovered that I have also followed this traditional "disease mentality" road in my two decades of working with community cancer programs.

Today my personal adventure in healing involves gaining an intimate understanding of the confusing labyrinth of passageways among the mind, body, and spirit. The first stop in my journey is the Mind/Body Medical Institute, a Harvard University program at Deaconess Hospital. While there I will also assess the possibility of bringing this new discipline back to our community.

James D. Rogers once said, "Over every mountain there is a path, although it may not be seen from the valley." I have no idea where this journey will take me; however, it has already challenged many of my assumptions and begun to enrich my life in ways I never dreamed possible.

What are the implications for the Association and my presidency? I invite you to open your minds to the possibilities of merging contemporary medical technology—brilliant though limited—with some of the newer disciplines as we prepare for the 21st century. I hope you will be a part of my odyssey. The path we discover together will exponentially improve my journey.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Diane Van Ostenberg". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Diane Van Ostenberg