The power (and perils) of positive thinking

by Brenda Denzler

When I was diagnosed with cancer, my cousin sent me two gifts. One was a lovely felt hat to cover my soon-to-be-bald head, the other was a copy of Bernie Siegel’s Love, Medicine & Miracles (Harper, 1986), which extols the virtues of positive thinking in overcoming serious illness. “The mind can cure cancer,” he writes, “for that doesn’t mean it’s easy.” Indeed.

I found myself buffeted, in those early days, by exhortations from friends and family to keep a positive attitude so I could win my battle against this monster that threatened a premature end to my life. The implicit or explicit message behind these kind exhortations was that if I engaged in positive thinking, the treatment would be less effective and I would be more likely to die.

Now, these very heartfelt wishes come from people who know me fairly well. My cousin and I share a lineage that is not known for its optimism—to put it mildly! And my friends and family members on the other side...well, they know me!

That being said, I found everyone’s advice a bit of a gut punch. It seemed to me that they were advocating that I deny my fears and anxieties out of, oddly enough, fear that admitting their existence would threaten my survival. So the underlying message was that out of fear of negativity, I should sublimate fear! Deny anxiety! Force myself to acknowledge only the positive! Two of the lasting “gifts” of cancer treatment for me have been lymphedema in the arm on the side where I had my surgery. I was getting a lymphatic drainage massage from my therapist one day and chatting with her about the other several long-term issues I’ve had to deal with.

“Yeah,” she said as she held my arm in the air and gently pushed the lymph fluid toward my shoulder. “Cancer treatment can have a lot of side effects.”

Today, I get a call informing me of yet another friend’s diagnosis with cancer—this time a cancer that has metastasized to her brain. She has requested that anyone who hears about her situation should be sure to hold her “in the light,” with an abundance of positivity.

I know that despite her grim situation, there is a chance that it can be brought under control and she can possibly have a good quality of life for a number of months or years. So in that sense, I don’t deny that there is reason to hope. But I also know that her situation is quite grim, and the end result is likely to be very different. If I am to honor her request, I would seem that I must embrace the former, but refuse to acknowledge the latter. This kind of split consciousness is hard for me to do. I cannot un-know what I know about cancer and how it behaves.

People think that having anything less than an optimistic attitude means laboring through life under a heavy psychological load. But sometimes, I think, it’s positivity that is a burden. When it is forced, when it is mandated out of fear that anything that seems to express less than optimism will produce nasty results, it’s not really positivity at all. It’s not even a good, honest “negativity.” It’s just denial, pure and simple. If it has to be worked up, it isn’t genuine positivity. It’s a cheap imitation.

One of the lasting “gifts” of cancer treatment for me has been lymphedema in the arm on the side where I had my surgery. I was getting a lymphatic drainage massage from my therapist one day and chatting with her about the several other long-term issues I’ve had to deal with.

“Yes,” she said as she held my arm in the air and gently pushed the lymph fluid toward my shoulder. “Cancer treatment can have a lot of side effects.”

What popped out of my mouth next, unencumbered and unfiltered, surprised even me. “If you’re really lucky,” I said, “one of them is life.”

I hesitate to admit that I said this. It goes against everything that everyone thinks they know about me. And I must say that at this point many people I’ve known reasonably OK with most people thinking that I’m “the negative one.” In fact, I’d be mighty insulted if people were to start calling me an optimist!

On the other hand, there’s a t-shirt that I’ve been tempted to buy. It says, “I plan to live forever. So far, so good!” But it feels like tempting the Fates to walk around wearing something as wildly optimistic as that—even just as a joke.

Nice to know I’ve still got some negativity left in me!

Brenda Denzler was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2009. She became a cancer survivor on the very day she was diagnosed.