



The Cancer Fields

I PAUSED, LEANED BACK IN my chair, and reread what I'd just written. Since it was getting dark outside, I went downstairs, cracked open an ice-cold O'Doul's, and looked for Ron. I was tired and needed to think about something else for a while. He suggested we go out for a quick dinner. Perfect, I said.

The following morning I was at my desk again.

Change. That's what the last two decades were all about, I thought, and it wasn't always pretty. I wasn't kidding when I said I've slipped on some serious banana peels in my life.

As I gazed out my office window, my mind started to wander back to the biggest banana peel field of my life. Within minutes, the memories took me back to the week before my fiftieth birthday.

I woke up as I usually do and headed straight for the coffee pot. A few minutes later, I was sitting at our kitchen table reading the newspaper when I got the strangest urge.

I felt like I should take up jogging.

Not earth shattering for most of you, but considering I have been severely allergic to exercise my *entire* life, this was a serious thought for me.

Ron couldn't believe it.

For days, I tried to banish the thought from mind, but I couldn't. I just couldn't shake the feeling in my gut that I *had* to start jogging.

God, it seemed, for whatever reason *really* wanted me to get some exercise.

So thinking I was having a mid-life crisis, a few days later I updated my status on Facebook and casually mentioned that I was thinking about taking up jogging. A friend immediately commented that I should try the Couch-to-5K® Running Plan.

Why not? I thought.

So off I went. For the next year, I ran every other day and managed to get myself up to two miles. Fantastic! I just loved it. On my runs, I listened to great music and meditated. It was a chance to be with nature and contemplate my life.

About halfway through the year, the weight started to come off of me. I went from a size 12–14 to a 10, and by March 2012, I was down to an 8. I thought it was great!

There was a darkness to the weight loss, though, and I instinctively knew it. Something wasn't right. The weight was coming off too fast. My cheeks were sinking into my face, and my clothes were hanging on me. Even my engagement ring didn't fit anymore.

On May 19, 2012, the day before my birthday, I found myself entering the darkest banana peel field of my life. I was in the shower when I found the lump on my left side. More than a little startled, I dried myself off, put on a robe, and found Ron. Although it was in a very strange place, he felt it, too.

On the morning of May 21, I was in the doctor's office.

"That's definitely a lump," she said after examining me. "Why don't you sit here, and I'll make a few calls." She put her hand on my shoulder and gave me a warm smile. She then twirled around and bolted for the door.

Bolted!

Okay, the fact that my doctor just ran out of the examination room is probably *not* a good sign, I thought miserably.

For the next few hours, I was scanned, poked, and prodded by a

battery of people. Apparently, I fell in the 10 percent of people who had such dense breasts that mammograms didn't work on me.

Wish I had known that *before*.

They could all feel the lump; they just couldn't see it. Eventually, they did a sonogram and found it.

I knew it was bad when the radiologist himself asked me if I needed a referral for a good surgeon.

"No, thank you. My doctor has already set me up with one," I politely replied.

"Good. You should see them this week," he said. "Tomorrow would be good."

His body language told me that it was bad.

Damn.

As I left his office, he turned to me and shook my hand.

"Your doctor should have the results in a few days. Good luck, Mrs. Giovanni."

It felt like a death sentence.

As I walked to my car, I wondered how long I had to live. I didn't mention this exchange to Ron, but it haunted me for days.

By the next morning, we were at the surgeon's office getting a biopsy. Afterwards, she spent several minutes telling us what would happen if it was cancer.

Both Ron and the doctor were trying to be positive, but in my heart, I already knew it was cancer. The lump was just too large to be anything else. Besides, I was not feeling particularly well and was tired all the time.

We spoke for a few minutes more, then Ron and I left.

"You know, this lump is in such an odd spot, that if I hadn't taken up jogging and lost all that weight, I would never have found it," I randomly blurted out to Ron in the car.

"It's a good thing you do self-exams," he said. His eyes stayed on the road, but I could hear the emotion in his voice. He was desperately trying to remain calm.

"Running literally saved my life. If I hadn't listened to God's voice in my head, I might be dead."

“Yes, but you’re not. Plus, we don’t have the test results yet, so don’t worry until we have something to worry about,” he replied.

“Yes, but what if it *is* cancer? Did I catch it in time?”

“Let’s not worry until we know the results.” Unable to speak any further, we drove the rest of the way home in stunned silence.

As luck would have it, I was really busy for the next few days. It was a blessing as it took my mind off of my prognosis for a while. My oldest son was graduating from high school, and I had to fly to Portland a few days later to do a customer-service workshop. I knew that with my luck, the doctor would call with the lab results while I was in Portland, and I didn’t need the distraction while I was speaking to a group. The timing was horrible, but the show must go on.

As I packed my suitcase, I stuffed the cancer and everything that word implied to the back of my mind.

“Please don’t call me when I’m in Portland,” I told Ron as we drove to the airport.

“Why not?” he replied.

“Because I know you too well. If the doctor calls and the test results are positive, I’ll hear it in your voice and I won’t be able to do this workshop. So just text me instead. Okay?”

“I understand. No problem,” he said.

For the rest of the trip we talked about everything and nothing, just enjoying being with each other. The possibility of cancer had already changed our lives, and we understood how fragile life could be.

As I leaned in to give him a kiss good-bye, I could see the pain in his eyes, and it crushed me. Deep down, he knew it was bad, too. I could see it written all over his face.

We hugged each other tighter than ever when he dropped me off. Since I didn’t want him to see me crying, I turned away quickly and strode into the terminal. A tear ran down my cheek unchecked as I searched for my gate.

When I arrived in Portland, Ron kept his word and texted me the entire time. He purposely kept his texts loving, positive, and motivational. Although the hotel was extremely nice, I barely noticed as I paced my room back and forth. My mind was racing, and I couldn’t

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stem the dark thoughts that kept creeping into my mind. I texted Ron for over an hour and then spent another hour on the phone with my close friend, Lisa Ann. They were my lifeline to sanity and kept me grounded and sane so that I could conduct the workshop the following morning.

The gig in Portland went really well, and I flew home happy that the client was pleased with the workshop.

When I landed, I went to baggage claim and waited for my bag. I knew Ron was outside in the car waiting for me because I texted him from the plane when we landed. I also intuitively knew what he was going to say when I saw him.

I grabbed my bag off the carousel and took a deep breath to center myself. To stop my hand from shaking, I stuffed it in my pocket and walked as calmly as I could to the revolving door. I saw Ron standing by the car the minute I got outside.

His face told me the whole story.

No words were spoken. We just hugged each other and cried.

Stage 3 breast cancer. Triple positive.

The disease that killed my grandmother and my mother.

As we silently drove home, I asked myself the million dollar question:

How much time do I have left?

I shook my head to rid myself of the memory and stared blankly at the computer in front of me.

Cancer. What a life-changing word.

As a tear began to quietly fall down my cheek, I began to type again.



CHAPTER TWELVE

The Four Words that Changed My Life

IT'S AMAZING HOW QUICKLY YOUR perspective can change. In my case, it changed in a matter of minutes. It only took four little words to completely shatter my world and change my life forever.

You have breast cancer.

Cancer.

The big “C.”

No one thinks that it will happen to them. In fact, dying is something far in the future that we all know is going to happen, but certainly not today.

Cancer is something that happens to other people, right?

Breast cancer. Certainly a death sentence twenty years ago but thankfully not one today.

While I am positive that I'll be around for many years to come, my perspective has changed. The little things that used to bother me don't matter so much anymore, and I tell my family and friends how much they mean to me on a daily basis. I relish the days I can be home with my family, and I am grateful for the times I can be in my office doing what I love.

We all take health for granted. Actually, we take a *lot* of things for

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granted. Most of us will get up every morning and think about all the things that we have to do and then we'll get stressed out and sick as we rush through the day like a runaway freight train.

Me? I'm grateful for every morning that I wake up. The day is a gift to me now. I look forward to each day and try to help as many people as I can, whether I'm in the grocery store, on the telephone, writing e-mail, or posting on the Internet. It doesn't matter anymore, I'll help as many as I can. I'll offer a smile, a helping hand, or some encouraging words.

Don't take the day for granted. Spend today living life to its fullest. Be happy and grateful for everything that you have now. One moment of gratitude can change the course of your day in a second.

If you're in a banana peel field, then stay positive and keep your eye on the edge of the field—the future that you want. How do you want it to play out? Write the script. Write down exactly how you want it to happen. Then keep reading your script every day.

And me?

I practice what I preach and have already written my script. I'm also staying positive because fear and hate won't help me. It's not always easy, though, as my mind can go to the dark side of cancer in a heartbeat. Sometimes being positive is a minute-by-minute effort. It's like recovery—you have to take it one day at a time.

So stay positive, everyone, and please don't take waking up tomorrow for granted. It's a gift. A brand new day to change your life.



I Don't Want to Die

“IT’S CANCER. STAGE 3 TRIPLE positive,” the surgeon said.

As she spoke to me about my options, I saw her lips moving but strangely I couldn’t hear anything. I nodded my head as if I heard her, but I didn’t. My mind was racing, and fear was taking over my entire body.

As a child, I was taught to keep a stiff upper lip in public and to show strength. The lessons served me well here, as I took the news as stoically as I could. I nodded politely and listened to her as calmly as possible.

I wasn’t really paying attention, though, because inside my mind, I was screaming like a maniac!

WHY ME? I don’t want to die!

“Now, we can treat this conservatively; you have options,” the doctor continued.

The words grabbed my attention, and I immediately snapped back into the conversation. Abruptly, I interrupted her right in the middle of her sentence.

“With all due respect. No. We are not going to do anything conservatively. I want you to do a double mastectomy as soon as you can book an operating table. Monday morning would be perfect,” I said. “Breast cancer runs in my family. Both my grandmothers and my mother died from breast cancer. I intend to survive this!”

“That’s a great attitude,” she said. “I can certainly fast-track you.”

“How much time do I have left?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“A lot,” she reassured me. “With proper treatment, you can live for many years.”

She continued talking about treatment and spoke about chemotherapy, radiation, reconstruction, and the many surgeries I would have, but I wasn’t listening. I couldn’t listen. I was numb. In shock. I saw her speaking and watched my husband nod his head and reply to her, but I couldn’t hear the words. Darkness flowed through my mind, and my brain shut down.

Many years, I thought miserably. I have many years, but *how* many years? I silently wondered to myself.

“It’s going to be fine, Kath,” Ron said as he gently guided me to the elevator.

Questions no one could answer flooded my brain. Could I have done anything differently? Why couldn’t I have caught this damn disease earlier? Stage 3? Seriously?

Cancer.

The word itself is like a death blow to your gut. You listen to the doctor tell you about what is going to happen, the operations (six or more but who’s counting?), chemotherapy, radiation, but you really are not listening because inside you are screaming, WHY ME? I don’t want to die yet!

Your brain literally shuts off, and you robotically leave the office.

Denial sets in.

Anger follows.

Life changes. Forever.

As we drove home, I began to mentally prepare myself for the challenge. Breast cancer took my mother at the age of fifty-eight, and it took my grandmother. My other grandmother had it as well, although that wasn’t what killed her in the end. Would it take me, too?

I decided then and there that I would be the first to survive and thrive. This is *my* life, and I get to choose what happens.

Game on, cancer, I silently said to myself.

You might have won this battle, but I’m going to win the war.

RAINBOWS AND BANANA PEELS

The thought propelled me back up onto the rainbow. I wasn't there for very long, but I was *there*.

I snapped back to the present.

I did win the war, I thought to myself. The fact that I am still here proves it.

It's all about faith.

I put my fingers to the keys and began typing about faith.



Faith Is Hard

FAITH IS HARD.

Why? Mostly because it's hard to have faith in something you can't see, touch, or smell. I can feel it in my heart, but I can't see it, and I certainly can't touch it. It becomes especially hard when your brain is talking you out of something your heart is telling you to do.

Many years ago, Ron and I took our two sons to Maine to visit family. I remember it was a beautiful morning, and my two brothers decided that we should all climb a mountain. Easy for them to say; I wasn't in "mountain climbing" shape back in those days. Still, off we went, despite my griping. Due to two bad knees, Ron stayed behind.

The climb wasn't bad, and I soon found myself at the top. Since I'm terrified of heights, I stayed by the tree line where I was certain I would be safe. My family, however, had no fear whatsoever. They all eagerly walked onto the cliff.

Although it was beautiful up there, I found myself frozen in place. I was absolutely terrified and refused to leave the safety of the tree line. In fact, from where I was standing, I couldn't see beyond the first rock. It was like an infinity pool as I couldn't see what was beyond the first ledge. So from my perspective, it looked like my sons were standing right at the edge of the mountain. Of course, I panicked even more and started pleading with them to come back.

RAINBOWS AND BANANA PEELS

Actually, if you want me to be completely honest with you, I wasn't just pleading; I was yelling, like a screaming lunatic.

My brothers clearly agreed that I was a lunatic because they both turned around and looked at me like I had lost my mind.

To calm me down, my younger brother called to my sons to come back. He then turned around and started to walk toward me. When he got closer, he gently asked me to walk toward him and told me that it was completely safe. Come and see for yourself, he said.

Faith.

Having faith in something you can't see, and trust that my heart knew what it was doing.

My inner voice gently nudged me forward.

Shaking like a leaf, I took a step. Then after a deep breath, I took a few more. I soon found myself standing on a very flat rock that winded around the mountain like a staircase. There was no steep cliff. I'll admit that I felt a bit silly and gingerly wandered around for a few minutes. To their credit, neither of my brothers laughed, nor did I get the famous "I told you so" line. They simply smiled at me, shook their heads from side to side, and we moved on.

Now why am I telling you this story?

It's all about faith.

If you have hit a wall with your personal life (or career), then it's time to move beyond the clearing. You need to move beyond the safety of the trees so that you can go to the next level of your life.

Now, I completely understand that it's hard; I've been there. But you must move beyond those fears if you want to get beyond the tree line. Is it a fear of success or a fear of failure? What if I told you that you absolutely can't fail? Would you move forward? What would you do? How would you act? What's the first step you would take to make your dream a reality?

Do that now.

Know that there is a huge, flat rock beyond that clearing. You might not be able to see it from your vantage point, but it's there. Now take a deep breath and start. Let faith and your inner voice be your compass.

What's the worst thing that can happen? You'll fall? I've fallen

FAITH IS HARD

thousands of times. There's absolutely nothing wrong with falling. It's only wrong if you don't pick yourself back up and try again.

Listen, if you are uneasy about something, or it just doesn't feel right, don't ignore that. Don't ignore uneasiness. Trust it. Have faith in your feelings. Don't let your brain talk you out of what your heart is telling you to do.

My inner guidance, my intuition, if you will, saved my life, and it could save yours. You can call this inner voice God or Tom, Dick, Harry, or Sue. I actually don't care what you call it. Just trust it. These warnings are like an alarm going off in your house. You know something is wrong. Search around to find out what it is. Don't ignore it.

Now take my hand and take that first step. I know you can do it.

If you have faith, you can do anything.