

The Beginning

1998

We had many adventures over 34 years of marriage, but this day was to be extraordinary.

We were at Herrick Hospital in Berkeley, California. Sarah had a hysterectomy and after four days in the hospital, it was finally time to come home. I stayed with Sarah each night. They had a handy little bed for me. Neither of us slept much during that period. We both awoke feeling drugged, although only she was taking medications. Throughout her stay we waited patiently for a pathology report, but hearing nothing, we passively assumed everything was OK. We trusted the various pre-surgery reassurances that cancer was unlikely. We were never passive again.

Today was the day of discharge. I brought four large plastic laundry baskets from home to the hospital. Sarah's room was exploding with flowers sent from her friends and hospice colleagues. (Sarah was the director of the Kaiser hospice program.) I packed the many vases of flowers and made several trips back down the elevator to my car. The vases clinked and made their own almost happy sound as I walked. I was pre-occupied with not breaking the vases. My trip took me past the maternity ward where I heard laughter. I was in a bit of a stupor due to lack of sleep.

When I got back to Sarah's room, my daughters Laura and Suzanne were waiting. They helped Sarah pack and get dressed. We began the long wait for the physician to do the discharge paperwork. A strange doctor appeared at the doorway, explaining Sarah's physician was unavailable this day, so she would handle the discharge formalities.

We asked about the pathology report. The rushed young physician riffled through the paper chart and found the path report. She began to read aloud to

us. The feeling in the room was all very lighthearted. Suddenly the doctor paused, paled and was clearly unprepared to read the result aloud: A diagnosis of uterine cancer which had spread to lymph nodes.

Up to that moment the pathology report was read aloud I was not terribly worried. We had numerous reassurances that the surgery went well . On the day of the hysterectomy, the surgeon told me he did not expect any negative result from the biopsy. Sarah had been relaxed.

Our home was nearby in Berkeley and we four all drove home in silence. My mind was racing.

We had no idea what to do. We had worried about cancer and then stopped worrying. Now what should we, could we do? What was my job with this new information?

At home Sarah was calm and reassuring to our daughters. She told the girls with false confidence that there was no need to worry. We would get the best medical care. The Cancer Center was excellent. "Everything will be alright."

The next morning was a Sunday. We drove to our favorite breakfast. We went to Peets Coffee and Noah's Bagels. We sat on a bench in the sun and planned our next steps.

"Mike, I need you to learn about my cancer. You know how to use the computer. You can learn everything you can about treatment."

"I don't want to focus on the Cancer. Would you do it, Mike?"

We sat in front of Cody's Books. We went in and bought five heavy books. It was the beginning of our little cancer library.

That was to be the division of tasks. I would become as expert as I could. I would talk with many doctors, nurses and read until late at night. In time, I would know things about Sarah's prognosis that I would not share with her. Staying positive was the primary goal.

During Sarah's treatment, I worked at a huge health care organization. We were in a glass tower in San Francisco. From my office, I could see the entire San Francisco Bay. I'm guessing 80% of my coworkers were women. When my colleagues heard that Sarah had uterine cancer, I was bombarded with sympathy and questions.

This was all so new to me, so it took several days for me to realize I could not work, if at any moment, someone would come to my door asking for me to retell the story, give a status update or, quite often, hear **their** personal story. I needed to work, but many of these friendly visits sent me almost into panic and disorientation. My breathing would become unsteady and fresh waves of anxiety washed over me. I would need to go into my office, close the door, and try to calm myself. I wanted to leave my story at the door, and I really had to stop the well-intentioned flooding of my days with sympathy and questions.

In my mind, I created a huge oak door. The door was so thick that no sound could be heard once it was closed. I visualized closing it no matter what was happening in my real life. When I entered the office tower, I was closed off from worry and fear.

I began to tell my co-workers about the door and why I had to use it. I only had to tell a few people before everyone knew my wishes. They absolutely stopped asking me questions, expressing concern and sharing their emotions with me. At work, I could pretend things were alright.