



SURVIVING THE QUESTION: “How ARE you?”

WHEN I WAS first diagnosed with cancer, everyone asked me, “How are you?” As if troops were gathering to wage battle against my fear and loneliness, “How are you?” became a comforting code-word for “I’m on your side.” But within a few weeks, the chemotherapy began to take its toll, the shock and novelty of being a patient wore off, and I came to dread being asked, “How are you?” This question undermined the distraction and healthy denial that minimized my distress. If I answered truthfully, I had to absorb the hints of disappointment, anger, frustration, sadness, fear, and helplessness that splintered others’ words of comfort. I found myself consoling those who asked, and then fighting the contagion of grief and fear. Even when the news was good, I didn’t have the energy to include all the people who wanted updates.

After my treatments ended, the prickles of “How are you?” sabotaged my attempts to move on. One day I spilled my frustration to my good friend, Debbie, “People keep probing! They don’t say, ‘How are you?’ but ‘How ARE you?’” Debbie suggested that I was being oversensitive. “It’s just an everyday greeting. Maybe they don’t mean anything by it,” she said gently. Not buying her argument, I explained how I’d answer, “fine,” and they’d double-check, “Really?” their eyebrows raised and their chin dropped ever so slightly. I told Debbie how one of my colleagues came over and asked the usual. Despite my enthusiastic, unequivocally positive response (“GREAT!”),

he then asked, “Are you still in remission?” “No, it was not my imagination. People weren’t simply saying “hi,” they were asking for my latest scan results.

No matter how it was intended, being asked, “How are you?” rattled my heightened sense of vulnerability by virtue of its literal meaning and my sense of not knowing how I was. My desire to be polite often battled rising confusion and panic as I thought, “I’ll find out when I have my

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check-up.” I told my friend Debbie, “I wish they didn’t ask.”

Debbie took their side, “Wendy, they are asking because they care about you.” She then listened patiently and tried to understand as I shared my struggle to find a “new normal” after cancer, one that included persistent fatigue and frequent doctor visits. I suggested she say, “How are things?” or “Good to see ya,” adding, “Don’t walk on eggshells, Debbie. When, out of habit, ‘How are you?’ slips out (and it will), don’t worry about it. I won’t take your question literally unless I want to.”

That offhand last comment led me to the key to surviving “How are you?” When

friends ask, I can respond whatever way works for me, trusting that the person wants to “be there,” whatever “be there” means that minute. With my answer, I can share the truth about survival: Some days are good, some bad; sometimes I need to escape, sometimes I need to talk it all out, sometimes I need to be held, other times I need space, and I’m not always sure what I need (so they can’t know, either). I’m learning to recognize when “How are you?” is meant as nothing more than “hello.” Occasionally I screw up and start to give a detailed or philosophical answer to someone who really doesn’t care or doesn’t want to hear. That’s OK. And I forgive all the people who say the wrong things. I’ve said a lot of stupid things in my time. As for the rubberneckers, I tell them “I’m fine.”

“How are you?” is not an intrusion, but the glue that holds Debbie and me together. Our initial responses, both verbal and nonverbal, telegraph if one or the other has news or problems or worries to share. We know within seconds if one is in need, even if that need can’t be met at the time. And, I was mistaken when I thought that I didn’t know the answer. Although on any given day I may not know what my next scans will show, I do know how I am. Cancer tuned me in to my body and clarified who and what are important in life. If anything, after cancer is when I started to really know how I was.

“How are you?” may never again have that innocent sound because I can’t go back to the way I was before cancer. That’s good. In letting others care for me, I’ve learned about caring for others. Whether I’m anxiously awaiting a check-up, or undergoing another round of treatment, or enjoying a blessedly ordinary day, Debbie’s three little words, “How are you?” stir emotions because they are powered by three other little words: I love you. ☐

Dr. Wendy Harpham was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in late 1990. She has since had five recurrences of her cancer. Next month she celebrates 12 years of survivorship and four years of remission.

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THERE IS NO "RIGHT WAY" TO HAVE Cancer

I HAVE TO SMILE when I remember the times I've sat waiting for my mammogram, trying to imagine how I'd respond to the news. "We found a little spot." Of course, I'd accept this information with quiet dignity, never losing my composure—a poster child for stoicism.

Being active in community groups, I knew I'd continue to attend meetings, and when people asked how I was, I'd say, "I'm doing great!" and mean it. Family and friends would marvel at how well I was handling the diagnosis and treatment.

After the mammogram was read as "normal," I'd leave the office serene with the self-knowledge that I was so strong.

Fortunately, my mammograms are still negative. Unfortunately, I was diagnosed with melanoma.

A diagnosis of cancer detonates a nuclear warhead in your mind. All of the role-playing you can imagine cannot prepare you for this diagnosis. In my many mammogram waiting room scenarios, I never considered total emotional devastation as a possibility. So much for self-knowledge.

From the day you are diagnosed, you will be forever changed. This event will be added to the list of "Where were you?"

Where were you when Pearl Harbor was bombed, when President Kennedy was shot, when the World Trade Center was attacked, when you got your biopsy results? I've been told that life becomes divided into BC (before cancer) and AD (after

diagnosis). I have found this to be true. Believe it or not, you will come to celebrate, perhaps, the worst day of your life. It will become the yearly finish line in a never-ending race to outlive your disease.

The good news is that birthdays, instead of being dreaded reminders of aging, become celebrations of surviving another year. You'll never again deny yourself that extra piece of cake.

At first, I felt tremendous guilt. How can

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I do this to my children? They're too young to lose their mother. (I still haven't figured out when it's a good time to lose a parent.) And how can I leave my husband and best friend? The people I love most would be hurt. All because of me.

I felt anger when well-meaning friends would tell me, "Don't worry. Everything will turn out all right."

Tell me you're sorry. Tell me you'll pray for me. Even tell me that you don't know what to say, but unless you have God's personal phone number, please don't tell me you know I'm going to be fine. It doesn't help.

My dermatologist told me to stay off the Internet until after surgery because of misinformation that could only make me feel

worse. Instead, I went to a bookstore for help. Scanning titles and contents of cancer-related books, it quickly became clear to me that this approach would not be very helpful. I was looking for something like *Cancer for Nervous Wrecks*, *Melanoma and Madness*, or *Pity: When You Just Can't Seem to Get Enough*.

Instead, I read about women who kept their chins up, home-schooled five kids, and went to law school in their spare time. I read about fighters who wouldn't let cancer get them down despite unbearable odds. Instead of inspiring me, what I was reading made me feel worse because I didn't measure up to these strong people. What I really felt like doing was eating large quantities of carbohydrates and sleeping. I gained 15 pounds.

Now, almost three years post diagnosis, my CT scans are clear, life is good (after getting help from a wonderful psychiatrist who works with cancer patients), and I have changed in many ways. No excuses, no apologies. "I am what I am and that's all that I am." At least, that's what Popeye says.

My advice? Be easy on yourself. THERE IS NO "RIGHT" WAY TO HAVE CANCER. Accept that you will come through this journey a different person. You will finally get to know your true self. Chances are you'll like yourself a lot more.

It's normal and OK to feel afraid, devastated, angry, numb, and whatever else you feel. If you don't feel like a cancer warrior, that's OK, too. Your doctors are fighting for you. But, if you find yourself having trouble getting through the day, get help. You deserve it. It doesn't mean you're weak. It means you're smart enough to know that you can't get through this alone.

It was helpful for me to tell my doctor about my fears. Healing cannot begin until your feelings have been acknowledged and your diagnosis accepted by you and your loved ones. □

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