

Fear, hope and humor in face of cancer



BARB GUY

We tick errands off our list as we accomplish them and we feel so satisfied. Credit union, tick. Grocery store, tick. Haircut, tick.

The other day, instead of the pleasant tick of an errand completed, my routine mammogram yielded a thud; I flunked it.

I'm not a neophyte to the world of breast cancer; my mom had a radical mastectomy when I was 10 years old, in 1970. Those were barbaric times in breast cancer treatment history.

Now, as an adult, I've seen more people than I can count, many of them people I love a lot, face terrible health challenges of one kind or another, several of them breast cancer. Three years ago when a friend passed away, I wrote a column for *The Tribune* about how my husband, Chris, and I had an inordinate number

of friends our age who had died. I mentioned 17 of them by name.

Their faces dance through my mind now, melding fond memories and harsh reality as I worry over my own developing situation.

It's probably quite normal to dwell on death after being given a cancer diagnosis, and writing about this in the newspaper might seem like an odd choice, I don't know. But the things occupying my thoughts this particular Sunday - my MRI Monday morning, my lumpectomy and whatever else comes on Wednesday, the subsequent radiation treatment, the worries about whether I'll have to do chemotherapy, what on earth will I do if I lose my hair, and other fears that remain unspoken - these are worries thousands of other people reading the paper are facing today, not just me.

Everywhere you go, someone has survived cancer. In a brief flip through mental files of our friends and family, and in happy contrast to the list of those who've died, I celebrate that Luci lived, Jules lived, Dale lived, Tom lived, Jean lived, Char lived, Patty lived, my mom lived, my cousin Greg lived, my father-in-law lived. My dog Cinco lived.

Their survival gives me hope. So all we can do, those of us who are having our turn right now, is act like we're going to live, too, because many of us will. Twenty-five years after my mom's mastectomy, she was riding a camel in Morocco.

My doctor told me that cancer survivors will present themselves to me, that I'll be amazed at how many there are. Good. That will help me cope. So will humor, I think.

In fact, I insisted on a hilarious surgeon. He's a fine physician, award-winning in fact, and he has the world's biggest heart. I admire him for his global view and his personal calling to practice medicine in the poorest parts of the world whenever he can. But I will confess that it's the hilarious that means the most right now.

When he told me we needed to meet and discuss what's coming, I asked if we could hold the meeting outside the hospital; in fact, I requested we have the meeting in a bar. To his enormous credit, he agreed - and offered to buy a round. (What? He's not buying every round?)

I am conscious of how much I have to be grateful for. I have a darling husband and more good, solid, wonderful friends than I deserve.

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I live in the first world and
despite all the chronic problems
facing our health-care system,
there is a thing called health care
available to me. At least a billion
people around the world cannot
say that.

So, ready or not, I'm embarking
on a journey I did not choose,
one I don't want to take. But like
so many other people among us
every day, here I go.

Oh, one more thing - get that
test.

*BARB GUY is a regular contributor to
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