

Thanksgiving Special

Through Illness, Surgery, Despair— A Promise Emerges

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Editors Note: Those who read Sharon B. Schuster's account of her husband's battle with cancer will recall his miraculous healing from a diagnosis of liver cancer, which has a 30 to 60 percent cure rate.

Just as the Schusters were recuperating from that experience, Sharon received devastating news.

It was the Easter holiday, 1987. Because it is such a hassle to take a day off from school, I scheduled an appointment with my gynecologist during the break. It was to be a routine exam to check out a probable benign fibroid tumor on my right ovary that had been detected by another doctor. Women often "get those things." I surmised to Chuck; "I'll probably need surgery to have this removed, but I'll wait till the summer after school is out."

I saw the doctor on Monday. I was in the operating room on Tuesday. My doctor, competent and excellent physician that he is, would not let me wait another day. He would not hear my pleas to "put it off until summer. I have to go back to school to tell the kids." What would they think, how would they cope if I did not return from Easter break - just disappeared?

My doctor projected six to eight weeks of recovery from what was expected to be a routine removal of a cystic - like growth. I made the necessary calls to the principal and arranged for a substitute to teach my Spanish classes.

I was so scared. I shivered and cried at the operating room entrance. I guess the possibility that this growth could be malignant weighed heavy on my mind. And I just wasn't ready to go through this now. The doctor spent time with us explaining the procedure and said he would try to salvage as much as he could. He knew of our desperate desire to have children.

I remember being returned to my room at the hospital, watching the lights in the halls of the hospital race overhead and Chuck holding my hand. "The doctor said everything is ok. He removed a tumor and the right ovary and part of the left ovary, but he said there was no sign of cancer," Chuck assured me.

I spent the next several days recuperating from the "bikini cut" surgical procedure, forcing myself to first get up, then go for walks down the short hall of the obstetri-

cal ward in which I had been placed. Even with the removal of the right ovary, I held on to the hope that there still might be a chance of producing children through artificial insemination. "Thank God there was no cancer," I thought to myself.

It was Saturday, almost a whole week later. I was getting adapt at walking the halls and anxious to go home. The doctor had told me earlier that he was waiting for the official operative report to confirm his initial findings in the operating room. Then I could go home.

I thought I heard him in a new mother's room down the hall. "I can't wait till Monday," I thought. "I'm going to be out in the hallway when he comes out and corner him." Corner him, I did.

"Is your husband here?" he asked. No, I was alone. I insisted that the doctor tell me the findings of the report.

"Let's go in and sit down," he said as he motioned toward my room. "Uh oh," I thought. Whenever a doctor suggests taking you aside to tell you news, look out. Why couldn't he just tell me in the hall that everything is ok, just as his preliminary tests had shown?

"The tumor was cancerous," he said with compassion. That heavy sensation took over my body. I felt flushed and scared. Fighting back the tears, I asked him to explain the procedure and the findings in depth. He took great care to make sure I understood the terminology on the papers and talked about sending me on to a gynecological oncologist, an expert doctor in the area of cancer in women's reproductive organs.

After he left me with this devastating news, I was alone in my room, alone with the thoughts that raced through my head. "I can't believe it - we just went through this with Chuck. How bad is it really? Am I going to live much longer? Will we never know the joy of raising children?" After several tries, I reached Chuck by telephone and he raced to my bedside. By now, the tables full of beautiful flowers from so many friends and well-wishers were no longer a source of comfort. And the cries of the newborn babies on the hall seemed a cruel reminder of what was to never be for us. I wanted to go home.

In subsequent consultations with the doctor by phone, Chuck pressed for more information about the disease - "serious papillary adenocarcinoma." While I

was confined to the upstairs bedroom to recuperate, Chuck took advantage of the private time to speak candidly with the doctor. "How serious is it?" he asked. "What's the cure rate for ovarian cancer?"

The doctor explained that it was very unusual for a woman of 31 years to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer. According to all the literature, the disease strikes women over fifty most often. He described the tumor as gray and ugly, about the size of an orange, with fingers that were reaching for vital organs. The cancer had been clinically classified as stage 1b, within both ovaries, and grade 2. Grade 1 is most often curable. Grade 3 is very deadly. Grade 2 was described as vicious and aggressive, and was the reason for a great amount of concern to the attending physicians. With the information at hand, a cure was unlikely. This disease spreads rapidly and at this stage can cause death within one to three years.

Chuck later told me that he was overcome with fear and sorrow, expecting that we only had a little time left together. But, he decided not to tell me of the gloomy prospects for complete recovery until after the next operation which would verify the findings from the first operation on April 5.

We met with the gynecological oncologist on April 22. By that time I was moving around pretty well. I had been taking slow walks around the farm at home, and even went back to school for a day to meet with my principal and supervisor for a year end evaluation conference that had been scheduled earlier in the year. I found that my students were in the very capable hands of Karen Evans who finished out the rest of the school year for me.

The specialist reviewed my records and met with me, Chuck and my father. All three of us tackled this together, armed with questions and support for one another. The doctor explained that the remaining part of the left ovary must be removed, in light of the official report which indicated a presence of cancer. On May 2, just ten days away, he would perform the surgery recognized to be most effective in treating my illness and probably follow up with chemotherapy.

During the month between operations, I had time to reevaluate the situation. The suddenness of the first diagnosis and surgery caught me totally unprepared. But, now I had time to ponder and pray, and that's just what I did. I read Bernie Siegel's Love, Medicine and Miracles, which is a must for anyone faced with a deadly disease. Aunt Ruby Preston gave me Norman Vincent Peale's Thought Conditioners which I read many times throughout my ordeal as a source of comfort and reassurance. Chuck and I also used positive imagery and visualization. I pictured deer grazing in a field which was my abdomen. And, as they slowly worked their way around, they gobbled up cancer cells as they went. I had a peaceful and serene feeling about the whole thing. Chuck and I prayed fervently together and asked the Lord for another miraculous healing.

A daughter Rachael brought what the Schusters term as "the third miracle to our family."

God truly does work in mysterious ways. Just when I had my life running at full tilt. He saw that I needed to slow down and take time to smell the flowers. My strength returned little by little every day. I took slow therapeutic walks around the farm. At a snail's pace, I couldn't help but notice all of God's wonderful creations - the bright yellow fields of mustard weed, the royal garments of Irises, the intoxicating fragrance of the Mock Orange bush in the yard and the pungent smell of mint as it crushed under my feet along the stream in the pasture. I took great delight in the spring colors and smells and savored every moment. Isn't it sad that it takes such a drastic measure to make us slow down?

We also came to appreciate the kindness of our many friends and family. Ann John, who teaches with Chuck, coordinated an effort among all the teachers of his school to provide us with a complete meal every day while I was incapacitated. She sent Chuck home with a complete meal for three (my father included) every school day for at least three months. Our family filled in with meals during the lean times and on weekends. Aunt Lucy Billings was a regular with good country cooking delivered in her best bowls with a sidedish of pleasant company.

The New Windsor Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church ministered to our needs as well. They fed us spiritually. And, when Pastor William Forsyth and the congregation said that I had exhausted my sick leave and therefore my income, the church donated one Sunday's offering to us. It was the largest offering the church had ever received. And, our good friend Doris Crawmer put me on the prayer chain right away. By the time that second operation came, I was on prayer chains across the country. Everyone was pulling for me.

May 2 came. I was not scared. I felt as though God were right there holding my hand as I waved goodbye to my family and friends in the waiting area. I wished that they could have the peace and comforted feeling that I knew. They were overcome with worry. It is obvious to me now that they expected the worst. So many times during the previous weeks my family had hugged me, clinging to me like it was the last one.

The four-hour surgery went well. I woke up in the recovery room in extreme pain and pleaded for more morphine. The surgery had started at 11:00 a.m. I didn't return to the room until 10:00 p.m. I spent seven days with no food or water, not even ice. I had a gastric tube which expelled the juices from my stomach, a catheter in my bladder, an IV and a catheter in my abdomen.

There, I lay in the hospital bed unable to swab my own dry mouth. When it was all said and done, I had a total hysterectomy, an oophorectomy, omentectomy, lymphadenectomy, and appendectomy. And, the surgeon examined every inch of the colon by stringing it out across the table and then putting it back in. But the good news was NO CANCER! Another miracle.

Chuck and his mother, Dorothy Schuster, took turns staying nights in the hospital with me. I was helpless. They cared for me with great tenderness and compassion. Aunt Roxie Brady relieved them during the days and took turns with Chuck's father, Lou, and my father. I couldn't have recovered as nicely and as quickly as I did without them.

Though I was relieved to know there was no evidence of metastasized cancer, I suffered intense pain and dreaded the next step. Two modes of follow-up treatment were discussed - chemotherapy and P-32.

After much discussion, it was

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Sharon found springtime so beautiful. She said, "Between operations I had time to slow down and smell the flowers."

Homestead Notes