

Fear of Recurrence: Practice Makes It Better

By Cathy Doser

"I'm afraid of my Cancer *coming back*."

Every time I say, or think that, it is an acknowledgement of a fundamental truth for me - uncertainty. Every time I choose to face it, a little bit of Cancer's power over me is *reduced*. "Fear of Recurrence" is the technical name. I learned on my own the *Doctors'* job was to save my life. *My* job was to cope with the Fear and Uncertainty ... for life. It's the ongoing Fear and Uncertainty that impacts my thoughts and emotions. It's something that they don't teach you about.

A Cancer Diagnosis means being sentenced to a Lifetime of Conscious Uncertainty - whether you're diagnosed as a child or up into your 80's and beyond. That uncertainty is difficult, because most humans don't function well with uncertainty. We are creatures of Habit and Routine. We are Planners and Organizers, who like to operate with an illusion of control, in our lives. Living with Cancer is Living with an acute awareness of our own Mortality, which we didn't have with the mental and emotional intensity and frequency before Cancer.

Intellectually, we all know we're Mortal, (Nobody gets out of here Alive!) but even our society doesn't deal with Death and Dying very well. We don't talk about it. We don't collectively look at it, and discuss it. Many of us, faith and belief systems aside, are not taught how to face our own Mortality. When a situation like Cancer thrusts this awareness of Uncertainty of our Life upon us, we can choose to use it as an opportunity to learn, and prepare ourselves.

I am still a student of this. I think the chance to learn is the good part of my Fear of Recurrence. Because the truth is that we all live with uncertainty, but Cancer Patients are just more aware of it, and learn to live with its' consequences. Practicing the art of Coping with an uncertainty, that shakes us to the very core of our being, helps us to manage our Cancer Diagnosis, and offers an opportunity for us to grow, as individuals. While a Cancer Diagnosis is incredibly bad, I've found that some good can come from it too - a little bit, anyway.

I was terrified, and shaken to my very core, when I was first diagnosed with Cancer in my early Fifties. Though less intense than it was in the first weeks and months, this uncertainty, and Fear of Recurrence, remains with me, all of these years later.

Before Cancer, I free-wheeling, in my life, with the emotional belief that all the 'really bad stuff' happened to other people. Yeah Right! My perspective isn't the same any more! But that change, that gave me a lifetime of uncertainty, and Fear of Recurrence, I don't see it as all-bad, as the weeks, months, and years away from my Diagnosis have passed.

There is gratitude. I don't take Life for granted. But I'm more grateful for so many more things, big and small, in my Life now. My head isn't in the sand, although some days I think that I would like to put it back in, if I could. I appreciate feeling Well on the days I do feel Well. I appreciate Good Weather when there is Good Weather. In Seattle, everyone learns to appreciate when there is Good Weather! I truly enjoy a brief moment of connecting with a friend, or a stranger. I try to have a smile on my face, as I walk anywhere, and share it with strangers. Many Life moments really are amazing! Life is good, but I'm still afraid my Cancer could come back. My type of Leukemia is notorious for returning!

And I think there's even more perspective. In some ways, I am more *awake* since the Doctor gave me this Life of Uncertainty. I don't sweat the small stuff as much. I try to live more honestly, with myself. I listen to my emotions more honestly. I try to be conscious of my thoughts and what I'm saying to myself. I have clarity in my life priorities that I didn't have before Cancer. It truly is time to grow my faith in people, to make them an ongoing priority. And to make, and actively pursue, my Bucket List, because I'm afraid my Cancer could come back.

Don't underestimate or shrug off the gifts of gratitude and perspective. They may be very internal, temporary changes, or you may use them to change your life. I'm grateful, and growing my perspective that my Cancer could come back, is one of those gifts.

It's your choice, not Cancer's choice, to decide what to do. I make myself try and try, and then try again. And my Fear starts to disappear! You can let Cancer control your life, or you can control it!