

Sunday April 18, 2021...

Spring is my favourite time of the year - it is a time of hope, renewal, rejuvenation, expectation and celebration. It begins with the Easter season where we celebrate the joy that Jesus Christ has risen. We look for the sprouting of flowers in our garden, buds on the trees and hearing the birds sing in the morning. We await for the warmer weather and put away our winter clothes.

April is the month that the Canadian Cancer Society has chosen as an awareness of those who suffer the burden of cancer. It is a time to pause and remember those we have lost to this disease, to think of those who continue to struggle with this disease, those who have been recently diagnosed with this disease and those who have survived this disease.

One of my favourite poems was written by someone I met along my pathway with cancer:

Spring Will Come

When winter's howling wind,

Gnashes at the darkest hour

I relive a moment

A bright spring day

The dancing breeze

Its silky touch

On yearning skin

Rejuvenating

HOPE

When daffodils bloom, hope grows....

The story of "Doubting Thomas" is one that I think resonates with a lot of us. Thomas wanted to feel the holes in Jesus's hands and feet where the nails were and the gash in Jesus side where the sword slashed. For Thomas seeing and feeling those wounds would help him to be convinced that it was truly Jesus. For Thomas seeing was believing. Jesus response (in John 20 v 29 'So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.' For many of us - especially when facing a life

threatening disease - with the wounds we have whether physical or emotional - we sometimes question our Faith....asking ourselves where is God will God be there to help us with our pain..

In 1993 when I was first diagnosed with Breast Cancer - I remember how I felt hearing those three words 'You have cancer.' Three words that so many of us fear were now being said to me. I was so afraid - my Dad had passed away with cancer less than a year before - how was I going to tell my Mom that her eldest daughter now has cancer, my children were so young and they will be afraid - are they going to lose their Mom like they lost their cherished Grandpa, how will we be able to pay our bills if I am too sick to work; how will John look after the children and carry out the tasks as a teacher; I didn't understand all that the doctor was telling me - I didn't want to die and I have so much I want to live for. So many questions, worries and fears - Will God be there to help me....

In the days going forward I had surgeries and was scheduled to begin my course of chemotherapy. Chemotherapy and I didn't get a long very well. I had numerous complications and hospitalizations. It was a very difficult time for me and my family. When I finished the treatment I experienced severe depression - I felt such despair and a sense of loss. I felt that my family would be much better off without me - so I attempted suicide a few times. The last time I was nearly successful.... I felt that I was in a black pit with no light at the end I scared my family, lost my job but most importantly I lost myself and my faiththere was nothing to see to believe in... I was doubting Joanne...

Looking for faith amongst the Daffodils.....

Over the next few months and years I worked hard in trying to heal myself with the help of doctors, our church and my family. At First I attended the Lectionary Group that met every Sunday morning at 9:00 am before the service. We would study and discuss the lectionary readings for that Sunday. It was a wonderful group and I found them to be very supportive and helpful as I tried to regain my faith. There was at that time another group at the church that

met on Tuesday mornings and prayed for various members of the congregation. Some members of this group were not members of our congregation. One of the members of this group became my dear friend Corrie. She was such a support and inspiration to me. She helped so much - visiting me when I was in the psychiatric ward at the hospital and bringing herbal medicines to help combat the toxicity of the drugs I had been taking. She helped me when I decided to stop all of the medication - we would pray together. She knew I was lost...

As time went on I became stronger both physically and mentally. I was able to pick up the threads of my life - be a mom to my children, be a wife to my husband and I returned to work. I still sought ways to nurture my faith and found many ways through our faith community at First United. The friendships I have developed during this time and over the years have been very important to me ... such a source of unconditional support....these friendships will always mean a lot to me...

Finding support and friendship amongst the daffodils...

There is one more person who played an integral part in my care and recovery - this person was my champion, my strength, my voice when I couldn't speak for myself - he has picked up from the bathroom floor and cleaned me up when I was too sick and weak to do it myself. He also ensured that I did what I was told by the doctors - which at times was rather annoying. Without him at my side I am not so sure I would have survived all of this - my partner John - for 49 years....

Finding unconditional love amongst the daffodils...

In 2008 the cancer had the sheer audacity to return again - this time it had spread to my lymph nodes. Once again I had to have extensive surgery - more wounds, more scars... I didn't have chemotherapy but had six weeks of targeted radiation. All of this left me with less

mobility in my left arm and shoulder and also lymphedema in my left arm. There is a lot of pain associated with this.

This time I wasn't as worried about having cancer again but more about if I would lose myself and my faith again....I didn't want to go back to that dark time. I found that my faith was stronger than I thought and I was able to put my trust in God - I knew that God will be there to help me a long this new pathway and I would survive my faith was there and I wasn't going to be a Doubting Joanne

Finding faith amongst the daffodils...

As it turned out my strength and faith would be challenged once again with a third diagnosis - in 2019 the cancer returned with a vengeance again. We also found out at the same time we were going to be grandparents for the first time. When I received this diagnosis all I could think of was a baseball game where if you have 3 strikes as a batter you are out. I wondered if this would be the time I wouldn't be able to survive. The surgery was once again very extensive - so much so my doctor worried how he was going to put me back together without causing more damage to my left side. The cancer had spread to my lymph nodes and I could see the worry on my surgeon's face when the pathology report came back. He tried to reassure me that he tried his best to get all of the cancer but there was so much. But after surgery and being put back together with 21 stitches and then 7 weeks of intensive radiation I survived. So going back to that baseball game - the score is Joanne - 3 - Cancer - 0 - I may have had 3 strikes against me but once again I won. My faith was there and I knew God would help to carry me along the way as I dealt with all the burns from the radiation and the pain of healing. I may not have seen God but I felt his presence.... I could believe without seeing....

One of things I wanted to do was to give back to the medical community that helped me so much during my pathways with this disease. Since 2010 I have had the opportunity to volunteer with Cancer Care Ontario, Grand River Regional Cancer and Grand River Hospital as what we call a "Patient and Family Advisor" - or commonly referred to as PFA. Through this

volunteer work I have met some pretty amazing people who like me have suffered the burden of cancer and other diseases like kidney disease and heart disease. I have heard their stories - some of the challenges they have had to deal with. I have also volunteered with caregivers or as we call them at Grand River 'Care Partners' - the challenges and heart breaks they have had to face with their loved ones. We have all come together for a common purpose - to assist in improving the health care system, share our stories and help remind health care providers what it is like to be a patient and the challenges of being in the health care system. Listening to our experiences and hearing our voice - has helped changed the direction of a lot of initiatives particularly in cancer care. This past year with all the challenges of COVID it has shown even more how important our voice is.... we have been called upon to assist in so many of the decisions and communications that have had to be made to keep everyone who enters a hospital or a regional cancer centre safe - not just patients and care partners but staff as well.

As a Patient and Family Advisor we have developed a partnership with the health care providers - we the people who have experienced the surgeries, the drugs, the radiation and side effects along with the people who have the knowledge, training and research - working together - the care can only get better and better - as PFAs this is our hope and this is our passion.

I look at myself as being the Visible Me and the Invisible Me. The Visible Me is what you see before you today - looking strong and happy. The Invisible Me struggles every day with the fear that the cancer will return, can only see the scars that I have been left with and lives with pain everyday, but this volunteer work has given the Invisible Me a voice and Hope. My faith has also helped the Invisible Me and has carried me a long the way each and every day...

I have learned over and over again that each day is a gift, family and friends are very important part of my life and that God never left me but carried me and gave me the strength I needed to face the challenges cancer has given me.....No longer a Doubting Joanne

**I found friendship, courage, unconditional love, Hope and Faith
amongst the daffodils.... Peace be with you ...**