



Opening Circle

When your fear touches someone's pain,
it becomes pity; when your love touches
someone's pain, it becomes compassion.

Stephen Levine

Friday evening. *Rob facilitates the first group exercise by asking everyone sitting in the large circle to take one or two minutes to introduce themselves by telling a little of their cancer story, what has been most difficult during their journey, and their hopes for the weekend.*

There is an uncomfortable silence when people realize they will be sharing the intimate details of their lives with fifty strangers. Rob asks for a brave volunteer and waits.

Earl raises his hand. He is a small pale man in his sixties with a thin white beard and dark-rimmed glasses. He looks comfortable in his V-neck sweater. His wife is beside him, her arm across his back. Earl's voice is soft, almost hollow, but he is articulate and seems completely at peace with himself. "I was diagnosed with prostate cancer five years ago. I've found myself on the wrong side of the curve every step of the way. I now have metastatic cancer that's gone through the bones and into my internal organs.

"I'm in the middle of the reprieve that comes from the hormone therapy. I'm doing great. I have a little bit of trouble justifying all the special attention I'm getting." He squeezes his wife's hand, then looks brightly out to the others. "But I'm getting used to it." He continues in an even voice, "The biggest problem I have is the effect it has had on Pat"—he taps his wife on the knee, "and the rest of my family. For me, a kind of acceptance came with the diagnosis. But it was painful to see people having to absorb this bad news as it came on to them rather quickly. We thought the cancer was under control, then it shot through the roof."

Earl pauses, then offers his hope for the weekend: "I'm looking for heart connections and more." He raises his eyebrows briefly and smiles gently.

Earl is unlikely to undergo any type of transformation during the weekend. He already rests calmly in a place of deep peace, acceptance, and love for his fellow travellers. He'll bask in the energy of the group, listen closely to their stories, and immerse himself in the group exercises. He'll support others whenever he can, like volunteering to speak first in front of the group. His inner radiance is already a guiding light for others, especially those who have been recently diagnosed. Near the end of his life, this man is very much alive.

Pat is younger than Earl, her dark hair woven evenly with grey. "Pretty much everything Earl said, I can echo. When we found out about the spread to the liver, I had a couple of weeks of crash and burn. I came out of that, but I still go into it every once in a while. Right now I'm struggling with work responsibilities and wanting to spend as much time as I can with Earl. So it's been a real roller coaster. Probably this group would understand that it is both the best time of our lives and the worst time of our lives."

Pat smiles at Earl. "In this weekend, I'm looking for the strength and skills that will take me through the future, no matter what that brings."

Nancy is next. A forty-year-old mother of teenagers, a nurse with a full bright face and brown caring eyes, her voice begins to tremble as she tells her story. She motions to the thin white-haired lady sitting beside her. "I'm here in support of my Mom. Cancer has touched our lives a number of times. My father had metastatic prostate cancer. My mother had breast cancer and now she has peritoneal cancer. Right now, I'm overwhelmed by everything that's happened. My husband has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's as well." With this she begins to cry quietly. Her mother reaches over and pats her on the shoulder. Nancy tries to continue. "I'm feeling...", but she just continues to cry.

I let out an audible sigh and support her show of emotion. "It's OK to cry. Just stay with it"

People are listening closely and I can sense a feeling of great caring in the room. Nancy finishes with, "I'm hoping to gain strength this weekend for the journey ahead. I want to help the people I work with, and my family."

Nancy's mother takes the microphone. She is a perky and positive person. "The hardest thing for me is the guilt that I have given this difficulty to my three daughters and son. They have all accepted it. And so we are moving on. I am very busy and enjoying life. My chemo is over now. I

sailed through that.” She runs her hand through her short curly hair, and then says with a laugh, “Now I have curls.” She wants to make Nancy feel better.

The group laughs as they continue to waver between touching their own pain and trying to stay positive. Several people already have tears in their eyes and I encourage everyone to share the boxes of tissues found under their chairs.

The next person to speak, a stocky middle-aged French Canadian woman with short hair, rests back easily in her chair. She’s confident, outgoing, and willing to express the truth as she sees it. Three years ago she was diagnosed with a rare type of cancer called carcinoid. There’s still anger in her voice when she says she was sent away from the emergency room and dismissed by her gynecologists three times before being diagnosed. She admits, “Being angry is one of the things coming up right now. I’ve had surgery and two bouts of chemo and right now I’m on vacation.” She smiles broadly at the group showing the humour that resurfaces through her introduction.

“The worst part is the anger, the stress, the effect on my husband, who is a double amputee. And the uncertainty.” She almost cries through her words. “Cancer is a blessing in a way but it’s also a curse. I find I can cope well most of the time, but at night I’m having a hard time. I’m glad I’m getting in touch with my feelings because I can use humour as a deflection device.”

She finishes by foreshadowing the work we’ll do this weekend. “We’re going to be looking at things that I’ve tried not to look at too much. I understand the more you try to control your thinking, the more you become obsessive. So I want to enjoy myself and work with those thoughts in the background.”

I thank her and reinforce that we welcome all emotions this weekend, including her anger.

The next woman is in her fifties and has been on treatment for multiple myeloma, an incurable type of blood cancer. Her face is pudgy from years of treatment with steroids. She shares with the group her reaction to being told over a decade ago that she had eighteen months to live. “I waited. And I waited. And waited. And I’m still here. And I’m not going anywhere.” She’s calm and smiles broadly at the group. “I’ve learned to accept it and live my life from day to day. I realize the next flu season could take me away.” Her manner is light and refreshing. “I just enjoy my life.”

Kathryn is a 37-year-old real estate agent. Her smile is infectious, and the group energy instantly lightens. She is quick to express her frustration at having stage three colon cancer. “I had a bowel resection last June which I hated. I really don’t like hospitals. I thought I would take a week off after the operation and then go back to work. Ha! Ha!” People recognize that Kathryn is laughing at her own naiveté and laugh along as she giggles.

She continues in a serious voice. “It took me a real long time to recover from that. I couldn’t get my energy back. I’m a single mom with three kids and this has devastated me financially. I lost my confidence. I felt I lost my life spirit. I was probably suffering from depression.” The group is taken aback by this admission of vulnerability from someone who looks so ‘together.’

Kathryn shares that she decided not to take the recommended chemotherapy and seems to be doing well. “My treatment plan is working, so I’m happy about that. But my doctors feel my stress level is in the danger zone, so that’s why I’m here. I really need to learn some stress reduction techniques for my healing.”

A large walker sits in front of the next woman. She is big and it’s obvious from her thin voice she has many health challenges and other difficulties in her life. She lists her struggles one after the other, in sentence after shocking sentence: she suffers from mental illness; she hopes for her own death so she can join Jesus in heaven; she writes about herself as the “despised person.” She summarizes her anguish: “It’s very hard to live with, and so if I say something unkind to you, I ask for forgiveness. I hope for this weekend that I’ll be in contact with Almighty God and that He’ll guide me.” The group listens attentively. This woman has been totally welcomed.

Maureen is obviously upset, her voice trembling. Five years ago, in her mid-forties, she was treated for kidney cancer and seems to be cured. She feels lucky now. She turns to the good-looking man beside her and begins to tear up. “But my husband was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor. I’m a glass half-full type of girl so I want to learn a few skills so I can stay half -full.”

Maureen’s husband takes the microphone and glances at his wife with a smile. “My name is Frank. I’m sorry I’m a bit shaky” His voice is wavering with emotion. “I had my tumor taken out on Christmas Eve.

“The most difficult issue,” he continues very slowly, “is to receive the love all the people are giving me. I’m having a hard time. I’ve never been

a receiver. I've always been a giver." The tears are streaming down his face. There's a long pause and he lets out a big sigh before he says with determination, "I believe in the power of my mind. What I want to get out of the weekend is hope and how to make it work." I sense a feeling of intense compassion building in the air.

Andrea jumps to her feet. She's a big and bubbly woman in her early thirties, doing well after treatment for breast cancer. She explains that a friend bought her a large coffee that afternoon, and, "she didn't order it decaf! I'm just wired here! I've been sitting here almost crying the whole time."

Everyone laughs as the tension is released. Andrea stays on the light side of her journey. Several others are thankful for the reprieve from the emotional intensity. But as the stories come, one after the other, they are naturally drawn to listen with compassion and empathy.

Rick has tears in his eyes as he listens to his wife, who was successfully treated for breast cancer four years ago. He is a hefty man with long wavy hair and a greying goatee. He drives a truck for the postal service and races cars in his spare time. His voice is pitched higher than usual, emotions caught in his throat. "I've been diagnosed with prostate cancer, and it's pretty serious. I'm on hormone treatment now." He wipes away his tears. After a pause, he bursts out crying. "And my mother passed away three weeks ago from a brain tumor.

"I hope to get some skills out of this weekend to help myself and to feel better." Seeing this rugged man cry brings the group into a deep silence and a true appreciation of his pain.

The next woman is on the verge of tears. Rick has provided her an opportunity she has been seeking. She's over the physical effects of her breast cancer, but realizes she has denied her feelings through the whole process. She says, "I really want to get close to my feelings. I want to mourn the loss of my life before cancer."

I look around the room and can see most of the people have a tissue in hand and have released some of their sorrow. With the intensity also comes a lightness, a feeling that there is more space in our hearts.

Ed has a brain tumor, which has come fifteen years after a testicular cancer diagnosis, and he struggles with the uncertainty of the situation. Debbie, Ed's wife, complains that "once you finish with one doctor, they send you off to another one. And they just cut you loose. You're just drifting. They never see you again." She summarizes, "The medical system has been a bit unsupportive."

More and more stories. People speaking from their hearts. Everyone listens with rapt attention. David is the father of Valerie, a beautiful young woman with a brain tumor. Valerie takes the microphone from her father and they glance at each other with love in their eyes. Her tumor appears dormant after surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, but everyone feels the sadness of a young woman taken away from her imagined future. “My dream was to teach and I was teaching in Japan when this happened. I don’t think I’ll ever teach again. And I’d like to be a mother, but that’s been put on hold too. I hope this weekend leads me to the path where I can start working again.” David wraps his arm around his daughter and she collapses into his shoulder. Our hearts are raw. People begin to wonder how long this can go on. We are only halfway through the circle.

Patty has just been diagnosed with breast cancer, and the staging tests show spots on the liver and lungs. “The most difficult thing so far”—her voice turns squeaky, tears streaming down her cheeks—“has been to tell my family. Because it makes them so sad. I wonder what I should have done so this would not have happened. I hope this weekend we can learn to deal with some of those things. Thank you all for sharing with us.” I make a note to myself to emphasize in the lecture later that evening that getting cancer was not her fault. But for now we will simply hold her pain.

Wally is Patty’s husband. He is a retired executive in his sixties and owns several companies. He has always been a “take charge” type of person. As he watches his wife he wipes the tears from his face. He blows his nose, slumping down, staring at the floor. His body begins to heave, trying to release the deep sobs of sadness. He holds himself in, pushing the tears back as they well up. He takes a deep breath. A few more seconds pass. He takes another long breath. Patty jokes, poking her husband in the shoulder, “...and Wally is my greatest strength.”

I wait for the laughter to die down so everyone can hear the seriousness of my voice: “This is strength that you’re seeing right now.” After a pause I add “Let it come. You have a deep heart.”

Wally’s voice lilts up and down “It’s been very difficult not knowing what the future holds. We are both results-oriented people and we had a life planned. We’ve done a lot of things together and I don’t want it to end.” Wally turns, his head lowered towards Patty, and she holds onto him tightly.

People are tiring now. I can hear a shuffling in the chairs. They are asking themselves, “How can I go on? How can I take any more?” People

do not yet realize that listening to the last twenty people in the circle will be a spiritual lesson as their hearts will keep opening with compassion.

Jan has lost her creativity. Kathy has had to accept the possibility of dying to facilitate her amazing recovery. Julian is dealing with the cancer by himself. Velma is surprised by her outburst of tears, having held onto the pain for so long—for her son's lymphoma diagnosis five years ago and for her husband's recent brain tumor. Theresa is cured of a lung cancer the doctors said was terminal ten years before. Her journey was "a wonderful experience".

Remarkably, for all the pain, suffering, and tears in the room, so many people keep saying how struck they are by the strength and courage they hear in each others' stories. The circle is generating a powerful feeling of love.

Anne passed the first time around, so she is the last person to speak. Her ovarian cancer came at a stressful time in her life. "I was single, lost my job in a mass layoff, and was about to start my own business when I was diagnosed." Her voice is weak with exasperation. "That was the last straw because I wasn't able to do anything, much less look after myself! I was told, 'We need six more months of your life to give you chemotherapy.' I wasn't sure how I would support myself... much less find the strength I needed.

"For my whole life I was someone who looked after other people. I was strong for people. But now I need to care for myself. I need to rebuild my confidence and my life.

"I focus on the word 'retreat' for this weekend because it takes me away from all the responsibilities I have. I am so grateful to have this time here with you."

After everyone has spoken, I reassure them that the whole weekend will not be as intense as this opening exercise. I encourage them to stay with whatever emotions have come up, listening to so many stories at once.

"Sharing and listening to stories can touch you in many ways. Stories can be inspiring and they can also bring up many different emotions; there is great value in welcoming them all. When you allow yourself to feel sadness, grief and pain, you stretch your heart, opening more space to appreciate the preciousness of life and the joy of living."