

Bonnie

Learning to Paddle My Own Kayak

“How did I get myself into this?” Exhausted and scared, Bonnie fought through the waves and riptide to get back to shore.

The adventure that seemed to be the turning point in her recovery from cancer started innocently enough a couple hours earlier. On a warm July afternoon, on a beach in Maine, Bonnie kissed her husband on his cheek, waved to her friends and got into her own kayak. A petite woman with sparkling blue eyes, and curly greying hair, Bonnie sat up straight, and gripped her paddle with determination. She looked over at Karen, a friend and guide, and began paddling slowly, happy to spend some time alone reflecting on her life.

Her cancer journey had begun six years earlier at age 46, when her three kids were aged 16-23, and her career and passion as a corporate trainer was flourishing. She had noticed lumps in her neck and began to feel weak.

Her doctor called her with the results of a biopsy while Bonnie was running a seminar. “You have lymphoma and need to quit work today. Like... today!” Bonnie replied “I’m a trainer and I have many people here who have paid \$10,000 a pop. I can’t just walk out.”

Her chemotherapy started three days later.

As Bonnie paddled along she recalled how hard it had been to tell her kids. Her eyes teared up as she thought about the long drive to visit her son at his boarding school to tell him the news in person. Her daughter was on exchange in Europe, and Bonnie couldn’t hide her diagnosis from her any longer. They both cried and cried - Bonnie alone in her bedroom and her daughter in a phone booth in England.

Even while paddling, Bonnie realized that through six long years, on and off chemotherapy, the same worries were still ringing in her mind. “I just don’t want to be a burden to anyone. My kids are in their mid-twenties. They should be out there leading their lives, not having to come home to a sick mother.” Despite being in remission for over two years now, she still felt like her friends and family shouldn’t have to deal with

her diagnosis and that her kids should be out 'having fun'.

Bonnie set down her paddle and lowered her head. Karen interrupted her to ask if she wanted to go out farther, beyond the waves. Bonnie was quick to smile and agreed, despite feeling tired.

She had been tired for a long time and she couldn't figure out why. She has a loving husband and a large group of supportive friends. Hundreds of 'Get well' cards and letters line the walls and windows of the sunroom in her house. The sun shines through the cards pouring in the light of love and good wishes on her. But when she sees herself sitting in this room and thinks about how she has put on her 'Revlon face' to try to make everyone happy, she feels isolated and exhausted at her core.

As Bonnie turned to head to deeper water, the first wave caught her by surprise, splashing water in her face and stinging her eyes. She gritted her teeth and tried to dig in her paddle. As she struggled through the waves, she thought about the occasional turmoil she has had with her adult children. One day she said to her daughter, "Everyone in the family is just fed up with my lymphoma." Her daughter retorted in frustration "That's not true, Mom." Bonnie was still confused by the turbulence in their relationship and wondered how to make it better.

Bonnie was shocked out of her reflections by Karen who shouted "You're in a riptide." Bonnie looked up and noticed that her kayak was being pulled further and further away from her husband and friends on the shore. She realized she was going to have to get back over the waves and paddle against the tide to return to the beach. Karen shouted instructions: "I'm going to tell you what to do. But it's you who has to do it because you are in your own kayak."

Minutes passed as Bonnie circled in the riptide, frozen with indecision. Her skinny arms felt like lead. Her body began to shake in fear.

Finally, with a rush of adrenaline she shouted "Let's go" and paddled with all her might. "I paddled my little brains out. When I got to the shore, it was totally magical. My husband and our friends were on the shore and everyone was jumping around. I was yelling, 'I did it! I did it!'"

Months after her kayaking adventure, Bonnie reflected on the meaning of overcoming the waves and tide. "That was the turning point in my recovery from the cancer. It was a metaphor for how I needed to take care of myself. My paddling partner, she had to wait out there with me. Other people were waiting to see if I could do it. Then I realized I had to paddle my own kayak and not worry about everyone else."

Bonnie then went on to explain, despite this insight, she still struggles to justify caring for herself, giving an example of deciding to take an eight-week mindfulness course. “For my whole life I never felt I warranted the time for myself. I had work to do and kids, and I didn’t feel I deserved anything just for me.

“With the lymphoma diagnosis, all of a sudden my time came. It became clear to me that learning mindfulness was exactly what I needed. They handed out audio tapes for practice and I set up a room for myself upstairs. It felt so good. And my family now knows when that door is shut I don’t take phone calls, I don’t receive visitors, I don’t answer to ‘what’s for dinner?’ When the door is shut, they know I’m doing my thing.

“And Yoga has been a lifesaver too. If I don’t do yoga class a couple of times a week, I feel I’m losing not only my physical strength but also my mental strength. So when I get strung out or tired, when there’s no reserve in the tank, I do some meditation and a couple of yoga poses and just pull myself together.”

Bonnie then referred back to a question she had been asked earlier during the weekend retreat. “When Rob asked us what we really want to do, I had an epiphany. I thought about my life. Every day for the last 50 years, I have woken in the morning with the question ‘What do I *have* to do today?’ . . . not ‘What do I *want* to do today?’

“Being a trainer for 30 years, every work day was focused on ‘How can I make my client’s day as good as possible’. My office was the training room. I never had a peaceful moment. I became a mom at 29 and from that moment on, I factored my family into every day’s plan. And I am a wife, dog owner, daughter, sister, and friend too. I did not balance it very well, did I?

“I think I just figured out why I am so tired and why I need to take care of myself right now! Nobody else can paddle my kayak for me.”