

Kathy

Miracles Can Happen

“I was blindsided. How plausible could it be that I had two potentially fatal medical conditions fighting for supremacy in my poor, tired, bloated body? I wasn’t sure whether to cry or laugh at the absurdity of this situation.”

Kathy, a beautiful 47-year-old executive and mother of two teens, lay in a hospital bed recovering from the complications of a liver biopsy. Her family doctor was explaining that her Hodgkin’s lymphoma (cancer of the lymph system) had recurred seven years after her first treatments. She had large masses in her chest and abdomen. In addition, for some unknown reason, her liver had been severely damaged. Her oncologist didn’t want to treat her cancer because the chemotherapy would further damage her liver, and her liver specialist wouldn’t recommend a liver transplant because she had active cancer. She was at a medical impasse.

Kathy knew she needed to find a way to support her body’s natural capacity to heal itself so she could undergo chemotherapy. So while she would work to get her medical specialists to find a viable solution, she would also have to draw on a deep wisdom to tap into the ‘power to heal.’ Her inward journey started with reading the journals she had written in every night since she was a young girl.

Kathy had moved with her family from Vancouver to Hawaii when she was in her teens. Having never moved before, and leaving the familiar surroundings of her old home, she became anxious and began to worry about death and losing her mother. A mild depression ensued, providing her with a space to reflect. Her mother, who has been on a spiritual quest all her life, gave her the Bible and the writings of the Buddha. Kathy also read Edgar Cayce and stories about life after death and near-death experiences. She emerged from her depression with a ‘knowingness’ that has never left her.

Kathy later wrote “Ultimately, I somehow locked onto the notion of infinity. I thought about what was before the genesis of man. I thought about what was before that. And before that. And I realized that the hu-

man mind could not comprehend the reality of ‘always was, always is.’ For me, that was the defining truth: finiteness and death are a subset of infinity, of being. This did not remove the pain and hurt of mortality, but it made sense of it for me. It also gave me a feeling I can only describe as overwhelming happiness—a pervasive love and connectedness to the thing that is All.”

Having this powerful spiritual insight as a young teenager gave Kathy a foundation of strength that she would later draw on throughout her life’s journey. However, as often happens with such early awakenings, the glow of that peaceful joy faded and the demands of life, survival and growing up moved into the foreground.

Kathy had been painfully shy as a child, but behind her quiet persona was a fierce competitive spirit. She excelled academically and in her other activities. With a loving home environment, she was developing into a true leader. At a critical point, when her parents went through a divorce and her mother had to deal with the reality of going back to work after 25 years, Kathy vowed to herself that she would never allow herself to be dependent on others for her livelihood. This vow drove her to work hard throughout her lifetime and set in place a belief system she pushed deep within her psyche.

Pouring her spirit into the business world, she rose quickly up the corporate ladder, featured in a business magazine in her twenties as ‘one to watch.’ By age thirty, she was a national vice-president at a large telecommunications company. Underlying her positive and gracious persona, however, was an edge that drove her to ‘outperform and outmanoeuvre her male colleagues.’

“I can see now that I was engaged in a fight that was much more about me than about ‘them.’ The war had been against myself. It took a lot of soul searching to see this for what it was.”

By age forty, Kathy began to recognize that her life was out of balance. An increasingly stressful job forced her to contemplate her goals and what it meant to live a life of integrity. She changed jobs to align her work more closely to her heart. Then suddenly a lump developed on her neck. A biopsy showed Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.

Kathy’s reaction to the initial diagnosis was “Cancer? There must be a mistake.” She cried in her car all the way home from the doctor’s office, thinking life was unfair. But her pity party lasted a single afternoon. Her goal-oriented personality took over and she set about solving the problem of cancer much like every other challenge in her life: failure was not

an option. Her mind told her she would achieve the goal, overachieve her targets, and emerge as the role model for all survivors. In an effort to be open about her diagnosis, she called a meeting of her team at work to tell them the news and was surprised to see many of them crying.

Kathy's approach to cancer was pragmatic and effective. She augmented the best conventional treatment with self-guided healing techniques, reading books such as *Love, Medicine and Miracles* by Dr. Bernie Siegel; *Anatomy of the Spirit* by Carolynn Myss; and other inspirational texts. She brushed up on her meditation and visualization skills and had reflexology sessions in her home after each chemotherapy treatment. She took vitamins, drank cleansing tea, ate all the right foods, and generally took control of the business of healing, much as she had taken control of all of the other challenges in her life.

But there was more to her journey than just getting through the treatments. Kathy began to ponder the lesson she was to take from this setback. She concluded that the cancer was a gift, sent to remind her of what was most important in life. She had two beautiful children, a great husband, and a wonderful support network of friends, family, and co-workers.

Kathy felt the cancer had been allowed to grow in her body because of the emotional turmoil, high stress, and long hours of her previous job—she comforted herself by acknowledging she had already moved into a new work role that was more in line with her true values.

After four months of chemotherapy, Kathy went back to work full time, her hair began to grow back, and she moved on with her life. Five years after her first bout with cancer, she was dismissed by her oncologist. She had achieved her goals. She believed she had emerged victorious, unscathed and convinced that she was in control of her life.

With a renewed appreciation for life, Kathy vowed to get home early and cherish her time playing with her kids and keep a happy balance. However, over the years, as the lessons from her cancer scare began to fade, she got drawn further into her work world. The prize of becoming a partner at her executive search firm tempted her to work harder and harder. In the months leading up to her recurrence of cancer, Kathy was going at an insane pace: fourteen-hour days in the office, jogging four miles to and from work with a backpack full of work clothes, calling clients from the airport before catching the red-eye to distant cities.

Her initial reaction to finding out her cancer had recurred, seven years after her original diagnosis, was, paradoxically, one of relief. In retrospect,

it didn't seem surprising to her that she had become sick again. The diagnosis gave her the ultimate permission slip to jump off the treadmill again.

But with the combined diagnosis of recurrent cancer and liver damage, Kathy was trapped between two illnesses, each of which prevented treatment of the other. Despite her underlying spiritual beliefs, cancer struck fear in her heart. Leaving her kids and husband was simply not part of the plan.

Since the medical system wasn't offering any viable option, Kathy knew she had to add complementary healing, provided it was integrated with her medical treatments. She read everything she could about her two diseases, about complementary healing options, about vitamins and supplements and possible interactions with chemotherapy drugs, effects on the liver, and so on. Her research led her to a local center for integrated healing, now called InspireHealth.

She set up a full consultation with the center's co-founder, Dr. Hal Gunn, who specializes in integrative cancer care. Dr. Gunn quickly understood the medical complexities of her case and recommended a combination of vitamins and nutrition, a continued focus on fitness tailored around her treatments, and an autoimmune boosting supplement.

With the help of the medical professionals at InspireHealth, and in full collaboration with her conventional medical specialists, Kathy created a self-directed healing plan. The plan was designed to accelerate her response to chemotherapy, fortify her bodily systems to minimize damaging side effects, heal her liver, and generally improve her overall feeling of well-being. She felt empowered and involved in making herself well.

Remarkably, Kathy's liver condition stabilized enough that her medical oncologist could proceed with full-dose chemotherapy. As her physical health began to improve, her spiritual healing was just beginning. Dr. Gunn was not finished with her.

In their first session, Dr. Gunn asked why Kathy thought she had developed cancer a second time. Kathy replied that she felt she had unfinished business on the emotional and spiritual side of things. The first time she was treated for cancer, she had focused on aligning her work world with her heart. Kathy felt that this time she needed to go deeper into an understanding of why her life was still all about work. She asked herself what she was trying to prove, escape, or find?

In their next session, Dr. Gunn invited her to examine her questions further. Unable to escape the soul-connecting gaze of his clear blue eyes,

Kathy heard herself admitting a painful, hidden and core belief that she was avoiding intimacy by setting up battlegrounds both at home and at work. She needed to learn how to open her heart before she could fully heal. Her words surprised her, welling up from some buried, dark corner of her psyche.

After the appointment, the question Kathy kept asking herself was why she needed a second wakeup call. Reading her old journals, Kathy found clues to repressed insecurities she had felt most of her life that had been feeding self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy. She had compensated by developing the false persona of ‘super woman’. As she sat reading her journal and reflecting on her life, she found she had to work hard to avoid judging herself. She felt she had to learn to be kind and loving toward herself.

Exposing this vulnerability left her raw and a bit emotional. By continuing to practice loving kindness and a non-judgmental attitude toward herself, however, she began to tap into a deep well of genuine compassion—for herself and for others.

Kathy discovered that practicing compassion with family members can sometimes be the most difficult challenge in life. Kathy’s family culture was one of stoicism and silent strength, despite the love they felt internally. At times, Kathy interpreted her family’s lack of outward signs of concern to mean that they didn’t care. This led her to feel frustrated, sad and isolated. Mindful of her reactions and determined to heal these feelings of separation, Kathy began to recognize her own patterns of stoicism and to see that she had participated in creating the culture that no longer felt supportive.

Kathy realized that her self-talk was keeping her perceptions stuck in place and so she learned to reframe her thinking when she felt a family member wasn’t being as supportive as she would like. The turning point for her was realizing that “It’s not them, it’s me. It’s what I am thinking about them. I need to be able to see them for who they are. So I reframed the situation by acknowledging ‘They are hurting, too. It may not show the same way that it does for me, but they need my love and compassion. They can find their heart if I open mine.’”

Years of being the strong, independent, and competitive persona had conditioned her family to give her that space which she now saw as an uncaring and distant vacuum. “They can find their heart if I open mine” was exactly the healing that her soul had prescribed.

Kathy's journey towards wholeness continued when she attended our weekend retreat. In one small group discussion, we explore the issue of death. During her first cancer diagnosis, Kathy wore the mask of the cancer heroine, never really considering that her life was at stake. When her cancer later recurred, along with advanced liver failure, she could no longer disguise the possibility of death. Kathy realized that it's not death itself that she most fears, because her reassuring insight developed as a teenager was still there within her. She knew in her heart that impermanence and death were "a subset of infinity, of being."

Although this spiritual awareness allowed her to be comfortable with the possibility of her own death, at the retreat her tears welled up as she considered its effect on her two children and husband. In a small group discussion, she shared her greatest fear: "I fear that if I don't live this moment, it could be the last. And that scares the hell out of me because I have spent most days on automatic pilot. I am busy, busy, busy. I try to do, and do some more, and then do even more. I'm focussed on achieving and making a contribution. Then my kid comes in and says, 'I need some attention', and I'm somewhere else psychologically. My greatest fear is that I'm going to miss today and that will be it. That will be the end. I will have missed out completely."

Kathy paused, brow furrowed. She stared off into a deep dark place. She was asked "What's the worst thing about dying now—from your kids' perspective?"

Kathy looked down, then back up. "That they never got to know who I was—that we didn't get underneath the veneer. They're teens now, and I'm not the fundamental part of their lives that I used to be. Will that be the memory they are left with—that I was a sick person who wasn't a friend? I don't want to be that tiny little superficial memory," Kathy was now crying openly.

In doing this deep but painful work, Kathy had lifted a shining nugget of truth from the treasure chest of her heart: that being vulnerable and looking to connect with others is her healing path. She can light her own way now with love, forgiveness, and wisdom – for herself and for others – and tap into the universal capacity to heal.

Toward the end of the retreat, Kathy shared a recent story of taking her eighteen-year-old son shopping: "I thoroughly enjoyed it. I could have been frazzled. I saw the other moms looking flustered, calling to their

sons, ‘Will you just get on with it? Hurry up!’ My son? He’s a six-foot-one ‘mountain man’ with washboard abs, and he comes out of the change room, does a quick turnaround, wiggles his backside at me, and asks over his shoulder with a big grin, ‘Do these jeans make my butt look fat?’ I just loved it. He was so cute. I just surrendered to the afternoon.”



Five years after Kathy was told that her lymphoma had recurred with no viable treatment options, she now has no sign of cancer. Her oncologist says that she is a walking miracle. Her liver condition also appears stable. If Kathy needs a liver transplant, her twin sister is ready to be her donor, and the rest of her family and friends will gladly gather at her bedside to nurse her back to health.