

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Cycling down the California coast in October 2016, aged 58, I felt great, covering over 750 kilometers in a week. I had been training all summer in preparation for this epic trip that started in San Francisco. After the ride I spent a few days in San Diego, then I flew to my friend's house in Florida where I joined a small group ride from Florida City to Key West and back.



I had received a routine mammogram reminder prior to my departure. However, obtaining a requisition for this required a visit to the doctor, so I postponed the appointment until my return.

In mid November, at a regular physical, my doctor commented that she felt some density in my left breast and sent me off for a mammogram and an ultrasound. I didn't think for a moment that this could possibly be cancer. After all, I was in great physical shape and felt very well. I couldn't feel any lump or density, or maybe I just didn't want to. If there was anything abnormal, I thought, it was probably due to all the cycling, perhaps a muscle that had enlarged?

On the day of my appointment, the mammogram equipment broke down. I must have been anxious, as I insisted on having the ultrasound anyway. There was no denying that

something showed up on the screen and it was measured by the ultrasound technician. The doctor at the lab confirmed that there was a mass and sent me for a biopsy. "Probably just a cyst", I thought. I had enjoyed excellent health all my life.

The biopsy results told a story I was not expecting. It was now just three days before Christmas. The lump was indeed malignant and I was told that it was a moderate grade cancer. I decided to process this new information and to keep the diagnosis to myself until after the festivities. I thought "Why not me?". Perhaps it was my turn for a health glitch.

Surgery was scheduled for 25th of January. Waiting for that Wednesday to come seemed like an eternity and it was torture knowing that the cancer was growing, and possibly spreading, inside my body every day. Bad timing, with Christmas and New Year holidays. The surgery was painless and I suffered no ill effects. However, an analysis of the tumour confirmed that my cancer was in fact Grade III. The grade of a tumor, not to be confused with "stage" of cancer, is the description of a tumor based on the abnormality of the cells and how tumor tissue looks under a microscope. It is an indicator of how quickly a tumor is likely to grow and spread. In my case it was fast growing and aggressive.

PHARMA ALLEY

I was prescribed twelve weeks of chemotherapy, followed by twenty days of radiation, then daily estrogen blocking pills for five years. I wondered how I would deal with this, as a swimmer and a cyclist who didn't want to see my life's pleasures disappear. However, I am stubborn and determined. I just decided that I wasn't going to allow the cancer or its treatment to take over my

thoughts or my life. I chose to pedal and swim on. In the afternoon of my first chemo treatment, I swam my usual eighty laps. I kept up this activity several days a week and, in July, completed my fifth annual swim across Okanagan Lake, adding just seventeen seconds to my previous year's time. Although I did not feel great at times, swimming was a good alternative to sitting on the couch feeling sorry for myself. I had been told that patients who keep up their activities throughout treatment not only suffer less fatigue at the time of the treatment and afterwards, but also that exercise can actually make the treatment more effective. All through my chemo I continued to cycle and swim. I wasn't fast but I kept going, reaching my goals and feeling better for the exercise. My cycling friends were very supportive and encouraging and I am eternally grateful to them for patiently waiting for me as I pedalled up hills. I was always at the back of the pack but I got there in the end.

The chemo wasn't too bad. The skin on my face became quite dry and coconut oil became my new best friend. Over time my skin seemed to renew itself and became soft and silky, with less lines and wrinkles. The worst side effect was a foul taste in my mouth - I likened this to eating dirty money from the bottom of a dumpster. A couple of weeks into the chemo treatment, my hair started to thin, so I decided to get my head shaved. I found some pretty scarves and a friend bought me a fabulous wig, so I just resigned myself to my new look - a small price to pay when I was receiving some of the best cancer care anywhere in the world.

THE GALL !

After the third chemo treatment, in an effort to mask this nasty taste I was experiencing, I gorged myself on a delicious creamy Vietnamese curry. The following day I continued to assault my stomach and indulged in dim sum, a couple of rich, Chinese buns and a smoothie. I don't know

why I bothered because the taste didn't go away and that's not the way I like to eat. I certainly didn't lose my appetite during treatment and just kept eating foolishly in an effort to mask that foul taste. That evening the heartburn (so I assumed) started. I took some antacid pills to no avail so I ended up calling Health Link. By 8 O'clock that evening I was doubled up in pain in the Emergency Room, writhing on the floor in my PJs, unable to hold my head up or even present my Alberta Health Card at the Triage Desk. The diagnosis took several hours while I was given hydro-morphine for the pain. By 8.30 the next morning it was clear that the culprit was my very unhappy and inflamed gall bladder. Surgery was inevitable as the stone in the mouth of the rather useless organ would have moved on an unknown path and possibly caused more serious problems. That evening I had my gall bladder removed, coincidentally by the same surgeon who had removed my breast lump. The operation went well. My white blood cell count was low from the chemo so I was not allowed out of the hospital for two days. Once home, I decided that going for a gentle bike ride would be more comfortable than lying on the couch, so off I went. I rode my bike a few kilometers along the beautiful Bow River pathway, while my house guests (yes, I had house guests from Europe at this time) walked the route.

FOCUS ON THE JOY

I was very lucky that I was able to organize health related appointments around all my pre-planned ski trips and other activities. Radiation started right after the Okanagan Lake swim. The Tom Baker Cancer Centre is about 14 kilometers from my home, with a couple of fairly big hills on the route. Nevertheless, I decided that I would cycle to and from my appointments, if I possibly could. And that's exactly what I did. The hills got easier and the ride was very enjoyable. In fact, the ride was something I looked forward to and it became the highlight of each day. The weather

was lovely and it was school holiday time, so the roads were quiet. During my twenty day of radiation treatment I could not venture far from home, so I made sure that the time was enjoyable by working diligently on a long overdue art project before and after the daily bike ride and treatment. The weeks passed quickly enough. I was feeling good and quite proud of my achievements. I didn't suffer any significant fatigue during or post radiation, nor did I experience any skin problems or discomfort.

Throughout all of this, I found that keeping my life as normal as possible, continuing to exercise and doing the things I enjoyed, really helped me to cope with the situation I found myself in. Besides, nobody can see that you have no hair when you are wearing a bike helmet or a swimming cap!

EUROPEAN ADVENTURE



Prior to or around the time of my diagnosis I had been planning a long bike ride in Europe for the Fall of 2017. I settled on Spain and Portugal.

I asked around to see if anyone would like to accompany me and decided that, if not, I was going to do it by myself anyway. As it happens, two friends joined me for a portion of the trip. It was great, perhaps vital, to have something to look forward to and to focus on. Just before the trip, my hair had grown a little, so I asked my hairstylist daughter to darken the silver regrowth which immediately made me look and feel ten years younger. On October 3rd I was on a flight to London and on to Madrid, bike in the cargo hold. The first two weeks took us across Spain and its wonderful history, then into Portugal along the Douro Valley, We had the most glorious weather, pedalled up and down countless mountains and enjoyed some great local food and wine. I felt as if I was pedalling onward and away from the cancer. When we got to the beautiful city of Porto, my friends had to leave, so I decided to tackle the coastal route of the Camino de Santiago and continued on to Santiago de Compostela by myself.

I assumed that I would see some other cyclists on the route. Not so. Apart from the initial few kilometers that took me along the beaches and boardwalk from Porto, the Camino was deserted. The ride was much tougher than I expected with miles of uncomfortable riding on rough cobbled streets that I had once loved for their quaint beauty. I followed the yellow Camino arrows as much as possible. However, after dragging my bike through the woods, wading through frigid streams and mud in my cleated, porous cycling shoes and being terrorised by feral dogs, I came to my senses and found my way to the nearest secondary road!

Sooner or later good bike trails deteriorated into steep, rough paths with jagged shale that caused many flat tires.

It took me four days to complete the three hundred kilometers, a little more distance than expected because I became a bit lost when the

path suddenly turned into a “no bikes allowed” route and I had to find an alternative way to ride.



I also added even more unnecessary distance riding up and down an inlet, as I chose to cross from Portugal to Spain on a Monday - on the ferry that does not run on Mondays! All part of the adventure and certainly a welcome distraction from my health concerns, just as I hope I have distracted you, the reader, from the primary subject of this story. You almost forgot about the cancer, didn't you? So did I.

This article isn't so much about breast cancer. It's more about the choice I made not to focus on a health issue, but rather to show that you can continue to lead a full and happy life while navigating it all. My hope is that it will be an inspiration to those who are facing early stage breast cancer. I was simply not willing to give the cancer or treatment too much of my energy or thoughts. My health care professionals, whom I cannot praise highly enough, were all doing a

great job and I had the utmost confidence that I was in good hands.

Christmas 2017 marked the start of a new phase in my life and I was able to give my adult son and daughter the finished products of my art project, a personalized treasure box for each of them, hand painted by me, against all the odds. I didn't know the first thing about acrylics or how to use them so I appreciated the free art workshops at Wellspring Cancer Support Centre. In 2018, my 60th birthday year, I am looking forward to many exciting adventures.

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS



On New Years Day 2018, I crossed off an item off my Bucket List, climbing a sixty foot ice tower. It was a tough climb in boots that were a size too big. The two millennials who attempted the ascent before me gave up early in the climb. With pure grit and determination and very sore arms I made it all the way to the top. I lead a full, busy and amazing life and I am assuming that I will continue to be able to do so. There is little point in thinking otherwise.

REFLECTIONS

During my experience there were many moments of fear and isolation and times when I thought my life would be cut short. Maybe it will be, but there's not much I can do other than to trust the doctors and treatments and see how it all unfolds. There are worse diseases and many other ways that life can end. I am going to focus on enjoying my family and my life, for as long as it lasts. Lots of people survive breast cancer and go on to lead a full, long and healthy life. Why not me?

WITH HUGE THANKS AND APPRECIATION

I feel grateful and privileged to have received the treatment and care I encountered. I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all the medical professionals who devote their lives to healing people like me. Every one of them was kind and generous with their time. Thanks to the volunteers at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre for donating their precious time to bring tea, cookies and a smile to the patients. Thanks to the nurses, the admin staff and the cleaning staff. Thanks to my friends and family who supported me during this interesting time.

If I can be of assistance in any way as a result of my journey, I would be pleased to volunteer my time and show, first hand, how I barely missed a beat during this surprise adventure. If this article can help just one person, I would be happy for it to be shared.



Utah, January 2018 and I'm having fun.

Life is Good