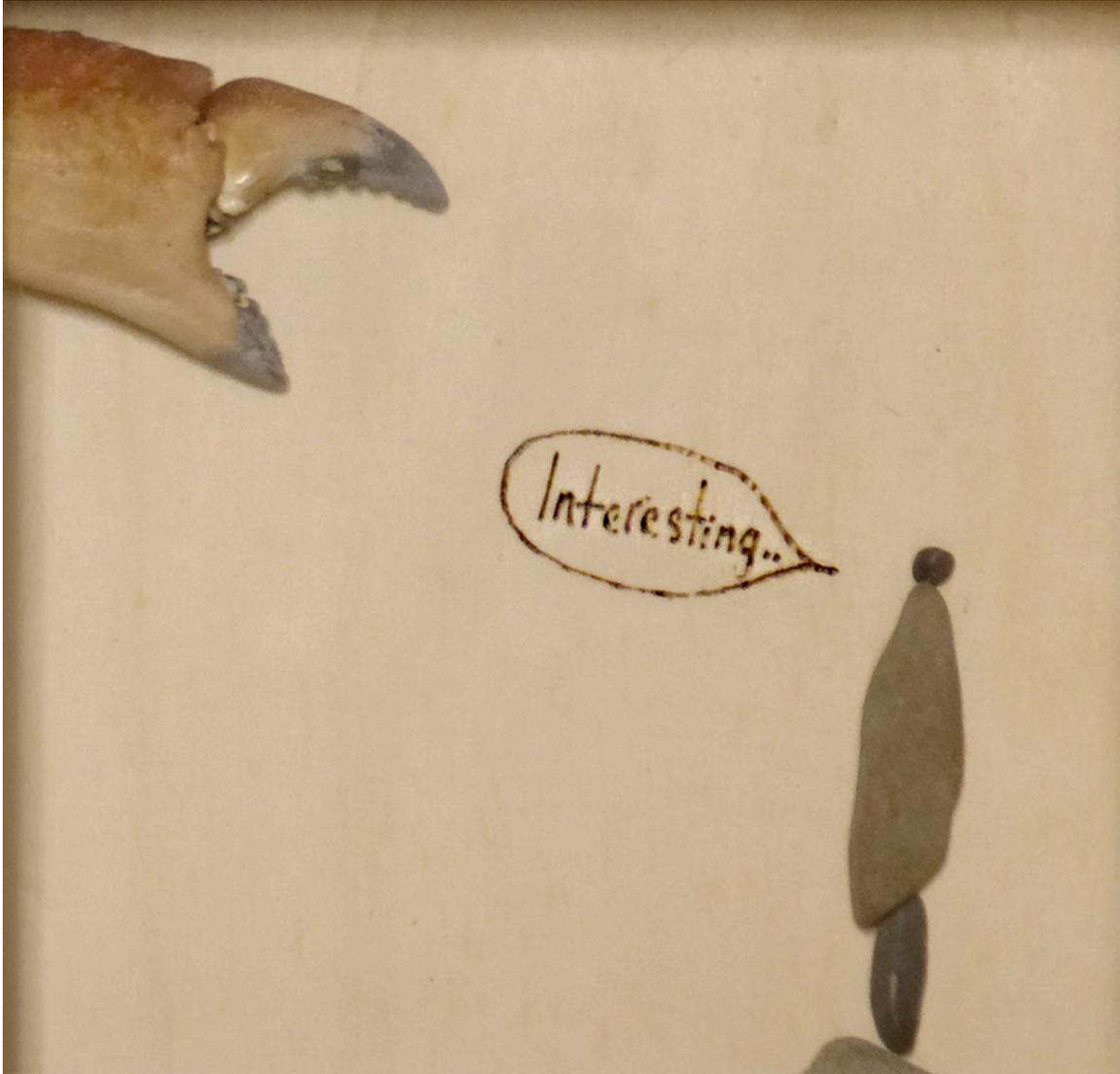


A Touch of The Cancer



Unexpected Gifts from an Unplanned Journey

Will Weigler

A Touch of The Cancer

Also by the Author

Books

The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre
(University of Victoria, 2016)

Strategies for Playbuilding: Helping Groups Translate Issues into Theatre
(Heinemann, 2001)

From the Heart: How 100 Canadians Created an Unconventional Theatre Performance about Reconciliation
(VIDEA, 2015)

Laughing Allowed! – A How-to Guide for Making a Physical Comedy Show to Build Neighbourhood Resilience, with Rob Wipond and Michelle Colussi
(Building Resilient Neighbourhoods, 2016)

Web of Performance: An Ensemble Workbook for Youth, co-editor with Monica Prendergast (University of Victoria, 2018)

Plays

Common Wealth: A Play about the People of Darrington and the Sauk-Suiattle

Rama and Shinta, you and me

Lovers, Lunatics and Poets: Behind the Scenery of Clayoquot Sound

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Stand by Me lyrics by Ben King, Jerry Leiber, & Mike Stoller

For Mia

No I won't be afraid

No I won't be afraid

*Just as long as you stand,
stand by me*

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During my months of active treatment and recovery, I chose to tell only a relatively small circle of friends that I had cancer. I want to acknowledge how each of you in your own way made me feel more embraced, supported and loved than I have felt at any other time in my life. My still-vivid memories of time you took to walk with me or sit with me at a cafe, the loving e-mail messages or cards you sent, the attentive phone calls when I needed to hear your voice and be heard, the willingness to pitch in and lend me a hand when I needed it while we told stories and laughed together—this is truly what love and care looks like and it made all the difference in the world to me.

A special word of thanks goes to my counsellor Genevieve Stonebridge. You have such an exceptional gift for gently holding space in a way that nurtures an awakening heart. Thanks as well to my compassionate doctors and to the entire radiology technical support team at the Cedar Room of the Victoria BC Cancer Agency. It may simply feel like showing up at work and doing your jobs, but to me you were saving my life. Thank you as well to Taina Uitto for so generously allowing me to use your delightful artwork as the cover image on this book.

This, and continuing gratitude to *All My Relations*.

Introduction

I've always been a lucky guy. From the time I was a small boy, I've had an innate sense that somehow everything will turn out all right. To some people, this may look a lot like privilege and naiveté about the way the world works. Still, despite having come face to face with half a dozen life-threatening dangers over the years, I have grown to rely on my impulse to expect that one way or another I will land on my feet.

My unflagging optimism was put to the test one morning in the autumn of 2017 when my partner Mia and I went to see my doctor to get the biopsy report on a mysterious lump I'd found on the side of my neck. Going in, I honestly thought the doc was going to say something along the lines of: "Funny story—it looks like you have an allergic reaction to sesame seeds and it's making your lymph gland swell up on the right side." I was so supremely confident of this kind of scenario that I'd convinced Mia to expect it too. We were more than a little surprised when, instead, he explained that the biopsy revealed I had cancer—and that it had metastasized: migrated from the source somewhere in my throat to the closest lymph node as stop number one on its anticipated travels down the path of my lymphatic system to set up camp throughout the rest of my body.

After the appointment, Mia and I sat on a bench in a park near his office while the gravity of this new reality began to sink in. Neither of us had any experience with the implications of living with cancer. I tried to regain my emotional balance by grasping for my sense that all would be well, but this landscape was too uncharted. With so many unknowns, my old impulses weren't working as they always had. I was surrounded by a sense of bewilderment that I hadn't known before. I felt that I was floating adrift, unmoored from my life as I knew it.

We made it through that first day and by the next morning we were at the office of an ear nose and throat surgeon who specializes in cancer patients. As he walked us through the steps ahead and gave us more information, it helped to anchor our ability to face what was coming next. We felt immediately that we were in good hands.

Mia lives in a different city and had to return home to attend to her work. I assured her that I would be okay and that, as always, we would be talking on the phone that night. In retrospect, I realize I had managed to hold it together to a large degree so that I could ease her distress. Hours after Mia left, I was coming apart at the seams as fear began to hit me in waves. I phoned my good friend Kit with a cry for help. Twenty

minutes later she met me at a park in our neighbourhood to sit with me and listen to me talk through my sobs and tears.

Late in the afternoon on the day I got the diagnosis, I sat at my computer and composed a message that I sent to a small circle of friends, telling them about this new turn of events in my life. I didn't know it at the time, but that one message would soon grow into a series of messages—healing updates—that I would send out via e-mail every ten days or so. As the weeks passed I would disclose my story to more friends whenever I had a chance to talk with them in person and I would add them to my circle of confidants. As anyone who knows me will tell you, I am at heart a storyteller. By turning my day-to-day experiences into a story, these healing updates became my way of helping to make sense of it all. As I met each complex challenge, sending these updates made me feel as if my friends were always at my side. The more intimate and open I was in the telling, the more support came back to me in the form of actual e-mails and visits, as well as in a palpable sense of spiritual sustenance that I felt in the air from everyone who cared about me and beamed their good healing energies in my direction. As I began receiving notes from my readers, I printed and posted them on a big bulletin board above my desk—a visual bouquet of love and support that sustained me every day.

In all, I sent out twenty-three healing updates starting from the day after my diagnosis through the several weeks of conversations with my doctors and with Mia about treatment options, through exploratory scans and surgery and six weeks of daily radiation, followed by months of recovery time. I sent out my healing updates for eight months, until shortly after the post-treatment scans showed the radiation had been successful and I was in full remission.

This relatively brief span of time was, without exception, the most profound period of learning and development of self-understanding that I have ever had in my life. Many of my friends told me that they found my writing personally valuable and they encouraged me to find some opportunity to share it with others. That's what I have done with this book. It is simply a compilation of my healing updates as I wrote and sent them, plus some sidebars with a few extra notes from my journal and descriptions of dreams I had during those months. I am offering it in the spirit of reciprocity for all the gifts I received. I welcome you to download it, read it, share it, and if you are moved to respond with a gift to me in exchange, you can send whatever amount seems right to you via PayPal or credit card by clicking the icon on the book's homepage: www.touchofthecancer.com.

Onward!

Sept 27 | There's something I want you to know

My dear ones,

I'm sending this to those of you who I've told about this mysterious lump on my neck. I care so much about each one of you and I know how much you care about me. Now would be a good time to send me your positive thoughts and good energies.

I just got back from the doctor's appointment where I learned the results from the biopsy. It is a metastatic cancer that originates from somewhere in my body and has moved to my neck and manifested as this lump. Technical term for what they found is a metastatic non-keratinizing cell carcinoma, which is strongly p16 positive (evidently this last bit is a good thing). My doctor says that, as it happens, Victoria is one of the leading centres in all of Canada for cancer research and specialists and treatment facilities. He has set me up with an appointment tomorrow with a top ear/nose/throat surgeon to start follow up tests (they want to start by identifying where in my head and throat it is) and we will take it from there. Maybe it's just how I roll, but I feel it was lucky that it metastasized to my neck so that I got a visual clue that something was wrong instead of having it grow silently somewhere inside until it got worse.

My mood is good. Mia came over from Vancouver and is here with me at my side, which is really helping me. I am grounded in imagining healthy positive outcomes—confident that I will sail through this. If you are wondering what you can do, it's just what I wrote at the top. Send me your good loving energies and know that I will be receiving them. I'll be updating you with more once we gather a better sense of what we're looking at.

For all the times I have signed off, *Onward!*, this is a time I sure mean it from my heart. With love to you all and full of gratitude to have you as my friends,

Onward!

The story behind *Onward!*

My fourth book, *The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre*, was written long before I learned about my own cancer diagnosis. Its dedication page explains why I often sign off my e-mails with *Onward!*

The eminent theatre scholar Marvin Carlson once reflected upon how much he treasures those rare, memorable moments in theatre that produce among audience members something akin to an epiphany. This book is dedicated to all those who, like Professor Carlson, go to the theatre in the hope that they will be fortunate enough to encounter a luminous and unforgettable experience.

On a more personal note, I also dedicate this work to the memory of Lisa Barnett. As the chief editor of the drama division at Heinemann publishing company, Lisa was responsible for opening the door to scores of new authors, enabling them to bring their diverse and innovative voices to the field of theatre theory and practice. I got to know her while she was editing my first book, *Strategies for Playbuilding*. She was an absolute joy to work with—gracious, exceedingly smart, and always marvelously funny. Lisa died in the spring of 2006, following an extended struggle with breast cancer that led to brain cancer. She is deeply missed by all who knew her, though her spirit remains with us. Lisa used to sign off her e-mails “Onward!” I now sign off that way as well so that I always keep her memory alive in my heart.

Sept 28 | We know more today

My dear ones,

If it's possible to say that one is both cautiously and extremely optimistic, that's how Mia and I felt coming out of the appointment this morning with my new specialist Dr. Cheung, the Ear/Nose & Throat surgeon. His wall was filled with all the degrees he's earned and his professionalism and 'bedside' manner was kind of dazzling. He walked us through the situation we're facing, explaining that this sort of cancer is very common—he has seen many many people with it—and the full recovery rate is excellent, typically 85% of people with squamous carcinoma are still alive and well five years following treatment.

We already knew from yesterday that the source of the problem was not in my neck—it has metastasized from somewhere else in my body. What we learned this morning was that it's virtually impossible the cancer has migrated to my neck's lymph node from some organ in the trunk of my body like liver or lungs or pancreas. It's almost certainly based somewhere in my throat, nose, on my tongue, or close in that area. When it began moving, it latched on to the first lymph node it came to. He said he knew exactly what he was looking for and began by searching with his fingers on the back of my tongue and then put a tiny camera down my nose and into my throat. A slight bump on my tongue was the only thing he found that was anomalous at all so the next step is to have a PET scan to identify exactly where the culprit is hiding. Even though he's confident that it's hiding in mouth or throat, he's ordering a scan of my whole body so they can really cross everything off the list. He made a phone call to start the gears in motion for scheduling and expects it will happen within the next two weeks. Most exciting of all is his confidence that due to the nature of what they found in the biopsy, they will likely be able to use lower levels of specifically targeted radiation to eradicate the cancer cells and not have to rely on chemotherapy at all.

Obviously we are not out of the woods yet. Who knows what we will learn in the weeks ahead when we actually have data to work with but as you can see, the prognosis is really bright. All of your good healing energies directed my way must be making a difference. I want to tell you that it's been enormously helpful for me to be able to give voice to what's happening to me and to be seen and witnessed by people who care about me. There will be more to come as the story unfolds. I'm sure I'll be seeing you individually over the next little while and I look forward to each visit.

Onward!

Dreams

In my dream this morning, a helicopter flying through a ferocious storm couldn't take people all the way to the ground to drop them off; it could only descend to the top of several fifty-foot tall pillars in the desert. From where I sat on top of one pillar, I watched as the helicopter dropped off two other guys on top of the next pillar over. One of these two men was skilled at belaying and confident that he could lower himself by rope down to the desert floor. The other was terrified, hugging his knees, crouched on the surface of the pillar. The experienced guy tried to encourage the scared one to go with him, but couldn't convince him to take the risk. I watched as the experienced climber lowered his ropes and began his descent. It was challenging for him, but he did it.

That's when I woke up.

Oct 3 | Definitely on the road now

My dear ones,

It is a crisp, beautiful, sky-blue day here in Victoria. I have expanded the circle of people with whom I've shared the news of what's happened in my life since last week, but it's still just a handful of you. I so deeply appreciate the love and care I've been getting from all of you, each in your own way. I got a note today that, among other things, read: "I have walked this path with a few friends. It is a difficult, profound moment in a life story. But in your case, let's make it a short, middle chapter in a nice long book."

I feel held and secure and not in the least alone. I'm going to start sending out group e-mail updates on a regular basis, to let you know how things are progressing. There's no need to reply unless you feel you want to. It helps me to be witnessed in my experience by people I care about.

I am still in a holding pattern waiting for word about when they will book me in for the full body PET scan to identify where exactly the tumour is growing in my esophagus area and to make sure there aren't more of them hiding somewhere else. It could happen any time. Once that's done and the report comes back, we move to treatment.

Another friend, someone who has been walking this path herself, told me about a resource centre in Victoria (a satellite of their main centre in Vancouver) called Inspire Health. I wandered over there yesterday and was welcomed in by the staff as if I were family. It is quite an extraordinary place, with bright sun coming in through big windows, and they offer ongoing access to a physician for extended consultations, a professional dietician who will work with people one-on-one, yoga classes, exercise classes, acupuncture sessions, one-on-one counselling, and all of it is free of charge for cancer patients. I can't tell you how much it has lifted my spirit to know this is here and only two kilometres from my house—an eight-minute bike ride. I'm signed up and starting right in with them.

That's all for now. More news as it unfolds.

Love to you all.

Onward!

Gifts of deeds and gifts of words

My neighbours Valeria and Jorge have told me that I should think of their telephone number as a kind of intercom down to the kitchen. All I need to do is pick up the phone to find out when supper will be on the table and then come over to join them for a meal. Tonight I was at loose ends and chose to not hesitate. I reached for the phone and took them up on this loving invitation. They insisted I didn't need to bring anything for the meal but on my way there I swung by the thrift store to find some little gifts for their two young children. It's an excellent thrift store and I found a perfect little something for each of them. While I was wandering the aisles, I bought myself a cork bulletin board that I will hang on my wall above my computer where I spend most of my time. I plan to print and post all the wonderful messages of support I've been receiving by e-mail and Facebook so that I can see my friends shining down on me through their words.

I am so very fortunate.

Oct 10 | Moving forward, standing still

My dear ones,

You are all so much on my mind and in my heart. It's only been two weeks since I first learned my diagnosis and in that time there has not been one single day that I have felt alone or on my own. Your love and support is surrounding me. I know deeply that you are with me in this and it has made a world of difference to my spirit and sense of hope.

Events in my life are moving quickly. I now have a date set for an MRI of my throat so they can get a precise read on where the tumour or tumours are, and I have a new radiation oncologist who will be in charge of reading the data and setting up treatment. The plan is for radiation blasts at my neck every day for seven weeks. To me, the line *and he went there every day for seven weeks* sounds like it's lifted directly from the pages of an old folktale. I now have a date set with a dentist who specializes in cancer treatment. Part of the protocol in preparation for head and neck cancer radiation therapy involves being seen by a dentist who evaluates whether your teeth are strong enough to withstand the battering of weeks of x-rays. I also have a date scheduled for a PET scan and an appointment set with my new medical oncologist. He will be in charge of reading that data to see whether there are tumours hiding elsewhere in my body. If that turns out to be the case, he will work with me to set up a treatment plan that will likely involve chemotherapy.

I find a special source of strength from those of you among my friends who have gone through this before and have shown me by example what it means to keep moving forward. Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat. Face what comes as it comes. I think it is curiously fitting that the premise of my PhD findings was that we tend to fail to see what is right in front of us for what it is. Instead we get caught up in the "story" of what we think it is. It is easy for me to get drawn into the "story" of that word *cancer* and all the implications and associations it has. That's what sends me descending down into the well of anxiety. My aspiration is to see past the story and be present instead with what actually is in my life as I meet it. There are so many variables still to be identified that this task is sometimes challenging. Random details seem to take on new meaning for me now. In a coffee shop this morning, I heard Jimmy Cliff's voice coming over the speakers:

Sitting here in limbo, but I know it won't be long

Sitting here in limbo, like a bird without a song

Well, they're putting up resistance, but I know that my faith will lead me on

I will send more news soon. Keep on keeping me in your hearts and spirits and know that your good energies are reaching me. If you would like to be specific in your wishes, your visionings, and your prayers for me (whatever you prefer to call them), let it be that the cancer is localized and limited to my throat and that this will all be contained and evaporated quickly and completely in the weeks ahead.

With lots and lots of love from me to each one of you,

Onward!

A visit to the dentist

Today was tough. The dentist was evidently trained in the "scare 'em straight" school of medicine and he laid out all the potential scenarios just so I would be fully mindful of them. I knew about the likelihood of losing my sense of taste and smell and that I may develop difficulty swallowing and opening my mouth. I didn't know that I might have to be fed through a tube or the possibility that the radiation could literally kill my jawbone, so they would have to surgically remove it. I find I am suddenly filled with motivation to floss and brush like never before.

October 19 | Miracles and love and grace

My dear ones,

All of your messages, both the words you've sent or the good and loving energies I feel coming from all of you each day, have been keeping me buoyant and feeling resilient. Thank you so much.

I would never have guessed how, as each new day comes, this experience of cancer would lead me into such a profoundly new level of self understanding, enrich my relationships with my friends and with nature, and truly anchor my belief in the extraordinary synchronicity of the universe. I sincerely feel that gifts are coming to me almost faster than I can count them. It is a lot to take in. It is strange to perceive this illness as a blessing, but it's hard for me to find another word for it. I am not deluding myself into thinking this will be an easy road, but I have to say that I am recognizing how everything I have done in my life up to this point—striving to become the person I have always aspired to be—has absolutely equipped me to be prepared for this.

The week started with a long morning walk along the breakwater in James Bay and a hot cocoa at Ogden Point Cafe accompanied by my friend Serap. While we were at the cafe, she spoke about water itself being a connector and a healer. That reminded me of a short speech from the play I wrote last year. Sitting across from her at the table, I told her the passage by heart. The play, *Lovers, Lunatics, and Poets* is about the people and history of the town of Tofino and Clayoquot Sound. This is how it goes

BETTY

A few years ago I was going through a rough patch. My sister had just died and I didn't know how I was going to make it through. One morning my neighbour came over and we sat and had tea. She told me that the writer Isak Dinesen once said the cure for everything was salt water. I didn't understand and asked her what she meant. She said 'Salt water, in one way or another: sweat, or tears, or the salt sea.' And she took my hand and told me I was going to be okay because in Tofino all three of those are here. They're here in abundance. She was right.

As we were leaving I was putting on my coat and accidentally knocked over the saltshaker, spilling salt on the table. Serap, looking at the coincidence of presence of salt in my play and salt on the table, invited me to scoop it up and take it with us. Holding salt in our hands, we went down to the edge of the water where she initiated a simple ritual. Led by her words, we returned the salt back to the sea and asked the water for its help in healing me.

My days are chock-a-block with miracles and love and grace.

And so I have begun to meet each morning with anticipation, curiosity, and an invitation to welcome whatever is in store for me. I will come out of this stronger and more true to myself than I was when I began.

Next Monday I begin a flurry of tests and follow up meetings with my oncologists. Very soon I (we) will finally get a detailed picture of where I stand medically. The next steps will follow from that.

I have been telling some of you about my recent interest in Julian of Norwich, the first woman to have a book published in the English language. She was a fourteenth century nun who nearly died during the great plague. During her illness, she experienced sixteen visitations by the Virgin Mary and visions of the Passion of Christ. And then as she prepared for her death, her illness passed and she lived. Her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, in which she wrote about her visions, contains a passage with these words

All shall be well

And all shall be well

And all manner of things shall be well.

In the last week I have been listening a lot to the voice of Julia Tindall Bloom who has arranged Julian of Norwich's words into a melody and sings it. It is giving me strength. When you have a chance, listen and think of me.

<https://soundcloud.com/julia-tindall-bloom/all-shall-be-well>

More news next week.

With love and appreciation for each of you.

Onward!

Dreams

In my dream last night I dreamt that I remembered having another dream long ago. In this earlier dream I had been trained as a healer and made notes about what I learned, which I had written on little scraps of paper and sent them to friends for safekeeping. In my dream last night I found some of those scraps of paper, proof of a period of life I had long forgotten. Then, still in the half-sleep of waking up, I wondered whether it was real, if I had actually found little slips of paper with notes on my training as a healer from some now-forgotten time in my life. For a few moments there in my early morning daze, I wondered if I should send an e-mail around to my friends asking whether any of them still have those notes I'd given to them.

As my head began to clear, I realized it had all been only in my dream.

Oct 25 | Choosing my metaphor

My dear ones,

In the very first e-mail update I sent after learning about my diagnosis, I wrote that Mia and I were feeling cautious optimism. It is now exactly one month later on this journey, and I can tell you that those good winds have not changed.

As of today we have more information to absorb (and to share with you), even though there are still important pieces missing. The best news this morning was when we learned that yesterday's PET scan in Vancouver revealed there is absolutely no sign of any tumours growing anywhere else in my body. [Insert Hoorays here.]

Also, the scan was not able to pick up the location of the primary source in my mouth either, which means there is no massive tumour hiding back there; the cancer cells must be extremely tiny and limited in area. [More Hoorays]. We have learned that the MRI scan on Saturday will probably pinpoint the source. If it doesn't, my surgeon may go prospecting in my mouth and throat with his sharp miniature equivalents of pickaxe and shovel to gather samples they can biopsy and use to locate the source. My whole team: two oncologists, the surgeon, technicians, and even a couple of PhDs in physics, will meet on Tuesday afternoon where they will sit around a table to confer about my case. They will pour over their individual notes and the data from the scans, and come up with a provisional treatment plan to present to me and Mia as early as Wednesday next week.

Until we know more, all treatment approaches are still in play: surgery, targeted radiation, and even chemotherapy. It was sobering to hear one of the docs walk us through what lies ahead for me, and to hear him tell us candidly that it's very likely going to be a rough road. He said he sure wouldn't wish it on anybody, but also said that based on what he sees in me—that I am relatively young and fit and have a solidly good attitude—he is confident that I will be able to weather this.

Lately I have been daydreaming about an alternative to thinking of this as an ordeal that's landed on me. I've been imagining that if I decided a month ago that I was going to enter a triathlon in the spring and was determined to cross the finish line, I would need to train hard and it would be tough on my body. Aches and pains from early morning runs and workouts, and sticking to a proper diet, and all that comes with going through the physical and mental process of training would take its toll. But that's the trade off I would accept for the goal I'd set. So that's how I'm thinking about this whole

business. I am prepared to endure all of it so that I can reach my goal to be back in full health by the time this thing is done.

I am so very mindful that among the circle of my dear friends reading these messages, there are those of you who have faced, and are currently facing, pain and stress and risks of loss that are far greater and more serious than what I am up against. And there are those among you who have lost people who you love because of this disease. As I approach the weeks ahead, please know that you are on my mind and I have grown much more appreciative of what I see in you—what I see in all the ways you have navigated your personal trials on your paths through this.

To all of you who send me notes, and to all of you who send me your visions of strength and good health and prayers through the ether of the space between us, thank you. I am filled with gratitude every day as I read your words and feel all of your love surround me.

More soon,

Onward!

Dreams

In my dream last night I was holding a twelve-inch tall doll—a spooky character from a horror film. Her face was pale; she had black hair and gaunt eyes. As I held the doll in front of me, it automatically activated. Her eyes glowed green, she smiled a wicked smile, and a little door in her chest popped open. A scissoring armature with an axe on the end of it extended out from inside her, making chopping motions as it came toward me. The scissor mechanism with the axe retracted and the door closed. Then it opened again and this time the scissoring armature held her beating bloody heart at the end of it. I could tell that it was all supposed to be scary, but I reacted with amazement at how cleverly it had been designed and constructed and I was curious to figure out how it all worked. It wasn't scary at all. It was intriguing.

Nov 1 | Navigating the currents and eddies

My dear ones,

Today was a good day. One of my oncologists, Dr. Livergant, called this morning to bring us up to date on the results of the round table meeting of docs and specialists at yesterday's confab about my case. The technicians at the MRI Lab had not gotten last Saturday's images to them in time for the meeting, but the consensus was that they want something solid to go on no matter what this new scan ultimately reveals. So next up for me is a daytime visit to the surgery room ASAP so that my Ear/Nose/Throat surgeon Dr. Cheung can collect an assortment of scrapings from the back of my tongue, the back of my nose, my vocal chords, and what's left of the base of my tonsils since a doctor took the dangly bits away when I was an adolescent. They will biopsy all of them and try to identify the primary source. Depending on what they find, they will either move ahead as planned with targeted radiation on that spot or—and this is actually a possibility—they may discover it is so localized and small that they decide to bring me back to surgery to slice it out and call it done with no radiation treatment at all. So in practical terms we are not much further along than we were last week, and yet I am feeling particularly free of fret and concern. Plans and actions will fall into place in the next few weeks. Nothing to do but let them unfold.

As always, I feel surrounded and supported by all of you. This summer I read a remarkable memoir written by my hero, colleague and friend Julie Salverson. It's called *Lines of Flight* and I recommend it highly. In one chapter early on, Julie writes,

I once told my therapist I couldn't do anything for a friend going through cancer. 'All I can do is listen.' My therapist shook his head. 'You think listening is a small thing?'

I can tell you, listening is not a small thing. Knowing you are reading my words and thinking of me, sending your care to me across the winds, is an almost indescribable source of healing for me every day.

This afternoon I got to step off the cancer rollercoaster for a while and wade back in to the work I love so much. Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde, who is an Iroquois Mohawk visual/performance artist living here in Victoria, is teaching a course at Camosun College called Indigenous Arts Studio. She'd invited her students to create a performance based on the readings they've been doing, and they were struggling with the assignment. Lindsay asked me if I would come guest teach a workshop on

performance creation with them. For two hours I was back fully in my element, doing what I do best and doing what I love. By the end of the time I spent with them they had inspired me and they themselves were inspired and equipped to move forward and create evocative and powerful performance pieces. This little detour I am on right now is teaching me a lot of big picture understanding about my life. Once I'm over these hurdles, I feel I will be ready to carry all of what I am learning with me as I move back in to the work I am here to do.

More news coming your way as soon as I have anything more to report.

Onward as always,

Dreams

I have had dreams in the past where I am pulling a string or cord out of my gums. Always before, I've pulled it out about a foot and then it stopped. Last night in my dream it was a black cord the thickness of alpaca wool yarn that I was pulling out of the gums at the back of my mouth and I kept pulling and pulling until I had finally pulled out a whole skein of it and looped it around my forearm. In my dream I found an Indigenous elder and I asked her if she would be willing to take the cord and weave it into a shirt for me. I wanted to give the shirt to someone who may need it to wear for protection and I told her that I believed the shirt might possibly even enable them to fly. I asked the old woman what gift would be appropriate to give her in exchange for her weaving work. She introduced me to one of her grandsons. He told me his name was Lapse and that in time I would know what my gift in exchange would be.

That's when I woke up.

Nov 20 | Tiny Lights

My dear ones,

Just a brief note today to let you know how extraordinary it is to be on the receiving end of the constant river of healing wishes and prayers and messages you have all been sending. I feel your energies palpably holding me every day. It is truly a gift to know I am so loved. Your support lets me, in turn, be strong, supportive and present for the people in my life who need me. It all goes round and round and I know that everything is going to be alright. Last night I heard the luminous Canadian folk and jazz singer Coco Love Alcorn in concert. Her song “Tiny Lights” captures just the sense of how I feel.

Tiny Lights by Coco Love Alcorn

We take a chance
When we can
We take a break
From having a plan
We are bold
Invite surprise
Then feel our spirits rise

We are tiny lights
That sparkle and glow
In a world much bigger
Than we'll ever know
We are tiny lights
Shining so bright
In a world we know
Is gonna be alright

We celebrate
Through love and play
We take a minute

Everyday
We chase the shadows
Far away
Finding colours
In the grey

We are tiny lights
That sparkle and glow
In a world much bigger
Than we'll ever know
We are tiny lights
Shining so bright
In a world we know
Is gonna be alright

If you try
And I try
And we try
We can light
each tiny light

If you try
And I try
And we try
We can light the world
tonight

We are tiny lights
That sparkle and glow
In a world much bigger
Than we'll ever know
We are tiny lights
Shining so bright
In a world we know
Is gonna be alright

Yeah we know the world
is gonna be alright

'Cause we got all these
tiny lights

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You can find much more about Coco on her website: <https://www.cocolovealcorn.com>

Listen to her sing Tiny Lights here: <https://tinyurl.com/y7pg8hb7>

Nov 29 | Vivid realities, vivid dreams

My dear ones,

It was exactly two months and two days ago that Mia and I first learned of my diagnosis. Today that has all turned into prelude for what now becomes the next step of this journey.

Starting at 8:30 this morning, Mia and I met with my throat surgeon and both of my oncologists one by one, though they had all met yesterday in conference. They'd reviewed the results of the biopsies from the exploratory surgery, discussed my case, and came up with recommendations for me. In the operation, my surgeon took 23 samples to test. They can say for sure that the cancer is there, but the biopsies showed nothing of substance as far as giving them a particular primary target where they can direct the radiation beams.

So I'll go straight to the punch line since I know you are eager to hear it. We have decided to start the radiation treatment in about a week and a half as soon as they are geared up and ready to roll. It turns out there is a risk of the cancer moving to the rest of my body through my lymphatic system and bloodstream and so we're going to jump on it right away and stop it in its tracks while it is still nascent. With no specific tumour to target, they are going to turn the aperture to wide beam and trust that over the course of seven weeks it will obliterate all the cancer cells that are there. In an effort to reduce the impact of the side effects, they will only have the radiation directed on my right side—the side that metastasized to my lymph node—and leave my left side alone. I asked my doctor about the possibility we'd discussed of lowering the intensity of the level of radiation to reduce the side effects even more and he was frank with us. He felt we were already compromising the full effectiveness by only targeting one side. He offered that if we really wanted to go that way, he would refer us to someone else who may be willing to go there, but it went against his best judgment. We feel we are in good hands with him and accepted his counsel.

My medical oncologist was up front with us as well, telling us about the rough side effects one can expect with chemotherapy and he admitted that with this type of cancer, the benefits would be marginal compared to all the potential liabilities. I've chosen to not add chemo to the mix and I am glad about that.

I feel that I have taken the reins as we move forward in the story. Through the long conversations I've been having with Mia and the readings from books on cancer that we've been sharing; through the time I've spent with Genevieve (my counselor at Inspire Health) and visits with many of you; through my own meditations and journaling on my discoveries and the images in my dreams, I have found a solid grounding in curiosity for what comes next and willingness to take it on. Wheels have been set in motion. As there is a starting point, so too there will be a finishing point when I am through this and stronger than I was when I began. I feel so blessed knowing that you are all here with me on this path.

Onward!

The jigsaw puzzle

I received an e-mail from someone close to me who wrote that he felt it must have been terribly stressful to meet with three doctors in a row today. I wrote back and told him that it wasn't stressful at all. I explained that, looking back on the day as a whole, the image I carry away from it was almost lyrical. It felt like one by one the doctors were handing us pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and as Mia and I collected each piece of information, we were seeing how and where they fit together to complete the puzzle. Once again, curiosity and appreciation have become my fundamental watchwords for finding resilience as I make my way through this learning.

Dec 20 | Kindness and grace

My dear ones,

I continue to feel your presence every day through the many thoughts/wishes/prayers and energies that continue to hold me and carry me along. You are tiny lights surrounding me and I am so very grateful for the gift of all this healing power. It makes a real difference knowing you are there for me in all the many ways you show it.

I started my daily sessions of radiation treatment last Thursday. I have been told that the first couple of weeks will be a sort of grace period that I get before the more challenging side effects really start to kick in. I have heard that everyone responds to the radiation differently so I'm not entirely sure how and to what degree it will impact me in the months ahead. In my journal writing, reflecting on what I need to be strong and well grounded through this next stage, I realized what an enormous difference it would make to be able to work and read, sleep and wake in a serene and pleasant place. I love my little apartment, but over the eleven years I've lived here it has gradually descended into a perpetual state of disarray. It got to the point where all the closets and cabinets required two hands to get into, one hand on the knob to swing open the door and the other hand held up to stop the jumble of stuff crammed inside from cascading out on top of me. I also had a dozen boxes stacked everywhere, filled with notes and random files and papers from my projects, my five years of graduate school, my writings, teaching and lectures and such dating back to the early 1980s. It was a heavy psychic weight taking up space and it was virtually impossible to find anything when I went looking for it.

And so two weeks ago I sent a request to some of the people in this circle who live close by. I asked whether anyone might have a few hours available to come lend a hand and be at my side to go through it all, radically reducing and organizing and then putting it all back together. I was overwhelmed with the outpouring of support. Each new day, in morning and afternoon shifts, I had a new crew of people come by: one, two, and three at a time stepping up to pitch in, sharing stories and laughter and care as we worked.

I asked Ivy Thomas, the Minister at First Met United Church, if she would let me use one of their big meeting rooms with the long tables so that I could bring in, unpack, and go through my carload of boxes full of papers. She welcomed me as her guest and after two days of sorting and redistributing much of it to recycling boxes, I now have it all organized into manageable working files. As of yesterday, it will just be a matter of a little dusting up. Here in my cozy Monk's Habitat on Gladstone Avenue, order has been

made from chaos and I can now breathe more easily as I move forward. I feel so deeply loved by all of you.



I want to share one brief story. I was visiting with my friends Margot and Rainey the other day. Margot told me that she'd recently been at Lifestyle Market and while passing by the counter at the Beauty/Cosmetics department she overheard one of those wonderful out-of-context snippets of conversation that take us by surprise. One of the clerks was telling another about a man who had dashed into the department to grab something. She said, "He came galloping into Beauty." Margot told me that she was struck by how poetic that sounded and how the line had stayed with her for several days. As we were talking, her face brightened and she said with delight in her voice, "Will, I just now realized how that describes you! You are always *galloping into beauty*." It was so moving to hear this from her. What a gift it is to hear that I am thought of like that.

I want to let you all know that in the weeks and maybe months ahead I may be derailed from actively moving forward in my work, but I fully expect that this side-track is temporary. When I come out on the other side of it, I plan to be galloping into beauty for many years to come.

May each one of you be surrounded with love and cheer and gladness during the holidays and on into a bright new year.

Onward with love

Will

ps. Margot is now writing a song about *galloping into beauty*, so as lovely as it sounds to all of us writers and poets and lyricists, do please let her keep the line for her work.

Dreams

In a dream I was swimming in a river among powerful black bears. I saw them taking huge boulders from the riverbed and stacking them on the bank to form a wall. I helped them by taking boulders I could manage, but they were doing the real work of it.

In a dream I was getting into my car and noticed I was parked next to a maple tree that had been tapped. The bucket hanging under the tap was full of maple syrup. Someone walking by saw me looking at it and she gently told me that the syrup was good and plentiful and it would be alright for me to fill my cup. I did.

In a dream I was directing and performing a show that required me to do high wire acrobatics. It was beyond anything I had ever done before as a performer or a director, but I knew I had it in me and so I climbed the ladder to the trapeze and started to create and learn the routine.

Dec 29 | The road gets bumpy

My dear ones,

There is an old story about a team of child psychologists who were investigating inherent pessimism and inherent optimism in children. They found a seven-year-old boy with parents who said he had always been hopelessly pessimistic. And they found a seven-year-old girl with parents who told them she had always been an unbridled optimist. They put the pessimistic boy in a big room filled with all sorts of fun, brightly coloured toys, and they put the optimistic girl in a big room filled with great piles of horse manure. After five minutes they went to check in on the boy and found him despondently sitting in the middle of the room. “What’s going on?” they asked him. The boy looked up and said glumly, “I’m afraid that if I play with one of these I might break it.” Then they checked in on the girl and found her with a big grin, skipping happily around the piles of horse manure and laughing as she skipped. “What’s going on?” they asked her. She stopped, looked at them brightly, and said, “There’s just got to be a pony in this room somewhere!”

I’ve always thought of myself as having the spirit of that little girl, but this morning the limits of my optimism were tested. During the past week, the first of the side effects from the radiation started to emerge as I began to lose the ability to taste food. I responded to it as I have to this whole enterprise—with curiosity and fascination. The taste receptors on the sweet end of the spectrum are the last to hold on, so eggnog and vanilla ice cream smoothies with protein powder have been going down a treat (as Mia would say). As for the rest, it’s actually been kind of trippy. It felt as if I was living in a science fiction movie where everything in the universe is normal except that food has no flavour. I could feel the texture, but it was like eating plastic. I’ve been assured that I will get it back someday, or most of it, and so I was perfectly willing to keep on eating despite this minor twist for the sake of bringing in the nutrition my body needs to heal. And then this morning came. I woke up hungry and made myself a bowl of crunchy granola with berries and milk to eat before I headed out for my early morning radiation session. I was caught off guard to find that the side effects had shifted overnight. The buildup of radiation had sent my taste receptors spiraling off kilter and so instead of no flavour, the taste was horrible. It was as if someone had played a mean trick on me and switched the granola with a bowl of cigarette butts and coffee grounds. The spirit of the optimistic kid so certain that there’s always a pony to be found was pretty badly shaken in the single instant of that one spoonful in the mouth. I was hit with a crashing wave of fear that every meal was about to become repulsive.

I left the uneaten breakfast bowlful on the kitchen counter and dashed off to my treatment appointment at the Cancer Centre. When I was finished I was still hungry and I decided to take a gamble. I walked to a diner in the neighbourhood to give it another shot. I asked the waitress for a cup of coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs, hashbrowns extra crispy, and hotcakes with butter & syrup. Imagine my immense gratitude and overwhelming sense of being blessed when I tucked into my food and found that it had no flavour whatsoever. I found the pony.

This journey continues to teach me about awareness and gratitude every day. I know the terrain will be increasingly rocky for me in the weeks ahead just as I am fairly sure that amidst the moments of beauty and grace in all of your lives, each and every one of you will also be navigating some aspect of rocky terrain as we move into 2018. In this New Year I wish for all of us that we may hold onto each other in full appreciation of all that we have, and that we may be surrounded by immeasurable rewards from giving and receiving love.

Onward!



Making breakfasts at home, trying to keep my weight up, even when I cannot taste the food at all.

Jan 11 | Vengeful gods and resilient mortals

My dear ones,

This journey continues to hold my attention. I've signed up for 35 radiation treatments. Today I was number 22. The technicians at the Cancer Centre are wonderful. From the very first day they made me feel like I was the new guy on their softball team. They welcomed me warmly with the spirit of fellow players, showing me the ropes and making sure I knew my way around the locker room and the ball field. I am in good hands there every day.

The side effects are starting to kick in with gusto now. It's a pain but so far no worse than having a really bad flu. I am exhausted a lot and navigating the various challenges. One of the issues I'm facing is that the radiation doesn't discriminate. The technicians focus the direction of the beam at my mouth and throat, but the beam cannot distinguish between cancerous cells and healthy cells; it obliterates them all, including my salivary system and my tongue's taste receptors, which are pretty much shot by now. My immune system rushes in to rebuild all the cells that have been wiped out and by default rebuilds them as healthy cells. That's the whole strategy behind the treatment. The new turn of events after these first weeks of daily treatments is that as the radiation has progressively picked up its destructive momentum, I am hungry all the time. As in day and night. As in I finish a big meal and within fifteen minutes I feel like I am starving. It's a good thing, since it means my body is desperately trying to gather the resources it needs to rebuild, but to me it feels as if I am a character in some ancient Greek myth. In my imagination, some god has cursed me with a compulsion to eat non-stop, and added a vengeful twist that everything I put in my mouth will taste like wet clay and Styrofoam. I have enough of an appreciation of literary themes that I actually find this intolerable situation kind of hilarious. Last night, feeling miserable, I fixed my go-to comfort food: vegetarian broth soup with peas and corn and little cubes of tofu. I snuggled into bed with a bowlful. One spoonful into it and I couldn't shake the feeling of being an actor eating soup on stage in a low budget production where the props person has prepared a bowl of hot water with bits of coloured cardboard floating in it. Somewhere far off I heard the gods snickering at me.

And yet I find there are unexpected advantages, too. I live about seven blocks from the Cancer Centre and it's a pleasant enough stroll through the neighbourhood to get there each morning. Last week I brought my own travel coffee mug with me on my walk and drank all the coffee on the way. Once inside, I saw a table with an urn of free peppermint tea and filled up my empty mug to take in some more hydration while I was

waiting for my turn in the radiation chamber. Afterwards I was on my way out when I spotted a different table, this one with an urn of free coffee. I figured I could drink it on the walk home and filled up, momentarily forgetting that the mug was still half full of peppermint tea. In normal circumstances it would be a waste, but these are not normal circumstances. Looking down at the unconventional mixture, it quickly occurred to me that I couldn't taste it anyway, so I went ahead and took some pleasure in drinking another mug of hot liquid. One finds small victories where one can.

Aside from all of that, I've been getting a lot of joy visiting with some of you at a local coffee shop or in your homes where we've talked about theatre and creativity and, to paraphrase a line from one of my favourite plays, talking about the subtle, sneaky, important reasons why any of us was born a human being and not a chair.

It's just a bit of a rough road now. Easier sailing is anticipated in about a month and I'm told that my ability to swallow regularly and to taste food again may be back on line sometime in March. I will get through this before too long, and be cancer-free to boot. Thank you all for every prayer and wish and message of love. I receive them all. More to come.

Onward!

Jan 21 | Nayyirah Waheed, Cheryl Heykoop, Moses and me

My dear ones,

This coming Friday marks six months to the day that I looked in the mirror and noticed an unusual lump on the side of my neck.

Tomorrow I start my final week of radiation. My doctors are confident that by Friday the treatments will have obliterated the last of the cancerous cells in my body. I know that it's not just the radiation from the machines that will have saved my life, but also the oceans of love and support all of you have been sending to me. They have been as regular and cumulative as the X-rays, and have been my stalwart guardians of healing this entire time.

The side effects from the radiation continue to mount. Each week brings a new twist. This week, along with the sore throat and glue in the mouth all through the night and loss of taste, the sunburn on the inside of my mouth and on my tongue has worsened. I have to learn to be exceptionally clever to work around each of these hurdles just to be able to eat and rest without it being a miserable experience. I develop little tactics to try to bypass the worst of it as best I can, always navigating the high stakes of incessant gnawing hunger and desperation to get sleep.

As distressful as all the discomfort is, I have been aspiring to hold fast to my understanding that my body is not my enemy. One of my friends gifted me with a quote that captures the sense of what I mean and I keep it close now as a talisman. The poet Nayyirah Waheed once wrote:

*And I said to my body, softly, 'I want to be your friend.'
It took a long breath and replied
'I have been waiting my whole life for this.'*

There is no use in getting angry about any of this. This is the body I was born with after all, and I am blessed to have it. Some of my cells mutated. They didn't get the memo handed down for millennia that when they go haywire they are supposed to self-destruct and clear the way for healthy cells to replace them. And so with love and technical know-how and patience, we are intervening to bring my body back into alignment the way it ought to be. And when I can keep that thought in my mind and in my heart, I am a little more able to navigate the rough terrain that comes with achieving that intention.

While the radiation treatments will wrap up on Friday, I'm told that the effects typically continue and even worsen following the conclusion of the daily sessions. Like soft-boiled eggs that continue to cook inside their shells after they're taken out of the hot water, the radiation will continue to "cook" inside my mouth for a few weeks after I stop going in for the treatments. It's so easy with eggs to hold them under cold water for a minute or so but there's no equivalent way to stop this process. And anyway, it's all calculated into the planning for the time it takes to make a clean break from the cancer. I am choosing to believe that my "bonus" weeks won't be exceptionally harsh. I already know the power of telling the story of what I imagine the future will be in order to manifest that future. I am envisioning the story that I will sail through these coming weeks with no noticeable increase of distress and maybe even a lighter load as I make my way to the finish line.

I want to leave you with a short video. A couple of nights ago I was at a gathering where I met and spent time with a perfectly delightful woman named Cheryl Heykoop who teaches at Royal Roads University just outside of Victoria. The work and research she is doing is simply thrilling to me and elegantly overlaps with what I do. We talked briefly about looking for opportunities to work together someday soon on creative collaborations involving research into the confluence of healing and performance. At age 34, Cheryl was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Follicular Lymphoma, a type of cancer that is currently incurable, though life expectancy varies from patient to patient. I just watched her TEDx talk in which she speaks about her relationship to her cancer in a way that resonated with me deeply. I watched through eyes welling with tears of recognition about what she was saying and explaining about her life. Her story brought to my mind a song I've been listening to recently by Bernice Lewis. It's a song about letting go of what you thought your life was going to be and stepping into the unknown with fortitude and confidence. The chorus goes:

*When there is no North Star left to follow
Someone parts the Red Sea
We can only let go of tomorrow
Moses and me*

Onward! with love and gratitude

Here is the link to Cheryl's eight and a half minute TEDx talk at Royal Roads University. Please take a moment to hear her story if you can. <https://tinyurl.com/ybrtng4t>

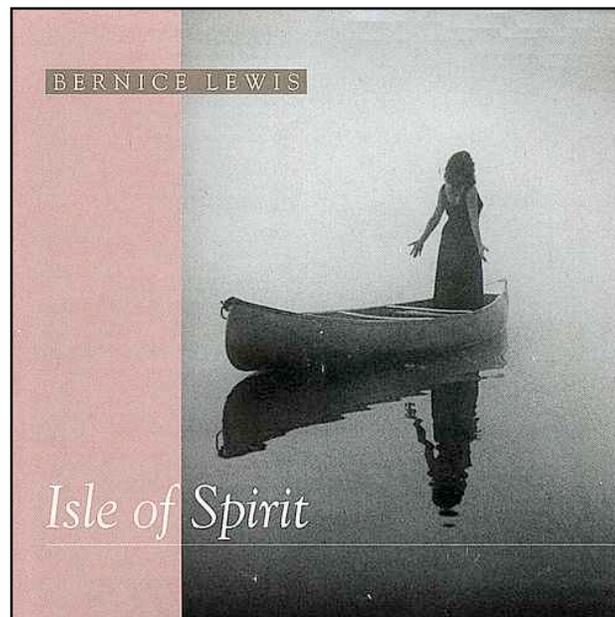


Bernice Lewis' song "Moses and Me" appears on her album *Isle of Spirit*

Bernice's website: <http://www.bernicelewis.com/about-bernice/>

Listen to "Moses and Me" <https://tinyurl.com/y7j46c5m>

Isle of Spirit is available here: <https://store.cdbaby.com/cd/blewis1>



Jan 24 | An invitation to witness my routine

My dear ones,

I know I just sent an update a few days ago, but there's something I felt compelled to add so here is a brief addendum.

There's a lovely sentimental saying that goes:

Good friends know all your stories.

Best friends are in them.

I've said this before and I think it bears repeating that writing down my reflections on the learning and experiences of this remarkable journey, and then sending my writing to you, has been my way of feeling that you are all in my story—that you are part of it and here with me each day as my witnesses and comrades. Today I had my 33rd radiation treatment. The final treatment—number 35—will be on Friday. Mia came into the Cancer Centre with me the other day and as part of chronicling the journey I asked her to take a photo of me in the room with the machines—what I have taken to calling my “garden of healing.” Looking at the picture afterward, I felt that sharing it here might be another way to invite you into the experience of my routine.

The sessions are typically scheduled between 8 and 8:30 am. I walk or ride my bike to the Cancer Centre on the Royal Jubilee Hospital campus. Every day my team welcomes me into the space. I strip down to my trousers and undershirt and hop on the bed with my head cradled in a holder that's been moulded to fit me. They always cover me with a warm blanket. The machine that sends the rays is on top. On one side is an x-ray projector and on the other side is the screen that receives the x-rayed images. The apparatus rotates back and forth in an arc across the top. A team of physicists calibrated the focus of the beams going into my mouth and throat. The x-ray machine is constantly sending live images back to the control room so that the technicians can monitor the beams in real time and make sure they are precisely on target.

The whole enterprise requires that I am positioned in the same place each day so early on in the process they gave me a small tattoo in the middle of my chest which they use as a kind of registration mark to line me up on the bed—side to side and up and down—ensuring that I am lying exactly where I need to be. Then they bring out the thermoplastic mask that has been specially moulded to fit over my entire head and shoulders and they bolt it to the bed so that I am completely immobilized during the

procedure. They've added tape with calibrating marks to line everything up with precision. This is what it looks like:



The last thing the technicians say before they leave the room is “Supe” and “Right,” verbally confirming the machines are aligned correctly on the superior (upper) and right positions. To me, it always sounds like they are saying “Soup Rite,” as in a ritual involving chicken soup for the cells.

Before they go, they start the music playing over the speakers in the room. They offer patients the option of playing the radio or playing songs from a menu of genres to choose from. I asked if we could have a different arrangement instead and they generously agreed. My friend Heidi mastered four songs I love as a single MP3 file. On my first day I brought in a USB thumbdrive with these four songs and that is what they play for me. I have listened to this recording each and every day for six weeks and it has given me a familiar, meditative place to go in my mind during my sessions. The session takes about ten minutes and then I am freed from the contraption, I slip back into my shirt and sweater, and I make my way home.

I think that starting next Monday I will still rise early and head out into the morning, but instead of turning left to go to the hospital, I'll turn right and go walking in the neighbourhood, breathing in the air and taking a little time to rejoice.

If you'd like to hear the songs, you can find them online (see links below).

More to come.

Onward!

All Shall be Well

<https://soundcloud.com/julia-tindall-bloom/all-shall-be-well>

Words by Julian of Norwich, medieval English mystic.

Music by Julia Tindall Bloom (Julia of Loveland), contemporary American contemplative.

www.juliabloom.wordpress.com

The River

<https://tinyurl.com/yc95hsjh>

Coco Love Alcorn, from her album *Wonderland*

<https://cocolovealcorn.com/home>

<https://cocolovealcorn.com/album/391915/wonderland>

Waterfall

<https://tinyurl.com/ycegjjuf>

Cris Williamson, from her album *The Changer and the Changed*

<https://www.criswilliamson.com/>

The Changer and the Changed: <https://tinyurl.com/y73663xz>

Here Beside Me

<https://soundcloud.com/the-henry-girls/here-beside-me>

The Henry Girls, from their album *Louder Than Words* <https://tinyurl.com/y9c48eza>

Karen, Lorna and Joleen McLaughlin are a musical trio of sisters from County Donegal, Ireland. In this song they are joined by the Inishowen Gospel Choir.

<http://www.thehenrygirls.com/>

Jan 29 | Out of the frying pan . . .

My dear ones,

Here I am over the hurdle of the final session and, true to the warnings I'd heard, the side effects really started gaining momentum at the end. In my update last week I drew an analogy between these six weeks of daily radiation and cooking eggs in a pot of water. When I started out, it was like starting with a cold pot that gradually gets warmer until, halfway through, it's simmering. That was me at the halfway point of my radiation: managing the side effects as they were building up. By the end, our pot of water has moved to a full rolling boil and you can imagine that Friday was the equivalent of that roiling hot water in my mouth and throat. The ferocity of the beams had built up to full on assault. After the final session on Friday, it was as if they'd finally turned off the flame on the stove element, but with the pot still sitting there, the eggs are going to keep right on cooking in the hot water for some time. That's where the analogy breaks down. With radiation there's no equivalent for putting me under cold water to stop it from cooking.

So last week leading up to Friday, the brutal sunburn all over my tongue and the inside surfaces of my mouth that hurt every time I swallowed was overwhelming me. I veered seriously off track from my positive attitude and dipped into feeling miserable and in pain.

Friday morning the first words out of my mouth were "FUCK me!" which is something I never say. I have a bottle of club soda next to my pillow and a tall plastic yogurt container next to it because every half hour during the night my sleep is interrupted by this throat that hurts and this mouth filled up with what feels like glue. I take a swig of the club soda to rinse out my mouth and spit it into the plastic container. Friday before dawn I hadn't slept much at all through the night and at about 5:45 am when I picked up the container to spit, it slipped and I spilled the cold horrible muck all over my chest and my pillow and sheets. So that's why I blurted out "FUCK me!" I scrambled out of bed, pulled the sheets and pillowcase onto the floor and stumbled into the shower.

Friday's session was scheduled later than usual—at 10:20 am—and I sat on the edge of my bed gritting my teeth waiting for the hours to pass. I was hungry but couldn't bear to face food. Then at ten o'clock, everything changed for the better. My dear friend Kit arrived.

For those of you who don't know, Kit designs my books and she lives in my neighbourhood. Kit knew that my partner Mia was in Vancouver making a presentation for a new public art installation and couldn't be here, so she offered to come over and walk me to the Cancer Centre on my last day. Kit was here at 10 and we started to walk. I love her so much—she is generous and kind and she sees beauty and delight in the world. She has two 14-year-old twin boys and she is a wonderful mom to them.

Kit and I had a good walk to the Centre. She waited for me and then we spent several hours together, walking around the neighbourhood. She bought me a protein smoothie at a health food place. We went to a couple of art galleries. We talked. Kit asked me to name two things that would help me feel better. The first answer was easy: climbing under the covers of my comfy bed. I gave some thought to a second one and, in the effort to answer her prompt, I thought of something that I hadn't really focused on. I realized that I have gotten away from writing in my journal—something I was doing every day at the start of this journey and which had helped me make sense of it as I was living through it. As the daily challenges have mounted, I've let my journaling lapse and with the lapse I've mislaid an important part of my healing work. Kit came back to my place and asked if there was one practical task she could do with/for me before she left to get her boys from school. She helped me do my laundry. And then she gave me a gift of one of her own favourite possessions: a little laughing seated Buddha holding an offering up over his head. It fits in the hand.

It had turned into a really good day. Kit's intervention and the care and love and support she gave me helped me to shift my gears back into feeling a sense of positivity about this rough patch ahead. This is what friends can do. I felt loved. What Kit did is just one variation of what so many of you have been bringing me. When you've come to help me clean my kitchen, or install a dish drying rack over the sink, fix a broken file drawer or help organize my stuff, these are all things that I could have done myself, but each task seemed so daunting. You have been taking the time to keep me company and letting me lean on you every bit as much as a person with a broken ankle leans on their hiking partner's shoulder to get down the hill and get home. When you have sent messages as simple as "loving you" or asking how you can step up in practical ways, or even telling me about what's happening in your life as a welcome distraction, I feel your love surrounding me.

Mia arrived Saturday morning and will be here with me all week. Even though the pain and discomfort is ramping up each day now, I am for the most part still able to hang on to hope and light. I'm told the final rough phase will diminish by the end of the next week or ten days. The boiling pot of water will be cool again.

Onward, with love—

Ps: I received messages from a few of you asking if I was still having dreams. Nights have been rough lately, but sometimes I do get some sleep and I do dream. I'll leave you with this dream I had a few nights ago.

Dreams

In my dream I was driving in a car on a highway in a vast canyon, following someone in a car up ahead who was leading the way to a place I hadn't been. I lost track of the lead car and wound up taking an exit off the highway that I hadn't intended to take. The exit led to a long bridge in a new direction and it became clear that I wasn't going to be able to backtrack or find my way to the original highway.

What followed was a series of encounters with some rough characters—people who had hijacked a delivery truck and were trying to find a way to sell the goods. One of the hijackers was a woman who had nicknames for everyone and she called me “inside pool” because she said I reminded her of one of those little wishing well pools with plants inside a mall where you can sit and have a rest and a talk with someone.

I befriended some street kids on a bus who were on the hustle for money or whatever they could find and sell. I gave one of them some coins and he showed me how to get to a part of the city that he thought I would find interesting. I got off the bus and saw a street busker—a woman on high stilts and a dress that went all the way to the ground—she was singing a difficult aria from an opera as she walked and I gave her some coins too.

I finally ended up back at my car, still abandoned at the side of the road and I found a map in the glove box. I saw that there was a route to the place I was originally going, but it was not at all where I expected it to be. I got back in my car, started it up, and began to drive.

Feb 6 | Learning to nurture curiosity

My dear ones,

In my last message I ended with a poetic image. I expected that on Monday morning I would walk out my door and, for the first time in six weeks, instead of turning left to go to the Cancer Centre I would turn right, walk in the other direction and breathe in the crisp morning air, grateful for my life.

It didn't exactly turn out that way.

True to everyone's forecasts, the period following the end of the radiation sessions is when the pain really amps up. What I hadn't anticipated was the fatigue. Every morning this past week was more or less the same. I'd wake up early, take a shower, then soak my mouth and tongue in a viscous numbing agent so I could eat without it hurting so much. Mia was with me all week and when I was up for it she'd make me soft boiled eggs and mashed potatoes with a side of some easy-to-swallow veg. On my more cranky days, she made me a chocolate protein smoothie. Then, as I was getting ready to dress for my walk, I heard a voice inside my head with a non-negotiable demand:

Not so fast, cowboy. Thanks for the nutrition, but we've got work to do rebuilding cells and we can't very well have you squandering these calories with your foolish locomotion. Settle down. NOW.

And almost like someone had flipped an off switch, all my ambition and capacity evaporated. It took every ounce of my strength to crawl back into bed where I would instantly fall asleep and not wake up until after noon. When I finally blinked awake, I did another round of the numbing agent and Mia would bring me a green protein smoothie. I would slurp away, reading your loving e-mails and writing some of my own. I'd watch silly YouTube videos and occasionally a TED talk. Then before long I would start to fade out again and I'd sleep until evening. That was my whole week. I managed to get out twice for a late afternoon stroll (and I did turn right at my sidewalk both times), but this has been a time of prioritizing the rebuilding of a healthy body. This past week I also started using morphine to knock back the pain. I freaked out when my oncologist began writing out the prescription, imagining that I would have to learn how to tie off my arm with a rubber tourniquet and inject myself. He calmed my fears, explaining that it comes in handy pill form now and I had nothing to worry about. It took a day or so of dosing every four hours to build up to the point where it began working. When it did, it was pretty remarkable how effectively it dialed down the hurt in my throat.

The morphine also added a hallucinogenic quality to my already vivid dream life. I still wake up every half hour in the night, but now the sensation of a mouth filled with white glue has been replaced with barren dryness. Once the drug kicked in, I would wake up again and again through the night with a horrifying certainty that some witch straight from a Grimm's Brothers' story had cast a spell on me turning the entire inside of my mouth—tongue, teeth and throat—into balsa wood. I fumbled for the bottle of club soda near my pillow, unscrewed the cap, swigged a mouthful and spit it into my plastic yogurt container to dissipate the dream. No matter how many times it happened, I would still come to semi-consciousness each time gripped with terror that it was real. Towards the end of the week, I began waking up aware that this had happened before, but convinced that although the other times were delusions, this time it was real. One morning in the dawn light I had a semi-waking dream that there was cardboard box at the foot of my bed, piled high with a jumbled stack of all the balsa wood mouth interiors I had spit out during the night.

I've begun to realize how facing these morphine-induced nightmares is really a reflection of my whole experience with cancer over these several months. Waking up suddenly with a visceral, unshakeable conviction that the inside of my mouth had been magically transformed into wood was emotionally terrifying—far more than I've ever felt watching a horror movie. And yet, for whatever reason, I have been able to pass through the experience and quickly become absorbed in how fascinating the experience is. The best parallel I can think of is when I was a teenage actor playing Alan Strang in Peter Schaffer's play, *Equus*. In the final scene I was able to enter into the character's feelings of absolute anguish and fear while at the same time I was grounded in being an actor making choices, noticing where the other actors were on stage, and aware of the big picture of the play. This is not a denial of the feelings; it is an act of embracing how extraordinary feelings are and step into how remarkable it is to be human.

A while back I met an artist called Taina Uitto. Among her several creative pursuits, she wanders on the beach near her home collecting pebbles and organic flotsam and then creates relationship-based scenarios by gluing them into small shadow boxes. She made one that spoke so perfectly to what I've been talking about here that I bought it from her on the spot. I cherish it as a way to remind myself that nurturing a bright and vivid sense of curiosity is always a beacon for me in challenging times.



Before I close, I want to let you all know that that in the last two days I feel I have turned a corner. I've been able to stop using the numbing agent on my tongue altogether. I've reduced the daily dosage of morphine to almost none—and the pain in my throat and tongue is barely noticeable. I still wake up through the night with a dry mouth, but it's only a dry mouth—no longer anything for me to be afraid of. The other day Mia made a supper of fried salmon patties with feta and spinach rolled into them, and I swear I was able to taste the feta.

One of the TED talk videos I've watched was Susan David speaking on the gift and power of emotional courage. Near the end of her talk she says something that resonated with me deeply:

Courage isn't the absence of fear. Courage is fear walking.

When I think of the six women in this e-mail circle who I know have been going through treatment for cancer, this is how I see you. In our conversations, in some of your Facebook posts, and through our correspondence, I have been observing and learning how you are navigating your lives and how each of you show such breathtaking

courage in the various ways you are holding your fears in your arms and walking with them. We all have so much to learn from each other, don't we?

Onward! with love—

Susan David's TED talk:

The gift and power of emotional courage



Watch Susan David's TED talk here: <https://tinyurl.com/yb9f55td>

Feb 15 | Trying to understand what these Ithakas mean

My dear ones,

Here I am, still on the mend despite a few random setbacks that occasionally pull me backwards and drag me down. This morning it was a swollen throat that made breathing difficult. A few days ago it was a single tooth that decided suddenly to become insanely sensitive to pressure and temperature. Each day, though, I am finding myself a little closer to the shore.

I had a lovely e-mail exchange the other day with an old friend from Minnesota, someone who was a real guiding light in my life over thirty years ago. We touched on the idea of what it means for any of us to express the wish to a friend that they will get better soon and reach that shore called “healthy.” The intention is grounded in love, of course, and yet it implies that after enduring a hardship, there will come a point at which one will be all done with it. She wondered what ‘doneness’ looks like especially considering how much the journey of making one’s way through an experience like this can be a process of revelation, growth, expansion, deeper awareness, and the richer understanding of family, community, all one-ness.

Her words brought to my mind one of my favourite poems: “Ithaka,” by the Greek poet Konstantin Cavafy. In the poem, the speaker is offering advice to Odysseus just as he’s about to sail home to Ithaka after the end of the Trojan War, a journey that will take him ten long years. My father first showed me the poem when I was 17 and all though my life I have kept returning to it as a kind of a general philosophy on how to live. Now, with my experience of cancer, I find that Cavafy’s lyrical insights have become very real to me, and very personal. The poem’s closing lines speak volumes to me about the inherent limitation of focusing all attention toward arriving at a definitive moment at which one can say: now I made it, now I am healthy.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you. Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean

For those of you who are familiar with the poem, and would like to read it again, you will find it online at the Poetry Foundation. If you haven’t yet encountered it, you are in for a treat: <https://tinyurl.com/y9wr8zst>

Until the next—Onward!

Mar 1 | On the road home, falling in love with beauty along the way

My dear ones,

I know it has been a while since my last update. Let me tell you that I am well and actually thriving in my own way. The side effects from the radiation are subsiding more and more with each passing day. Now and again one or the other of them decides to rear up and thwart me for a few hours (loss of most of my hearing, or my throat constricting to the size of a dime, or some other wacko malfunction) but it passes and I recover. My ability to taste is still mostly absent, though here and there it lights up for an unexpected flash of flavour. The other day it was Dijon mustard, which I could taste again as if nothing had ever happened. Then a few days later it was fresh mint.

When this whole radiation business began last December, the first phase of it was as if I had been transported to a parallel universe in which the world around me was just the same as my own world, but in this universe food had no flavour. Later it progressed to where food tasted horrible and it was a fight to force it down. Then I got to the hurty part and that was bumpy. The hurt subsided and food returned to being simply unappealing to me. Now here we are over a month after the end of the treatment, and I'm back to food with no flavour at all. There is a warm feeling of familiarity that surrounds me. It's as if I have been away from my home for a long adventure in foreign lands. I'm walking now, back to where I used to live, and the valleys and the meadows—the territory all around is becoming familiar to me. I'm not yet home, but I know it's ahead of me. I know I will be there soon.

For the past two and a half weeks I have been in England. Mia's father Kurt died in January in his bed in his home in London at the age of 93. He lived an extraordinary life and the way he chose to live it made an enormous difference in the lives of many many people from around the globe. Mia has lost her dad, and I cannot imagine what that's like. I am here supporting her as we are both here spending time with her mum, another extraordinary person who has worked all her life as her husband did, much of it side by side with him making their one corner of the world a place of peace and love and care.

We'll be in London for another week and then back to Canada after that.

In my next update I will tell you an incredible story full of miracles and grace. A new performance project is manifesting in my life. It is huge and important and the creative potential has my spirit absolutely flying over the moon. More to come soon, I promise.

I want to leave you with one of my favourite poems. "Aimless Love" by Billy Collins. This encounter with cancer has made my appreciation blossom for the small things all around us. My eyes seem to well with tears at the slightest provocation as I go about my day. So be it. Apparently, this is me now.

You'll find Billy Collins' poem here, along with a link to the poet reading it aloud.

<https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/aimless-love-7641>

Onward!

Nansen Village



Nansen Village in North London, founded by Kurt and Charlotte Weinberg.

<https://nansenvillage.org/overview/the-beginning>

Mar 19 | My new sisters

My dear ones,

I have quite a story to tell you (and be forewarned, it's a long one). Chalk this one up to the list labelled "I did not see that coming" or perhaps just file it under "Serendipity" along with the dozens (hundreds? thousands?) of other stories of serendipity that regularly seem to show up at my doorstep.

This story starts fifteen years ago. My first book, *Strategies for Playbuilding*, had recently been published and one of the early reviews appeared in *Research in Drama Education* which, as some of you will know, is a leading scholarly journal in the field of Applied Theatre. The review was written by Alice Bayliss (now Alice O'Grady), and it was a stellar [review](#). I was thrilled to read her kind words and I wrote her a note at the time thanking her for her support of my work.

Last August when I was at a theatre conference in Manchester presenting a paper on my *Alchemy of Astonishment* work, one of the first things I did when I arrived was to check the names on the registration list to see if Alice might be at the conference. There was no sign of her but I didn't give up. That night I Googled her name and discovered she was Head of the School of Performance and Applied Industries at the University of Leeds. I sent her an e-mail to ask if she was at the conference. She wrote back a cheery note explaining that she wasn't there this year because she'd been diagnosed with cancer in February, was on hiatus from work, and was currently undergoing chemotherapy. I wrote back with encouragement and good wishes; gave her a little summary of what was happening at the conference; and expressed a hope that our paths would someday cross. Little did I know that the strange lump I'd noticed on my neck a few weeks earlier would turn out to be a thread that would connect us in a new way. Flash forward to late October, some weeks after I'd gotten my diagnosis. I wrote to Alice again and told her about this plot twist that had drawn me into the same club she'd found herself in six months earlier. We began corresponding and I soon became utterly charmed by her wit, her insights and intelligence, and also by the attitude she brings to her healing that is so resolutely in the same waters where I swim. As a result of this diagnosis she is finding quite unexpectedly what can only be called *gifts* of deep appreciation, self-learning and personal strength.

It was during this period that my good friend Kath Bishop sent me a link to a TEDx talk given by Cheryl Heykoop. As I told you in my update last November, my eyes welled with tears watching Cheryl in her video speak about her response to being diagnosed at

the age of 34 with Non-Hodgkin's Follicular Lymphoma, a type of cancer that has no cure. I was so moved—and I found such personal resonance—in how she so gently chooses to step away from the ever present militaristic language that associates having cancer as fighting a war against a ferocious enemy. She says that of course she wants it gone and will do anything she can to make that happen, but that she has no wish to think of her body and the cells of her being as a battlefield for the rest of her life. Instead, she chooses to ask how she can learn to take care and love her body—every cell—cancer and all. In one passage in her blog (fullofgrace.ca) Cheryl writes:

I've been pondering a lot of what ifs lately: what if we talked openly about our own lived experiences with cancer? What if cancer was perceived differently? What if we saw patients as human beings first and as patients second? What if we expressed our hopes, fears, and unknowns more? What if we talked openly about death and dying? How could these what ifs shift or transform how we experience and navigate cancer?

Within a week, I had an opportunity to meet Cheryl in person. It was such delight to sit and talk with her. For over ten years Cheryl has been working with children and youth affected by trauma (armed conflict, natural disasters, and chronic illness), using a participatory action research approach to enable these young people to share their stories and perspectives in a way that feels ethical and meaningful for them. And that's just a small part of what she does. That night we both felt such a sense of kinship and knew that we had to find a way to work together on some project someday.

When I attached the link to [Cheryl's TEDx talk](#) in my healing update, Alice saw it because she's in this circle of recipients. After watching it, she wrote to me:

I loved that video clip. Thank you so much for sharing it with me. A lot of what Cheryl said also resonated with me too. I honestly feel the same as her. I'm a different person because of my diagnosis and I live differently. I doubt I would go back. The rhetoric around cancer definitely has to change. As drama practitioners, we know the power of the stories we tell about ourselves and the gift we have in being able to alter those stories using creativity and imagination. Now, here's an idea. When you're recovered, how about we think about how all three of us could put our specialisms together? I suspect we could write something pretty powerful together . . . I don't want to gate crash your relationship with Cheryl but it was just an idea...

As you can imagine, I was absolutely elated by the prospect of a theatre collaboration between the three of us. I contacted Cheryl right away to run it by her and she was equally enthusiastic. When I wrote back to Alice, I told her I was going to be in London in late February and she said it would be crazy to not take advantage of the proximity. She offered to take the train from Leeds down to London where we could finally meet face to face and discuss this idea in person.

On February 20, Alice and I met at London's King's Cross railway station and we had a three-hour non-stop gabfest. What a treat it was! It felt as if we were long lost pals having a much anticipated reunion. She gave me a copy of her new book, *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, and I gave her a copy of *From the Heart* (she already has a copy of *The Alchemy of Astonishment*). Along with trading life stories and work stories, we started to map out how we might approach using applied theatre practices to shift perceptions about cancer and challenge the paradigm of fear and dread, creating a theatre performance that would impact people at an experiential level. Toward the end of the conversation, Alice suggested that it might be wise for the three of us to find an oncologist to join our team to ensure that the work we do would also respond to questions that those in the medical profession are asking. She told me that there is a School of Medicine within the University of Leeds and that when she got back, she'd do some nosing around to see if she could find someone who may wish to collaborate with us.

And here's where the story gets really interesting.

It turns out Alice never had a chance to ask around. Shortly after she was back in her office, she received an e-mail out of the clear blue sky. It was from an oncologist at her University's Medical School. He introduced himself and explained that he worked with teens and young adults affected by cancer. He was writing to see if she might have some ideas for how they could integrate theatre into the research.

That all happened within the last few weeks and now Alice and Cheryl and I have begun to develop our ideas and the ways in which we might take our working relationship forward. If funding comes through we'll be working with groups of teen and young adults with cancer who self identify as reaching for that elusive quality of renewed appreciation and an embrace of life as a result of their diagnosis. Cheryl will take the lead in facilitating a participatory research process with this young ensemble of co-investigators to explore stories from their own lives as well as stories gathered from other people with cancer reflecting on their experiences. The ensemble will be looking to identify and name what it is that enables a person to make that leap from dread and

fear to embracing life. At the same time, I'll be teaching the participants the *Alchemy of Astonishment* staging strategies. Once they've built their fluency in the alchemy vocabulary, they'll apply what they've learned in their work with me to transform the findings they've generated in their work with Cheryl into a series of unforgettable performance pieces, including songs, scenes, and whatever else emerges. Alice will then take the lead in helping them devise a structure for a coherent show. This is performance as research. After the initial performance of the show in Leeds, we'll field test it for different audiences—medical professionals, youth and adults with cancer, and the general public—elsewhere in England and here in Canada. We'll take note of feedback all along the way and in the final year of the study we will integrate what we've learned into a working script/score that can be performed by any group in any community. We also plan to write a companion guide outlining the process of how one can turn the story of one's personal experience into a performance piece so that subsequent groups can integrate their own experiences into the script/score when they perform it.

So that is the extraordinary project that has emerged out of a most unlikely series of events in these past several weeks. I am truly over the moon seeing this reality come into focus, allowing me to turn a life-threatening illness into an opportunity to collaborate with these two remarkable women on a project that will certainly challenge and nurture us all creatively, personally, and professionally while also offering us a way to contribute meaningfully to other people's lives through our work.

Thank you all for your patience in staying with me through this long story. I hope it lifts your spirits as much as it has lifted mine. In the midst of all this magical grace that has surrounded me, I find myself repeating the final words spoken by Molly Bloom at the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

With so much love and appreciation for all of you— Onward!

Apr 11 | Feel the feelings and drop the story

My dear ones,

It has been a few weeks since I last sent you an update. It seems that this is a period of taking small steps in my healing process, which is not a bad thing. I'm glad to be able to tell you that my ability to taste foods is slowly flickering back to life. My eternal optimism continually misleads me, though. Wandering the aisles of a grocery store the other day, I ventured to buy a jar of artisanal dill pickles since I've been craving them. As soon as I got home I unscrewed the lid, fished one of them out with my fingers, and bit into it. I swear the first thought that flashed through my mind was that this batch must have gone bad since that pickle had no flavour. Then, of course, it occurred to me that it was because my particular taste bud designated for pickles has not yet come online. But some flavours are firing. Yesterday I stopped by the new pizza joint in the neighbourhood and tried a slice. I couldn't taste the cheese or the tomato, but I definitely tasted the green olives and the artichoke hearts. At the end of March, Mia and I were at a Passover Seder hosted by friends and they graciously made a pot of chicken-free matzo ball soup for us vegetarians. Imagine my surprise at the first spoonful when it tasted just as wonderfully ordinary, nuanced and comforting as matzo ball soup is supposed to taste. One of the guests brought his guitar that evening and periodically throughout the meal he picked it up and got everyone singing together. One of the songs was *Stand By Me*.

No I won't be afraid

No I won't be afraid

Just as long as you stand, stand by me

Holding each other's hands under the table, Mia and I tried to sing along but it was hard to do with all those tears rolling down our cheeks.

During this last month and a half it has been so interesting to experience the complete randomness of lingering symptoms from the radiation. It hasn't been a process of feeling them all gradually diminish in any kind of rational way. It's more like some super computer in a sci-fi movie wildly and arbitrarily firing off past programming commands and protocols as it slowly fizzles to a stop. One day I would lose about 50% of my hearing, then the next day my hearing would be back but my tongue felt sunburned, then two days later, tongue was fine but my teeth hurt, then teeth were fine but my throat was so sensitive I couldn't swallow. Then the next day I was back to hearing loss. Crazy. And more than a little crazy-making. But here again was another gift. In the

midst of it all, I found a path to equanimity when I was able to stay anchored in curiosity about it. Way back in those first days after my diagnosis, when I was fully feeling the weight of this new turn in my life, my good friend Kit sat with me in the park and told me what she'd learned from the Buddhist nun Pema Chodron: *Feel the feelings and drop the story*. I've thought about that ideal over these months, but it has remained as a kind of intellectual concept for me. It was the daily battering of these unpredictable symptoms that finally wore down my resistance to dreading them, and I found myself shifting into just observing them as feelings. By now, they have more or less all gone away except for one. Every night I wake up once an hour with my mouth so dry that I can't breathe. It's the perfect opposite of drowning with a mouth and throat full of water. In my reality, I suddenly open my eyes and open my mouth and I can't get any air in. I sleep with a bottle of club soda next to my pillow and all it takes is grabbing it, unscrewing the cap, gulping a little of the liquid and then I'm fine, at least for another hour. When this first started happening, I woke up utterly panicked each time and desperately lunged for the bottle like it was some fast-acting antidote to imminent death. But now I've become accustomed to it. I'm no longer attaching a story to it. I open my eyes, know what I need to do, and take in some water to respond to the feelings.

In just a little over two weeks, on April 27, it will be the three month mark since I finished my course of radiation treatments. I'll be going in for a full-body PET/CT scan. I'll meet with my oncologist two weeks after that to learn the results of the scans. We are trusting that, for now at least, it hasn't spread to anywhere else in my body and that all shall be well.

Over and above all of that, what I really hope for is that I will manage to hold on to all that I have been learning on this extraordinary journey—all the many gifts of seeing in new ways and all the resonances that have actually shifted how I walk in the world. The poet Rumi writes: *The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep*. That's my aspiration. And you know me—ever the optimist—so I have a good feeling about this. I deeply appreciate how all of you have been my witnesses and my confidants this whole time. It's through my writings to you that I've been able to make sense of so much of this experience. And it's through your messages so full of love and support—whether in person or in e-mails or your palpable healing energies sent to me on the waves of the ether—that have made me feel held by your many hands and surrounded by your many lights.

No I won't be afraid, No I won't be afraid, Just as long as you stand, stand by me

Onward, with a heart full of love—

Apr 28 | Not pushing the river

My dear ones,

Not long ago I was poking around the aisles of a thrift store with Mia and I came upon a black coat. There was something about this very narrow and very long coat that caught my eye and made me want to take it off its hanger for a closer look. When I tried it on and turned to look in the mirror, I burst out laughing. The coat made me look like a cartoon version of myself, completely comical with no effort at all on my part. I called out Mia's name and when she turned to look at me, she started laughing too. I knew that I had to buy it right away. I don't have any plans to perform in a physical comedy show anytime soon, but I know I will some day and when that time comes, I will be prepared for it because I'll have the coat to support me being funny on stage.

I've been thinking a lot lately about what it means to have a good foundation that supports you when you are out on the edge. In January I started feeling concerned that I was squandering precious time. Weeks of being zonked out/spaced out/and all played out meant that I was getting further and further off track from taking steps to actively pursue leads that will enable me to earn a decent living pursuing my career. I got some good counselling to relax, be kind to myself, and trust that it will all work out. As I tried to let go of my fretting, I remembered some words of advice I'd heard years ago from my mother: *Don't push the river*. When I first I heard it I thought that it meant, *don't try to row upstream against the current* and it struck me then as a rather conservative piece of advice. Later I came to learn that this isn't at all what it means. I learned that *Don't push the river* means that you do the work you need to do, putting a good foundation in place to support you in your canoe on the river and then you trust that the river's current will carry you along at just the right pace. You don't need to push it any faster. Healing from this cancer has definitely carried me along at a pace it has dictated. Writing these messages to all of you, writing in my journal, and talking with my counsellor have all contributed to giving me the foundation I've needed to be out on the edge. I am coming around to an understanding that my future is unfolding as it needs to. I'm realizing that the work I've been doing for years, developing a whole range of innovations for how to create theatre in community, has also been giving me a foundation for what I want: getting more frequent and better paying creative work. I'm glad to say that in the last few weeks alone, the seeds of half a dozen potential projects have been starting to surface in my life. All of them are thrilling and rich with meaning for me.

I'm not out of the woods yet. My salivary glands are still severely compromised from the radiation and I struggle every night and day with a bone-dry mouth. Some days I am strong and full of energy while other days all the steam leaves me and I have to lurch to a bed to collapse and sleep for hours. But this is all part of the journey and the river carries me forward. Yesterday I had my full body PET/CT scan. A week and a half from now Mia and I will visit my oncologist to learn the results. We are visioning that we will get an all clear and we are full of confidence that all shall be well.

I will keep you posted.

Onward! as ever—



May 1 | Too many blessings to count

My dear ones,

I got a phone call a few hours ago from my oncologist. It seems that the radiology department was able to process my PET/CT scans from last Friday a lot faster than they expected and he got them today. He was calling because he didn't want to have to wait until our appointment next week to tell me that the scans show no trace of cancer remaining anywhere in my whole body.

We have our all clear, my friends.

And so, I get to step forward into the May Day sunshine with all of you at my side and I get to greet the future as it dawns on this incredible day.

I'll be in touch again. I just wanted to let you all know this great news right away.

with a world full of love and gratitude—

Onward!

June 10 | The next chapter begins

My dear ones,

It has been well over a month since I last wrote to you all. After receiving my “all clear” report in early May I have been on some truly extraordinary adventures and I am eager to tell you about them. But aside from the stories of what happened, I want to tell you about how I have been relearning to walk in the world. You may remember that in one of my updates I reflected on my ardent hope that in the months and years ahead I would be able to remember and hold on to all of what I’ve learned along my path to recovery. I was mindful that even after a profound experience, one can return to the old routine and wind up slipping into old patterns. I heard the voice of the poet Rumi cautioning me:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don’t go back to sleep.

I can tell you that, at least so far, I haven’t gone back to sleep in the way that Rumi means. There is a sort of magic that has been carrying me along in these past weeks—a deep appreciation for each person I spend time with, a sense of presence in the moment and a constant recognition of the subtle and remarkable instances of miracles and grace that surround me at almost every turn. I have plenty of bumps and spills too—hours squandered looking at silly YouTube videos or spent staring blankly at the walls of my little apartment. But on the whole, I feel that something important has shifted within me and it’s not going away. It’s getting stronger.

One of the most significant pieces of learning to come out of my experience with cancer is a renewed resolution to not be cowed by what appears to be bad news. After all, this whole business began with what appeared to be bad news. Last fall I was on a weekend holiday with my family at a beach house on the Oregon coast. Next to the basement room where I was sleeping, there was a bathroom with a miserable little shower stall. At home I always shave in the shower, since it’s so comfy and hot and steamy in there. But that wasn’t going to happen here. The water spray pressure from the showerhead was pitiful and the hot water faucet only went up to tepid. So I was in and out for a quick rinse only and I shaved in front of the bathroom mirror. When I lifted my chin to shave my neck I stopped, razor in hand, and thought, “What on earth is that?” as I saw a lump the size of half a golf ball near my right lymph node. That’s what led me to getting tested and a biopsy, and learning that it was throat cancer that had

metastasized to my neck in preparation to make a road trip down the freeway of my lymphatic system to the rest of my body.

That miserable shower at the beach house saved my life.

And that's what I mean about how I've been embracing each twist and turn simply as a twist and a turn with curiosity about what will happen next. I'm sure some of you know the old Taoist story about the Chinese farmer and the horse. It is the perfect example of this idea. It goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer who owned beloved horse that helped his family earn a living. One misty morning the horse ran away and the neighbours all came by to express their concern. "Your beautiful horse ran away, what terrible luck!" The farmer said to them, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

A few days later, the horse returned home, leading seven wild mares back to the farm as well. The neighbours were amazed. "Your horse has returned, and brought more horses home with him. This is such good fortune for you and your family!" The farmer said to them, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

Later that week, the farmer's only son tried riding one of the mares and she tossed him to the ground, breaking his leg. The villagers cried, "Your son has been badly injured, how terrible this is for you!" The farmer said to them "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

The following week, soldiers from the national army came to the village, conscripting every able-bodied young man. The farmer's son was still recovering from his injury and so they did not take him. Everyone stopped by the farm to say, "Your boy has been spared from having to fight in this awful war, what good fortune you have!" To which the farmer said, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

And so it goes. My wish for each of you is that you remember the story of the farmer when you run up against a wall that looks like terrible news and can find some way to say "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

The grant for the big theatre project in Leeds, England didn't come through but is that terrible? Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see. Cheryl and Alice and I are now actively pursuing other ways to support our creative collaboration on our project using performance-based research into understanding how one can embrace trust and love in the face of a life-threatening illness.

I'll be stepping away from sending these healing updates now that I have reached the end of this part of my journey. I've said it many times before—having all of you receiving my writing through these months has been such a saving grace for me. I have felt that you have been with me every step of the way, holding me up in spirit and in your actions. You have been my lights in so many ways as I have looked for and found my way.

I'll see you the next time we get to cross paths and we will enjoy each other's company.

Until then, with so much love—

Onward!

Will

Tiny Lights

By Coco Love Alcorn

*We take a chance
When we can
We take a break
From having a plan
We are bold
Invite surprise
Then feel our spirits rise*

*We are tiny lights
That sparkle and glow
In a world much bigger
Than we'll ever know
We are tiny lights
Shining so bright
In a world we know
Is gonna be alright*

*We celebrate
Through love and play
We take a minute
Everyday
We chase the shadows
Far away
Finding colours
In the grey*

*We are tiny lights
That sparkle and glow
In a world much bigger*

*Than we'll ever know
We are tiny lights
Shining so bright
In a world we know
Is gonna be alright*

*If you try
And I try
And we try
We can light
each tiny light
If you try
And I try
And we try
We can light the world tonight*

*We are tiny lights
That sparkle and glow
In a world much bigger
Than we'll ever know
We are tiny lights
Shining so bright
In a world we know
Is gonna be alright*

*Yeah we know the world
is gonna be alright*

'Cause we got all these tiny lights

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<https://www.cocolovealcorn.com>

Listen to her sing Tiny Lights here: <https://tinyurl.com/y7pg8hb7>