



Bridges

CONNECTING CANCER SURVIVORS

ONLINE SPRING 2012 SUPPLEMENT



The Waiting Room

By Rhonda Silver

Rhonda Silver had her last treatment for non-Hodgkin lymphoma on Valentine's Day 2011 and has shown no evidence of disease since then. She and her husband live in New Jersey, where she owns her own consulting firm that provides writing services to nonprofit organizations; she also has two grown sons. Rhonda hopes to run the NYC Marathon this fall to raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

The waiting room at the radiation treatment center is a strange place. You see the same people every day. We smile at each other, exchange commiserating looks, but rarely does a word pass between us. We are a group that has shared a common experience for weeks on end, and then we will go our separate ways, not even knowing one another's names, never seeing one another again, having no idea who recovers and who does not.

A mother and son sit diagonally across from each other. He looks to be around 18 years old and wears a brace to support his neck, probably weak from a tumor pressing on his spine. I want to cry when I look at him as I have a son about the same age. He passes the time in deep concentration reading t'hilim (psalms), holding a small, worn book in one hand and rocking back and forth. His mother clutches a similar book in her hand but barely glances at it, spending most of her time speaking inces-

santly on her cell phone in rapid-fire Hebrew.

I spot a man I remember seeing in the waiting room on the day of my first doctor's visit. Just a few weeks ago he appeared healthy and fit. I remember wondering whether he was a patient. Now he is gaunt and weak; he shuffles as he walks with great effort. I reach for my husband's hand and squeeze it, try to focus my attention elsewhere.

Many people hammer away at laptops; others hold books, some reading, some just staring at the same page without ever turning it. People slump in their seats, twisting this way and that, balling up their coats to make a head rest, trying to get comfortable in the hard, utilitarian chairs. My husband goes to the beverage station where the hospital provides us with free drinks but soon abandons his cup of bitter, lukewarm coffee. One glove sits on the receptionist's desk, waiting for whoever left it

behind — maybe months ago — to come back and claim it.

Every time we go to the hospital I bring a bag packed with items with which to occupy my time — books, puzzles, magazines, iPad. But once at the hospital inertia sets in, along with an inability to make a decision. Do I want to do Sudoku or read a novel? Perhaps I decide to read but then I have to choose from among the various reading materials I've brought and suddenly I feel overwhelmed and weary. It's so much easier to just sit and stare and wait.

In his seminal work, *The Sabbath*, the great Jewish scholar Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes about the sanctity of time. "Time is the heart of existence," he writes. "Every hour is unique...exclusive and endlessly precious." Humans "may shape and change the things in space as we please. Time, however, is beyond our reach, beyond

our power...time remains impervious... time transcends man.”

When you are sitting in a waiting room you are in limbo; there, time is a perpetually open-ended proposition. You're waiting for someone to see you or something to happen, and you have no idea when the waiting will be over. What's more, you have no way to grasp even the slightest bit of control over the situation. Should I start this chapter or is the doctor about to call me in? If I leave to use the bathroom will I miss my turn in the blood lab? Heschel says, “No one possesses time.” I agree. In fact, often-times I feel as if time possesses me.

On my last day of treatment I thought I was done with cancer. Good-bye diffuse large B-cell non-Hodgkin lymphoma! We celebrated with champagne and there were lots of congratulatory “you made it” e-mails and phone calls. But the reality is that I am far from done with cancer — or perhaps it's more accurate to say it is far from done with me. Moreover, I am far from done with waiting. Everyone tells you to be patient with yourself but all you want is your old energy back, your hair back. Mentally you're done — unfortunately, physically there's a long way to go. I met someone a few weeks after I finished treatment who told me it took him two years before he could go for a long walk and not have to sleep for a week afterwards. My first reaction was that this is

simply unacceptable; my second reaction was to realize that my opinion on this matter is irrelevant, my rate of healing beyond my control — beyond my power, impervious to my desires.

Every morning I scrutinize my scalp and weigh the possibility: Can I or can't I go outside without a hat? There are two issues: (1) Will people stare at me, and (2) Will my head be cold? I didn't think I'd be so impatient about my hair growing back but I'm at my wit's end. I'm tired of looking and feeling like a freak. But the way I feel about being bald is unrelated in any way, shape, or form to how long it will take for my hair to regrow.

I now measure time differently, in different segments. In so many instances I don't think about hours, minutes, seconds. I think about “before” and “after.” In a few weeks I will sit in the doctor's office, waiting for her to come in to tell me the results of my post-treatment scan. Has the cancer come back? If so, is it localized or has it spread, that ugly word “metastasized?” The one or two seconds it will take for her to say the words that will change my life irrevocably are the dividing line — before and after knowledge. Before knowledge, anything is possible. After knowledge, options are circumscribed, limited, and I enter a new realm of existing. It might be better, it might be worse. There is that kernel of time where no matter what the reality is you don't have to face

it because you don't know yet, can convince yourself that reality might change as long as the words remain unsaid, even though the facts are already set in stone.

Do I want to stop her from speaking and stay in the world of all possibilities? Or is it better to take a chance — high risk having the potential for a high rate of return as I learned in business school? But this is all illusory —there is no control. No matter what the doctor says or doesn't say, time has continued and my body has either changed or not changed, for better or for worse. For the rest of my life I will have to have periodic tests and follow-ups and scans and endure the concomitant waiting, waiting for results. This is my new reality FOREVER. Even if I am cured, uncertainty will always be there, my constant companion.

I think back to that unclaimed glove. It's hard to not notice that you only have one glove. Maybe its owner can't bear to return to the hospital unless it's absolutely necessary. It's worth it to buy a new pair of gloves to not have to go back. But once you've been sick, you realize that kind of thinking is just a head game — a game you may choose to play with yourself in order to stay sane but a game nonetheless. There is always that other shoe that may or may not drop. And so we wait...

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