**Spiritual and Emotional Freedom during Difficult Times**

*Delivered by Michelle LaGory* on July 17 2016

**Reading:** What light is to the eyes - what air is to the lungs - what love is to the heart, liberty is to the soul of man.
-Robert Green Ingersoll

My presentation today is a very personal story. I hope that it does not come across as just self-indulgent.

Jules had approached me, asking whether I would be interested in doing a presentation on the Freedom theme this month, from the perspective of someone who has faced a life-threatening illness.

These past couple of months have been a bit of a struggle for me. I just recently celebrated my 5 year post cancer-free anniversary, which is definitely a cause for celebration. And I have celebrated and will continue to celebrate.

My beloved doctor retired about a year ago and I didn't feel the connection to the partner that I started seeing. After my last visit, I got to graduate to yearly followup appointments. Though thrilled that I have made it this far, I kind of felt like a cat or dog that gets abandoned must feel. As I walked away, looking back, moving on, looking back some more, wanting to run back, but eventually moving on. A sad little image, right? I could have used it for the moment of reflective silence.

One of my co-workers was recently diagnosed with cancer and I've tried to be supportive in ways that I remembered as being helpful to me. There is nothing fair about an illness like cancer, which may appear suddenly and works silently, progressively. There were four people I know who passed away after a struggle with cancer within the previous year, including our own Harold Johnson. Maybe I need to start hanging out with different people. However, as I've come to know, especially as I age, cancer is relatively common. Statistically, one of three people in this room will have some form of cancer at some point in their lifetime. That is too many of us.

Illness-- Unexpected arrival.

In the year prior to my diagnosis, I enjoyed a lovely hiking trip with my family. As usual, they were way ahead of me, and I was lollygagging stopping frequently to take bad photos or check out birds or wildflowers. As I ran down the trail to catch up, assisted by gravity, with the visor of my cap turned down to avoid the glare of the sun, my head encountered the rock overhang of the trail that I had noticed on my way up. The object in motion (me) was brought to an abrupt halt. It knocked me to my bum, hurt like a mother and there was blood. That was how I felt after I got my diagnosis. I had not seen this one coming.

In April 2011, I went in for my usual annual exam, or boob and lube, as Sally Tibbs affectionately called it. It was all going swimmingly until the nurse practitioner thought that she felt a lump. She returned to the spot to be sure. She was sure. She told me that it was probably nothing serious, but since I was due for my annual mammogram, I should probably schedule a more comprehensive diagnostic, rather than screening, mammogram. I had been vigilant about having annual mammograms. During the mammogram and even biopsy, I was told that it just looked like normal tissue.

The diagnosis came after an emotional roller coaster—could I sense whether it was cancer? My thoughts went back and forth--I do, I don't, but ultimately rested on "it's possible". Nobody deserves it. I waited over the weekend for biopsy results, struggled through business as normal as much as I could at work on Monday. I made several calls into my doctor. I was told that the report was on his desk. He would call me. Finally, near five o'clock, I called. The doctor said told me that he had tried to call but the number he had was wrong. It seemed odd because I had been a patient there for over twenty years and I had about four numbers on file. I kind of sensed that this was a bad sign, that he was avoiding talking with me, especially because the nurses that I had spoken with earlier couldn't tell me anything. But no matter, what was the verdict? It was cancer. He asked if I could sense that it was. No, I hadn't other than the moments of…of course, bad stuff could happen to me, why would I be immune? Then, he proceeded to tell me of another patient who had been recently diagnosed and how it was bad and all over her abdomen. "Shut up!", the little voice inside me said. "Go back to how to deliver bad news to patients school." He was only human, and tried awkwardly to tell me that I could contact him at any time with questions, not just as a patient, but as a friend. His daughter had been close friends with my daughter Maura when they were younger and we had that care about each other's kids connection. Step one of spiritual awakening in the journey. Though his delivery was awkward, I felt compassion for the doctor, my bearer of bad news.

I did not feel sick going in…this was the threat I could not see.

Because of this, it felt as if reality had tilted…and it seemed like now anything could happen…anything, no matter what I did. Someone could tell me that I had a horn growing out of my head and if I looked in a mirror, I could see that indeed, I have a horn coming out of my head. Someone else could tell me that my toes were going to fall off and sure enough there they go.

I think that I had honestly come to terms years ago, especially with raising my children, with the idea that the amount of control that I felt I had over my life was largely illusory. I was and am still a great believer in the idea that challenges have the potential to make you stronger, more insightful, and more humble. I knew that, though I hadn't really made any amazing contributions to society, my life was fairly successful, in large part because conditions had been in my favor.

Though death is inevitable for all, this was not a convenient time. Like the infamous cartoon from the New Yorker by Bob Mankoff, which shows a man on the phone in his office, my response to the specter of death calling was "How about never? Does never work for you?"

I had audits at work coming up, applications for accreditation renewal that were due soon, and a big national accreditation that we finally felt ready to shoot for. On the home front, my baby was about to graduate from high school and launch off to college. My oldest daughter, Aisha, was living in Ankara, Turkey. Anna in the middle had returned from a year in Chile and resumed school in Greeley, CO. I didn't want to miss being a part of their bright futures.

In the 70's, I read a short story in a magazine about a woman who, returning home from a shopping trip, suffers a stroke on the stairs leading to her apartment. As she collapses, her bags of groceries fall and the contents spill down the stairs. As she lay dying, or perhaps she was already dead, she sees the mess she has made and knows that she can't die yet, she has to clean up her mess. She picks up the oranges and other items that have taken off in all different directions and manages to get everything back inside her apartment. And so begins a series of tasks that she performs that need to be done around her house, including making love with her husband. All while dead, because this was not a good time to die; she has too many things to do. Thinking of this story still makes me smile inside, and it made quite an impression on me. Humor, and sometimes dark humor best of all, became my friend.

Because my physical state did not initially seem affected by the disease, my fights or struggles were mostly emotional, and yes, even spiritual, and they did take their toll physically. Before too long, cold fingers of fear and uncertainty touched me, resulting in a fairly extreme lack of appetite that bordered on nausea. Sleep was disrupted, not restful. I would wake up every couple of hours. I was given a prescription for Ambien, but I did not like it. About twenty minutes after taking it, I would have to be in bed, because it would suddenly kick in and I would be out like a light. After watching some humorous You Tube videos of people under its influence, I decided that it was evil and found an alternative. Such a whole being response required a whole being fight back.

My first fight back directly against the illness was in ensuring that I got a diagnosis and that I had found a team of doctors that I felt confident in. I dropped my polite habits of being grateful for any tidbit and apologetic with health care professionals. I sought second opinions on everything and chose my team based on gut instinct and how they made me feel. I also checked credentials and got lots of reviews from other users. I felt like I should be writing a Consumer Reports article.

My next big step was surgery. I had felt kind of sorry for the body part that had failed me…poor baby can't make cells right…but she had to go; we had different goals, and it wouldn't end well if I let her stay.

And then my diagnosis kept getting a little scarier. Eight of the 10 lymph nodes removed at the time of surgery yielded cancer cells. After a PET scan, I learned that the cancer had appeared to spread to an area under my collar bone. Surgery can't be performed there without likely killing the patient. The collarbone stuff was still considered to be local, so I just got in under the wire with a stage of IIIC, narrowly avoiding the dreaded stage IV or metastatic cancer.

This was soon followed by chemotherapy treatments.

Even prior to the start of chemo, I was hit with a serious dose of lethargy. I'm guessing that this was in large part due to my emotional response to the whole adventure. I wanted to return to work, and get back on my feet and exercise. But first I'd have to purge the lead out. It was hard to get out of bed in the morning and seize my life. I was given a guided meditation CD by the same wonderful woman who had discovered my cancer during my annual exam. She herself had battled two rounds with different cancers and had found it helpful. The visualizations took a very spiritual path. Pulling my sorry ass out of bed every morning as early as possible, I would lie on my couch and listen to the CD. This would start my day on a positive, empowering note every time. I would get up, go to work, and just deal with whatever the day would bring, which was many good things.

All through this, I was astounded at the kindness of friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and even strangers. People shared their own stories of struggle and survival, and went out of their way to make me feel valued and cared for. My Doctor would take my calls and even call me at home. Co-workers chipped in to purchase a gift certificate for over $1000 for meals from Designing Dinners—my freezer and fridge was always full of good things to eat or offer to others. Co-workers also made up a schedule to bring meals after each chemo treatment, so I wouldn't have to worry about feeding my family. My church family also brought marvelous dinners that were delivered with smiling faces and the kindest wishes. Even Chuck and Halene brought us a delicious meal and an inspirational book, while Halene herself was battling lung cancer.

Others brought books that were perfect for where I was, and movies that made me laugh. I gave up watching beautiful existential and nihilistic art films in favor of films that produced belly laughs. The one gift that was brought to me that dropped like a hot ball of bad joujou was a book titled "Close to the Bone". Written by a psychiatrist, the stories that I first landed on told of the freeing transformation of terminally ill people when they accepted the inevitability of their pending doom. I felt as if I had been bitten by a snake. It lurked in my dining room for days, until I confessed my reaction to a visiting friend. She grabbed the book and hid it from my view. It was silly, I thought, and my obligation to be entrusted with someone's book made me feel childish. But my friend had no qualms about removing it for me.

And it quit haunting me. Not too long ago, I found the book. It eventually got moved again in the shuffle during a fast and furious house clean up before guests arrived. It stayed there for awhile, then I retrieved it one day when I finally remembered it. This time, I sat down with it at my dining room table and did not see the passage about the woman who was valiantly dying. Instead I saw lovely passages that spoke to sentiments I shared earlier, about how illness had made people strip things to the essentials and really see. And it was full of the "I and Thou" concept to which Robert had so eloquently spoken the previous Sunday. So, my big fear had become an ally of sorts, after having lain unnoticed for five years. I am so glad that I had the luxury of waiting until I was ready to receive its message. Thanks, Janelle.

My connection to the UU meditation group, which will be held here tonight at 7—shameless plug—was renewed, and like the guided meditation CD, became a powerful tool in my healing toolbox. The readings found their way to my soul, the meditation helped me to see and to live in a way that made me nicer to, or at least more thoughtful of others, respectful of their journeys, and allowed me to keep fear from taking up too much space. Our group, despite its small and fluctuating size, became a place where I could continue my own development of mindfulness while being a part of the group. I can't say that I thought of cancer much while I was there. And I didn't think of it much in my yoga classes or when I joined a gym through IML's wellness program, or when I finished the Flying Pig Marathon in Cincinnati, twice.

I found parables in everyday life, as I always do, but I think that I was more receptive to them.

And so, armed with the powerful tools of modern medicine, good food, community, a loving family, yoga, exercise, meditation, I gradually returned to a sense of normal without noticing the transition.

The distraction of work and my place in that world drove me forward and drew my focus outward. I met deadlines and goals, and our lab did receive the national accreditation.

Through my journey, the support of friends, acquaintances, co-workers was vital. I truly believe that being part of a supportive community is powerful.

My perspective on many things seemed to change radically and I began noticing a real change in how I reacted to things. At work, I began feeling less like I was personally responsible for everything.

In an encounter with angry driver, my immediate reaction wasn't an obsequious cringe and feeling of submissiveness. Instead, I felt myself feeling compassion for this poor guy who had reacted so volatilely with such poison as I watched him contort his face as he mouthed "F… you" with a young child beside him in the passenger seat.

There isn't a lot of choice involved in having a life-threatening illness, but there are opportunities to make some choices. We've probably all heard or read "Cancer is a gift"—It is a pretty crappy gift, but it is a game changer, and as in many life circumstances, how a person chooses to respond can make all the difference in the world. I don't mean to imply that people who respond "right" will live and those who don't will die. Self-righteousness does not win any battles. I encountered a certain amount of that sentiment in my journey.

I listened to a Naturopathic doctor give a presentation in which she threw out a statistic that up to 85 or 90% of cancer was preventable, strongly implying that only those who were not taking proper care of themselves got cancer. This was at a wellness retreat, with cancer survivors in attendance. When I attempted to question the doctor, with my wobbly voice betraying me, she stated something to the effect, that yes, if people improved behavior and diet, up to 90% of cancers were avoidable, unless maybe you grew up in one of the "cancer alleys" in Ohio. I grew up in Ohio. Was it a cancer alley? Before I let myself go down that rabbit hole, I told myself that it didn't matter. Maybe my cancer was caused by those red M&Ms that I loved to moisten with my saliva and use to paint my lips red when I was little. Maybe it was caused by poor emission standards applied at the Fernald feed plant outside my hometown of Cincinnati Ohio. Feed plant sounds harmless, doesn't it? It conjures up images of a Purina plant where they make food for bucolic cows. However, at Fernald, they took uranium ore and made it into uranium fuel cores. It is now a Superfund site. Were M&Ms, Fernald feed, or poor behavior and diet responsible for my unseen enemy? There were many paths I could take in what I hoped would be my triumphant recovery, but I decided that spending time on what led to this was not one of them.

A co-worker seemed to think that I would be interested in hearing about how a relative had battled cancer over and over and how she suffered and it was certain that she would die. As a newly-diagnosed person in shock, I told her that I really couldn't listen to stories of suffering and defeat. I needed happy stories, happy endings, and hope. It did not stop her; she continued to tell the sad stories, once prefaced with "now I know you don't want to hear this, but…" But I see you and move on was my inner response.

Other people, of course, go through the same type of struggles in crisis as I did with my illness. Some move safe to the arms of Jesus, and that works. Religion and spirituality aren't only for those in deep crisis, but it is a time when non-essentials can be stripped away, you are more open to the search for meaning and purpose, and also to assess the type of person you have been and to pull closer to those you love, and who for some strange reason love you. There isn't a lot of room for thinking of amassing stuff or petty grievances that you've carried way too long. It is a time to open your eyes and your heart wide, to acknowledge gratitude for all you have experienced, and to let go of things that aren't worth the energy that you have. It is a time to make the most of what you have as a whole being, while you still have it.

So this is where I am now. I spoke earlier about my initial fears of not being part of my children's futures.

My baby graduated from high school, then went on to get a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Montana. She is currently living in Chicago Illinois and works for a law firm as a writer.

Anna finished her degree in Art Education at the University of Northern Colorado. She worked together with her then boyfriend, future father-in-law, and many contractors to build a house that they turned into a home. She got a Master's Degree and a job as an Art Teacher at the Junior High. Last summer she got married to that boyfriend, a great guy. Last weekend she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, and I got to be there at her delivery and welcome her into this crazy world. Anna's father cried at both events.

Aisha returned home from Turkey, and just defended her dissertation prospectus at Ohio State University, where she is studying International Relations.

In these five years, I know that I have indeed been blessed. I no more deserved to live than did those I know who have lost the battle with cancer deserved to die. To quote the great philosopher Clint Eastwood in the movie "Unforgiven", "Deserving's got nothing to do with it".

I do not believe that I have survived this long because I was disciplined in following the right way to recover. The disease was real, and it still may get me, because I know that something will. I just found some freedom to keep living pretty fully while I am still alive.

I remain a flawed human. I hope that there will be a day when I will truly accept that it is okay to just say that I am a human, that I can embrace that I am human and the "flawed" qualifier will not be necessary.  That I will just feel the awe of life, possibilities, feel joy, birth and rebirth, connection, possibility, appreciation, and that death will lose part of its terrorizing power.  But not yet.  I am not yet that Close to the Bone.