How to Write a Cancer Memoir

February 16, 2017 By Robin McGee

Cancer narratives have the power to guide and inspire others. However, writing a cancer memoir from one's own life requires a certain kind of balance. You have to juggle the emotional pain of your lived experience with the exigencies of producing a work of art.

Having written The Cancer Olympics, and having recently worked on production of an audiobook of the same, I understand that challenge.

What advice might I have for an aspiring cancer memoirist? Here are some ways of managing your own feelings while producing an engaging and informative book:

1. Work from notes. A journal, a blog, a diary, photographs – all these can help you stay grounded and accurate as you chronicle your experience. I used my own private blog and social media communications to guide me.
2. Don't shy away from describing your emotional experience. Most readers are very interested in how cancer patients face their anxiety. I remember defying an editor who urged me to drop what she called "the wobbly bits." She thought readers wanted to know more about the scientific details of my cancer treatment than my feelings. Since, I have heard from many readers that the description of real-time emotion was the most compelling aspect.
3. Consider professional therapy to address the trauma of cancer. Turning traumatic memories into narrative memories can be greatly aided by psychological help. I am a psychologist in my day job, so I can say that with authority.
4. Write. Weep. Walk away. Come back. If you get overwhelmed emotionally at times while writing, that is understandable. You may need to step back and come at certain passages another day. Keep your Kleenex handy.
5. Ensure technical accuracy. I had cancer doctors and pharmacy experts review my treatment descriptions, to ensure that all the relevant details (and spellings!) were correct. We patients can become "jaded" by immersion in medical jargon: share your medical content with novice readers to ensure it is understandable.
6. Hire a professional editor. I remember wondering: "are there two t's in vomiting?" "Oh, wait, I have two periods after the word "anguish." The truly trained and dispassionate eye will catch those minor typos that can beset all writing, but particularly emotional writing.
7. Stay with it. Although there are many struggles in writing a cancer memoir, there are also great rewards. Dozens of people have contacted me to say that reading The Cancer Olympics led them to follow through with needed screenings: many reported being saved from pre-cancerous lesions. And many, harmed by medical error as I was, respond with gratitude to my illustration of fighting for medical justice. Just last week, a parent contacted me to tell me, "our daughter was so inspired by your book, she read it cover-to-cover many times…right up to her cancer death, two months

> ago, at age 30.” To think my book made a difference in the life of that young woman moves me deeply.

Yes, writing your cancer story takes emotionality as well as emotional restraint. But the recompense is worth it…for you, for your readers, and for all encouraged by your example. You are helping others with your story, no matter what their own story may be.

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