

A Compass for the Cancer Journey: Scientific, Spiritual, and Practical Directives

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How might their lives be different, because there is a nurse to whom they turn? A nurse who helps them learn to light a candle, a nurse who helps them accept and trust their limitations, rebuild their strengths, and know, in the dark of winter, that their energy will return like the spring (adapted from Duerk, 1989, p. 103).

The legacy that continues through the Mara lectureship is a wonderful gift. In preparation for this presentation, I reflected on my 31-year career in cancer nursing, the thousands of patients I have had the privilege to care for, and the journey that has led me to this place. It is a long way from a childhood in Kansas. Who would have thought my journey would unfold in this way? It has been a wonderful journey, with lots of hills and valleys. I am so proud to be an oncology nurse.

I chose the compass imagery for directives because I believe each of us develops in our profession with the mentoring direction of others, some internal drive or motivation, as well as our intellect and compassion. We also give direction to our patients and their families. Many patients have described their experience with cancer as a journey. Thus, the compass metaphor seemed quite fitting and worth reflecting on as I recalled stories from my practice—the challenges, joys, and fears of patients and family members as they had told their stories to me. The stories of patients are as I remembered them, and many others came to visit my heart as I prepared for this presentation. It was a gift to remember the parts of their journeys that we shared and what they had told me about finding their way. Although I am a scientist, an advanced practice nurse, and sometimes an educator by professional position, education, and experience, this presentation was prepared simply, completely, and passionately from my grounding as an oncology registered nurse. These stories are part of my professional journey, from my intentional and sometimes unintentional wanderings, and as such, this is very personal. Hopefully this will be personal for each of you in some way. Every oncology nurse has a great deal to say about nursing, because you have cared for patients, walked with patients and their family members, and perhaps have done the same for your own family members and friends. Some of you reading this have walked the cancer journey yourself. You have

encountered obstacles along the way, as well as made new discoveries, and often met these with knowledge, wisdom, great integrity, and great vision. Sometimes you have traveled in broad daylight and sometimes with only a dim light to guide you. Sometimes you have been successful; sometimes you have met with disappointment. I imagine that you have grown with the experiences or you would not be reading this article now. Or perhaps you are curious how what you read here might enhance your journey as an oncology nurse. Gustafsson and Fagerberg (2004) reflected that nurses experience situations where courage is needed. Nurses take risks, occasionally testing methods, procedures, or acts that are new territory for us.

The purpose of this article is to affirm the significant contributions of oncology nurses to the well-being of people with cancer and their families, through stories representative of the cancer journey, a journey moving toward healing and wholeness. Because my professional practice for the past 20 years has been only in breast cancer, much of this article will reference these experiences. I trust however that these stories will speak to you no matter what your practice area includes. Thus, as you read the stories that follow, reflect, reminisce, or let your thoughts drift to new ideas. Contemplate and see yourselves reflected in the stories or recall your own. Reflect for a moment on where you have been in your journey as an oncology nurse, where you are now, and what your future holds. Draw your own conclusions about what a compass for the cancer journey means to you and to the patients and families you serve.



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