Cast Away With Cancer

Katherine Wilson entered nursing school in 1999 and, soon after, developed a cough and chest pain which turned out to be small cell lung cancer. Katherine’s strength and courage helped her to conquer her disease and go on to graduate from the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Nursing in 2004 with a BSN and as a Sigma Theta Tau inductee. However, after six recurrences, Katherine died on February 16, 2005, at the age of 28. Katherine’s own words from the nursing school assignment that follows are an inspiration and touch the heart of oncology nursing.

I recently saw the movie Cast Away. I’m sure my perception of the movie was quite different from the perception of others in the theater. To me, a 24-year-old lung cancer survivor, Cast Away was, in many ways, metaphorically about cancer. The movie began by revealing the day-to-day life of FedEx employee Chuck Noland, the character played by Tom Hanks. One evening, Chuck’s normal routine was disastrously wrecked. He said goodbye to his girlfriend and boarded his plane to make a trans-Pacific FedEx delivery. However, the plane encountered a turbulent storm, lost control, and crashed. The audience felt Chuck’s horrific terror as the plane plunged thousands of feet and crashed into the ocean. The small plane was engulfed and destroyed by the powerful sea. Chuck awoke on his emergency raft as he floated ashore on a remote island.

To me, this crash represented my cancer diagnosis. I was in nursing school at the time of my diagnosis, incredibly busy with my own routine. On April 7, I abruptly left my seat in the middle of class to go to the student health center because the sharp chest and back pain I had been experiencing for a week had developed an odd crackling noise in my lungs that morning. I had a chest x-ray and it was decidedly “unusual.” Pulmonary specialists were called over from UNC, and they felt that I should be treated for walking pneumonia. After taking antibiotics for five days, I returned to the pulmonary clinic to be evaluated. The chest x-ray and computed tomography scan revealed an abnormality in my lung. The doctors recommended a lung biopsy.

There was no question; I immediately had the biopsy. On April 25, my surgeon regretfully told me that I had small cell lung cancer. All the tests prior to my diagnosis were like a storm. My life was disrupted and suddenly boisterous. The diagnosis was a terrifying, tragic “crash.” A wave of overwhelming emotion and indescribable fear engulfed my soul. I thought I was going to die. And I thought about the countless number of individuals who had died before me of this same despicably disease. I am sure that Chuck thought he was going to die and he probably thought of the many people who died in plane crashes before him. But both Chuck and I survived our crashes.

New World

Through my eyes, the turmoil of Chuck’s new world was similar, emotionally and mentally, to the tumultuous world of a patient with cancer. To survive, Chuck and I had to display unstoppable determination and insurmountable strength and had to rely on love and hope to nourish and motivate our spirits.

Chuck’s determination was best exhibited in his hard work in starting a fire. He spent hours and hours rubbing sticks together, completely focused only on the fire. When it finally ignited, he yelled, “Look what I have created!” As a patient with cancer, I feel that surviving the treatment required extreme determination to fight every little battle that came along the way. There were battles all day, every day, for six months. Combatting constant constipation that resulted from the medications I was taking was quite difficult. I persistently tried many different methods that were painfully nauseating before finding something that actually worked. When it worked, I, like Chuck, wanted to scream, “Look what I have created!”

Eating while undergoing cancer treatment also required strong-mindedness. Because of chest radiation with concurrent chemotheraphy, I acquired one of the worst cases of esophagitis ever seen at UNC hospitals. I couldn’t even take a sip of water without experiencing indescribably unbearable pain. I was hospitalized for about three weeks and could not eat anything. My determination not to waste away inspired me to numb my throat with “magic mouthwash” between each sip of Boost® which my mother encouraged (maybe even forced) me to drink. These sips of Boost sustained me during that period of time, although I lost 25 pounds and didn’t have nearly that much to spare to begin with.

Later in my treatment, I experienced nights where I left the chemotherapy clinic vomiting and continued to vomit every couple of hours until I returned to the clinic the next day, only to receive more of the “poison.” My whole body was involved in the vomiting; it felt like I was retching from my toes up. It took determination just to survive nights like those.

Strength to Endure

Essential to Chuck’s survival was his deep inner strength to endure. He reached a point where his own strength was not enough to sustain him. He then created Wilson from a volleyball that washed ashore in a package. Wilson was symbolic
of a friend, and he provided the extra support that was necessary for Chuck’s survival. Wilson's presence and companionship served as a source of strength to Chuck. Chuck needed someone to understand his trials; he needed someone’s compassion. Because of Wilson's friendship, Chuck was a stronger man.

I also needed great strength to survive. I used my inner coping mechanisms at all times, but in addition, I had to draw strength from others. Fortunately, unlike Chuck, I had an incredible support system from which to draw this strength. My entire community rallied around me, pulled for me, and cheered me on. I received inspirational cards and gifts in the mail each day, and many prayers were offered up in my name. My family and close friends were there for me physically, emotionally, and mentally, and they unfailingly provided me the encouragement I needed to make it from one day to the next.

Most amazing were my parents and a very special friend who sacrificed a fun summer after graduating from college to help take care of me. They were the ones who were with me every single moment of my battle; they were the ones who helped me through the worst days and nights. They were my strength.

Chuck became very attached to Wilson because of the close bond they formed during his time of need. When Chuck decided to battle the sea and flee the island, he chose Wilson to captain the ship. However, during the trip, Wilson was lost in the sea and Chuck was devastated. He grieved for the loss of his friend who had given him such strength. He looked longingly from the ocean back to the island in the distance, perhaps feeling a little sad and scared to leave the place that had been his home for four years. This island was all he really knew anymore.

I too became very attached to friends and family who provided me support, my doctors, nurses, and even the treatment itself. I experienced extreme anxiety and grief near the end of my treatment. As much as I hated treatment, it had been my way of actively fighting cancer, and the medical staff had been a huge part of my support system. Letting go of that safety net was upsetting and frightening. I didn’t lose my support network of family and friends, but the dynamics of our relationships changed. I was no longer the sick patient who needed to be cared for. As much as I hated being a patient, I felt a loss as I let go of that role. I had been living in a bubble world for six months, and cancer was at the very center of this world—it was all I knew.

**Changed World**

Chuck, who also had been living in a world of his own, was rescued from his raft in the Pacific and taken back to civilization. While he was away, he had idealized his old life and the people who had been part of it. When he returned, nothing was as wonderful as he remembered. It was a noisy world with chaos and confusion. He re-entered it quietly and awkwardly, always feeling out of place.

My transition back to a world without cancer was a confusing and difficult time. I felt like everyone expected me to be a ray of sunshine at all times because my treatment had been successful. But rather than feeling happy as a lark, I just felt relieved to still be alive. I felt confused and wondered how I would fit back into my old life because I did not feel like the old Katherine. Instead, I felt like an *old* Katherine, completely worn from all of my suffering. People were compassionate and kind, but no one knew what it was like to be me. I realized that it would be impossible for someone to know. Instead of focusing on feeling misunderstood, I decided to try to find meaning from my experience for myself and to make peace with my experience, learn from it, and grow personally.

It took time for Chuck and me to feel at peace with our worlds. Frustrated, we stood at the crossroads and watched which way the wind blew. For me, it was back to Chapel Hill, where I eased my way back into nursing school. As time passed, both Chuck and I felt more and more at peace. We started thinking less about the future and more about the present. We savored the sweetness of life as we moved from one moment to the next. We felt truly appreciative of each blessing in our lives. Because we almost died, we understood what it is to live. We will live fuller lives because we are survivors.

For more information about Katherine Wilson and the UNC School of Nursing Scholarship in her name, please visit http://nursing.unc.edu/development/kws/katherine.html or www.unclineberger.org/gift/lcccclub/wkatherine.html. Barb Henry, APRN-BC, MSN, can be reached at mhap65@ucmail.uc.edu, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org.