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

Rebecca Crane-Okada, PhD, RN, AOCN®
2007 Mara Mogensen Flaherty Memorial Lectureship

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 that as a child I would have moved to California to attend college, or that I would have moved to Colorado years later to work as a cancer nurse specialist in the John Wayne Cancer Institute at Saint John’s Health Center in Santa Monica, CA. As the recipient of the 2007 Mara Mogensen Flaherty Memorial Lectureship, Crane-Okada presented this article at the Oncology Nursing Society’s 32nd Annual Congress in Las Vegas, NV. Crane-Okada is the 26th recipient of this lectureship, which recognizes a healthcare provider who has made a substantial contribution to psychosocial aspects of cancer care.

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. 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.

Rebecca Crane-Okada, PhD, RN, AOCN®, is a clinical nurse researcher and oncology clinical nurse specialist in the John Wayne Cancer Institute at Saint John’s Health Center in Santa Monica, CA. As the recipient of the 2007 Mara Mogensen Flaherty Memorial Lectureship, Crane-Okada presented this article at the Oncology Nursing Society’s 32nd Annual Congress in Las Vegas, NV. Crane-Okada is the 26th recipient of this lectureship, which recognizes a healthcare provider who has made a substantial contribution to psychosocial aspects of cancer care.