

The Scenery of Cancer

Sometimes in life you don't get to choose, says Zen teacher and cancer survivor DARLENE COHEN. And that's a good thing.

IN *OPENING THE HAND OF THOUGHT*, Uchiyama-roshi talks about experience as “the scenery of life.” Experience simply presents itself, one minute after another, the way scenery rolls by a window on a road trip. Such experience is fully engaging if we allow it to be our whole world, moment after moment, without preference. Rinzai put it this way: “Even if all the Buddhas in the ten directions were to appear before me, I would not rejoice. Even if the three hells were to appear before me, I would have no fear. Why is this so? Because there is nothing to dislike.” *Oh, really?* I have often thought. *That's not always been my experience.*

The three hells appeared before me last September, when I went to the doctor with a distended belly (I had tolerated that distended belly for almost two months because it matched a lifelong worry: Am I getting fat?) and was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

The word “cancer” carries with it some very scary baggage, such as death, debilitating illness, and the removal of much-loved body parts. But the baggage of cancer has been most conspicuous in the people around me. I have become a finite resource: some people have started attending every class and lecture I give; long-distance students have cancelled our phone appointments and flown in to see me; I don't have holes in my dokusan schedule now. For me, though, the idea of an imminent leave-taking is too abstract. I don't *feel* like I'm going anywhere. When I asked my acupuncturist if he thought I was in denial, he said, “Most people, when they get cancer, have some life-altering experience. They become aware of their lives for the first time and reorganize their priorities to make room for some kind of spiritual life. But isn't that already your job?”

I HAD SIX TREATMENTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY. I was put in the hospital for the first two-day rounds so they could monitor me. They shot my belly full of toxic drugs until I labored just to take in air. I felt pregnant, but not with any child of this world. I couldn't lie down or sit with that enormous belly on top of me; I could only walk. For hours I staggered up and down the hospital corridors, pushing the IV stand ahead of me, and occasion-



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ally stumbling with exhaustion against the wall. Finally, in the middle of the night, a nurse with tears in her eyes cut me loose from the IV and I walked free. The next morning I thought, Dear God, what do you have to do to bring tears to the eyes of an oncology nurse?

I went home on the third day, and chemo hell continued. I couldn't breathe deeply, eat, or drink. I lived in a primal animal realm in which I was a creature without thought patterns or discriminative judgment, experiencing sensations and emotions that passed through in a constant stream. For twelve days I lay on my couch, laboriously breathing in and out, enveloped in a gestalt of pain and fear.

Yet simultaneous to that misery was the most beautiful autumn I'd ever seen in my life, happening right outside my room in a grove of maples and redwoods. The slanting light, characteristic of northern California autumns, dramatically showcased the reds, golds, apricots, and browns of the evolving plants. As dawn broke each morning, sunbeams penetrated the windows along my eastern wall, progressively highlighting the dark wood of my

chair and table, the threads of my blanket, the reds and blues of my rug—and my waiting body. At such ecstatic times I felt as if I were being lifted and carried right through the windows into the air on a heavy linen sheet borne by the sweet-faced angels that used to illustrate the turn-of-the-century hymn sheets. My world was full, lush, and compelling.

Since then I have wondered what grounded my willingness to sink into pain and fear and ecstasy as they manifested in turn. What enabled me to patiently observe the “scenery” of my illness as it unrolled?

In my animal realm, more attuned to the pulses of the earth than I ever was before, I began to be palpably aware of the well-being ceremonies that people were doing for me all over the country. Whole sanghas were chanting every day for me with all the psychic vitality at their command.

I immediately felt the benefits when I woke up from the surgery to remove the tumor: As the anesthetic let me go and I moved toward consciousness, I became aware of a path of stepping-stones spread out before me in the dark. I put a cautious foot on one, and it held me utterly. I stepped on the next with my other foot. It held me absolutely. The stones were immovable, supportive, reliable. I stepped confidently until the light flooded in and I saw the faces of my husband, Tony, and my good friend Keith smiling down at me in my bed.

WHEN I HAD MY HIP REPLACED two decades ago, life before and after the surgery was completely different. Life before was one flowing whole, but until I healed, life after surgery felt mismatched. This time, however, there has been no rent in the fabric of my life. The days before the tumor surgery and the days after continue to be all of a piece: I see students, I write lectures, I get cut open, I eat Jell-O, I receive visitors, I feel as sick as a barfing dog, I pace the corridors, I ride home with the passenger seat all the way down, and so on, to the experience of golden apricot colors, helplessness, dread, and being borne on a sheet carried by angels.

Next to this kind of unbidden adventure, a life of preference becomes not only

self-indulgent but also deadened. When my son was a child, I refused to see the stupid Muppet movies popular then, or to go to Disneyland, or to color Easter eggs. He had to do all that with his friends’ parents. Now I wonder what kind of narrow-minded wit chooses her aesthetic tastes over spending exuberant time with her child! When you insist on having only particular kinds of experiences, nothing can deeply touch you. You’re too busy judging. On the other hand, a life lived openly without filters includes pain, heartbreak, Disneyland, and unpleasant occurrences. But you do have a satisfying feeling of being infinitely approachable; the universe gets through to you, whatever scenery it’s hauling.

For many years now, I have been consciously practicing not always choosing what I prefer. The first time I ever did this, I was in an ice cream parlor. I was surveying the flavors, trying to determine which would be the most intense chocolate experience. Suddenly it occurred to me to just step away, close my eyes, and pick a flavor. I did so and, much to my horror, I picked orange sherbet. I thought, should I go through with this? Yes, I decided. And you know what? Orange sherbet is great! Sherbet melts faster on the tongue than ice cream, and though I’m not a fruit-flavor fan, the taste of intense citrus was delicious—unexpectedly delightful and refreshing. And to think, if it weren’t for that little experiment, I would have gone to my grave without ever having tasted orange sherbet.

Most of our preferences don’t make much difference, like whether to choose chocolate or orange, but if you always go with your preference in every matter, then it’s harder when it *does* matter—like preferring health to cancer. The statistical weight of your always choosing what you prefer becomes enormous, and your flexibility sags under it. It’s much harder to see everything as scenery.

Now I regularly practice nonpreference. I wear whatever underwear comes up in my hand from reaching into the drawer. I randomly choose the third item down on a menu. And I watch with enthusiasm every movie my grandson chooses. ♦