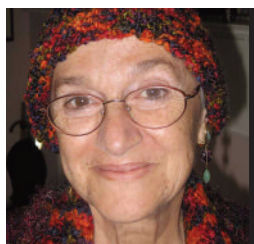


## My Cancer, A Meditation on War and Peace

By Aspasia Nea, EdD '97



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**I**t was the last day of June, 2005. I heard the diagnosis rendered with tear-rimmed eyes by the doctor who performed the biopsy: “pancreas cancer, adenocarcinoma, stage four.”

He stared at me compassionately, almost unbelievably. I smiled back. After surgery and a year and a half of treatment and recovery, I have met cancer survivors who do not identify with the metaphor of the “battle against cancer,” but for me the battle metaphor is fitting.

In my battle I identified myself with “our boys (and girls) in Iraq.” For me, an avowed adherent to the peace principles of the Dalai Lama and Gandhi, this was an unexpected turn. I realized that, like those soldiers, I went into battle without knowing the enemy; like them I had to be prepared from the outset to die in strictly unfamiliar territory; like them I had to have faith in the hierarchy—the oncologist, the gastroenterologist, and especially the nurses who took care of me. I had an objective to reach or perish in the process. Like them, I obeyed the agreed-upon protocols that had been established, purportedly to make my life more secure. I took courage from my peers, the cancer survivors, the support providers, and the family and friends whose loving thoughts protected me. I mourn the loss of fallen comrades who battled at my side, cheering me on, giving me courage through their bravery and strength.

But how do I reconcile that metaphor with the dominant need for peace in my life? How do I live in peaceful co-existence with the “scourge of cancer”?

Peace for me came at the beginning when I got the diagnosis, right when I went to war. I remember my husband, Steven, suggesting that he, our 33-year-old daughter, Celine, and I go away before the surgery to a hot spring spa in the Sierras. We soaked in the healing waters, meditated, held each other, cried.

In my mind, I saw a fork in the road: One way

led down the path of tears, drama, and sorrow; the other led to a striving for inner peace. My choice was not to think about my possible death in the impending surgery, not to read statistics about my cancer, but to do the chemotherapy and radiation like someone doing calisthenics, to wear bright colors, and to live in the moment, in peace.

I’ve come through the treatment and I’m still alive, and the metaphor of the soldier resurfaces—how does someone used to taking orders (from generals or from doctors) regain the power to act on one’s own behalf? I struggled with thinking for myself, all the while realizing it’s my only route to survival.

The cancer gave me license to withdraw from the daily grind. I had the luxury of lying back and watching the daylight come and go while listening to Tibetan chants and reading books. I had the unremitting love of my partner who prepared tasty meals and would not let me starve. I watched a year paint its colors on the tree outside the window as I lay under a soft comforter. While my muscles atrophied and the skin hung from my bones, it was for me pure luxury. I had profound conversations with my daughter. I reconnected with my sisters after years of isolation. I met inspiring women who lived through cancer and now help survivors heal physically and spiritually through yoga and meditation, dream-tending, art, and writing. All of these experiences are the gifts of cancer.

So, the question remains, is cancer the enemy?

Like the soldier returned home, I have been in another, more compelling world, and I won’t play the game of survival of the fittest anymore. I know that collaboration and caring and friends’ prayers even from afar helped me survive. Like a soldier returned from war, the one thing I know for sure is that I long for peace for people and our world. **USF**