

Detour

By Michael Parra

I fled the retreat center, escaping under a full moon and the rustle of a warm autumn wind in the trees. I wheeled my luggage past the pool and the lawn where my fellow yoga instructor candidates gyrated hoola-hoops and danced cartwheels. It was after midnight and I was in no mood for such merriment. Delirious with an awful flu, I was abandoning my Thanksgiving weekend retreat and returning to my partner who was at home enduring chemotherapy for stage IV lymphoma. Of course I knew that once home I wouldn't be able to go anywhere near him. Chemo destroys not only malignancy but the immune system as well. He might survive the cancer but die of my cold virus. I was also incubating my own cancer, but I didn't know that then. My diagnosis wouldn't follow until the next year. At that moment, two years ago, I thought my cold was the worst of my problems.

Leaving the retreat center, I sped south on the highway that takes one from the moon-flooded vineyards of Napa Valley to the twinkling skyline of San Francisco. I was still in the marshlands north of the Bay with the car windows open to welcome the warm air, when I came upon a double line of glaring road flares, emergency red. A large orange and black sign leaned against one of the police cars blocking my path - DETOUR. I knew of no other road to get me to the Golden Gate Bridge and home. The way ahead, to the east and around the entire Bay, was mysterious. Challenged on every front, uncertain of my direction and all alone, I had to continue forward. I wanted to pull the car to the side and sob. The metaphor of detour for my life at the moment could not have been clearer.

Perhaps I should have postponed my instructor certification that year and devoted myself strictly to care giving; but my partner's diagnosis felt like a divine message, "Do it now. Time is precious." Thus everything about my yoga teacher training was imbued with a very personal, spiritual significance. Back at home I watched my partner maintain his yoga practice throughout his cancer treatment. There were days when merely getting out of bed required all his courage, and attempting asana was a heroic achievement. It lent him a sense of control and routine in an otherwise powerless, monotonous time; and his home practice provided brief respite from an otherwise relentless focus on his ill health.

Yoga's spiritual emphasis is what drew me to the practice in the first place. For a ballet dancer, fitness trainer and Pilates instructor, the spiritual element is what distinguishes yoga from my other movement forms and gives yoga its greatest value. Few of us undergoing cancer treatment believe that any sequence of postures will have a curative effect on the malignancy itself. It's the serenity we seek. In fact, if one of the principle aims of hatha yoga is to quiet the churning of the mind, then cancer patients may have a leg up on our healthy fellow students. "You learn not to sweat the small stuff," one breast cancer survivor told me. Poses that encourage lymph movement, and postures that may enhance kidney and liver functions embattled by toxic medications are helpful; but more important than form and sequence is the

quality of acceptance. Even if the patient's prognosis is favorable, cancer evokes a feeling of bodily betrayal, spoiled self-image, and a loss of innocence. Our trust in this world has been invaded at a cellular level. We must find a way to be content with whatever remains to us. The underpinning of a cancer patient's yoga practice is acceptance; acceptance of the body in its newly challenged state (often including pain), acceptance of whatever comes as a result of treatment (sometimes including disfigurement), and ultimately acceptance of our end.

During my partner's initial hospitalization I walked him down to the main lobby. Using the waiting room's walls, chairs and end tables as props, we managed to get a little exercise while getting away from the tubes and needles and out among the living. I was surprised, not by what this did for my partner the patient, but rather what it contributed to the relatives and loved ones waiting in the lobby. If this experience was still part of my detour, then my passenger seat was occupied by a lot of people. Their beaming smiles acknowledged the common sense of our practice, and our public display confirmed to those waiting that this hospital was a good place where people truly cared for one another. My partner and I had just unintentionally transformed adversity into purpose.

Months later, agonizing over my own cancer treatment options, I taught a cancer awareness workshop. My voice was quivering and my entire body shook as I told my story. Eight men, seated in a tight circle, quizzed me about my diagnostic procedures and possible treatment outcomes. I think I remained fairly dignified during that forum. It was only after the guys left the room that I burst into tears, exhausted but again surprised. My fear was gone. I felt unburdened, relieved.

In support of my medical expenses, one of my private fitness clients endowed a scholarship fund with a request that once healed, I use the money to assist others similarly afflicted. My partner joined me in offering a class at our local recreation center. We call the program Bounce Back, and it includes yoga among other movement forms. It gives me a place to apply the lessons of my mortality, a forum in which to voice and sometimes resolve my fears, and a noble purpose to my cancer, which would otherwise steer me towards an unknown and senseless destination.

Seeking solitude, not just going inward but also hiding from the world, is natural following a cancer diagnosis. "You want to curl up in a fetal position facing the inside of the couch," one cancer patient observed. However, problems are amplified when one is alone; and the embrace of community is healing. A return to the class setting, or to teaching a specialty class for one's fellow cancer patients is vital. As it turns out, there's a great many people on this detour. In the end, everyone is faced with mortality. The journey is best when we share the road.