

HUMOR LIGHTENS THE DARKEST DAYS

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Don't ask me why I remember Delilah's royally jealous significant other telling her—when she professes hatred for Samson in the movie about those star-crossed and ultimately stone-crushed lovers—that “love and hate are but different sides of the same coin.”

Well, I've been thinking that the same is true about tears and laughter . . . and last month that latter coin was in near constant circulation around our house. Certainly one can expect tears aplenty when one is diagnosed with breast cancer, but laughter, too? Amazingly, yes. Consider Erma Bombeck's reaction when she was diagnosed with the disease; she admitted to having a flashback to all those events where someone slapped a nametag on her left bosom and she inquired, “What shall we name the other one?”

Speaking from personal experience, if you have to have breast cancer, my advice is not to have it in October. During that month of breast cancer awareness, you can't put it out of your mind for even a minute. It's everywhere: TV, newspapers, grocery stores, churches. I finally got to the point where the sight of a pink ribbon brought on instant depression and a significant gag reflex.

The last straw for me was when the leader handed out breast cancer prevention material at a breast cancer support group. I stared at her in astonishment: “Too LATE!” I exclaimed. She gave me a wide grin and said, “You're going to be OK, Marsha.”

And I believe I am. At least the surgeon who gave me the diagnosis after the biopsy insisted she was delivering “good news.” Relatively speaking, I know she is right. One study shows that a group of women treated for my type of “in situ” breast cancer outlived a control group of cancer-free women. Statistical fluke? Perhaps, but comforting nonetheless.

Still, the surgeon could have fooled me. I assumed good news would be “benign.” Husband Ray and daughter-in-law Val, who got the report before I did, had reactions similar to mine. “My arms and legs went numb,” says Val, “and I got dizzy.” As for Ray, he admits to going “BATS!” I still don't know exactly what he means by that term and I'm afraid to ask.

My doctor endeared herself to me by measuring the size of my lesion in centimeters. That's because I know three other women whose doctors told them their tumors were, respectively, the size of a lemon, lime and pecan. “What is this?” I demanded of Ray when I heard about the fruit and nut comparisons. “Do they think women only understand produce?”

During the month between biopsy and surgery, Ray and I—knowing that sometimes you must change your latitude to improve your attitude—spent a few days in the Ozarks. Our worries accompanied us, of course, but boating on Table Rock Lake, attending a piano concert and dining at a fancy restaurant with four good friends briefly distracted us.

I know that many readers will say that there's nothing funny about breast cancer. And they are right. Yet, more often than you'd think, Ray and I found something in our situation to laugh about and I'm pretty sure we're not the only ones who react this way.

When one woman with breast cancer was told by her doctor that she was otherwise healthy, she snapped, “Yes, I’m healthy from eating all that damn broccoli so I wouldn’t get cancer.”

Doctors, too, often show a comedic side. After my friend Jackie’s husband recovered from cancer, his doctor asked him if he knew why he contracted it. “No, why?” Bob asked.

“BAD luck,” said the doctor solemnly.

If you are a friend who is just now learning about my recent surgery, know this: at the time I am wounded, I want only those nearest and dearest to me to know I am bleeding. I have a deep-seated aversion to a calamity in my life being casually discussed over a bridge table by people who neither know nor care about me. If you are a close friend whom I didn’t tell, it is because I thought you’d cry and make me cry, too, when laughter is by far the better medicine for me.

As with the overall tragedy of breast cancer, there’s also nothing funny about the attempted assassination of a president. Yet as President Reagan prepared for doctors to operate to remove his would-be assassin’s bullet, he gave them a sterling one-liner: “Please tell me you’re all Republicans.”

It is obvious that both Ronald Reagan and I share Norman Cousins’ belief in the healing power of laughter. I only wish it worked on Alzheimer’s Disease.