

# **THE MYTH OF CANCER**

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(THE FOLLOWING STORY IS A LIE.)

In a dark cave, high on the side of a great stone mountain, there lives an evil wizard. Dressed in long black robes he gazes into a crystal ball and sees into peoples' lives.

He chooses an unsuspecting victim and flings a dark seed flying into their bodies. Sometimes it lodges in their breasts, or their bowels or their lungs. The accursed seed begins to grow within them spreading its tendrils throughout their bodies and taking control over their minds.

They hear voices whispering in their ears, "You will die. When you are cursed with cancer you will always die." Whenever there is some hopeful news, these voices change it to yet another message of doom. "You cannot believe good news," they seem to say, "once you are cursed all you will ever hear is bad news."

As the cancer seed continues to grow, it spreads its branches and a dark shadow falls over its victims, identifying them as guilty of some heinous crime, deserving of perpetual punishment. Others, not yet cursed, can readily see their shame and avoid them, fearful that the curse will spread by contact. Whenever the victims look into mirrors their eyes see only guilt and the poisonous voices cry out they have brought this curse upon themselves, it is their own fault for becoming ill.

In despair they turn to shamans of all sorts, seeking to know how long they will be cursed. Again the voices whisper, "Doctors have the power to lift the curse or confirm it. Whatever number they speak has special meaning. Heed it well for this is how long you will live." Sometimes the voices feed the victims' deepest fears and stir up even greater confusion by calling out, "Don't trust him, he doesn't know, continue your search for the Great Healer who will promise the Cure."

As the cancer seed releases its poison into their bodies, the victims become ashen, their flesh begins to wither, and they drown in a sea of decay as wave after wave of uncontrollable pain overcomes them.

## **THE END**

We live in a world shaped by myths. Joseph Campbell has pointed out how myths make our lives more understandable. "Primitive" man believed that the gods ruled the winds and seas, the sun and the stars, the earth and the harvest. "Modern" man has more sophisticated myths which he accepts, as primitive man did before him, as truth. These stories, i.e. scientific explanations, explain not just how things have come to be but give an answer to why things are the way they are.

"America is the Land of Opportunity; if you work hard you will be successful." "If you can play the guitar and can get a group together, with a few breaks you can be a rock star and make lots of money." "Successful businesspeople work hard for long hours and reach the top when they get a corner office and a Mercedes or BMW."

So also our culture has a myth about cancer, and as one patient pointed out, "Cancer has a bad reputation." The story above illustrates many of the principle characteristics of that myth. Cancer is dark and evil, mysterious and malevolent. It is always fatal. Somehow the person, however innocent, feels as if he did something wrong to deserve or create the cancer. The doctor knows just how long the person will live and he alone has the power to cure it. Cancer has replaced the devil as a dark force in our culture and doctors have replaced priests as agents of hope.

Although we may scoff at such stories, at some level we accept them as true. Either consciously or unconsciously we accept the myth and it shapes our behaviors. Patients describe their lives in the past tense, "I have had such a good life..." as if their lives cease at the moment of diagnosis. A wife cautions her mate, "You'd better not overexert yourself, dear," as if suddenly her husband who was playing 3 sets of tennis last week had become brittle and would shatter if he got out of bed.

Such myths convince patients that it is futile even to try to overcome the cancer. The will to live is drained of any vital juice. For doctors these myths shape their approach to cancer as an enemy force to be fought. The only defense against cancer becomes an omnipotent or omniscient doctor, a white magician to overcome the black wizard. Both patient and physician are trapped in the lie.

The treacherous part of this myth is the element of truth hidden among the fearful fantasies. People do die of cancer. Its cause is not well known. The body may become quite frail and bones do break. Doctors do cure patients, sometimes miraculously. The deceit rests in seeing only these facts and not the other equally valid ones. Many cancers are preventable. Half of all serious cancers are cured. Over one third of people with cancer have no significant pain. Patients are not helpless but can play a significant role in their recovery.

We do live in a culture that believes in the Myth of Cancer. It is difficult if not impossible to divorce ourselves from that fact. Myths are a necessary part of our lives. Rather than try to live without them it is better to develop a new one, a story that will serve to create a new consciousness. Several thousand years ago the Mother Gods of fertility which dominated early cultures gave way to male gods which made the development of city-states possible. Zeus replaced Hera. I propose the following story as a counter myth that might free all of us from the hopelessness and despair which the diagnosis of cancer elicits.

## **THE HERO AND THE WOUND THAT HEALS**

Once upon a time there was a Hero. Although there were no portents at his birth, or outward signs of his future deeds, he was nevertheless a genuine Hero. He lived an ordinary life, growing up, working, having a wife and family. Nothing set him apart as being destined for greatness.

One summer's day, while walking in the forest with his dog, he scratched himself on a thorn bush. He thought nothing of it until the cut refused to heal. He and his wife went together to the Doctor who said, "We must do tests."

When the tests were done, they were called into a small room and the Chief Doctor spoke to them. "The cancer thorn has pierced your skin and a bit of it has broken off and lodged inside. We must operate to remove it."

The Hero and his family considered this and agreed. Moreover, a resolve began to form in his heart. "Yes," he said, "I will enter the Temple of Medicine and make use of all the Doctors' Wisdom. They are truly powerful. But I will not rest there. I must accept some responsibility for my return to health. I vow to purify my body and eliminate any vestiges of the poison the thorn might have left. Furthermore I will learn to walk in the forest again safely and without fear."

The Hero gathered his council around him and created a Community. He listened to their words and felt their support, thanking them for their love. He took what was useful and put aside the rest, knowing that it too might have some use later. Knowing that his doctors were human and subject to error he sought confirmation of their proposed treatment. He began to reflect on the events that had led to the thorn lodging in his flesh.

He prepared for the Operation, trusting the Gods to watch over him and his Doctors. Feeling strengthened by his trust and their love, he recovered from surgery and began to make plans. He knew there was much to be done and began to develop his Strategy to deal with it all.

He sought Healers throughout the land. Though they often were in conflict, again he took what seemed useful and put aside the rest. His body grew strong as he ate only pure foods and drank only pure waters. Each day he sat in quiet, silencing the chattering voices in his head. He waited until his courage grew to enter the forest again.

Each day he walked to the edge of the wood, but could not bring himself to enter because he feared what lay ahead. One day as he stood looking into the forest, a shiny black raven called out to him, "Hero, what do you fear? I will guide you. You will not be alone for others have passed this way before." So, taking a deep breath, the Hero entered the Forest.

On he walked, ever farther into the shadows of the tall trees. The trail began to climb. Seeing the raven fly from branch to branch above his head drew him onwards though the path grew ever steeper and in some parts quite difficult. He began to hear voices calling out to him, questioning his right to enter this domain. Although at times his heart beat quickly and his breath came in gasps, he remembered his vow to walk the woods fearlessly and he kept on.

The trail brought him to the entrance of a cave. While he debated whether to go on or turn back, the raven flew down and lit beside him, a shimmering white crystal in his beak. Again the black bird said, "Hero, what do you fear? I will guide you. You will not be alone for others have passed this way before." So with a silent chuckle he thought, "I've come this far, I might as well go all the way; at least it's downhill from here," and entered the cave.

The light from the crystal shone the way as the Hero and his guide went deeper into the mountain. Through twisty tunnels and into great caverns they walked silently until their way was blocked by an underground lake whose width and depth could not be fathomed. With only a moment's hesitation he shed his clothes and plunged in. He began to swim calmly and with great strength (for he had grown quite powerful during his climb through the woods.) Guided by the shining crystal that seemed to float above him he came to the opposite shore and stood upon the bank. Miraculously he found there

dry clothes, folded neatly, as if he had been expected. Putting on the fur-lined boots and drawing his woolen cloak around him he continued on. Soon he saw a light ahead and he strode towards it, emerging from the cave into the forest again.

Now he was different. He felt different. He walked nimbly amongst the bushes. He saw clearly the thorns as well as the flowers. He respected the thorns but did not fear them. He looked back and noted where he had come from. And then he looked forward to where he was going.

### **Not THE END, but the BEGINNING**

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