




Stronger Together

---My Journey of Taking Care of A Cancer Patient in Family

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Bad news came.



Breast cancer is the most common cancer among Canadian women. In fact, 1 in 8 women in Canada are expected to be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime. Hearing the words “you have breast cancer” changes the lives of thousands of women every year – early this year, my sister-in-law (Elaine, yes, we shared the same name) was one of them.

When Elaine was diagnosed with breast cancer, she was hopeful and anticipated a few months of treatment and an immediate recovery. But she soon found that treatment was more challenging than she had anticipated – in addition to undergoing a mastectomy (a surgery to remove all of the breast on both sides, she had muscle pain from chemotherapy, and radiation gave her blisters and burns. Fatigue and upset stomach were her day-to-day experiences. Words come up short to describe the multitudes of changes that took place for her at all levels.



“We are here for you.”

While her healthcare team helped manage the physical side effects, family and friends knew that she needed emotional support and additional resources. I volunteered as her primary caregiver during Elaine’s treatment and recovery. It was at once a humbling and taxing experience. Knowing the rocky road ahead as a cancer patient/survivor caregiver, I counteracted my own insecurity, weakness, and emotional roller coaster by relentlessly researched, studied, reached out to resources, and built connections.

The truth is, besides love, we also need knowledge and community. I asked and researched for any helpful tips or stories relevant to the road ahead. We turned to excellent online community like Cancer Information Helpline, CancerConnection and Canadian Cancer Society for services available to people affected by cancer, caregivers, families and friends, and healthcare professionals. We learned and continued to learn and share information about prevention, treatment, side effects, coping with cancer, emotional support services and more.

Along the way, Elaine joined a survivors’ group so that she could connect with others who have been affected by breast cancer. There were tears, fear, frustration, but even more laughter, cheers, and encouragement.

We continue to draw and share love and strength from the cancer survivors' community to this day.


“As a caregiver, I am growing too.”

On the practical side of caregiving, I learned a few lessons.

First, understanding the cancer-patient-experience is crucial to provide adequate and appropriate support to your loved ones. Today, most cancer care is given in outpatient treatment centers – not in hospitals. This means someone is needed to be part of the day-to-day care of the person with cancer and that sicker people are being cared for at home. As a result, caregivers have many roles. These roles change as the patient's needs change during and after cancer treatment. It's helpful for me to get a clear picture of the diagnosis so that I can understand the disease process and get an idea of what lies ahead.

Some of the first questions that you and the person with cancer should ask the doctor and/or the cancer care team are:

- ✓ What kind of cancer is it?
- ✓ Where is it? Has it spread beyond where it started?
- ✓ What are the treatment options? Which do you recommend?
- ✓ What's the goal of this treatment?




✓ How long will treatment last? What will it be like?

Where will it be done?

✓ What side effects should we expect?

✓ How will treatment affect everyday activities?

✓ What's the likely long-term outcome?



When providing care for my sister-in-law, I helped with feeding, dressing, and bathing and housekeeping, arranging schedules, managing household finance issues, communicating between parties, and providing transportation. I wore many hats indeed and still meeting the needs of mine own and other family members. In other words, on top of the normal day-to-day tasks, such as meals, cleaning, and driving or arranging transportation, I also become an integral part of Elaine's cancer care team.

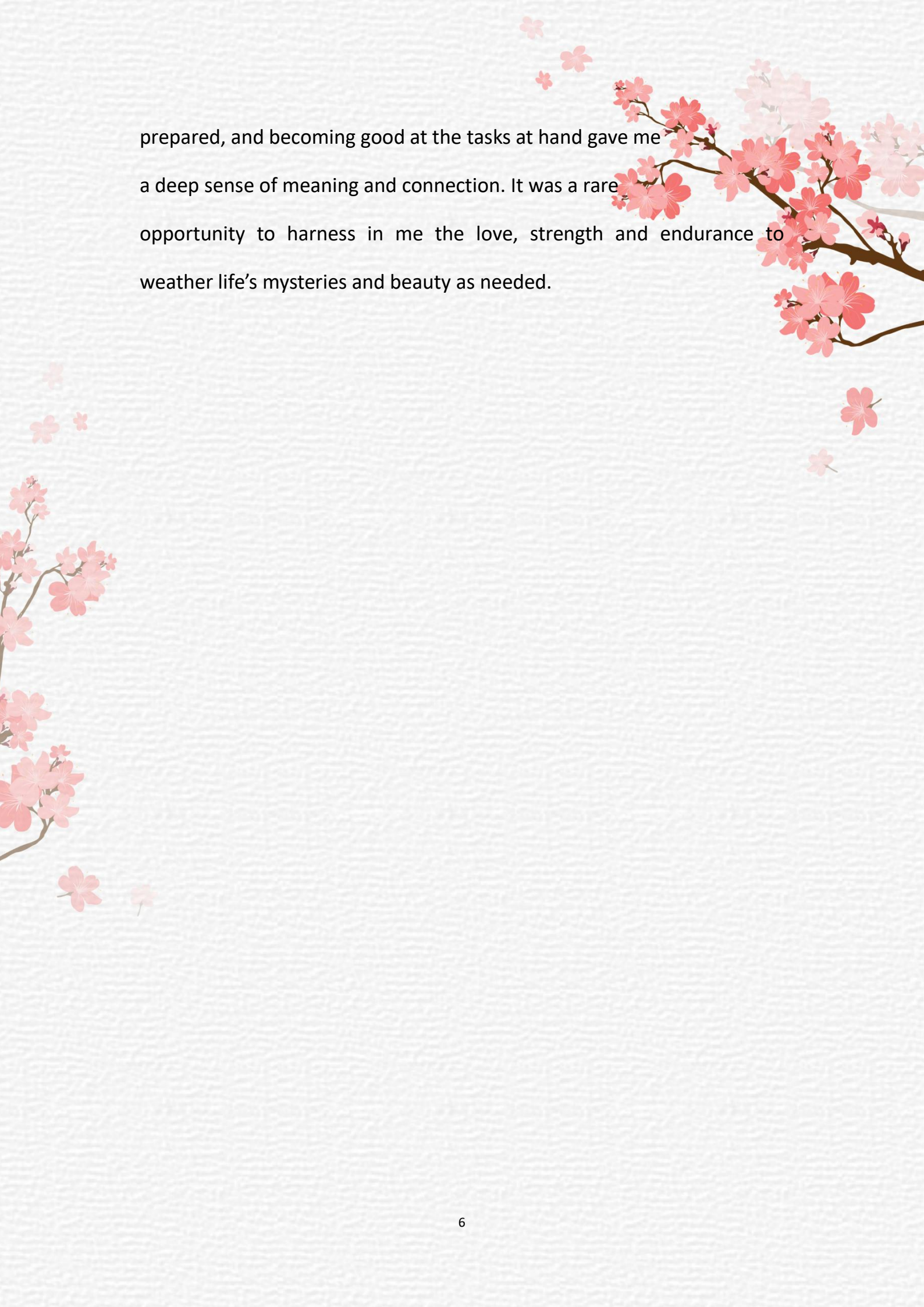
Second, having faith as anchor or a sense of meaning provides emotional stability and inner strength. During treatment, the word busy can't begin to describe the demanding schedule. It's helpful to remind myself that this period of time that I choose to care for Elaine is meaningful to me and my family. My tasks are my worship. By surrendering my tiredness, sadness, or fearful thoughts to prayers, journaling and meditation gave me inner strengths, emotional / spiritual

stability, and abilities that I didn't even know I had.

Being Elaine's caregiver opened doors to new friends and relationships for both of us. Through attending a few support groups, we get to know people who have faced our same kinds of problems.

Lastly, put your trust in community, we are stronger together. I must admit, there were many moments of frustration (e.g. confusion and delay in test results and treatment schedule due to covid-19) and pain (sadness and shock crept up on the mind when least expected). Tiredness and trouble sleeping catch up to you even when you try to will them away. My saving grace was support. But support does not find you or read your mind. So, don't be shy asking for help, plan ahead, communicate your needs, know your limits, take the breaks. This is the time to be gentle and generous to yourself (even if just temporary); e.g., use a meal delivery service, hire housekeeping service, use a taxi so you can focus on accompanying, pass the baton to someone on your backup list. I posted visible reminders to myself that said, 'don't press forward alone' 'to receive help is to allow love' 'caregiving is joy not misery', etc. Bottom line, I can't give my best if my own quality of life suffers.

Although caring for my sister-in-law who went through breast cancer treatment and recovery was no cake walk, but getting educated,



prepared, and becoming good at the tasks at hand gave me
a deep sense of meaning and connection. It was a rare
opportunity to harness in me the love, strength and endurance to
weather life's mysteries and beauty as needed.