



THE RIPPLE

Even at our most
helpless moments,
we can still support
the work of
positive change.

Last fall, I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the third time. The news came two days before I was slated to go on tour for my new book, *Common Shock*, which explores ways to transform the effects of violence and violation through compassionate witnessing. I've taught this process in conflict-ridden places like South Africa and Kosovo, and in this country as well. Little did I imagine that I would have to dig into my own beliefs to grapple with the very challenge I've written about for years: overcoming a sense of helplessness to move toward healing action.

My Post-It notes made a crazy quilt: write op-ed piece, research radiation options, call back for copies of mammogram, pick up travel bag. Of course, I



Jim Cummins/Getty Images

EFFECT

By Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D

wasn't going anywhere, except to doctors' appointments and hospitals.

The news made me more incredulous than mad, more disappointed than bitter. And I was so incredibly sad—for myself, my family, and my friends—that we had to go through this again. I remembered the fear, pain, bad burns, and fatigue from radiation treatments fifteen years ago, and I still had to deal daily with the long-term consequences. But radiation again offered the best survival odds. With so much I wanted to accomplish, I was working as hard as I had imag-

ined, but at something I had never wanted to do again.

I started daily radiation treatments at the end of November. The routine was relentless: drive to the hospital, wait, lie on the table, leave disoriented and tired, my life disrupted. But, really, what life now? My life is about offering compassionate witness to those caught up in violence and violation. I have devoted my work to helping people heal through turning the witnessing coin, from unintended witnessing to chosen, compassionate witnessing, whether they have suffered in circum-

stances of political or domestic violence or in the ravages of illness or war.

Now, my world had shrunk. I was unhappily inside my own story, and the one I used to inhabit was covered with sheets, like the furniture in a summer cottage. But I needed to find a way to continue my work, even though my most urgent task was to lie on a table in the bowels of a hospital, getting zapped by electron particles.

Monday, December 1, was World AIDS Day. It was day eight of thirty-five for me. My husband, Hilary, was

planning an event to publicize the AIDS pandemic. Though I was too weary to help him, I attended it before that day's radiation. Hilary began with an excerpt from a speech Robert F. Kennedy gave in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1966, during the height of apartheid and our Civil Rights era. Kennedy's opening is stunning:

I came here because of my deep interest and affection for a land... which once imported slaves and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage.... I refer, of course, to the United States of America.

Kennedy created a reversal; there, he was talking about here. I realized that I, too, could reach out here and touch others there. As I listened to Kennedy's historic words, I thought about how much I admire the courage of my colleagues in South Africa, who are working in communities devastated by HIV and AIDS. I decided to tell them. On Tuesday, December 2, I sent them an e-mail:

As you know I am undertaking radiation treatment. While there are discomforts, I am mindful of how fortunate I am to be able to receive treatment. I am dedicating my session on Wednesday to the four of you for all that you do for those who suffer with AIDS and for those families, caretakers and communities that suffer as well. In deep gratitude for all that you do.

Johanna wrote back immediately, attaching a photograph of her little daughter Lerato, who has HIV. Johanna founded and staffs a mental health project dedicated to community-based healing in a township outside Johannesburg that has been devastated in the aftermath of political violence, burdened by extreme poverty, and decimated by deaths from HIV and AIDS. With three adopted daughters, Johanna is a model to me of dedication, creativity, and perseverance. She wrote:

Take care of yourself, we are with you.
Lots of love
Johanna and all of us at Ekupholeni

With me. With me. I made a copy of Lerato's photograph and on Wednesday, day ten, I placed the image on my tummy, covered in its regimental blue and white striped robe.

"What's this?" asked Joannie, the technician, as she placed my arms in the metal stirrups above my head, helping me get into a position that each day seemed less and less feasible.

"My friend's daughter," I explained.

"Isn't she beautiful!" Joannie exclaimed.

"She is," I replied. "She has HIV. I brought in her picture as my way of symbolically transmitting these healing rays that are going into me to her. There isn't much I can do, but I can dedicate my treatment to her today and, really, to all those who suffer with AIDS, with no treatment on the horizon. Eight thousand peo-

nizations to write them letters that would truly witness their work. I labored over each letter, explaining why their work moved me to link them to my daily work of being radiated. I wrote to the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and a reporter based in Iraq. I sent the letters off with no expectation that I would hear back. Writing the letters helped me focus on one aspect of global violence each day and believe that I was contributing to the effort to make a positive difference.

Dedicating my treatments made the radiation sessions tolerable. First, it resolved the conflict between dreading the pain and knowing I was privileged to have any treatment at all. Second, I was doing my work, on and off the table, by transforming my private pain into an

In focusing so intently on the people, organizations, and causes I had chosen to honor, I felt an intimate connection with them, **A PROFOUND BOND THAT WAS CLOSE TO JOY.**

ple will die today, and as little as I have to offer, at least I can offer it to them."

That session, with my eyes open, I focused on the image of Lerato so intensely that, as if my mind were a projector, I could imagine her in the room. As the rays hit my body, I thought them 8,000 miles across the planet. Hit, I could imagine the radiation affecting her. I felt an absolute peace and purpose; the pain became inconsequential.

A few hours later, I devised a plan. Each day I would dedicate my radiation treatment to a person or a cause whose work in relation to violence I wished to honor. I hoped that the knowledge that someone cared enough about the work they were doing to dedicate their treatment to them would encourage them in the daily challenges they faced.

For the next twenty-five days of my treatment I researched people and orga-

portunity to recognize others' efforts to transform violence. Third, the pain felt different. I was using my body to absorb rays that I could then send out beneficently to others. I felt like a conduit through which healing rays could be sent out into the world. Finally, in focusing so intently on the people, organizations, and causes I had chosen to honor, I felt an intimate connection with them, a profound bond that was close to joy.

One day the machines broke and I was told to stand by. I called every few hours, thrilled when I learned I could come in. Miss that day's dedication? I now had a passion, and it got me through every treatment.

Joannie, the technician, was very interested in what I was doing. She often asked me to whom I was dedicating my treatment as she set up the equipment in the cavernous, windowless room. One day

she had a story to tell me. On a stormy December evening, she arrived at the train station very late, ordered a sandwich and then realized she had given some of her money to a colleague and didn't have enough to pay for her food. The clerk said to her, "Oh. Don't bother. It's OK." She felt embarrassed, but knew she had a long trip ahead and took the sandwich.

"I thought of you," Joannie told me. "I thought to myself, *I will dedicate this experience to homeless people who often feel shame when they are hungry.*" Ripples out.

WHEN I WAS TIRED, discouraged, and sick, dedicating my treatments helped me transform them into an intensely meaningful experience. Now it's spring, and I have a new dream: starting a national program that gives people with cancer the opportunity to dedicate their treatments to individuals and groups whose work they wish to honor.

I envision a program in which trained volunteers help cancer patients decide to what or whom they wish to dedicate

their treatments, and also assist in composing letters. Volunteers might also have suggestions, culled from others' experiences, of ways each patient could create symbolic connections during their treatments to the people and organizations to whom they're dedicating their treatments. My local Wellness Community and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute plan to pilot this project in the fall.

Cancer isolates us, but dedicating connects us. It does turn helplessness into effective action. Receiving one letter may energize one person for one more hour of one more day, and it may be that hour that saves a life or returns a child to school or puts food in a baby's mouth. I have written a lot about hope. In my view, hope is not just a feeling, but something we *do*, often with others. Writing these letters and dedicating cancer treatments, I have discovered, is "doing hope," even lying on a radiation table in the bowels of a hospital.

Kaethe Weingarten is the author of *Common Shock, Witnessing Violence Every Day: How We Are Harmed, How We Can Heal.*

She returned to South Africa in May to continue building partnerships in the Eastern Cape for her work with the Center for International Health Partnerships at Cambridge, MA, Health Alliance.

Want to Learn More?

Weingarten has prepared two guides, one for patients and one for allies, to assist people with dedicating their treatments. If you wish to learn how to dedicate your cancer treatments, or to learn how to help someone dedicate theirs, go to:

www.witnessingproject.org.

Other Resources:

www.commonshock.com

Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture

www.torturecare.org/uk

Ekupholeni Mental Health and Trauma Centre
c/o South Africa Partners, Inc.
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