

# **CANCER as an OPPORTUNITY**



**Transforming pessimism into optimism**

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## **PART ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*"We are meant to discover that we are powerful creators, if not of our entire reality, at least of our experience of reality. We aren't responsible for what each moment holds, but we are responsible for our experience of each moment, because we have the power to make any moment heaven or hell."*

-Gina Lake: What about Now?

Former tennis great, Arthur Ashe, was quoted as saying: "Fear should not be an excuse to come to a standstill. It provides the impetus to step up and strike." Cancer as an Opportunity is a guide to overcoming the fear and dread of cancer. For some, cancer can be a wake-up call to reorder priorities and commitments that can vastly facilitate emotional and physical wellness. We will discuss the latest techniques, taken from cutting-edge neuroscience and cognitive behavioral psychology to help you with your cancer challenge. We will discuss why our quest should not be so much for miraculous healing, as for mindfulness -- the greater appreciation of each delicious moment we are on the planet. Our discussion will be up front and personal; this book is addressed to readers who have all, at one time or another, stared into the abyss of a cancer diagnosis and had occasion to ruminate over the apparent grave implications. To begin our discussion, I would like to introduce myself so that you may gain insight into my motivation, and my related perspective as a cancer patient, survivor, and advocate.

#### *Words from My Father*

When I was 13 years old I lost my father, at the age of 43, to lung cancer. It was a dreadful ordeal to see him -- once athletic and muscular -- slowly wither away, a captive of the agonizing,

convulsive, and uncontrollable coughing spasms that characterized the last few years of his too short life. His cancer was relentless -- ushered in after years of smoking three packs a day of non-filtered Camel cigarettes from the days when he was a teenager. At the time of his diagnosis, my father's cancer was a veritable death sentence -- the malignancy had metastasized to numerous other parts of his body, and he was given six months to live.

Notwithstanding the stark reality of his brutal diagnosis, my father reached out and touched me with his love and communication during the months before his untimely death in a manner he had never done before. Even as his body inexorably withered, his emotional awareness and sensitivity flourished in a way that allowed him to transcend his emaciated physical state. My father was able to connect with me, his youngest son, in a fashion that elevated our relationship way beyond that which was attained when he was healthy. Clinging by the thinnest of threads to the life he had remaining, my father explained to me, in his simple, yet eloquent way, that the quality of our life is more important than how long we live. He went on to remind me that the manner in which we live and conduct our affairs is, in the long run, far more important than how long we are on the planet. He told me that, although there were many things he would like to have done, everyone must die someday and that, whether we have 3 months, 3 years, or 30 years to live, it is all relative -- life goes by in the blink of an eye. He spoke, from memory, of Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous quote:

"One of life's illusions is that the present hour is not the critical decisive hour, write it on your heart that each day is the best, the most crucial day in all the year."

## **About This Book**

*"A thousand moments lost because you took them for granted, just because you expected a thousand more."*

*-Saleem Sharma*

Great strides have been made in the last few decades regarding the physical treatment of cancer. New methods of operation, radiation techniques and the application of promising chemo and immunological therapies have brought about dramatic improvements in prognosis, extensions of life and even ultimate cures. However, little attention has been paid to the catastrophic and potentially crippling mental consequences of cancer that can rob the individual of his/her enthusiasm and hope, ultimately compromising the ability to enjoy life fully and without fear. This book focuses on the mental aspects of cancer -- more specifically in dealing with the pervasive fear that can consume the cancer patient or survivor -- the obsessive worry that can be debilitating and actually impede your ability to successfully cope with the course of everyday life.

We will work on replacing whatever negative, energy-sucking, emotional challenges you may have, to help you turn them into an opportunity that propels you forward with courage and optimism. We will focus on your attitudes, enthusiasms, hopes, fears, and expectations to marshal your positive mental resources so that you may optimize your chances for a successful journey through the cancer experience and beyond. We do not make a guarantee of survivorship or cure, but, rather, promise a way of putting your best foot forward. Your cancer can be a starting point for a constructive re-examination of your priorities and attitudes that can lead you to even greater fulfillment and a life full of positive expectation.

The mind-body techniques advocated in this book represent the latest in neuroscience and cognitive behavioral psychology techniques for mobilizing your inner resources for fighting cancer and for engaging in life positively. Of course, you cannot always predict your cancer outcome, but you can and should be ready and willing to deploy your optimal inner resources to enable the best outcome that you can imagine. Your attitude can make an enormous difference in your experience with cancer and can even be a decisive factor in your survival. Our hope is, that above all, you 0

Throughout this book, I advocate that, regardless of your cancer prognosis, you live your life in the “now,” fully, passionately, and with gusto. Ironically, in order to embrace the concept of “living life fully,” we must accept the reality of our own mortality. Regardless of whether you are healthy or not, denial of death, our unalterable life journey’s end, can be ultimately frustrating, fraught with self-deception and, at the end of the day, insidiously counterproductive. On the other hand, when we contemplate the inevitability of our own mortality, “someday,” regardless of our cancer outcome, and accept its reality, we can begin to cherish the priceless opportunity that our remaining time on the planet represents.

We can choose to squander our remaining time, put our heads in the sand and resign ourselves to ultimate futility, or we can deploy what time we have left to elevate our game, to enhance the quality of our lifetime experience and to live bravely and fully, with gusto and with passion. In this way, cancer can represent an enormous opportunity. We can strive to make our relationships and actions empowering for ourselves and others, as my father did, or we can passively resign ourselves to a negatively anticipated decline. This decision by each individual is volitional -- it is subject to our conscious will -- and is ultimately at our discretion: We can choose to embrace the process and love the adventure of the journey, or we can curse our misfortune.

Preeminent social psychologist, Eric Fromm said: "To die is poignantly bitter, but the idea of having to die without having lived is unbearable."

Successful living, as I conceive the process, celebrates the fact that life is finite and underscores the priceless nature of the time we have left. We must always remind ourselves that we do not have unlimited time. Indeed, the finite nature of life enhances and accentuates the intensity and excitement of our existence. Today really is the first day of the rest of your life!

I have addressed this book to cancer patients, survivors, and their advocates. Although the techniques and observations we espouse apply to everyone, and all types of anxieties and fears, those who suffer from cancer with all its implications, are at a particularly poignant juncture in their life, where an enhancement of attitude and perspective can provide an extraordinary opportunity to navigate this life stage optimally. We can see our cancer experience as an opportunity where we can strengthen and enhance our personal relationships and cultivate significant accomplishments, or we can dread the stereotypical physical and lifestyle decline commonly associated with this nefarious disease.

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***What about Future Physical and Mental Ailments?***

*To some degree, we must depend on our good fortune to be spared a cancer catastrophe, and indeed, other poor health and/or mental and physical disability in later life. These variables are controllable, only to a certain degree, and, of course, we will do well to optimize our prospects, to the extent we can through diet, exercise, supplements, meditation, or other legitimate holistic means. In various sections of this book, we discuss the significant proactive steps we can take to optimize our access to optimum medical and ongoing emotional support. But, to be clear, no matter how much we prepare, we must acknowledge that, when it comes to our ultimate outcome -- there can be no guarantees -- we have no choice about the existence of these challenges.*

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Instead, in these pages, we will concentrate and emphasize that which is volitional on our part -- that over which we can exercise ultimate control: our attitudes. We will accentuate a process for dynamically adjusting our individual mindset and predisposition to our cancer status. We will explore the enormous beneficial effect that our own personal attitude can have on our ultimate navigation and, yes, even enjoyment of this poignant life challenge. The potential to upgrade our attitude represents a tremendous resource that we all can tap, if we are willing to extend the effort.

This book is intended to represent a rejoicing, a celebration of the many benefits and blessings that can be obtained from the examination of our own "inner space" -- our contemplative, detailed review of what makes us tick: our unique, personal attitudes and beliefs, both positive and negative, that have a profound effect on our own particular brand of happiness, regardless of our cancer status quo. We will discuss at length the potential for self-engineering a constructive, personal orientation towards a successful negotiation of our cancer challenge that will ultimately enhance and optimize the experience. Throughout, I will allude to factual personal episodes and experience to illustrate, from a personal perspective, the critical role that attitude plays with respect to the challenges that a cancer diagnosis presents. In particular, we will explore the potential for "re-engineering" our inevitable fears in a manner that provides the optimum opportunity for facilitating future and present quality of life, irrespective of our cancer. This book is intended to be a "hands-on, how-to" guide for individuals that are committed to navigating the cancer process, while not eschewing his/her passionate participation in the rest of their life. From a practical standpoint, we will discuss how you can take the cognitive behavioral concepts we discuss and apply them directly to your own life situation and circumstances, for your immediate benefit.

Michael Landon, the beloved movie and TV actor who died at the age of 51 from pancreatic cancer, was quoted as saying:

"Somebody should tell us... Right at the start of our lives... That we are dying. Then we might live to the limit, every minute of every day. Do it! I say. Whatever you want to do, do it now! There are only so many tomorrows."

### *A Surfing Lesson*

My own personal medical history includes a bout, some 25 years ago with bladder cancer, various intermittent skirmishes with skin cancer - an unwelcome consequence from years of surfing under the intense Hawaiian sun -- and, most recently, a diagnosis of high risk prostate cancer for which I have undergone the removal of my prostate and, as an extra bonus because my cancer was considered "aggressive," seven weeks of concomitant radiation therapy. I would like to briefly share with you some personal anecdotes regarding my journey.

I was first diagnosed with bladder cancer at the age of 35. In many ways, prior to my cancer diagnosis, my life had been a celebration of what is possible. I owned my own national CPA firm, was a nationally recognized expert witness in complex financial litigation; was invited to testify before the U.S. Congress as an expert on banking matters; was a prominent author, lecturer, and trainer for numerous government regulatory agencies and industry trade groups and the father of three beautiful daughters. As a forensic accountant, I was at the top of my game professionally and newly elected as the president of the National Council for Self-Esteem, a California-based nonprofit whose directors comprised a Who's Who of prominent self-help psychologists and renowned educators.

After graduating from college at the age of 20 with a degree in mathematics I had moved to Hawaii, where I taught at the Kamehameha Schools, an elite private school for Hawaiian

students, and pursued my main avocation and passion at the time -- big wave surfing on Hawaii's famous North Shore. Dealing with monstrous waves that found their way down from the Aleutian Islands to pound the shore at Waimea Bay, where I lived with 12 other surfers in a two-bedroom house, I was no stranger to abject fear -- in fact, we sought it out.

One day, while my documentary film partners were filming giant Waimea Bay breaking at more than 30 feet, I found myself in the ocean with a group of inveterate, hard-core surfers, smack dab in the middle of Waimea Bay, when all of a sudden, the horizon filled with mammoth waves that were somberly, and inexorably, marching towards us. We sat, aghast, bobbing on our surfboards under the dazzling Hawaiian sun, preparing for a momentous and violent event. These waves were "closing out," and way too big for us to successfully ride. Helicopters circled above, and hundreds of spectators, up from Honolulu, were expecting to see breathtaking rides, as well as -- to be sure -- the catastrophic wipeouts that would inevitably occur. To be caught "inside" as one of these giant waves crashed down, was a truly harrowing experience. I was the last person "outside," that day and, therefore, furthest out from the shore.

As the huge waves lumbered in and filled the horizon with their presence, I paddled desperately up the face of wave after wave, hoping to get over each colossal swell before it broke into massive, chaotic turbulence that could hold me down, and spin me around, underwater, for what would seem an eternity. I found myself climbing up a 30-foot perpendicular wall of angry, churning sea -- fearing to go over backwards, to be slammed to the ocean floor, with lungs gasping for air -- my body desperately seeking the surface for a fresh gulp of oxygen before the next wave inexorably pounded in, bringing yet more chaos and disorientation.

If the Richter scale measured fear, my fear would've been a 10, as I desperately stroked to climb over the waves before they would devour me. After barely negotiating my way up what seemed like a dozen of these monsters, I realized, muscles screaming, that I was at the end of the set. No more waves would be coming for a few minutes and the ocean surface took on a relaxed, deceptive, calm. I had frantically paddled out past the point where these freakish waves would break. Eerily, I was all alone -- the two dozen top surfers who, only moments before had been in the lineup with me, had all been caught inside by the giant waves. Their surfboards had been ripped away and they were forced to find their way to shore through the roiling surf and surging riptide. My stomach churned and adrenaline gushed as I realized there was no way to paddle in, since the waves were so gigantic they were even breaking in the channel, which normally provided a safe avenue to the shore when things got too gnarly. As helicopters hovered above, and cars lined the highway to see if I was going to drown, I made the calculated decision to take off on the first wave of the next set, even though it was too big to ride safely. I had no choice. Two thirds of the way down the face of the behemoth wave, I lost my balance and was slammed towards the floor of the ocean. Lungs screaming for air, and powered by adrenaline, I made it to the surface only to be pounded by the next giant wave that pushed me with explosive force past the shore break and, eventually, to the safety of the beach. When I finally staggered to the shore, I was greeted by a young man who presented me with a large piece of my surfboard that had washed ashore, broken in half by the massive wave.