



Clare L.

Chapter 4

Know That Life Is A Gift

by Clare L.

My journey began during a routine check-up with my primary care doctor. I mentioned the post-eating discomfort and the occasional vomiting I was experiencing. (I found out later that these symptoms were not caused from the cancer but rather a non-sliding hiatal hernia.) My doctor suggested having an endoscope as I suffered from acid reflux and had been on GERD (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease) medications for probably fifteen years, and it was about six years since my last scope. I scheduled the scope, and for the first time ever since having scopes, the doctor told me he removed a small polyp and would send it away for testing. He told me that I should not worry, and that it looked ok to him.

On Sunday, December 10, 2009, I received a call from the gastroenterologist saying that he was terribly sorry. He proceeded to inform me that the results were positive, and I indeed had esophageal cancer. He instructed me to call his office in the morning and set up appointments for scans and surgeons.

“Ok, I have cancer, now what?” I thought. Being told you have cancer sets your world spinning out of control, and part of me was now numb. I had so many questions, and I knew I only had one chance to beat this. It had to be the best chance I could find. Needless to say, instead of getting ready for Christmas, I was now faced with many decisions to make with this horrifying diagnosis. Telling my children was the hardest part as I did not want them to worry. I thought to myself, “How can this be? I feel ok. I am sixty-three years old and married with three grown children and eight young grandchildren. I have so much to live for.”

One of the first things I did was pray for guidance and direction. I then went online and started reading about esophageal cancer.

Unfortunately, I found the statistics on surviving esophageal cancer are not good.

The next couple of weeks were extremely busy with tests and doctors' appointments. I did not feel comfortable with the surgical procedure at the hospital I was at, so I started questioning another opinion. I wanted that 'Get Out Of Cancer Free Card' and knew I needed to be treated at the best possible facility.

I contacted an acquaintance, a doctor in the cancer research field from Canada whom my husband and I had met on a cruise years ago. I told him I had an appointment at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Texas because I wanted to get the best treatment I could and that I had read many favorable reports on the facility. He told me they were good but not to overlook the great hospital in my own backyard, the University of Michigan Health System. After talking with my oncologist (who was not a U-M doctor), he also recommended the University of Michigan Health System because they had a doctor who pioneered a surgery there for this specific type of cancer.

Further research on the internet led me to Dr. Mark Orringer. I called his office and was encouraged to go to the esophageal cancer support group meeting that week. My husband and I went and I knew then that I was in the right place. Seeing people who had been through what I was facing, looking healthy, and living normal lives, gave me the hope I needed. I brought all my tests and scan reports with me and gave them to the nurse, Lori, that evening. A few days later I received a call saying that Dr. Orringer would take me as a patient. I had my initial appointment, and after that I have never looked back. After my first appointment, I was in survivor mode and began the recommended walking three miles a day and using the spirometer. I was determined to be in the best physical shape possible to face this surgery.

I had the usual PET scan, which showed some other "spots". I was told that everyone has spots that show up on this scan and that I should not worry. My spots were mainly on the thyroid and kidneys. The spots on the thyroid bothered me the most as they were brighter.

After my constant prodding, my oncologist agreed to have a biopsy of the thyroid. More devastating news came my way. I had thyroid cancer, too, on both sides of the thyroid gland.

I was extremely anxious before surgery, and I couldn't wait to get the cancer out of me. I knew I was in great hands. I had prayed a lot and placed my trust in God and the doctors. I thought, "Whatever this is, I'll deal with it," as I hoped for the best. I was fortunate that I was in Stage I for the esophageal cancer and needed no additional treatments except for the surgery, which was scheduled for March 17, 2010. I was going to have the thyroid removed first by Dr. Barbara M., and then Dr. Mark Orringer would perform the transhiatal esophagectomy the same day.

My surgery didn't go perfectly. I developed a bleed and had to have a thoracotomy performed, which resulted in the loss of a couple pints of blood. Recovery was slow for me as well. I was in the hospital for thirty-one days instead of the seven to ten days originally thought. I had complications of a leak in the back of the anastomosis, which required a surgery and left an open wound in my neck that required packing.

I then developed an infection and they had to open the abdominal incision, which required another surgery with a 'wound vac' put in for faster healing. Both open wounds required packing and several weeks of home care from visiting nurses. I also developed blood clots in both legs and pneumonia - just some minor setbacks. I only mention these complications because there are some of us who fall in the two percent who suffer side effects; however, the body can heal and come through more than you think. It is what it is, and you have to get up each day and do what you have to do to get better. The main thing was that the esophageal cancer was contained and had not spread.

The thyroid cancer was a little worse than first thought being at Stage II, which required radioactive iodine treatments. Fortunately, both cancers have stayed in remission, and I am enjoying and living life normally. I suffer from some of the normal side effects from the surgery, but they have not stopped me from living and enjoying my life.

In the beginning, I needed stretching of my throat a few times as swallowing became difficult, but luckily I haven't had any problems for three years now. I can swallow well. I sleep elevated on a couple of pillows, and I avoid sugar as it seems to bother me; however, there are many substitutes one can use. I can eat almost anything. I just have to remind myself to eat slowly and not to overeat; otherwise, I am miserable for the next hour. I enjoy my times with family and especially my grandchildren. My husband and I travel, go on cruises, and we just recently bought a new motor home and look forward to spending a summer in Alaska.

I feel the care I received during my stay at the University of Michigan Health System was exemplary. Their nurses and physician assistants know what they are doing. They deal with this type of surgery every day. It is not a procedure that they only encounter a few times a year. Recovery takes time, and you have to be patient. However, it does get better. In the first year every new month brings added normalcy to your life. It just takes time.

Because of the open abdominal incision, I developed an incisional hernia that required surgery a year later where mesh was put in for an abdominal wall reconstruction. So I guess I can say it took me over a year to really get back my strength and feel "normal" again. But now, after three and one-half years, I can honestly say I feel well and appreciate my life.

My faith and trust in God were a vital part of getting me through this journey as well as the blessings of much love and support from my family and friends. I know this is a very serious disease. I have seen it come back to some who have gone through much more than I have and eventually claim their lives.

There are no guarantees in life, but I feel I had the best chance of beating this at the University of Michigan Health System. Dr. Orringer and his team consistently do an amazing job and put their whole lives into their work. I am forever grateful to him and all who have aided in my recovery. Live your life every day, and know that life is a gift. Be grateful for each and every day.