

Embrace Release Heal

*An Empowering Guide
to Talking About,
Thinking About, and
Treating Cancer*

LEIGH FORTSON

 sounds true
Boulder, Colorado

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FOREWORD

Infinite Possibilities

From the perspective of curative and preventive therapy, we have lost the war on cancer. Deaths from cancer are increasing. In 2008, there were 565,000 deaths in the United States alone. One in three people will get cancer in their lifetime. And few people know that solid tumors grow slowly for thirty years before they can be detected. We now have 17 million Americans walking around with cancer somewhere along the continuum from initiation of a cancer cell to detectable tumor.

In the “war” on cancer, we are fighting a losing battle for one simple reason: we are focusing on the wrong target. As a physician, I was trained to focus on the tumor: to burn, poison, or cut it out and then wait, watch, and pray for the cancer to stay at bay.

The problem with cancer is not the tumor, however, but the *garden* in which the tumor grows. In caring for a garden, if the weeds get too big, we pull them out—just as we do with cancer using conventional therapies. But then what?

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Embrace, Release, Heal is about the “then what.” It’s about the inexplicable, spontaneous remissions, cures of the incurable, about pioneering researchers, doctors, and patients exploring the edges of possibility and bumping up against a fertile science of how to tend our gardens.

The future of cancer care lies in the thinking and exploration found in this book. It provides a doorway of hope and possibility that rests in learning how to tend your own garden. The science supports this. But medical practice lags behind.

Traditionally, we have focused on late-stage curative care, and in doing so, we have missed the thinking and the treatments focused on changing the underlying conditions that led to the cancer in the first place. Diet, lifestyle, thoughts, and environmental toxins all interact with our genes to change the landscape—or garden—of our health. We have been asking the wrong question about cancer. We have asked “what”: What tumor do you have? What kind of chemotherapy, surgery, or radiation is needed for that tumor? What is your prognosis? Rather, we need to be asking “why” and “how”: Why did this cancer grow? How can you change the conditions that feed and support cancer-cell growth? How did your garden become a host to such an invasive weed?

Surprisingly, scientific literature is abundant with evidence that diet, exercise, thoughts, feelings, and environmental toxins all influence the initiation, growth, and progression of cancer. If a nutrient-poor diet full of sugar, lack of exercise, chronic stress, persistent pollutants, and heavy metals can cause cancer, could it be that a nutrient-dense, plant-based diet; physical activity; changing thoughts

and reactions to stress; and detoxification might treat the garden in which cancer grows? Treat the soil, not the plant. It is a foundational principle of sustainable agriculture, and of sustainable health.

In my oncology rotation in medical school, I asked my professor what percentage of cancer was related to diet. Expecting a gracious but insignificant nod to the role of diet as a cause of cancer, I was surprised when he said that 70 percent of all cancers were related to diet. The 2010 report from the President's Cancer Panel found that we have grossly underestimated the link between environmental toxins, plastics, and chemicals and cancer risk.¹ They have yet to acknowledge how thoughts, emotions, and overall stress impact that risk, but that acknowledgment is sure to come. The facts that gravitate around cancer support evidence that will motivate us all to take a deeper look.

Consider this fact: 16 percent of all cancers are new, primary cancers in patients who have had cancer, not recurrences. This means that people who have cancer are more likely to get a second and independent cancer. Could it be the garden? I recently saw a patient after her third cancer, wondering what she could do to prevent cancer rather than waiting around for another one.

Consider this fact: the lifetime risk of breast cancer for those with the "breast cancer gene," or BRCA1 or 2, is presently 82 percent and increasing every year. Before 1940, the risk of getting cancer for those with the cancer gene was 24 percent. What changed? Our diet, lifestyle, and environment—both physically and emotionally. Might these factors

be a better place to look for answers to how to address our cancer epidemic?

Cancers arise from a disturbance in your physiological state. Addressing that disturbance is the foundation of future cancer care. This approach might be called milieu therapy. Rather than treating cancer per se, we treat the milieu in which cancer arises. And this is manageable: we can enhance immune function and surveillance through dietary and lifestyle changes, nutrient or phytonutrient therapies. We can facilitate our body's own detoxification system to promote the elimination of carcinogenic compounds. We can improve hormone metabolism and reduce the carcinogenic effects of too much insulin from our high-sugar and refined-carbohydrate diet, and help the detoxification of toxic estrogens through the modulation of diet and lifestyle and the elimination of hormone-disrupting xenobiotics or petrochemicals. We can alter how our genes are expressed by changing the inputs that control that expression—diet, nutrients, phytonutrients, toxins, stress, and other sources of inflammation. And we can focus on less divisive and more generative thoughts that, in turn, create more uplifting emotions—all good fertilizer for the soil in the garden of our body.

The future of cancer care must use medicine's understanding of the mechanisms of disease, as well as physiologic and metabolic balance, to design treatments that support and enhance normal physiology. The future of cancer care lies not in finding the best cocktail of chemotherapeutic agents, the right dose of radiation, or a new surgical technique, but in finding the right way to personalize treatment according

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to the individual imbalances in each person. This book contains the stories of the people—doctors and patients—who have paved the way. The pieces of the puzzle that hold the answers for cancer prevention and treatment are strewn about the landscape of medical science. They need only be assembled into a story that can guide clinical care. The time is ripe to accelerate this process. And this book begins the telling of the story of how to tend the gardens of our body, mind, and soul.

Mark Hyman, MD

Chairman, The Institute for Functional Medicine

August 1, 2010



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It takes a community to heal. I am blessed with a community of loving and generous friends all over the place. I throw buckets of gratitude into the faces of:

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INTRODUCTION

From the End to the Beginning

*No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars,
or sailed an uncharted land, or opened
a new doorway for the human spirit.*

HELEN KELLER

When my radiologist (we'll call him Dr. R.) told my husband, Ed, and me about my third cancer diagnosis, he was grim. Although Dr. R. is a very good man and a diligent and caring doctor, the seeds of hopelessness he planted within me that day were far more destructive than the centimeter-sized malignant tumor near my sciatic nerve that the biopsy had just confirmed.

"This doesn't bode well," he said, eyes staring at the chart on his lap. He explained that they couldn't use typical radiation because they had shot me with as much of it as my body could handle the first time I'd been down that road. Any more

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would do me in. Surgery wouldn't work either. I'd had surgery after my second diagnosis, and because the radiation from the year before had fried me so badly, it took nine long miserable months for my poor, compromised skin to heal. So no more radiation either. Apparently, for this new situation, chemo wasn't appropriate, which I was grateful to hear because, plain and simple, I don't like it, and I wasn't going to opt for it again.

"I'm pretty sure we can take care of the tumor that's there, but it's what's to come that . . . it's what's to come . . ."

His words trailed off, but my imagination filled in the blanks. The pictures were paralyzing.

Ed and I left Dr. R.'s office gripping tightly to each other's hand. We were convinced that this diagnosis was the beginning of my end. We went to a park bench on that warm July day, and I wept between the bursts of terror that froze my body. Our children, Lyric and Tucker, eleven and thirteen years old, were the lights of our lives, and I couldn't bear leaving them motherless. They were my greatest concern and the source of a grief so deep I felt I would vomit if I had to contain it.

On that park bench, we talked in near grunts about how my husband would cope with being a single parent. His face was pale with shock, and he gripped my hand rigidly as though he were hanging on to a dissolving lifeline. We frantically turned the soil of our stiff minds and said aloud the names of family and friends who would inevitably step up to help raise our beautiful children. We knew they would do what they could to provide Lyric and Tucker with safe harbor after such a devastating loss.

Knowing that we would have to break the news to them about the recurrent cancer, we somehow managed the

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strength to stand, put one foot in front of the other, and make our way back to the car. As much as we wanted to protect them from the news until we ourselves could absorb the shock, there was no way either of us could hold back the intense emotions that shook us. My sister, Leslie, was visiting from Germany, and my mother was scheduled to come for dinner that night. We would tell them all at once.

Lyric erupted into tears at the news. Sobbing, she kept saying, “I thought this was over! I thought we were done with this!” Tucker was stoic, shaking his head in disbelief. My mother cried silently as my sister held her hand and sent me love through the gaze of her tender, moist, brown eyes.

Finally, Lyric took a breath and asked, “Does God want you to die?”

After the previous two diagnoses, we had confidently told our kids that I would not die from the disease. This time, however, the only truthful answer was, “I don’t know.”

It was a long night of seemingly endless tears. Leslie wanted to do something helpful, so she set out to make a meal of comfort food: steak, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and dessert. As she prepared the steaks for the grill, she looked at me and said, “I know a woman who had brain cancer. Her brain was full of tumors. Everyone thought she was a goner. But she ate raw foods and did coffee enemas every day. She’s fine now.”

“How long ago did that happen?” I asked, thinking that the five-year survival rate I had been trained to believe in was an important marker.

“I don’t know. Maybe twenty, twenty-five years ago.”

Now a different seed was planted. I felt a physical sensation of something being uplifted and energized. “I could do that,” I thought. “I *will* do that.”

In that moment, I promised myself I would find a way clear. I would call that woman who had brain cancer twenty years ago and hear her story. I knew someone else who had healed herself from lung cancer. I’d call her too. I wiped away another round of tears and took a deep breath. Somehow, some way, I would find meaning and purpose and health. I would embrace my cancer and embrace the responsibility for my own wellness. I would release whatever was in my way of good health. By the grace of God, by my own tenacity, and by the infinite possibilities that are available to us *as long as we believe in them*, I would heal.

The Third Time’s a Charm

Following the third diagnosis and during hours of contemplation, I knew something big had to change. The first diagnosis had put me through a brutal round of radiation and chemo. The second had resulted in three surgeries and a wound site that took nine long months to heal. This time I would do things differently, but I didn’t know what or how. Should I start by eating raw foods?

The current cancer culture insists that diet doesn’t matter and only chemo, radiation, and surgery can work. But they hadn’t worked for me, and all I knew for sure was that going down that path again seemed insane. As Albert Einstein put it, the definition of insanity is “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

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And so began the biggest adventure of my lifetime: to find new ways to treat my cancer. I was terrified at first. I had no idea if any dietary changes, psychological inquiry, or alternative protocols would work. My doctors didn't believe in any of them, and some friends looked askance when they learned, for example, that I would become a raw foodist. I often teeter-tottered between sheer panic and doubt and blind faith. In my mind, however, I had no choice but to be open to everything—from hypnosis to cutting-edge treatments offered by an oncologist to herbs and enzymes suggested by a naturopath. I patently refused to buckle under the weight of the dismal prognosis delivered at the cancer center, and instead devoted myself to finding the center of my cancer so I could heal once and for all.

A few days after getting the bad news, Ed, Lyric, Tucker, and I spent a weekend in Breckenridge. It was one of those truly magical family trips where the kids didn't fight, the hotel was nice, the pool was big, and the food tasted good. Pinched in between all that were stolen moments between Ed and me, where we cried, held each other, and wondered how the hell we were going to make it through this.

When the weekend came to a close, I headed to Denver to see an oncology specialist. I left with an urgent need to keep my family together; to be there for my two exquisite, smart, and beautiful children; and to live beyond my fifty years. My gut twisted with anxiety about what treatments the specialist might suggest. Then it flip-flopped with excitement about trying new things, daring things that would define my adventure—stuff that the specialist in Denver surely wouldn't approve of.

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As I turned onto I-70, it came to me: I would write a book! Surely other people wanted to find a new way of dealing with cancer, people like me who had tried all the conventional treatments without success. Or maybe there were people who wanted to bypass chemo, radiation, and surgery altogether. I simply couldn't accept that nothing else could work. I would write about what I found and share it with other seekers. Maybe, like me, there were people who hungered to know more about the possibility of spontaneous remission. I'd find people who had experienced it and write about them, too.

This idea invigorated me. I felt support from forces beyond this world. It was my way through.

Who knows the real truth behind the laws of God's universe? We can only hope that when the time is right, when conditions are such that change is the only option, a wave of invisible support will emerge from the heavens, and that which seemed so unlikely will come bounding through like a landslide of uncompromising opportunity.

By the time I sat down to write, I thought the book would be about some credible alternative cancer treatments, with a few good miracles thrown in. I thought I'd have to put an ad in the *New York Times* to find people who had healed cancer through alternative or spiritual means, but shortly into my journey, I quickly learned that these folks were *all over the place!* They could even be called fairly common! These were people written off by medical doctors after chemo, radiation, and surgery hadn't worked, simply because they knew no further options.

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Nearly everyone I interviewed had been expected to die. As I heard their stories, my mind was slowly cleansed of doubt. I began to *believe* that it was possible to really and truly heal. These people had been in far worse shape than me, and now they were all thriving. Only a few still had signs of cancer, yet they were living completely functional lives, largely because of their new sense of purpose and because the treatments they chose were compatible with living a full and productive life.

Some of the people I spoke with regained health through alternative protocols; others simply *made the decision* to get well. Some gave credit to religion, faith, or spiritual dedication, while others spoke of what can only be known as grace. Most of them believe a bank of negative emotional turmoil contributed to the cause of their cancer. Likewise, they attribute much of their healing to creating an inner environment of love and forgiveness. All of them believe that we can heal ourselves or find effective treatments outside of the conventional medical paradigm.

These people enabled me to surrender my fears and replace them with hope. They were my guides, my angels. They made it possible for me to believe in my journey and ultimately my wellness. They are my heroes.

Their stories aren't the only things that inspired and educated me. So did interviews with naturopathic and alternative doctors and other health care practitioners who explained their innovative treatments—most of which medical doctors would readily dismiss. Since the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't condone most alternative cancer treatments, many of these doctors practice outside

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the United States. Despite what the FDA posits, the work of these practitioners is exciting, and they're enjoying a wide audience and good success.

Originally, I had not intended to include mainstream medical doctors and oncologists in this book, yet it became clear that to exclude them made no sense. Their stories are power-punched and just as promising as the others. Plus, the healing journey is unique for everyone, and for those who choose to include conventional treatment in their menu of options (and many will), it's important to know which facilities offer the most holistic and progressive approaches. I've featured only a handful in this book, but thankfully, more and more are sprouting up across the country. (I've included additional references and information in the appendix. Also, check out my website for more: embracehealingcancer.com.)

I learned a great deal from these allopathic doctors, because they are some of America's greatest leaders and researchers in the cancer field. They understand the need to overhaul the cancer industry. They're working fiercely to reconstruct medical-school curriculums to include important dietary changes and emotional or spiritual support. Policies and politics are being scrutinized as well. Some of the docs are on a mission to clean up unethical conflicts of interest between medical researchers and the pharmaceutical industry, both of which essentially govern all allopathic medicine.

The politics of medicine and the profits that drive those politics are mind-boggling. We desperately need insiders like the doctors featured in this book in order to help change the parts of medicine that point to a faltering and corrupt business.

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Surprisingly, the only oncologist I interviewed perceives cancer as a multidimensional and even spiritual disease. Hearing his insights was like finding a pot of gold.

The book also includes stories of authors and experts who can explain just how extensive the relationship between our minds and bodies is. This isn't just a "connection," as it's commonly called. The two are actually *one organism*. For the purposes of healing, the implications of this union are huge. In a nutshell, if we dwell in (or repress) a world of conflict, stress, anger, and hatred, then the cells in our bodies and immune system respond accordingly and are weakened. At the same time, if the atmosphere we create contains positive qualities such as joy, playfulness, and peace—any of the attributes of love—then our cells and immune system are strong. Perhaps the best news is that we have the *choice* of which world we occupy. That choice—free will—is the very source of our personal power and authority.

We now have ample reason to follow the wisdom that spiritual masters and religious leaders from nearly every faith have been ministering to us since time began: Love your neighbor and yourself. Forgive. Find compassion. Be still. Give thanks. Create peace. The science behind these tenets promises good health in return.

The Emotional Map to Physical Well-Being

Given that science can now track the biological benefits of inner peace, isn't it time to give up the fight, the battle, *the war on cancer*? I know that goes against the grain of our shock-and-awe culture, but as the fatalities continue to

mount, we have to admit the current medical battle strategy isn't working.

In writing this book, I've come to understand that what's really destroying us is our addiction to fighting—that the fight itself may indeed be part of why we get cancer. I also believe that when we surrender what often motivates a fight—anger, resistance, blame, judgment, resentment, or anything that eats away at us—then healing truly begins. In this context, surrender is actually the first and most powerful step toward wellness.

Giving up the fight doesn't mean relinquishing a healing protocol and being passive about what happens. In fact, healing requires a great deal of fortitude and due diligence. It means taking full responsibility for the quality of our lives and the choices we make.

On an emotional level, healing means releasing what tethers us to our sense of separateness, of being wronged, superior, inferior, lacking, and so on. It means giving up our habits of resistance and “against-ness,” whether they are being directed toward our spouses, our bosses, our children, our parents, our friends, the government, corporations, or most especially, toward life, ourselves, or God.

Healing isn't a fight. Rather, healing is proactive and busy, contemplative and still. It is a process of educating ourselves about the options available and choosing the best fit. Healing also invites us to continually release every belief or habit that blocks us from living in peace. Healing is a holistic experience that inventories our physical and psychological lives, and then adjusts them if they are at odds with our purest intention to be well.

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For many of us, calling upon invisible forces for help can serve to comfort, reassure, and surprise us with what some call miracles. Yet even atheists can experience these transformations, as long as they are willing to give up “against-ness” and dedicate themselves to peace and total wellness.

Healing from disease is about discovering the depth and breadth of who we really are, and then discovering what it means to live from our divine nature. When that happens, the entire world of possibilities presents itself anew.

The purpose of this book is to help empower those with cancer—or any type of degenerative illness—during a time when empowerment is in short supply. The book is a map that begins at a place of hope rather than fear. It invites you on a journey of peaceful exploration rather than asking you to muster the strength to wage war. Even if you choose to undergo conventional treatment—which I did—the book introduces strategies that bypass the “battle with cancer.” Instead, it activates a relationship between your everyday self and your Greatest Self, a relationship in which true and lasting healing is possible. Without personal or emotional wholeness, our physical wellness is incomplete, and all the chemo and radiation in the world may not do a thing.

There is no guarantee that the map I’ve sketched out will lead you to being cancer free. But if you are true to yourself, if you can free yourself from what eats at you, I promise that you will find relief, peace, and love, and that the probability of being completely healed will be amplified.

I tell you the route I took and what I learned along the way. The stories in this book will provide inspiration and

tools. But only you can bring your soul to this journey. Only you can determine how deeply you will go.

How to Use This Book

Read this book however you want. Reading straight through is good. Jumping around is fine. Each chapter title is noted by a single word that gives the essence or theme of the chapter. Pick and choose. No matter where you start, you'll be uplifted.

Stories help us make sense of madness. I include here both my own and the stories of other people who've had cancer. Most were told they would die. They didn't. After exhausting what conventional medicine had to offer, they walked away from the grisly prognosis and found another way. Some call it a miracle. I've come to believe it's just the way things work when we get out of our own way.

These stories will help inspire you to see the infinite possibilities that may be available to you, but that your doctor will likely dismiss. They reflect the truth that cancer can be effectively treated physically, emotionally, and spiritually through a different, more life-affirming paradigm than conventional medicine traditionally offers. These stories demonstrate why the conversation around cancer must be changed. If nothing else, I urge you to read all of them. Simply put, they are good medicine.

There are other stories here, too. The doctors and researchers unknowingly gave me hope for the medical system at large. It's heartening to know that there are exquisitely talented people working within the system and

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diligently trying to improve it. And they will. I trust you will find their information useful and enriching.

Finally, the authors, experts, and spiritual perspectives of the people I spoke with can enlighten you to the power within. While the crosshairs of collapse are centered on our current health care system, it's imperative to finally acknowledge that *the mind plays perhaps the most significant role* in our journey toward wellness. In the existing cancer culture, our state of mind is given little, if any, responsibility for the reasons we may get cancer in the first place or for potentially catapulting us into complete and final healing. We're at the point where it's practically impossible to separate the scientific from the spiritual, as both are playing out the same stories—through us. At last, cutting-edge scientists are able to show us how.

Each interview can be read as a new way of talking about, thinking about, and treating cancer. I include differing points of view, trusting that one or more of them will speak directly to you and light the way for your own unique path to wholeness and healing.

Although I emphasize diet, the power of the mind, spiritual prowess, and some alternative treatments, I won't tell you to cancel your next appointment with the oncologist. Instead, once you know there are other options, I simply ask that you look within and determine for yourself what is the best possible treatment for your condition. By looking within, by accessing your own unique and personal expression of wisdom, and by trusting your own authority, you will come to know yourself and what is best for you.

Introduction

A good creed to keep in mind: “Cancer is a word, not a sentence.” I believe this, and I hope to take it at least one step further by suggesting that cancer is an opportunity not only to live life fully, but also to empower ourselves to heal on every level.

Typically, people who are diagnosed with cancer are taught to believe in limitations rather than in possibilities. Yet by opening our minds, by exploring and loving the deepest parts of ourselves, and by negotiating our own path with the light of the inherent power within, we can quickly realize, with great shouts of joy, that we are boundless. Indeed, we *are* the possibilities.



Note: There is no single point of view presented in this book. I do not necessarily agree with the treatments or opinions of all the people I interviewed. Likewise, the doctors, patients, and authors cited in the book do not necessarily agree with one another, nor with everything I offer to my readers.

All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous unpremeditated act without the benefit of experience.

HENRY MILLER