

I CAN COPE BUT CAN I DEAL ?

Laurie's Speech to the Hematology/Oncology Staff 2005

The title of my speech tonight is I CAN COPE, but can I DEAL?

I CAN COPE with everything, all the time, and the degree to which I have to cope grows larger as I live every year beyond my original prognosis. There is no level beyond tough enough. While the rest of the world seems to be humming along in a fairy-tale, we have to live in our illness, go about our endless stream of doctor appointments, sit through uncomfortable procedures, scans and treatments, and brace ourselves constantly for the conversations we fear the most. Getting in and out of the car all the time, walking, sitting in a facility among several people who are summed up two ways – better or worse than you. The land of the sick. Despair and drowning. Weak coffee. Get on the scale. Shuffling along calls upon you to cope more than you have ever known. We think back on our memories as either BC before cancer or AC after cancer. And we sit under a microscope in public, our friends and family looking to us, gauging their worry on our abilities to cope.

Coping along. I can cope. Nine years later, I can cope. Eight surgeries, seven parts of my body radiated, and three chemos. I cope well because I can take a lot. I can cope, but can I really deal? Every day I mash through the same steps. Loving people out of nowhere ask, how are you? In that way, that only says one thing. You're down in it. Exposed and revealed and humiliated. Loving people knowing your most intimate medical details—your family and friends asking in broad daylight how your constipation is going. I had a fellow breast cancer survivor saddle up to me while I was standing in a buffet line and advise me to see an end of life counselor. Strange, inappropriate and ridiculous. End of life? Who says? We are living people!

So, are we?

Hold a mirror up to yourself. Do you no longer care, but want other people to? Do you take the short road, the biggest piece of pie? Have you lost your pride? Crawled back to the womb? Do you ever look around and mire as to what life was “supposed to be?” Your life everyone else lives but you. Are you angry at cancer and then take it out on your body? Have you shut down on people, gone inside to stay there and hidden for days, weeks, months, years? Look at yourself, are you helpless, victimized, scared to death? God help us, is it the illness or is it the mind-set?

They say the smile is the greatest mask of all. So is the sick card. Being sick allows you to be encompassed by the greatest feeling of all, Tired. Whenever you pull it out and use, it, you know you are going back to start on a game board somewhere. The danger about being sick is that you are automatically granted a Do Not Disturb sign that you can easily take advantage of, disrespect, or become addicted to. Addicted to suffering. The word Tired. I've never realized how powerfully empty those words really are. Tired becomes the answer for everything, and Tired makes you sick!

I am so bored with being a sick person, everyone acting like I am a sick person. For years I've adjusted my personality and my habits around my illness and I feel strangled by the constant and dire character that cancer has. Physical pain is the cloudy factor of every day, no matter how brilliant and beautiful.



I have wasted more time counting raindrops on those days. I want to believe I am going to be able to jog again, or even run road races. I want to believe that I can heal, that I might get not only a second but a fourth, fifth, sixth chance! I might live like this for a while! It may or may not ever go away! Yes, along with fighting cancer in my body, I also have to fight the fear in my mind. Yes, it's hard, miserable, exhausting, full-time nights and weekends!!

I want my friends and family to see me as well, so I can feel well. How others see us greatly defines how we see ourselves. So look at me, I am 37, yes a survivor, yes still in the battlefield. I can cope, I can take it, but I won't wear it anymore.