



membership

Messenger

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A Balancing Act

by Mary Rose Weckerle, a grateful volunteer

Christmas 1994: Delivery of our first home personal computer. What excitement! What is this America Online? Let's try it! Hmm, chat rooms, e-mail, games, unending discovery, and fun.

In May 1996, during my annual visit to a gynecologist, nodules were discovered on my thyroid gland, and you know the rest of the story... papillary with follicular variant. Total thyroidectomy followed by 110 mCi radioactive iodine and a lifetime of thyroid hormone replacement, tests, and vigilance.

Gazing at the concerned faces of the two doctors who examined my throat after the initial scan, I realized that no one needed to say a word. I walked to the parking garage in a bit of a daze, holding in uncertain tears. How could I go home to my eldest daughter and announce the inevitable? I couldn't. I immediately planned to go somewhere to calm myself for a while. Walking with my head down toward my parked car, I saw a piece of colored paper on the ground and scooped it up. It was a prayer card. On the front were images of two saints; on the reverse side, a prayer written in Italian. This 2" x 4" piece of paper was yellow with age, slightly torn in one corner. As I stood transfixed studying the images, I tried to translate the prayer. All I could make out



Searching for answers moments after being diagnosed with thyroid cancer, Mary Rose Weckerle stumbled upon a discarded Italian prayer card. In her attempt to determine its meaning, she found hope, ThyCa, and greater purpose.

were the names of the saints: Damian and Cosmos. (I had never heard of them.)

What does this card say?

I took the card and drove to a coffee shop, determined to translate the entire passage. The saints had been beheaded for their faith. Through the few words I was able to translate, I knew it meant I was to have surgery and it would all be okay. Later, I called a friend who researched the history of Damian and Cosmos. They were the patron saints of surgeons. (Did this little gem fall out of the wallet of a surgeon?)

Further research revealed that the saints were brothers who lived during the 12th century. They were known to have traveled

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Your Presence at the Survivors' Conference Makes All the Difference

On behalf of the volunteer Conference Committee, I am honored to invite you to the 5th Annual ThyCa Conference. This conference is for everyone whose life is touched by thyroid cancer -- patients, their loved ones, healthcare professionals, clergy, caregivers and others. Your presence will not only make a difference in your life, but also to others who share in your struggle.

Hundreds of us will gather in Los Angeles, California from October 11-13, 2002 to learn, participate, communicate, and to know that we are not alone in our fight against this disease. This three-day event features sessions about every type of thyroid cancer that are specifically geared to newly diagnosed individuals, people being tested, survivors, and their family members and caregivers. We are grateful to our outstanding speakers who so generously donate their time to share their expertise. (See speaker list on page 4.)

I encourage you to send in the enclosed registration form soon. You can find additional conference details on the ThyCa web site at www.thyca.org. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to join the planning team, please contact me at conference@thyca.org. See you in LA!

Megan Stendebach,

ThyCa Conference Coordinator /Board Member
San Antonio, Texas



Balancing Act (continued from page one)

A Survivor's/Volunteer's Perspective

the countryside in north Africa healing, for no fee, those who came their way. Had I been paying attention all these years, I would have known their names. There is a church named for them nearby. All of this was too coincidental to ignore, and the result was courage on my part. Somehow I believed that I would be protected. I had the card laminated, and now it sits on my desk.

Armed with a seemingly "sacred mandate," it was time for me to put as much energy into re-searching thyroid cancer as I had into researching the lives of saints. Lo and behold, in the AOL Chat Room on a Monday night, I found more saints, living ones! Karen Ferguson, Ric Blake, Jan Scheurman, Kim Repola, Leah Guljord, Betty Solbjor, Elizabeth Irion, Eric Vahlbusch and others. All there, all ready to help me figure out what was going on and how to go about dealing with the unexpected. There were about a dozen at first, all of us having been diagnosed about the same time. We were plugged into the Internet sharing information, e-mailing supportive notes. Karen started the AOL Thyroid Cancer Mutual Support Group. The following year, Ric began the first local support group near his home town. They and others patiently answered my questions, read my often too-long posts, and guided me through the entire ordeal, step by step, day by day, and sometimes hour by hour.

My gratitude knew no bounds. Except for one or two very close friends, I could not in any way bring myself to tell anyone about a cancer diagnosis, not even my family members. It was unthinkable for me. Most of my maternal family had died from various cancers. I could not explain it away as the "good cancer." It had taken me weeks to research and learn about the types, the stages, the treatments and the

prognosis. How could I relate all of that to each and every person who would ask, and then be able to convince them that my life was not over?

So, it became "my thyroid problem," and, to some, it was "precautionary" surgery. Luckily for me, few even knew they had a thyroid gland or where to find it or that there was such a thing as thyroid cancer. It



The Italian passage was undiscernable by Mary Rose Weckerle; however, even before she researched the saints, in her mind, the message was clear: "You will survive and help others to survive."

was easy to bluff my way through. I was so grateful to our AOL group.

They were the only people who knew of my cancer and the only real support I had.

My gratitude could only be expressed in constant communication with this gaggle of saints and a desire to go forward to help others who found themselves in a similar place. ThyCa, Inc., had its start because we all felt this support to be immeasurable and, in fact, to be found nowhere else! Oh, where to begin?

Much time was spent e-mailing back and forth with ideas suggested, rejected and celebrated. As Miguel Melendez states in the last issue of the "Messenger," so much time spent on the computer and what about the rest of the family and your life? In the meantime, our daughters were planning a wedding and getting ready to graduate from high school and college. There were family anniversaries to be celebrated and relatives to visit. The lives around me did not halt in their evolution. I needed to find a balance. How do I devote myself to both family and the duties of volunteering?

Last year, 2001, was the most enjoyable year of my volunteer service. I finally found the harmony, the balance. Having devoted time to the ThyCa Steering Committee and then as a member of the newly formed

ThyCa Board of Directors and the ThyCa Membership Committee, I had decided to try to volunteer where and when I was able. As a person also blessed with the vagaries of an auto-immune syndrome, Fibromyalgia, my commitments are often limited by the unpredictable daily levels of energy and pain. It was clear I needed to pace every aspect of my life if I wanted to continue trying to express my gratitude and not deny myself the joys of the rest of my family life.

In 2001, I was able to host a successful fundraising party for ThyCa on my own time schedule. I facilitate a monthly support group, though we don't meet in the cold Michigan winter months of December, January, or February. I help respond to calls to our toll-free number during the weeks I know I will be able to fully devote myself to the task. It is wonderful! I can give and receive without stress, pressure, or cheating anyone, including myself, of precious time. I am also a member of the ThyCa Membership Committee and helped put together the first issue of this newsletter.

ThyCa is a daily part of my life, but it hasn't taken over my life. I am grateful to all those who devote so much time and energy to putting together and maintaining ThyCa in all of its expressions, especially on the larger ends of fundraising and organizing all of the volunteers.

The early participation has become a daily source of pride for me. The annual conference has received the support of the medical community. We now have an official Thyroid Cancer Awareness Week.

Thanks to the work of our current ThyCa Chairperson Gary Bloom and the talents of those on the Board of Directors and the many volunteer teams, I no longer feel the need to keep my thyroid cancer experience a secret, because with the story of my experience comes the history of a hugely successful organization.

Gratitude. Balance. Pride. It was a very good year!

