

A heart is drawn in white paint on a dark, textured wall. The wall has a rough, cracked appearance with various shades of blue and purple. The heart is simple, with a slightly irregular outline. In the background, there are some faint, illegible markings on the wall, possibly graffiti or other drawings.

A story of love,
medicine, and a
miracle

LOVE LESSONS *from* MY SON

by Sheila M. Kelly

A Mother's Journey Through a Teen's Cancer

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PRAISE FOR LOVE LESSONS FROM MY SON

"I have just finished your book. I have been fortunate today as I have had the day off. My first real day off in over two years.

"I had decided that I would take it for myself to do some reading and to be honest with you reading your book was not on my agenda today.

"However, after reading a chapter in Wayne Dyer's book "Powerful Intentions," the Spirit screamed out to me to go downstairs and read your book. I do not want to go into a long dissertation of all the things I got out of this, but let me tell you this:

"It was the first time I felt "present" for a long time. It helped me to realize that I have not forgiven God for putting me through this experience.

"I have been focusing on the negative aspects of my cancer experience which has resulted in me living in a shell. I have, to a certain extent, lacked the courage your son showed. However I know this experience was here for a reason.

"A light has ignited in me this afternoon. Something I have not felt for a VERY LONG time. Of course, it is always there. I have just chosen not to acknowledge it. Why? Because living from fear has served me. It is familiar, it is "safe," it is the

“status quo.” But I am tired. I know through your sharing that there is hope. I have abdicated my purpose, my living to outside forces for too long. This does not serve me, it envelopes me, it constricts me, and it depresses me. I am ready to claim my right. My right to be happy, to be successful, to be at peace and to let abundance into my life.”

– Jamie Pritchard, President, Aspire Higher Institute

“I read your wonderful book about Jeff and cried. I think a story like this could inspire parents to revisit or start a journey of faith.”

– Shelley Cox, Career and Leadership Mindset Coach

“Sheila writes from her heart and with profound openness and honesty about a very

difficult family journey. Her words will resonate with anyone who has faced such a crisis of their own. Though she shares her story not to offer advice or guidance, there is no doubt her courage and strength will inspire others.

“Be prepared for the need to finish this book in one sitting and with a box of tissues close at hand!”

- Linda L., Mom and Entrepreneur

Love Lessons From My Son

A Mother's Journey
Through a Teen's Cancer

Sheila M. Kelly

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Editor: Marlene Oulton, www.MarleneOulton.com

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to any parent who has held the hand of a sick child. As well, this book is dedicated to my son and his beautiful family.

DISCLAIMER

This book details the author's personal experiences with and opinions about her son's cancer. The author is not a healthcare provider.

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This book provides content related to physical, psychological and spiritual wellness. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

FOREWORD

It's been 16 years since I had "a disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body" (thank you, Google)...nearly half my lifetime ago. This simple definition doesn't exactly do justice to what someone goes through when fighting cancer. My recollection of the whole experience has generally been tucked away somewhere far away in my mind, but I do know that at the time it felt like "abnormal cell division" was the least of my worries.

When you're 17 years old, in the middle of high school, trying your best to be a "normal" teenager, the psychological battle that goes on when you have a life-threatening disease almost seems as bad as the physical toll it takes on your body. High school is tough; you're trying to sort out your self-identity and establish where you belong in the grand scheme of things, but it just seemed a little tougher when you're essentially "the cancer guy" in a school of 1,000. When you're trying to be cool, it doesn't matter that you feel like hell after a couple hours of chemotherapy...it's having the same hairstyle as Gollum in "Lord of the Rings" that really rattles your self-esteem. Losing your hair, especially as a teenager, was the one thing I considered to be the screaming beacon that said "I'm a pretty sick dude, folks"; there's just no hiding it.

But you know what? I never really felt all that uncomfortable with it. Sure I can recall at least one or two awkward moments (ironically due to adults, not

classmates), but the overwhelming vibe around me was that everyone just seemed to know that I wanted to be treated as normally as possible. This stemmed from my mom and dad. My mom immediately got to work in creating wallet-size cards that said "Jeff is happy, healthy, and healed" and handed them out to my friends. I was definitely very sick, but I was still 17 years old, and I remember this being a little embarrassing for me...but I was too weak to fight it. But I was glad she did it.

This small act set the tone for how things were going to go during the course of my treatment (although I can say I wasn't too "happy" after taking my chemo beatings every two weeks). There was no other outcome, no other way it was going to end for me other than happy, healthy, and healed.

And they allowed me to heal by giving me space. I still think about the leeway that my parents granted me during the whole process...they allowed me to still be a teenager, and allowed me to live my life as normally as possible during that time. A common term thrown around nowadays is "helicopter parents" – always hovering around their child, ensuring they are protected to a fault.

My mom and dad were not helicopter parents. Don't mistake it: they protected me, cared for me intensely, wouldn't let me do anything insanely stupid, but most importantly, they trusted me to make the right decisions during my treatment...decisions that included being with my friends on weekend nights when I should have (probably rightfully) been in bed recovering and resting.

They loved me enough to allow me to heal and kill off those “abnormal cells” in my own way. I somehow managed to survive eating a fast food hamburger with compromised immune system (sorry Doc), and camping with my friends (where a few beers may have been consumed). Guess what? I beat it, and I don't recall mom ever pushing me too hard to reconsider eating that hamburger because she understood the risk was worth the reward...I wanted to be normal, not sealed in my room in a Haz-Mat suit.

Sixteen years later, I don't discuss what I went through very often.

I'm honestly not sure how I feel about a book being written about the whole ordeal...it's not easy to think about that period in my life again. I don't proclaim to understand why it happened to me. I don't look back and think of clichés like “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger”...I still wish I (and millions of others) didn't have to go through it.

And I don't feel like anything we did as a family to get through it was exceptional, though I fully grasp that a lot of families are not so fortunate to get through cancer as well as we did (we have lost many immediate relatives to the disease).

To me, the fact that the whole experience seemed as “normal” as it could possibly be speaks volumes about the support and love I had...it may have been a different story otherwise. Fortunately, the story that has been written for me is that 16 years later, I have a beautiful and loving wife,

a daughter that is quite possibly the cutest baby ever born, two parents who love me, and I'm still 100% happy, healthy, and healed. Thank you mom!

Jeff Kelly

INTRODUCTION

This book is being written for my son, Jeff. As I write these words in November of 2005, it is with the commitment that this book will be a Christmas gift for him as he gifts *us* with a visit from Alabama.

This book is being written, as well, for the family and friends who were part of Jeff's journey through cancer. Even those closest to us have an incomplete picture of what it was like to navigate the emotional twists and turns of this path.

I'm also writing this book for all the parents who have had to walk this painful path. Please know that my heart goes out to you. Perhaps reading this book will help with your understanding or your emotional processing. It is not meant to be a "how to" guide, for I know that no matter how valiant the efforts of parents and medicine are, sometimes, (and too often in my opinion), cancer claims our beloved children. This is really a "how I" got through the alternating periods of peace and fear. It was not an easy journey, but somehow, we did get through it and emerged triumphant on the other side. Personally, I drew upon deep spiritual beliefs to get me through. Those beliefs brought me all that I needed to survive this extremely painful and emotional time. Yes, there were moments of deep personal despair, but they were always put aside so that I could tend to my child. It was my "job" – my purpose at that particular stage of my life.

And, finally, this book is for me. It has not been easy to write. I realize that I still have pockets of pain embedded in my body... memories of the traumatic experience of traversing the terrain of cancer. Even within this distance of time, there is deep sadness and pain around this life-altering event. However, I feel blessed that I was able to just be "with" Jeff and hold his hand through the life-threatening illness.

Going through experiences such as these are what I refer to as the Olympics of life.

If you know of anyone who would benefit from the reading of this personal story of living with cancer, please pass it on with our gratitude and appreciation.

MEETING ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Heavenly hues and blissful blues

Swirled in the realms of light,

Lovingly two sparks embraced

Prepared for earthly flight.

The charted course held twists and turns

Though both were well aware,

If the road should bend too sharply,

Then the other would be there.

From "here" the route seemed very clear –

The shadows posed no threat

But once the dark clouds came to pass

They would sleepily forget...

"A challenging task" ... the wee light said,

"Do you think we'll make it through?"

"How can we fail?" the wise one asked,

"You'll have me and I'll have you!"

"I'll go first and pave the way,"
"But I pray we're not long apart..."
"Because I've written in a scene or two
That's sure to break my heart..."

"That'll be my cue," chimed the little light,
"As you're bound to need me then.
We'll meet 'on the road less traveled'
And we'll call each other friend."

"For my road as well shows pain and doubt
I'll need to find you too."
"I'll light the Course," the wise one said,
"So you'll trust your path is true."

So all will be well... yet a golden tear fell,
For who would play the Son,
And a wiser voice from a higher realm
Whispered softly - "Mom ... I'll come!"

Then one by one the sacred script
Was cast with Souls of Joy,

In honor of one who would teach such Love
Yet appear as "but a boy."

The wise one smiled, but questioned,
"If we'll not shine so bright...
Will you know me in my humble form?
And recognize my light?"

"Be not concerned". The wee one said,
"If we'll not know your face,"

"We'll know for certain it is you,
By your Strength and through your Grace."

Written by Sheila's dear friend, Rev. Theresa Tomilson,
December, 2006.

LOVE LESSON # 1: CHILDREN TEACH... PARENTS LEARN

*“While we try to teach our children all about
life, our children teach us what life is all
about.”*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

When he was twenty years old, my son Jeff wrote in a card to me that I was “beautiful,” and I could only think that he is the one who exemplifies beauty. As I opened his gift, it reflected a depth of understanding about me that deeply touched my heart. His gift was perfect: a blue leather bookmark with a circular gold medallion engraved with my initials. When I pointed out to him that blue and gold were the colors of my *Course in Miracles* book cover, he said, “Yes, I know. That is why I chose those.”

Of course! I didn't think he paid much attention to that book which is worn from years of reference. I was reminded once more that not much missed that keen young mind of his.

If I had thought at all about the nature of the mother-child relationship when my son was born, I would have thought of myself as the teacher and he, the student. Ha! This gentle being who has graced us with his presence has been a great and powerful teacher for me. From the

moment of conception, he has been a reminder of how little I really know about how to walk through life with grace and certainty.

In fact, initially I did not have the wisdom to realize that children teach the real lessons of life – the lessons of love. I may have been intelligent, educated, smart even, but I was not wise.

At the time of Jeff's birth, my husband and I were doing what everyone else in our circle of friends seemed to be doing: Working to make our lives better than that of our parents. We, and especially I, were operating under the assumption that a bigger house, a more expensive car, and a nicer neighbourhood to park it in, would surely make us all happier.

I do not look back at that period of my life with any sense of personal pride in whom I was. That phase of my existence contained, at all times, an undercurrent of anxiety. A forced pleasantness from me did not fool anybody else any more than that it fooled me. How I got to be 31 years old without understanding the things which truly matter in life is not the focus of this book. I could only say to my son that I loved him beyond measure, but that love was flawed by what could be called emotional insecurity and immaturity. This feeling is not so unusual perhaps, but sad nevertheless.

If Jeff came into my life to teach me about love, he has been the teacher of teachers.

At the time he was born, I was love deficient and didn't even know it. I thought I knew what love was. I was mistaken. I

can only say “thank you” to my son for allowing me glimpses of the love that would ultimately be revealed as we journeyed together.

The first glimpse of the meaning of love came at the time of his birth – that magical moment when I held him in my arms for the very first time. I was totally unprepared for the emotion of falling in love with my baby boy. I was so exhausted from a long, difficult labour that my husband had to wheel me down to the hospital nursery in a wheelchair. I had not held Jeff in the delivery room because he had been rushed to intensive care in distress, the result of being two weeks overdue, swallowing meconium (the dark green substance forming the first feces of a newborn infant), as well as the use of forceps and an epidural in a very long labour.

It seemed that everything had gone very wrong during delivery, but Jeff himself was so very right. At first, I did not know if I had the strength to hold him, but once I did, I did not know how I could let him go.

Despite my loyalty and commitment to the well-being and care of our child, despite the intense knowledge that I would indeed die for him, despite my willingness to put aside my own needs, despite the knowledge that something deep within me stirred with love, there was still much that needed healing within me.

Thankfully, we cannot see into the future, so I could not predict at the time of Jeff's birth the power and impact of the lessons he would teach.

I certainly could not predict that, 17 years later, on a day dedicated to celebrating love, February 14, 1997, our beautiful boy, my son, would be diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Perhaps it was the kindness of the surgeon; perhaps it was because we were exhausted after enduring all that we did to get to this point; perhaps we took some clues from our son on how to handle the impending news, but as the three of us (son, mother, and father) sat in a drab hospital office, we received these words with unbelievable calm and stoicism. Minds may have been racing, hearts may have skipped a beat, but on the outside, each of us put on a brave face.

I had a burning question inside my head, "Does Jeff know that Hodgkin's is cancer?" The surgeon had not used the "c" word. As we got into the car, I turned around to Jeff in the back seat and said to him, "You know that Hodgkin's Lymphoma is a form of cancer, right?"

"I know that," he informed us. Turns out that one of his hockey heroes, Mario Lemieux, had just completed successful treatment for the disease. Jeff's brave words from the back seat of our Honda were, "I know I can beat it, too."

What we didn't know then and what we didn't find out until the end of treatment was that Jeff's illness was much different than Lemieux's. Lemieux was treated for a nodule in his neck. We knew Jeff's tumor was in his chest, but what I found out in a follow-up appointment after the end of treatments made my mouth drop. We were sitting in the hematologist's office, Jeff and I. I was feeling so happy and

relieved that Jeff was out of the woods and that everything looked fine that I looked at the doctor and said, "Jeff wasn't as sick as you thought he was." The doctor looked at me and said, "There was a lot going on with Jeff that had me very concerned. The tumor in his chest was the size of a football."

I am so glad I did not know the size of the tumor until after the treatments were finished. I am glad that no one told us. I am glad that none of us asked. If that is denial then it seems to have served us very well. To know the size of the tumor would have added an unnecessary layer of concern to the fear I was already experiencing.

We were about to begin a journey through chemotherapy: a journey through a dark forest; a journey to save his life. His belief that he could beat it, just like his hockey hero, well ... I was up for supporting that belief!

LOVE LESSON # 2: KNOW WHAT'S IMPORTANT. EVERYTHING ELSE WILL FALL AWAY

“We go around thinking that real life is about adding a rec room to the basement. But this is not real life. Cancer is real life. When you accept cancer, it is as if new systems within the organism automatically open – like the oxygen masks and flotation systems that automatically drop in your lap on a 747 in an emergency.”

*– Simple Abundance, Sarah Ban
Breathnach*

When cancer visits a home, it is somewhat like being involved in a car crash. Suddenly, all those systems that have been set into place for handling emergencies such as these are called forth. In the beginning there is shock, but there is also much to do.

In 1997, when it first became obvious that Jeff was getting sicker seemingly by the minute, the equipment that was supposed to drop into place to address the problem initially malfunctioned. As an example, we had taken Jeff to

the doctor in early January, 1997, because he was complaining of chest pain and was not feeling well. At that time he was diagnosed as having the flu. The pain in his chest was thought to be tissue damage, the result of a car accident he had been involved in just before Christmas of 1996. Physiotherapy was recommended to relieve the discomfort in his chest. As well, a nasty flu bug was rampant and vicious in our community at that time, with people actually being hospitalized for its lingering impact.

So the physio began for the supposed tissue damage from the car accident, but the flu symptoms did not dissipate. As January wore on, Jeff was in and out of school ... going to class some days; staying home on others.

Warning bells went off on February 4th when I arrived home to find Jeff stretched out on a sofa, pale, tired, and looking thinner. "Are you losing weight?" I asked. "Yes," he replied. "My pants seem to be getting looser around my waist."

As soon as my husband Dave got home from work that day, the three of us drove to our local doctor's office to see an after-hours "duty" doctor, who advised us to take Jeff for a chest x-ray and blood work the next day.

Another warning bell sounded the next day. As Jeff and I sat in the hospital waiting for his name to be called for the x-ray, he placed his head on my shoulder and closed his eyes. Huh? This 6' tall man-child usually walked three steps behind me in public, too cool to be seen walking beside his old mom. And here he was today with his head perched on my shoulder. Definitely, something was not right.

After long hours at the hospital, we returned home, barely getting through the front door when our doctor called. "There's a mass in Jeff's chest," he said matter of factly. "We don't know what it is, but we don't think it is a lymphoma."

"That's good," I responded. I really didn't know what a lymphoma was, but it seemed a good thing that Jeff didn't have it. I probably sounded rather nonchalant. In retrospect, I was going into that state called denial.

Because Jeff had indicated that he thought the foul-tasting air-bag dust that exploded at the time of his accident was linked to his not feeling well, I found myself asking if the mass could be the result of Jeff swallowing that residue. Could it have settled into his chest somehow? "It could be anything," said the doctor. "Jeff needs a CT-scan. Are you available this afternoon if we can get him in?"

Was I available? No need to even ask! I sat by the phone, waiting for that call, ready to move heaven and earth to get my son a CT-scan. And, yet, I was still not really concerned. Again, that thing called "denial" was performing its role ... preventing me from stepping into the idea that my son, my one and only child, could be seriously ill.

In retrospect, perhaps that was a natural thing to do. After all, he had been through other medical situations and had come through them with flying colours.

As mentioned earlier, immediately after being born, he had been swept into intensive care because he had ingested meconium into his lungs. At 8 weeks of age, he had surgery for pyloric stenosis, a narrowing of the pyloric sphincter that blocks the passage of food from the stomach into the

duodenum. At age four, a bout of strep throat exploded into an emergency visit which ended up with him being admitted to a small-town hospital for four nights, complete with massive doses of antibiotics being pumped into his system to try to get the infection and a raging fever under control.

It was during this episode with the strep throat that I bargained with God. Jeff was not getting better; in fact, he was getting worse. His fever continued to rise dangerously high and some red blotches were coming and going on his skin. A nurse had, in fact, peered at one big red patch on his chest, looked at me, and asked, "What's that?" Not a reassuring comment to be sure.

That night, I returned home, leaving my husband with Jeff at the hospital. It may be considered selfish, but I knew I had to get some much-needed sleep. As I stood in the shower after midnight, with water pouring over my body and tears streaming from my eyes, I prayed, "Dear God, please do not take my son. I will do anything. I will be a better person. I will start going to church. But please, please, please make my son well." I did not understand at the time that I did not have to beg God to make my son well. I did not understand that God was not the cause of my son's illness; in fact, God's will is only perfect peace and perfect health.

However, there is power in heartfelt prayer and this one was probably the first I had ever prayed with such intensity. It was that night that Jeff's fever broke, and when we arrived at the hospital the next morning, we found him

sitting up and feeling much better. In fact, later in the day, he decided to take a stroll through the hospital corridors. There he was, a little 4-year old boy in flannel pyjamas, holding onto the IV pole and looking up at us to ask, "How come we didn't go for a walk before?"

It was now thirteen years later, and although we did not know it, we were about to take another walk, the first step of a journey that would take us through the winter, spring, summer and well into the fall of 1997.

Were we ready? No, we were totally unprepared. Yet in some strange way, everything had been preparing us for this journey. I, for example, had been immersing myself in the study of a spiritual path based on a book called *A Course in Miracles*. I had stopped working at my management job about a year earlier and was voluntarily facilitating a *Course* study group as well as designing personal development workshops for a local community college. That spiritual foundation was hugely important to how I traversed the path through Jeff's diagnosis, illness, and recovery.

Often, during Jeff's six months of chemo, people asked me if I was working outside our home. Thankfully, I was not. My job was something that had "fallen away" over a year before his diagnosis. Thus, I could respond to that question with the response that my "job" was taking care of Jeff. That was it. I felt very fortunate to be able to devote myself exclusively to caring for him. Dave could be at work, but my job was to attend to Jeff, to walk beside this young man

every step of his journey. It was the most important work I had ever taken on.

Nothing else mattered. Everything else fell away. We may have appeared to be somewhat "normal" to the outside world, but it would not be "business as usual" in our family household for many months.

It is interesting to note that although I had started offering workshops at our local community college, the classes did not fill up. Registration was so low that the college cancelled the classes. I was very disappointed at the time, but in retrospect, I saw that they fell away in an absolutely perfect way leaving me free to do what I needed to help my son.

What was of primary importance to the three of us, Dave, Jeff, and me, was Jeff's health and his healing. My life was structured around his appointments, caring for him, getting him back and forth to school, etc. During the six months of chemo, I seemed to exist only to care for him. If that sounds like a sacrifice, it was not. It was nothing more and nothing less than a gift I was happy to give him.

Something else that fell away during this time was a lot of contact with family and friends. It was in this area that I became passive ... waiting and expecting other people to make contact. It could be said that family and friends became an outlet for a lot of my emotions as I silently harboured anger and resentment at those people around me who kept such a safe distance from us. I began to think of them as "friends, family, and other strangers." As I write

this now, I know that everyone did what was right for them. At the time, however, there were many lonely days where I felt I had no one to talk to or lean on besides my husband.

Thank God for a couple in our group who got in the habit of dropping by our home on Friday nights. Jeff's chemo treatments were scheduled for alternate Fridays, so their presence was truly a gift. They did not worry about imposing. They did not assume that we needed to be alone, neither did they smother us. They simply showed up and were "normal" with us. Dave and I have said "thank you" more than once to these dear friends. This is a very public "thank you" to them for who they showed themselves to be ... courageous, caring, and kind. Their support during this time is one of the anchors that will forever hold them steadfastly in our hearts.

LOVE LESSON # 3: PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS: STEP UP TO THE PLATE, ENGAGE THE HEART, PLAY A HIGH- LEVEL GAME

“I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children.”

— Oriah Mountain Dreamer

In the last chapter, I talked about system malfunctions, and a big one occurred right at the very beginning when the mass in Jeff's chest had been identified but remained unexplained. It was at this time that one of the region's CT machines was being dismantled for a move to a new hospital, and there was a backlog of cases waiting for their appointments. We were told that Jeff would have to wait a month for a CT-scan.

I don't know whether it was instinct, mother's love, or plain old common sense, but I knew that there was no way my son could wait a month to have a CT-scan. I knew exactly what was important in that moment. Any passivity I had around Jeff's treatment quickly fell away. I learned that I

might not always speak up for myself, but I would not accept any less than the best treatment for my son.

Thus it was that I stepped up to the plate and found my voice, speaking quietly but firmly to the kind person who had called from our doctor's office, "I know that you are doing the best that you can. However, there is no way we are waiting a month for our son to have a CT-scan. We will fly him to Boston, MA, or Portland, ME, or somewhere. Waiting a month is not acceptable."

And then another piece of emergency equipment fell into place... this one the result of a phone call I made to a nursing friend. I called her in tears, telling her that we were having trouble booking a CT-scan for Jeff. And she said, "Sheila, the children's hospital will do CT-scans on people of any age, even 95 year olds. Call them." I did. They, in turn, instructed me to get Jeff's doctor to call them, and so it was that we got a CT-scan appointment within a few days.

From then on, the medical system worked, if not perfectly then at least to a level that reflected the caring, compassionate people that were part of it. There was no more waiting for anything as Jeff moved to the top of the treatment list. Metaphorical oxygen masks and other life-saving equipment were provided when needed with ease and grace.

Pulling out all the stops, for me, meant using everything in my power and within my grasp to deal with my son's courageous journey.

THERE WILL BE NO CHEMO TODAY

Another small example of stepping up to the plate and finding my voice occurred after Jeff had been hospitalized. Everything that had happened in the hospital was in preparation for the first administration of “the chemo.” The port-a-cath was in place, the protocol around explaining the risks had been taken care of, and the stage was set.

And in “she” came: the nurse who was going to do “it.” Robed from head to toe in blue scrubs, huge rubber gloves on her hands, wheeling the heavy-duty intravenous equipment as well as the heavy-duty disposal unit into Jeff’s room. She was ready.

Because the port-a-cath had been surgically implanted in Jeff’s chest only hours before, his wound was fresh, swollen, and very tender. Understanding this, they sprayed it with a topical antiseptic to freeze it and make it painless for the needle to be inserted into the port-a-cath. Hah. Jeff literally screamed when they began the procedure and started to cry. I started to cry. Dave was crying.

It was one of those moments when something inside of me just said, “Enough.” Somehow I found myself saying, “There’ll be no chemo today.” I think I must have processed the thought that even though we had waited this long for the chemo treatments to begin, another few hours would not make a difference.

Thankfully, there was no argument from the nurse. She graciously wheeled her paraphernalia out of the room and

we had a restful afternoon. The chemo was re-scheduled for the next day, Saturday.

MOTHER'S TOUCH

On this afternoon and on many days prior, as Jeff became sicker and sicker, he would experience physical pain in his back. I used what I call "Mother's Touch" to bring some relief. The process was simple. I'd close my eyes, call on God, and ask that my hands be used to channel healing energy to my son.

I knew that my son would decide, at some level, what to do with it. I can tell you that my son always answered positively when I asked if he would like his back massaged. It brought him relief.

FOCUS

After his diagnosis, I arranged with his high school principal to meet with anyone, including Jeff's fellow students, who wanted to know more about his illness. At that meeting, attended mostly by Jeff's many friends, I passed out business-sized pieces of paper. On those pieces of paper were typed the words: "When you think of Jeff, please think of him as happy, healthy, and healed." I knew how frightened they must be, because I knew how frightened I was about his condition.

I also knew how important it was to focus on life, not the possibility of death. Medical doctors like Dr. Lissa Rankin are providing evidence that thoughts, attitudes and beliefs have a physiological impact on the body. A positive outlook can absolutely influence disease in a positive way, triggering a self-repair mechanism.

Several years after I passed out the positive focus cards to Jeff's friends, one of the young women who had received one told me that she still carried that piece of paper in her wallet. That brings a lump to my throat.

This beautiful young woman had the courage to sit with Jeff during one of his chemo treatments. After high school, she went on to become a nurse, taking her gifts of compassion and care into a broader arena.

LOVE LESSON # 4: MIRACLES HAPPEN EVERY DAY

“Miracles occur naturally as expressions of love. The real miracle is the love that inspires them. In this sense, everything that comes from love is a miracle.”

— A Course in Miracles

In my world, miracles are magical reminders of love. They may be big or they may be small, but they are never insignificant because of the love that inspires them. This chapter is intended to focus on some manifestations of love... physical expressions of the love that inspired them.

THIS SHOULDN'T BE HAPPENING TO YOU

He was a man of few words, but he came highly recommended, this hematologist in cowboy boots named Dr. Ormille Hayne.

He also seemed visibly shaken as the three of us, mother, father, and son, sat in his small office on the Wednesday following Valentine's Day. The definitive diagnosis of Hodgkin's Lymphoma had gotten us speedy access to this busy practitioner. I had learned that he typically paid little

attention to anyone except “the patient,” in this case our son, and true to form, spoke mainly to Jeff.

He had photos of his own children on his desk and he looked at Jeff and said, “I have children of my own. This is not something that should be happening to you.” With those words, I knew that Jeff was in good hands. Despite his gruff exterior, this man would do everything he could to ensure Jeff received the best possible care.

That was demonstrated very quickly as he asked Elaine, his extraordinary office manager, to check on the availability of a special dye that would be used to test the extent of the disease.

This miracle dye was shipped in weekly from Montreal, which was hundreds of miles away, and it would indeed be a miracle if there was any on hand at our local hospital. Thankfully there was enough for one test and Jeff got an appointment that very afternoon.

WE HAVE A ROOM FOR JEFF

In the hospital, Jeff was placed in a ward with three middle-aged men. Something about this placement didn't feel right. I especially disliked the fact that one bed was completely draped, protecting and hiding a very sick man. I thought he might be dying and wanted to get Jeff out of there.

I asked the wonderful young nurse if we could have a more private room, and although offering no hope for finding

one, she came back in an hour to let us know that they could move Jeff to the bone marrow transplant unit. Not only would he would have his own room and his own bath, the room came with a VCR and access to movies. Compared to the rest of the hospital, this was like a four-star hotel. Jeff was not interested in watching movies, but it was a beautiful room for our beautiful son and an indicator of the caring professionalism of a staff who understood, as Dr. Hayne had said, that this was not something that a young man on the cusp of his future should be experiencing.

My husband and I were reassured that our son was being taken in and being cared for by compassionate people in the often impersonal world of adult hospitals.

LOVE LESSON # 5: FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WANT, NOT ON WHAT YOU DON'T WANT

“What we focus on, we begin to experience.”

– Sheila M. Kelly

After the initial malfunctions of the medical system regarding the CT-scan, the well-oiled hospital machine kicked in. Jeff was admitted to hospital a few days after Valentine's Day, very weak and tired, but ready to do what had to be done. We were told that Jeff would be going to the Operating Room to have a port-a-cath implanted in his chest. It would be the site for receiving the chemo which would be injected intravenously.

It was after midnight before they wheeled him down the corridor leading to the operating room, and we said goodbye to Jeff at the elevator. There was little sleep for us that night as we awaited his return from the operating room. The staff brought in one cot, with strict instructions that whoever was sleeping in it must be out of it by 7:00 a.m. I recall spending that night on the cot while Dave went home to shower and grab whatever sleep he could.

The three of us, Dave, Jeff and I, were actually joking around a little bit when, later in the morning, an intern came

in to explain about the chemotherapy and, in the name of disclosure, fill the whiteboard in Jeff's room with all the possible side effects of the ABVD (chemo) treatment. These four drugs could cause any number of side effects from tingling in the toes to baldness on the head.

I wimped out. I could not sit through it and left the room. I decided this could be a father-son moment.

When I returned, I wrote three words at the top of the whiteboard, on top of all the negative things that could happen: "Chemo is healing." Despite all the horrific potential side-effects, it seemed to me that the staff was neglecting an important aspect of the purpose of the treatment.

Dave said that one of the doctors snickered when he read those words on the whiteboard. It angered me a bit but, really, I did not care. I wanted only to remind all of us that chemo had a purpose and that purpose was healing, not hurting. I especially needed that reminder. Some might say it was denial, and perhaps it was. I prefer to think of it as a recognition of the clinical possibilities as well as a focus on the positive. I had embarked on a crusade with a theme that was something like "do everything I can to stay focused on a positive outcome."

LOVE LESSON # 6: GENTLENESS IS STRENGTH... STRENGTH IS BOTTOMLESS

“Gentleness can only be expected from the strong.”

– Leo F. Buscaglia

Jeff is the personification of gentleness – always has been. He comes by his gentleness honestly. His grandfathers and his father personify the word. My husband's love, patience, and gentleness were demonstrated early in Jeff's young life. It was another Christmas, the first with our infant son, when Jeff suddenly began vomiting. Before finding out that he had pyloric stenosis which required surgery, Dave discovered that by holding his infant son on his chest, the milk would stay down in Jeff's stomach. I can still see them: Dave on his back, infant son face down on his dad's chest, at rest and at peace. I have no idea how many hours the two of them spent together in that way, but I do know those hours extended to night times when Dave tenderly held his child, trading in his own sleep for the well-being of his son.

It was after his first chemotherapy that I saw my own father very clearly in Jeff. My dad, one of the gentlest people I know, died when Jeff was eleven. I have a very clear

memory of Jeff holding my hand to comfort me at my dad's funeral.

YOU LOOK LIKE AN OLD MAN

As Jeff sat in bed with his navy blue housecoat on after his first round of chemo, he was peering at the plate of food in front of him with disgust. The chemo had heightened his sense of smell, and he couldn't tolerate the odors that were coming from the domed container that had been presented to him at dinner time.

As he struck that pose, it was as though my father were sitting there in front of me. Jeff had the same hunched shoulders and the same look on his face that my father had when in the months preceding his death, he would sit at the kitchen table, peering down at a wonderful home-cooked meal prepared by my Mom. She would say, "Burns (my father's name), you have to eat."

And he would just sit, head down, as if he didn't think he could muster up the energy to pick up the fork. It was a look of resignation, like, "You expect me to eat at a time like this?" With Jeff, it was similar but more like, "You expect me to eat ... this?"

That Jeff looked like my old dad was validated for me later in the day when Dave said that he, too, thought of my father when he saw Jeff hunched over his plate. As well, one of Jeff's young friends, Heather, came in. She took one look at Jeff, and said, "Jeff, you look like an old man." At her retort,

we all broke up laughing. It is funny what can make you laugh at these times.

I think Heather's statement was true, not only from a physical perspective but from a spiritual one as well. It seemed to me that this son of mine is truly an old soul, meaning that he came into the planet at an evolutionary stage that is somewhat more advanced than mine.

There was evidence of that when he was four years old and refused, absolutely refused, to push back when one of his playmates was pushing him. I was, in fact, on my hands and knees on the carpet of our living room demonstrating to Jeff how he could push back when his friend pushed him. Jeff kept saying, "Mommy, I can't. I can't do that, Mommy." Finally, he just started to cry. It was a light bulb moment for me, as I wrapped my arms around him and saw that I was trying to teach my son to be violent. It is just not who he was then or is now.

In that moment, I got it. I "got" that this little boy did not have it in him to push back. I also "got" that teaching my son to fight was not exactly taking the high road. I learned to respect my son that day, to understand that he would choose to hang out with friends who did not want to fight with him, and that I could trust his instincts. I got a glimpse of the gentleness and strength that was contained within that little person.

That gentleness continued unabated through his growing up and beyond. He is not one to "push back" and it seems to work very well for him. He is confident and assertive as well as sensitive. He can speak for himself, but he is not one

who fights just because there is an opportunity to do so. During his teens, he had the ability and the intelligence to stay disengaged from the physical battles, on and off the playground.

And he cultivated great friends. One of his best buddies was Ron, and it was Ron who showed up in a dream that Jeff shared with us.

THE DREAM

Jeff told us about a powerful dream around the time he received his first chemo treatment. In that dream, he and his best friend, Ron, are wearing long, brown, hooded robes.

They are being pursued by armed and angry beings. These are beings of the darkness intent on causing harm to Jeff and Ron. They, however, are behind a fence, and it serves as a protective barrier: the weapons of attack used by the dark beings cannot penetrate.

In another sequence of the dream, Jeff and Ron are in a tower, looking down at the angry army who are attacking them, yet the dark beings cannot get to them. If you have seen the movie "Lord of the Rings," you have a wonderful visual image of these beings of darkness.

In Jeff's dream, I believe the dark beings represented the cancer that was intent on not only invading his body, but in taking his life. I am so grateful for the protection symbolized by the fence and the tower. I am also grateful for Jeff's

buddy, Ron, he who was there with my son, bravely standing with him and beside him through it all. You will notice that they did not have to resist, they did not have to "bear arms," but were protected by the fence and the tower. Ron has gone on to study medicine, specializing in general pathology. His gifts as a healer began long before he started his university studies, demonstrated clearly in the way he stood by his friend, Jeff.

SOME DAY YOU WILL MEET A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

It was Jeff's gentleness that I noticed most when he was confined to the hospital room with those three older men. He was very ill and very weak. You know a 17 year old male is sick when he extends his hand for holding. I was at once honoured that he reached towards me with his outstretched hand, wanting me to hold his hand in mine, and horrified at how sick he was. Again, his hand was a reminder of my Dad ... how he reached out for touch during his last days with us.

As we sat together holding hands, these words came to me, and I spoke them from my heart. I told him, "Jeff, someday you are going to meet a beautiful woman. You will get married and you will be so happy." A lovely smile appeared on Jeff's face as he looked at me, and with his hand in mine said simply, "Thank you, mom." He does not remember this happening, but I do. Clearly. Happily, my words turned out to be prophetic.

LOVE LESSON # 7: COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS... DENIAL IS NOT TO BE UNDER-RATED

*“It takes tremendous courage to live any life
at all ... even if it is just tending a simple
garden outside your kitchen window.”*

– David Whyte

Think about this: How many people do you know who go through life without any trauma, unforeseen drama, or downright tragedy happening in their lives?

Our story, unfortunately, is not unique nor was our handling of it especially courageous. But as anyone knows who has walked into a chemo room with a loved one, those patients who are subjected to this particular form of torture are indeed courageous.

The first chemo was done in the confines of a private hospital room which was the equivalent of a 5-star hotel compared to what Jeff had encountered as an outpatient. Our first trip to the chemo room, complete with mismatched La-Z-Boy-type chairs lined up against the wall and limp curtains available to provide some semblance of privacy, assaulted my eyeballs. It was bleak and gloomy, and an elderly lady sitting in a far corner, spitting up in a

crescent-shaped blue bowl was enough to make me want to run back to my car and away from this nightmare that was playing out on the screen of our lives. I wanted to escape the confines of that room and the awfulness of the situation, but I didn't run and neither did Jeff. He knew he needed this, and he valiantly, resignedly, and almost defiantly, pulled his shirt off, baring his chest to receive the needle in his port-a-cath. Each chemo treatment lasted about 3 hours. He didn't even want a curtain pulled around him for privacy. It was as if he understood that there was no way to hide the horror of this particular assault on his dignity.

At first, there were few side effects, but as the months wore on, he was experiencing more and more nausea. It became harder and harder to walk down the corridor to the chemo room and, ultimately, Jeff began to experience anticipatory nausea. It was not fun.

About 3 months into the chemo regimen, half-way through, one of the side-effects manifested. I was in bed, unable to sleep, hearing Jeff in his bedroom across the hall, moaning in pain and distress. My husband was sleeping soundly, so I went to Jeff's side. His feet were causing him a great deal of pain. His toes were turning black. He wanted relief and the Tylenol wasn't working. I pulled out all the tricks I had in my "mom's bag:" massaging his back, trying to relax him with a soothing visualization, putting on a Bernie Siegel tape that we had purchased – nothing was working that night. Finally, I returned to my own bed, distraught and upset at my own helplessness and inadequacy. Mother's love was not enough. It was a long night.

I'LL GO TO THE BATHROOM AND THROW UP

Despite Friday being the day he received chemo, Friday nights usually found Jeff determined to spend time with his friends, to socialize with them, and lead the life of a "normal" 17 year old.

On one of those Friday evenings, I heard him in the main bathroom, gagging and throwing up into the toilet bowl. And then a few minutes later, I heard him opening the closet door in the front hall. "Where are you going?" I asked with concern. "Over to Jen's," he replied. "But, what if you get sick while you're there?"

"Then I'll go to the bathroom and throw up."

Of course. Jeff's matter of fact response communicated to me what a silly question I had just asked. He was confident in his relationship with his friends, his relationship with himself, and his relationship with the treatment.

His connection with his friends was such that there was no embarrassment or concern about his illness. I knew of their tremendous support of him – a reflection of their love for him. On the evenings of those chemo Friday's, they gathered about him, included him, and embraced his desire to continue to be as normal as possible. Normalcy for them was just hanging out and doing what they typically did on a Friday night. The difference now was that one of them had somehow gotten cancer. They were as baffled about that as we were. Why Jeff? Certainly not because he "deserved" it, at least not based on anything he had done in

this lifetime. He was gentle, and to my knowledge, had never lifted so much as a finger against anyone in his entire life.

The time came when he asked the question, "Why me?" The only response I could make was "Why not?" As he looked at me with wide eyes, I could only say that he did not deserve it, but, really, neither did anyone else. I could not wish this disease on my worst enemy. I sincerely believe that no one deserves cancer.

Jeff's relationship with himself was reflected in his relationship with the disease. He must have been afraid, he must have had fear, but it did not colour his world. The treatment was as much an attack to his body as the disease and yet neither could defeat his spirit. The moments of our greatest frustration were the times of pain. These few moments of anger were caused by the indignity of having to vomit in the fishbowl of the chemo room, surrounded by strangers, onstage for all to see. The biggest times of helplessness were when we would walk the corridors leading into the treatment area to begin the chemo.

LET'S STOP AT MCDONALD'S

We were driving home from the hospital after his first round of chemo and Jeff wanted to stop at McDonald's. He couldn't stomach the hospital food and was now craving a burger. Oh boy – what to do. The hospital staff was adamant: stay away from fast food. The chemo weakens the immune system and it was important not to

compromise it any more than it already had been. Fast food was not a smart choice.

Jeff, however, was as adamant about eating at McDonald's as the hospital had been about not doing so. Furthermore, he informed us that his friend, Jennifer, worked there, and he would tell her to cook the meat longer than they normally did, thus eradicating any bacteria that might be present.

It was a logical response. We reminded him of the possible consequences, but Dave turned into the parking lot, deciding that it was Jeff's body and that he was old enough to make this decision. The only consequence to our giving Jeff permission to trust himself was that he truly enjoyed those burgers.

DENIAL

I am one who doesn't want to know everything there is to know about the anatomy of a particular illness. Some people want or need to know everything... the statistical chance of a cure, the worst-case scenario, all the information that is available, etc. I certainly do not condemn anyone who needs to do that when faced with a similar situation. However, for me, I wanted to know as little as possible. Thus I was not at all interested in delving into the details of Jeff's disease. I had set my focus on supporting Jeff and doing everything in my power to be there for him. This supported my belief that what we focus on, we strengthen in our experience.

The psychological principle of denial involves not recognizing or dealing with what is obviously going on in our present time.

I don't think that reflects what was going on with me. I believe that by choosing to focus on Jeff rather than on the details of the disease, I was not so much practicing denial as exercising choice. If I was "in denial," then I saw it as an absolutely essential place for me to be. I could only process so much of what was going on and still be available to positively support Jeff.

None of us, in fact, asked too many questions. After we got the definitive diagnosis of Hodgkin's Lymphoma on Valentine's Day, we simply got on the treadmill of appointments and treatment without much fanfare. Jeff appeared calm and so did we. If denial is responsible for that, then so be it.

LOVE LESSON # 8: USE MEDICINE... CALL ON GOD

“There are those who have reached God directly, retaining no trace of worldly limits and remembering their own identity perfectly.

These might be called the Teachers of teachers because, although they are no longer visible, their image can yet be called upon. And they will appear when and where it is helpful for them to do so.”

— A Course in Miracles

I shall try to put into words an experience that was so powerful for me that it is difficult even today to articulate. For those who are not *Course in Miracles* students, this chapter introduces concepts that may be outside your belief system. To put *Course* in context, it can be summed up in three sentences:

Nothing real can be threatened.

Nothing unreal exists.

Herein lies the peace of God.

“*Nothing real can be threatened*” refers to a thought system based on love. *Course* says that only love is real. Love,

being created by God and being the only thing that is real, cannot be extinguished.

"Nothing unreal exists" refers to a thought system based on fear. Our bodies, being temporary and thus illusory, do not represent who we really are and are ruled by fear.

"Herein lies the peace of God" is the natural result of connecting to what is real and letting go of all the fear-based beliefs.

"There are no accidents in salvation," is another tenet of *A Course in Miracles*. And thus, what may seem like an accident is often the result of an unseen system working flawlessly, arranging a sequence of events to come together at just the perfect time.

In this case, the coming together of events coincided with Jeff's first chemo treatment on the last Saturday of February, 1997.

On the night before Jeff's first chemo, Dave stayed at the hospital and I returned home, totally spent and emotionally taut. It was at 11:00 p.m. that the phone rang, a call from another *Course in Miracles* student/teacher from Toronto named Jim. Jim and I had been in contact to arrange for him to do a one-day workshop in Halifax the next day, Saturday. Jim had asked me to give it a title, which ended up being, "Healing the Fear." Here it was: the night before Jim's workshop and the night before Jeff's first chemo. If ever I doubted that "There are no accidents," the collision of these two events on the same day erased all that.

Who would have guessed when I took over the arrangements for the workshop from my dear friend Theresa that the workshop would end up being exactly what I needed?

To give a little background, let me summarize by saying that I had been a student of *Course* since 1993; a group facilitator since 1996. I had done the workbook. I was doing the work. I was on the path. I was "spiritual." God loved me. I loved God. I was high on love. I will admit to you now that I believed nothing "bad" would ever happen to me again.

And then Jeff, my one and only child, who introduced me to love as no one had ever done before, was now deathly sick. My spiritual work to date had not prepared me for that one, but it had prepared me to understand that God did not make this happen and God wanted only healing ... whatever form that took on this earthly plane.

When Jim called me that Friday night to let me know he was in town and looking forward to the workshop, I was the proverbial mess. As I told him on the phone, I was meditating and finding moments of peace, but I did not think I could attend his workshop. One of my rationalizations was that, because I was a *Course* study group leader, I did not want my "students" to see me falling apart. As well, I thought I would cast a pall over the whole event with my less-than-upbeat energy

Jim said all the right things.

"Sheila, you cannot meditate this away."

"Sheila, it would be a gift for others to have you present."

"Sheila, you can come for only part of the day, if you wish."

Dave and I had discussed whether or not I would attend the workshop. In the end, I pointed out to him that he would be heading off to work on a daily basis and I would be Jeff's caregiver. The workshop was something I wanted to do for me, and we negotiated that we would both be with Jeff for his chemo Saturday morning; I would then attend the workshop in the afternoon.

"There are no accidents," and the workshop was held directly across the parking lot from the hospital. I simply walked over after Jeff's chemo and after lunch was served.

Man, was I a mess. Jeff's first chemo had gone well, but when I got in the seminar room, I couldn't stop crying. Jim had his guitar and it seemed that every song he played had a link to Jeff.

Creedence Clearwater Revival's song *Proud Mary* elicited an image of 11-year old Jeff standing on the rail of our back deck, dancing enthusiastically to the beat of the CCR tune. Janis Joplin's *Oh, Lord, Won't You Buy Me a Mercedes Benz* just happened to be (ha!) a Jeff favourite. My friend and dear soul sister, Theresa, sat with her arm around me one side, and a neighbour and dear friend, Debbie, sat on the other side of me as I bawled my eyes out.

When Jim put his guitar down, he instructed us in an exercise to say "I hate you" to others in the room. We were shocked at such an exercise and resisted. After all, we were all supposed to be spiritual beings. "We love one another," we said. How could we say that!

Jim did not make any of us do any of it, but he very wisely said, "It's not true anyway."

Thinking that I could say "I hate you" to someone I did not know, my eyes fell upon a lovely, dark-haired woman. In the small group composed mostly of people that I already knew, she stood out because I did not know her. Approaching her, I asked her permission to do the exercise with her. She smiled gently and said, "Yes." Then I did it. I looked her in the eye and said, "I hate you." And then I knew. My hatred had nothing to do with the woman who stood across from me, the stranger among these people whom I knew:

My hatred was about me.

It was really me that I hated.

I had deep hatred buried at my very core.

It was an "aha" moment extraordinaire.

And I bawled some more.

If I had not come face to face with that... well, who knows if the outcome with Jeff's treatment would have been different. I certainly cannot answer that definitively.

"There are no accidents," and I was not surprised when Jim came up to me during a break and gently asked if I would participate in an exercise in front of the group. The exercise required that someone sit across from me in the center of the room and the person who volunteered was... the "I hate you stranger" with the dark hair.

The exercise that followed was based on a clearing process attributed to a *Course in Miracles* teacher from Sweden. Based on *Course* principles, its purpose is to clear away fear using forgiveness.

Under Jim's guidance, I again looked at this gentle stranger sitting across from me, and articulated all the fear that I had been holding inside. For example, I said, "What I want you to know is that I am thinking that if I were a better mother, Jeff would not have gotten ill. What I want you to know is that I am afraid that he is going to die." The stranger was instructed to respond with two words: "Thank you."

At the same time, I asked forgiveness for the beliefs that supported my fears. I said things like:

"What I want you to forgive me for is believing that Jeff's illness is because I am a bad mother."

"What I want you to forgive me for is believing that my son could get sick."

"What I want you to forgive me for is believing that anything could die."

The stranger's response to all of this was to say: "Thank you. Thank God, it is not true," followed by a correction of each statement; i.e., "You are a good mother."

I then began to articulate some things I had forgotten:

"I want you to forgive me for forgetting that God is only love."

"I want you to forgive me for forgetting that what God creates cannot die."

"I want you to forgive me for forgetting that my natural state is peace."

I do not know how long it took us to go through this process. There was much more said and experienced than I can recall or put in words. What I do know is that I felt total peace after the exercise was completed.

I returned to the hospital totally peaceful, totally calm, feeling a great sense of release. It is difficult to know what to attribute that to. Some would, I'm sure, attribute it to the release of all the pent-up fears and the shedding of tears. Some would say it was the total acceptance and love I experienced in a room of people whom I knew. I would say it was the tapping into deep truths that I knew in my heart, but which were being blocked by all the emotional fear.

In any event, when I returned to the hospital, Jeff was brighter, even after receiving the chemo toxins. When I got back to his room, his best friend, Ron, and his mom had dropped by. She is also named Sheila, and we two decided to leave "the boys" alone and headed off to the cafeteria for a coffee. As we sat there, I found myself comforting this other Sheila as she shed tears not only for my son, but for a family member of hers who was dying.

It was on that day that Jeff's crusty hematologist, a man of very few words, stood beside Jeff's bed and said, "I've got a good feeling about you." They were the first words of encouragement we'd heard from him.

As we had sat across the desk from him in his office a few weeks earlier, he said things to our son like, "I have children

of my own, and this should not be happening to you," and, "You have one chance to beat this, and this is it."

Yes, he was a man of few words, this doc in cowboy boots, but we knew that he would do everything possible for our son. And he did. He and his office administrator, Elaine, were our partners in making a somewhat broken medical system perform exquisitely. We noticed that this doc was hugely respected by all who knew him, not for the words he spoke, but for the care he took.

I did not take lightly his words to Jeff about his "good feeling."

The workshop raised many questions. One thing that I have often asked myself relates to the identity of the dark-haired woman who partnered with me in the "I hate you" exercise and in the middle of the room. There were probably a dozen people in the room that day, and I knew most of them. I have asked everyone I know who she was, and no one has any idea.

Was she simply someone who heard about the workshop and "happened" to show up? Or could she be a "Teacher of teachers" who "appeared" to me that day?

What you believe will depend on what your beliefs are. My belief is that she is, at the very least, a reminder that there are Unseen Forces at work to bring healing at all levels... mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical. These Unseen Forces exist and are available to us when and where it is helpful. It is incumbent on us to invite them in, either consciously or unconsciously. They, in their infinite wisdom, know precisely how and when to appear.

The dark-haired woman was also a reminder of the power of the mind. A friend and coaching colleague of mine often says, "The mind tells the body what to do." I happen to believe that it is at the level of mind that real healing occurs. When I speak of mind, I am not referring to the brain, but to a spiritual principle involving a consciousness that is beyond the physical. It is what Georg Groddeck, respected but controversial colleague of Sigmund Freud, referred to as "the It."

Using that terminology, the wrong-minded use of "It" thinking involves fear; right-minded, love. We have the ability to shift from one to the other. To use an analogy, it is like using the left-side versus the right-side of the brain. Just as different parts of our brains are used in different ways, so the spiritual principle of "mind" involves tapping into different fields of consciousness. To experience profound peace within the chaos of cancer occurs at the level of mind; more specifically, right-mindedness.

Getting back to the dark-haired lady who was a participant in my accessing the right-minded peace within, let me say that whatever or whomever she was, she will be forever held in my heart with gratitude. I am grateful not only for her, but for all the people who showed up on that day of days, who held and cradled me in the arms of love. As for Jim, I have not seen him since that day, but he holds a very special place in my heart.

Thanks to all who ministered to me and, by extension, my son. I believe but cannot prove that you were part of a circle of love that extended beyond the physical world into the

realm of the Divine. In my soul, I believe that you helped save a beautiful young man's human life.

**LOVE LESSON # 9:
LOVE IS ALL THERE IS:
FEAR SCREAMS LOUDLY FOR ATTENTION,
BUT LOVE IS ALL THERE IS**

“Love will never let you be the same.”

— Andrew Lloyd Webber

“Love changes everything,” wrote Andrew Lloyd Webber, but in my case, not right away. Lest one think that my serene sense of peace continued unabated, let me assure you that it did not. Before long, weariness and anxiety started to take up space in my psyche on a rather regular basis.

When Jeff was discharged from the hospital on the Monday following his first chemo, it was his desire to be as normal as possible, return to school, be with his friends, and, oh yes, go for chemo every 2nd Friday.

The first three months went quite smoothly. Jeff's young body was handling the chemo quite well, and the expensive anti-nausea medication was doing an adequate job in helping him maintain about an 80% attendance rate at school. By receiving chemo every second Friday, the theory was that he would feel well enough to go to school

the following Monday. Often, it was Tuesday or Wednesday before he felt well enough to return to class.

About mid-way through the chemo, at the three-month period, a chest x-ray revealed that the tumor appeared to be gone. Hallelujah! However, medical protocol dictated that the chemo continue for another three months. Jeff, naturally, wanted to know why chemo was still necessary if the tumor was gone. However, like taking penicillin, protocol demands completing the cycle.

I will not dwell on all the ways that fear screamed for attention for I do not feel it is productive. I will say that the final 3 months of chemo were particularly challenging. With the chest x-ray showing no more disease, it was like Jeff's young body, not to mention his mind, started to rebel against the bi-weekly chemo assault.

The two of us found ourselves with little to say on chemo days. We would literally shuffle our way into the hospital and ride the elevator to the long hallway which took us to "the room": that cheerless space with its cauldrons of drugs.

A Course in Miracles teaches that love is all there is. Everything that is not love-based is fear-based. God is only love and creates only love. Sickness is not of love, and thus is not of God. Believing otherwise turns God into some sort of cruel, vengeful monster.

I knew all of this in my head and in my heart. However, sickness in my only child, especially cancer, pressed all kinds of fear buttons. Most powerful was the fear of death and that button was being pushed very strongly, setting off alarms all over my psyche. It is the teachings from *Course*

that prepared me to maintain some sense of sanity around my son's illness.

One Sunday afternoon, in particular, found me unable to overcome the feelings that were registering in my body. Reading positive words was not working. It was like every nerve cell in my body was on fire with all the pent-up fears and frustrations of our journey. I was saying things to myself like, "It's not fair. I can't take this anymore. Why me? Why Jeff? Why us? Why? Why? Why?"

Jeff had already asked the "why me" question, and I had responded, "Why not? None of us is exempt from this. Even someone as good as you. You did not deserve this."

On this particular Sunday afternoon, I knew all of this to be true. However, anxiety persisted, silently but loudly screaming for attention. Thus, in a desire to protect my husband and my son from this pent-up dump of fear, I took myself into our master bedroom's walk-in closet, far from the family room where husband and son were hanging out and I just screamed. Long and loud, I let it all out. Like a baby I howled and kicked and thrashed. You know, it felt good.

On that day, my body was like a pressure cooker with a lid so tightly sealed that nothing could escape. I was holding everything in. It was helpful to take the lid off and just let it all out.

The only fear Jeff ever articulated to us centered around losing his hair. It was, I suppose, something "safe" around which to contain all the conscious and unconscious fears that he could not or would not articulate. The messages

around whether or not he would lose his hair were mixed. One medical professional would say that he definitely would lose ALL his hair; others said maybe not. It didn't help that on his admission to the hospital at the very beginning of his treatment, one of the first people I met was completely bald from her treatment. She and I started talking as we sat together in a waiting room. She didn't waste any time informing me that she knew someone who had Hodgkin's lymphoma. He died. Her insensitivity was outstanding. I wanted to hear only of happy endings. And hope. Thankfully, there were those who showed up with those kinds of stories as well.

We proposed to Jeff that he might want to proactively shave his head, but he decided on wearing a bandana or "doo rag" instead, negotiating with his school to bend their no-hats rule.

In the end, Jeff's hair thinned out but he was not totally bald. He abandoned the doo rag. We did learn that, in the event he had lost his hair, his friends were prepared to shave their heads as a show of support. In my book, that is love.

LOVE LESSON # 10: THE END OF CHEMO WAS NOT THE END OF FEAR

"The end is where we start from."

- T. S. Eliot

The end of August, 1997, marked the end of chemo. As we vacationed with friends at a cottage, Jeff begged us, "Please don't make me have that last treatment. I'm cured. I know I am. I don't need it."

Oh man. In my heart, I wanted so badly to say to him, "It's your decision." I wanted so badly to give him permission to never walk down that chemo hall again. I wanted to say those things. Instead, what I said was this, "I know, but if you don't do it and the Hodgkin's returns down the road, we would find ourselves doubting the decision." As parents who want their son to outlive them, we wanted to ensure all the bases were covered.

Thus, it was that we spent our last day of vacation dreading our return to the city, knowing that we were going to take that long walk to the chemo room one more time the next day, the last Monday in August.

One more time, we shuffled our way to Jeff's last treatment. One might think there would be some joy in knowing it was

the end, but an unexpected thing happened: the end of chemo created panic within me. The end of chemo created another kind of fear: what now? The end of treatment meant that "they" weren't doing anything. Shouldn't "they" be doing something? What if the Hodgkin's wasn't really all gone?

We celebrated, though. Yes, we celebrated. First of all, we planned an outing with family friends and their children to go river rafting on the highest tides in the world here in our little province of Nova Scotia. What was most fun was that we ended up in a wimpy boat. No danger or risk at all. Our wet suits were definitely not needed. We laughed a lot over that!

We also hosted a party for Jeff's friends at our house. The photos show Jeff with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes, but we didn't notice. The chemo was over.

Last, but certainly not least, we were granted a wish by The Children's Wish Foundation, which fulfills wishes for children under 18 who have faced or who are facing grave, life-threatening illnesses. When asked what wish he would like granted, Jeff responded, "Well, I've always wanted to go to Hawaii." Who knew?

And so it was that the three of us, mother, father, son, plus Jeff's friend Ron, spent Christmas at Waikiki Beach, Oahu. We gave the two then-18 year olds lots of space to enjoy their time in the sun and surf and beyond. One of the highlights of their trip was making their first visit to a Hooters restaurant. The young ladies who worked there seemed delighted to pose for pictures with two tall,

handsome 18 year olds from Canada. We are so grateful to The Children's Wish Foundation for the blessings they provide families being visited by serious illnesses.

I am so grateful, as well, to all those in Heaven and on earth that helped us through the journey.

The end of chemo also meant the beginning of follow-up meetings with the hematologist, meetings which lasted for 5 years and ended with these words, "I hope I never see you again." We laughed with delight at words which could have been insulting but for the fact that we understood how deeply they reflected the heart of a doctor who wanted only the best for our boy.

ONE LAST THING

At the time of his diagnosis, Jeff was working part-time for my friend, Theresa Tomilson, whose poem is at the beginning of this book. She wrote these words seven years after the fact:

It's a BIG job, holdin' the light, isn't it? And Jeff is... as you are... extraordinary. "Newnique" would be the word my daughter and I would use. He's got stuff to do. Big stuff, I think. It's gonna be a challenge, but he's got the best support in all the world ~ you, with whom he can share his pain. Gotta love that! It's so hard to be "bigger" when we're the parent and we just want to make it stop for them. Hard to walk through it with them...but then, you know that road well my friend, don't you? You walked with him through the fires of hell and came out the other side.

I could never say I am happy that Jeff walked this particular journey, but I feel blessed to have walked it with him and to have witnessed his courage, his tenacity, his gentleness and his strength.

EPILOGUE: 2013

It has now been 16 years and Jeff continues to inspire me with who he is: a conscientious husband and father, a man who knows who he is, a man who is respected by his peers and colleagues... a gentle man.

On February 9, 2013, just a few days before Valentine's Day, we were in the midst of an East Coast blizzard and, once more, we were in a hospital. This time, though, we were awaiting the birth of our first grandchild. We knew we would be blessed with a girl.

I cannot express to you the joy I felt, seeing our son walk out of the delivery room, beaming from ear to ear, as he carried his newborn daughter from the operating room to meet me, my husband, and her other grandparents. They say babies cannot see, but this brand new little one, swaddled in a hospital blanket, was looking straight into our son's eyes. He was looking right back. He was in love. So was she. And so were we.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Besides being a wife, mother and grandmother, Sheila M. Kelly is a corporate life coach who has, over the past dozen years, worked with hundreds of middle and senior managers over thousands of hours, individually and in groups. Sheila experiences great joy in partnering with her clients and watching them shine as they remove self-limiting beliefs and move from workplace disengagement to transformation.



Sheila and her husband live in Nova Scotia, Canada. They are grandparents to a beautiful girl born in 2013.

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