

# LIFE IS MESSY:

## A Holistic Nurse's Story of Being Patient and Trusting Self through Adversity

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Sixteen years ago, in December 2004, I got a cold. After a few days, the symptoms disappeared, but what remained was a low-grade fever that lasted six weeks. Other than the fever, I had no symptoms. Nothing indicated a reason for this fever, so I was referred to an infectious disease specialist. "It's probably a virus," he concluded. But alas, the fever continued. And so did a nagging feeling – I *knew* something was wrong with my appendix. My feeling was now a belief. I had appendicitis and knew surgery was indicated despite the physicians' diagnoses. No more waiting. But first, I thanked my appendix for its service. It did a stupendous job trying to get my attention, but it was time for the retirement gold watch.

I was ready to advocate strongly for myself and take my health care into my own hands. No one had listened to what I *knew*. As a nurse, I knew a symptom no one could refute: my perception of pain. I called my doctor as I walked into the ER, "Please order a CAT scan. I don't want to lie and pretend when they do the rebound maneuver to make this happen. I know I am right." Finally, he listened. The scan proved I was right and my fear eased. "Your appendix could burst at any time," the resident said looking very worried, "It is three times its normal size. You need emergency surgery." I was vindicated.

At last, I said a final goodbye to my appendix and hello to my own bed, ready to heal after the impact on my body, emotions, thoughts, and spirit. I had learned to trust myself and vowed to fulfill my promise to my stalwart appendix: I would listen

to *me*. I would trust myself. However, two days after surgery, I received the post-op phone call. It was not the nurse but my surgeon, "Jalma, you must come back and have a third of your colon removed. The biopsy showed an adenocarcinoid tumor. You have cancer; I'm so sorry. The standard of care is to remove a third of your colon."

I went numb. Standard of care...*what if you are wrong?* Without thinking, I asked, "Am I dying tomorrow?" He paused and tentatively said, "No, not yet but you have to do something right away." *Not yet?* The numbness disappeared, and I became aware that there was tension in my shoulders. I was scared, and my fear was shifting into full gear. So many thoughts rushed around my head all at once. *Why was everyone in such a hurry, now?* And, what is "standard" anyway? He doesn't know me. Maybe I am not like the standard. I told the surgeon, "I want to think about this." "Don't wait too long," he said immediately, "If you want a second opinion, that's your right, but don't put your head in the sand. You have to do something quickly."

I hung up the phone and stared out the window. I needed time to think. Fear generated many questions: What did I *know* was needed? What did I want? What should I do? The words "Do nothing more" jumped into my thoughts, but this was crazy. I had cancer. What if I made the wrong decision? Maybe I needed more than one second opinion. Maybe I should find a specialist in appendiceal tumors...so many thoughts. I was overwhelmed with fear and the prospect of making the wrong decisions. Who could help me make this decision?

Within a week, I had found four highly recommended physicians, two surgeons, a medical oncologist, and a radiation oncologist. Each had different treatment recommendations – four different standards of care that left me with more questions and no answers. My sister, an ARNP, found a specialist in Washington D.C. who told me I was smart not to have had additional surgery on my colon. “This kind of cancer spreads only to the reproductive organs, gallbladder, and abdominal cavity,” he told me. “Having a portion of your colon removed would not be effective.” He didn’t need to see me. “Go live your life,” he said and hung up. I was hesitant to believe this. Why wasn’t I more relieved? That’s the funny thing about fear – it offers no possibility of clear thinking and wants immediate answers. It kept me unable to hear this physician’s message of “do nothing,” so I decided to convince him to see me in person anyway and asked him to look at my films again. Two days later he called me. On second look, he believed he saw a shadow above my diaphragm on one X-ray, indicating that at some point, my appendix had burst and had the potential for spreading cells into my abdominal cavity. I immediately made an appointment to see him even though I didn’t understand how my appendix could have burst and sealed over without experiencing any pain or developing sepsis/infection. My fear had taken over and I had stopped listening to myself! My promise to my appendix was waning, offering me a ticket on a very dangerous and scary roller coaster.

My husband and a friend accompanied me to Washington D.C. I was too scared to hear any details; I needed others to be my ears. After the physical exam, I was ushered into the specialist’s office. He explained that he was the only one to help me. After 25 years of researching this aberration, he had devised a program that included many of the individual recommendations the other physicians I had contacted suggested. “Surgery and chemo are definitely warranted,” he said, “...but not on my colon.” He would admit me right then and prep me for surgery. He would make an incision from my xiphoid (mid-point just below my rib cage) to the top of my pubis. I would no longer have a belly button. This incision was necessary to remove my gall bladder, uterus, and ovaries. He would then scrub the greater and lesser omentum (the connective tissue sac holding the abdominal organs in place). Next he would instill a chemo cocktail of his design into my abdominal cavity for a period of one week, sew me up, and keep me in the hospital during that time. The chemo concoction would be removed after that week, and I would stay in the hospital for six weeks for monitoring. Without a breath he said, “You are a young woman and healthy. I can cure you, but you have to do this now. If you do not, you will be dead in six months.” He proceeded to pick up the phone to admit me. It seemed that the roller coaster was out of control. I just stared. I could feel a horrible feeling in my gut. I looked at him while I thought silently, “This is too fast. This is my decision not his. He is acting like I am not even here!”

Through all this, my husband’s eyes glazed over, and I think he fell asleep. I was stunned and couldn’t say anything except,

“That’s an awful lot of organs; I’m not ready to lose them.” No words by anyone else were said. It was so quiet until he uttered, “What’s your problem? It’s only a few organs.” I looked directly at him and said, “Yes, but they are *my* organs. I have to think about this.” I needed time to talk with my organs. They have so far been right. At that point, I was in a fog. I found myself holding my abdomen the same way I did to protect my child while I was pregnant. My friend was leading me out of the office. I looked at her and said, “I don’t think they are ready to go yet. And I can’t make this choice alone.” We drove home.

*What do I do? Who do I believe?* I called John, a shaman with whom I had just started working. I explained what had occurred and asked, “What should I do? What decision do I make?” “You already know,” he quietly said. “No, I don’t,” I could feel myself getting annoyed. This was the man I believed knew things I didn’t. He was supposed to help me. “What if I make the wrong decision?” I asked. “You won’t. Whatever you decide, it will be the right choice. “Your body knows; you already know. Be quiet and let the answer emerge.” This was all gibberish to me. I was getting angrier, “But if I make the wrong choice, I might die!” There was no response for a very long time, just silence. Then I heard him say, “So...you’ll die,” he responded matter-of-factly. “The decision you make must be one that no matter what the outcome, *you* are sure that that decision is the right one for *you*. You will be OK with the choice. The end result is not the issue; you have to trust yourself. This is *your* decision and *your* body.”

I knew I didn’t want to die. So I *knew* what I did *not* want. *But did I really want to live?* I sat with that for a while. *Have I really been living?* What is living anyway? Was I eating well and exercising? Was I having fun and enjoying everything I could, or was I only doing what I thought would keep me breathing? Is breathing enough? Is that really living? “This is your Shamanic Journey,” he said, “Be quiet and listen. The answer will come to you.” Now I was really angry. *Come to me? How?* By text message...a white dove...maybe a Candygram? How would I know? I had so many questions, but no answers.

My family all agreed that I should do what the specialist had recommended. They wanted me to “not be stupid.” Everyone but me seemed to know. “Hmmm...,” I thought, “Why don’t I know?” Then my 24-year-old son walked over to me. Looking me in the eyes, he took my hand and said, “Mom, do what you believe is best for *you*; I will support you and be there no matter what. I love you.” Smart kid, but my fear was still in high gear.

That night in bed, I prayed. At that time, I had very little experience praying to God or Spirit since I was 3 or 4 years old when I asked God to make my parents stop yelling (and they never did!). I clasped my hands together, looked up to the ceiling, and prayed, “Show me a sign. What do I do? Who do I trust? I don’t know what to do.” No booming voice nor epiphany happened, just that nagging feeling I should “do nothing.” I was young and healthy, and the specialist would cure me. I crossed myself and kissed the Jewish star my mom gave me for my bat mitzvah and asked every entity that I could think of to send me

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a message. I even got out of bed, faced East and bowed, got on my knees, and asked aloud, "Show me a sign that I am right. I believe I should do nothing." The agreement with my appendix was clear. Letting go was all that was needed. *Was I really living? What do I want?* A flood of tears ran down my cheeks. As I said these words, I could feel fear overtake me and I repeated, "Give me a sign. What can I do to *really LIVE* loudly?" I lowered my head feeling helpless, confused, and scared.

A half hour later, my sister Joyce, who had been the most ardent supporter for working with the Washington D.C. specialist, called me. She said:

*I just had the weirdest experience, about a half hour ago, I was sitting on my bed with the cats watching TV. I asked out loud, 'What do I do to help Jalma?' All of a sudden, the lights flickered. I felt really cold immediately, and the cats ran out of the room. I looked outside, and everyone else still had lights. My whole house was dark. I got a flashlight and checked the breaker box. Everything was fine. I went back upstairs not knowing what to do. As I walked back into the bedroom, I said out loud again, 'How do I help Jalma?' Then I heard a loud male voice that said, 'Do nothing.' The lights came on, and it was no longer cold. The cats came back into the room."*

After a few minutes, she took a loud deep breath, and there was silence. I listened to this story. When I heard the words "do nothing" coming from the most ardent supporter of drastic surgery, I could feel my shoulders lowering. My fear lifted like a big wind had just come through the room, and I *knew*... just like what John, the shaman, had said. I had decided to trust myself. I knew I was going to live. I knew doing nothing was the right choice.

Immediately after this revelation, Joyce said, "Jalma, don't do what the specialist said. He needs a healthy person to be able to live through his treatment plan, and he chose you. *Do nothing*. You are right. I *know* you will live a long life. I don't believe in ghosts or God, whoever this was, but do what you want. You are right!" I got my answer, trusted myself, and didn't die. Then my whole life changed.

Life is messy. Living is messier especially when you are scared and don't even realize it. But your body knows, and by some powerful process, it remembers fear and kicks into protection. I believe everyone has some level of hidden fear created over time by one or many experiences. I no longer needed fear or someone else deciding what I needed. I had my answer. Spirit led me to people who supported me and kept my appendix from bursting. People I hadn't seen in years called saying they just had a feeling they should speak to me... each led me to experiences that led me to the work I now do. I left my job as an organizational development and executive leadership coach. I started working with John, the shaman, and became his student. I began exploring holistic approaches, and by a strange coincidence, I found AHNA.

During a Body Talk workshop, one of the participants happened to mention a book she had read about how a Holistic

Nurse had supported a patient with a brain tumor. "What's a Holistic Nurse?" I asked. When I got home, I looked up the nurse author and called her (I never did meet her in person nor remember her name). She suggested that I attend the next AHNA conference in New Hampshire the following week. "What's AHNA?" I asked. She answered, "It's an organization of holistic nurses. You will not be disappointed." So I went.

That nurse author was right. Within nine months, I was board-certified as a Holistic Nurse, which offered me an understanding of the appendix incident and how my fear had been such a gift. Spirit helped me develop trust in myself, and the support I found allowed me to believe in myself. I became involved with the AHNA. I read voraciously on energy and energy medicine. Finally, I opened my own private practice and built it within a short period of time into a successful business. I loved my work. Those who found me had been unable to be helped by traditional medicine, and we saw miraculous results. I was finally living. Why was this happening? What was different now? Was fear the compulsion? I found that living is messy and challenging. It is also invigorating and a miraculous mystery. Instead of blindly following "standard procedure," I did not do what everyone said. I did "do nothing" and magic happened. I was finally aware of and listened to what had been there all along. I did something I had never done; I trusted the universe to present opportunities. I found that quiet place, as John mentioned, where the answers are not in my head but in my heart. This place is described in a poem by R.M. Rilke (1903/2004):

*Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart  
And try to love the questions themselves  
Like locked rooms and like books  
That are written in a very foreign tongue....  
The point is to live everything.  
Live the questions now.  
Perhaps you will then gradually,  
Without noticing it,  
Live along some distant day  
Into the answers.*

#### REFERENCE

Rilke, R. M. (1903/2004). Letters to a young poet. Letter four. (M.D. Herter Norton, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company.

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