

Cancer Healing and Containment

Judith Edwards^{1*}

¹Cansurviving.com, UK.

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Judith Edwards; Email: judith@judithedwards.co.uk

Citation: Judith Edwards (2017) Cancer Healing and Containment: Nessa J Cancer Sci and Therapy

Received: April 8th 2017, **Accepted:** May 19th 2017, **Published:** May 22nd 2017

Copyright: © 2017 Judith Edwards, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Any cancer diagnosis is a trauma, both for the person who hears the words ‘you have cancer’ and the family and friends surrounding the afflicted patient. For some people these three words spell the beginning of a new state of mind, designated as PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). In this state of mind it is often hard to sleep, often the traumatic diagnosis is relived through nightmares and flashbacks, and people may experience feelings of isolation, irritability and guilt. These symptoms can range from mild to severe, and can have a significant impact on a person’s daily life. Post-traumatic stress disorder may be treated in various ways, but as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist of over thirty years (see Edwards, 2016), I would be thinking about derivatives of ‘the talking cure’- or at least a form of people talking together which can help unpack the thoughts of the traumatised individual and render them more manageable over time. This is ‘containment’: what the dictionary defines as ‘the action of keeping something harmful under control or within limits’.

This is the very same activity which takes place between the ‘ordinary devoted mother’ and her baby. The mother takes in the baby’s feelings and processes them, giving them back in a less alarming form. Gradually by being thought about by the mother or primary carer the baby her/himself may take in the notion of thinking about the self. Put shortly, one can think about oneself once one has been thought about. Once the baby has the belief that thinking about the self is a valuable activity, this generalises into thinking about others. As Mahatma Gandhi put it ‘your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, and your values become your destiny’. Those three words ‘you have cancer’ can paralyse thinking. The individual seizes up, freezes, and becomes helpless, like the rabbit frozen by the glare of the car’s headlights. This paralysed thinking makes the ‘rabbit’ easier to capture, and in the same way the thoughts of others can seep into the newly traumatised patient who no longer has the capacity for judgement, discrimination, or the independent facility to generate her/his own thoughts. This of course is a dangerous time, when the patient is helplessly tending to

flail around, desperately searching for 'the solution' and eager to grasp onto anything which might be offered at that point. 'Just take this away!' - 'heal me!'.

This state of mind is not at all helpful for the newly diagnosed. It is important if not vital not to fall into the trap of red-alert urgent thinking, but to be able, often with the help of those around in the family, to process what has happened and have the space to think through the next step without being pressured (as many people so often report) into instant solutions. But what happens when kind and well-meaning family and friends are also catapulted into this state of urgency, and pressure the patient to take the first offer of help without any consideration of alternatives, or different points of view? One has to step back, breathe, calm down and consider what might be best. This cancer has been a long time growing in the body and instant solutions are often not the best ones. That is why having heard these three words myself, and after some time of being in that inevitably frozen state, I started the site www.cansurviving.com to help others through the dark time and onwards towards a life of living with cancer rather than dying from it. It is not only possible, but doable, and is done over and over again as any search on the World Wide Web will show. But the World Wide Web, sea of shifting information that it is, can be a bewildering place when you are in a state of shock. In the site founded five years ago one of our forums is called 'How do I start?' which many people (from 46 countries at last count) have accessed. We ask 'Are you dazed and confused by all the information out there?' Starting with juicing, and listening to a radio programme, we encourage the traumatised person to start to feel less alone, more held and contained, and able to regain a state of mind where real thinking and choosing is possible., One has to be one's own advocate, make one's own decisions, in a world post-cancer diagnosis where there are no magic bullets and no cast-iron guarantees whichever route you choose to take.

When I first was diagnosed with cancer I dreamed of driving in my car into a huge black cloud. I could see nothing. But I could see that further along - but how much further along- the cloud turned into thin fog, then who knew what came next? Yes, a storm was brewing. I can now look back, and I really resonated with something Haruki Murakami said in his novel *Kafka on the Shore*.

"Once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about"

The importance of mindset

Mindset is indeed key to this endeavour of surviving the storm and carrying on. Many people have reported to us how alone they feel, after they have been discharged from their orthodox treatment, because it was indeed that containment, desperately called on during a time of maximum stress, which helped them feel they were not alone. But of course the orthodox team moves on, and the individual feels yet again left on her/his own to cope with the fears and anxieties which

may start to rise up again in the mind, when the containment of the hospital and the consultant is over. While I did not feel I wanted to put forward my personal story on the site, many others mailed us (I have a team of four people around me who contain and help me as we all need to be contained) and after a while I had to have a conversation with myself: 'Perhaps what you have been doing all these years does have a relevance here too, in the world of cancer and its aftermath'. As Atul Gawande said in his Reith Lecture (a link to which is on the site) 'if talking were a drug, it would cost millions of pounds'. Face to face talking is of course the gold standard, but with the rise of the web international 'talking' can now be undertaken and is proving to be extremely beneficial.

Personal Stories

So the Forum 'Personal Stories' came into being, and people have posted their stories as a way both of helping others and of feeling less alone themselves. The site Newsletter is another way in which people can feel united in their efforts to undertake massive changes in their lives, involving mind, body and spirit. This is one response to the last newsletter: "Thank you so much for including us in your newsletter. It is great to find out more about your helpers, and it tends to make them people we feel we can know rather than just a name. Barbara and I admire the efforts all make to ease concerns and assist so many people get through the dreaded C. We also believe a website focussed on building personal stamina in the so many ways members suggest can assist far more than many of the product suggestions offered. We are not against any product or suggestion that can be offered to anyone, in some way they can all help somewhat we guess? It is the **mind set** to get through the problem that we find helps so many people with any issue they may be facing and your website could quite often be the "Key starter" for this." The idea of the site being a 'Key Starter' is an excellent one- and it IS the start of something new...there is no going back and most people really appreciate that, and enjoy new lives in the company of others. Being part of this site and helping it grow is one of the activities that make up the whole that is 'the designated patient'. Adding in raw, organic foods, super-herbs, clean water, etc. will cause an undeniable shift in metabolism and in the ability to go out in the world and carry on living. As people begin to feel the results from the shifts being made, they regain happier states of mind and feel compelled to share what they know- as was I. It spreads from there. This type of personal experience is what cascades into more and more people making changes and transforming from the inside out.

History is not Destiny

If I loop back once more to the experience gained from over thirty years in the profession of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the act of containment helps people to realise that history is not destiny (Fonagy et al, 1993), that change can be effected and even quite drastic pronouncements can be shifted over time, looked at from different perspectives, and result in different outcomes. His research shows this very clearly: that it is the reflective function which carries people through difficult times. This is in essence what lies at the heart of this word 'containment': that new thoughts can germinate and old thoughts can fall away. It is remarkable how much longer so called 'terminal' patients live when they

are in the caring environment of a hospice, and it is also remarkable how 'terminal' diagnoses can be lifted. This was the experience of the person who was my role model: he was told to go home, make his will and prepare to die eight years ago. He had secondary tumours and the medical team did not know where the primary tumours were located. He is still happy and healthy today, having followed this idea of changing mind, body and spirit. There are no tumours now in evidence. This is just one story: not a miracle.

From containment to commitment

After containment, commitment is staying loyal to what you set out to do, long after the initial mood you said it in has disappeared, there is no short cut to complete well-being. It is an ongoing progress which takes determination, as we say on the site. 'Please be aware that once you become cancer free that does not mean you can return to an unhealthy lifestyle. Why change something if it worked for you? We do not all have an adviser {though people can gain much helpful information from the one site} but we do have that small voice inside telling us "If we stop now we might never get back to this point'. We had this mail from a journalist site member who had recently been diagnosed...'I wanted to thank you very much for being so kind to me. {the power of containment} Initial diagnosis and those damn scans were shocking...I have to admit I'm no longer in a permanent state of panic, that subsided thanks to you but it's still far from ideal. Meanwhile I'm following a fairly rigid diet and having acupuncture. And have just about recovered from my shock about how revolting vegan and sugar free chocolate is!' Slowly does it: baby steps which are indeed what the contained baby learns to take.... One of our newest members commented 'Your site interests me each time I study it..there is always something significant on it. It is terrific: you have the skills to make the reader go on reading' (yes we encourage all people who access the site to browse and come back again and again- just as those having a course of psychotherapy come back for regular sessions.)'Keep up the impressive word pictures! Continue moving the people!' A year after setting up the site, which has grown over these five years as we all have grown, (it is now accessed in 46 countries, from Chile to China, from the USA to Uzbekistan) I met someone in Italy who said her sister in law had healed herself of cancer after not tolerating chemo using 'this site called can surviving'. She was thrilled to make the link. This of course strengthened my own determination to continue: to be motivated at the times when depression threatened to envelope life.

Stories and containment

The various forums on the site range from a library of book with reviews, a huge and growing forum about Diet and the Body, which has subsections on naturopathy, homeopathy and acupuncture, an up to date research forum headed by a researcher from What the Doctors Don't tell You, and posts in the Mind and spirit forum which include meditation and dancing, laughter and joy, as well as poetry, music and storytelling, depression and dying (which we will all have to do one day). 'Will you or Won't You?' is our title for that one. We all have a tendency to turn a blind eye and deny mortality, as Freud said, but it is there. There are posts about exercise, and about the importance of sleep- and of course

of dreams and dreaming. Every person's story has a special dimension and a man or woman's sense of self and his/her world is created through their story. These stories orient the life of a people through time, as we can survivors establish the reality of our new world. Meaning and purpose are given to people's lives. Without story, in a sense you could say we do not exist. And what story will we tell ourselves? The way of containment and story is how we discover who we are; all of us on this site have discovered something more about ourselves through being part of this venture. Creativity after diagnosis is something which unites us all, and is also the name of a Forum on the site, where 'famous' people and also just 'ordinary' people find out that creative wellsprings become stronger in the face of adversity. Eve Ensler, creator of the Vagina Monologues, was diagnosed with Stage 3-4 cancer several years ago –'Cancer was just like a smash into the wall. When I sat there and they said the cancer might be in your liver too, it was like a new world. Wake the fuck up, sister! And I bless it...Was I glad to get cancer? Are you kidding? Of course I am. I wasn't in the beginning. But then I really got it. I'd always been out to prove myself: was I going to prove myself to death? Now? I'm missing seven organs and 70 nodes, and I'm functioning. How would I not love this body? Once you live in your body, you can just be'.

Conclusion

What I hope to have shown here is that containment is a vital part of the process of healing from cancer. It is something often ignored by 'orthodox' medicine and it is something that people yearn for as they wander helplessly around the world-wide web, searching for they know not what. The can surviving site aims to provide this containment, via the power of the group process, and our rising numbers hear out that it is fulfilling its unique function.

I would like to end with both some words and a song. A member from Australia said "I heard about this site from some colleagues in the USA. They said it was the best site on the web for healing cancer". Since there are over nine million of them that is quite an accolade. I hope this article will widen the ever-growing remit of this free site, with its growing membership, and help more people become can survivors and thrives rather than cancer victims, as they experience the power of containment and group support. A singer-songwriter has written the site a song called 'Take a Look Outside the Box'--- <http://www.jpalliomusic.com/outside-box/> (also on the site)--that's also a good way to end, to keep on thinking, not in competition with anyone, but in cooperation, in order to help women and men and children too who receive a cancer diagnosis, go on to live their lives fully, being contained by the group of which they are now a part.

References

1. Edwards, J. (2016) *Love the Wild Swan, Selected Papers in the World Mental Health Series*, London and New York, Routledge
2. Fonagy, P., Steele M, Moran G, Steele H, Higgitt A, (1993):Measuring the ghost in the nursery: an empirical study of the relation between parents' mental representations of childhood experiences and their infants' security of attachment *J Am Psychoanal Assoc.* 1993;41(4):957-89.