

ARTS & LIFE

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A woman's account of journey through illness resonates with many



SUSAN
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It has been 20 years since Montrealer Susan Wener had her cancerous right lung removed — and 25 since she underwent surgery for colon cancer. And with the perspective that time brings, she has decided to write about what life in the crucible of illness has taught her.

Following the colon surgery, she had chemotherapy. But when doctors recommended chemotherapy after her lung surgery, she chose not to follow their advice.

“I decided to go rogue,” Wener, now 61, observes in her unflinching new memoir, *Resilience: a Story of Courage and Triumph in the Face of Recurrent Cancer* (Figure 1 Publishing), “and from the moment I made my decision, I never looked back.”

When we're sick, most of us spend far too much time worrying about whether we will live or die, she continues. “It would make so much more sense to think about how well we could live, or even how well we could die.”

When she was sick, Wener looked for books “by people who had lived a long time, to model — you want to know what happened to them, how it turned out — and I never found them,” she said in an interview before the recent Toronto launch of the book.

Most people who write ill-

ness memoirs write them soon after the ordeal. She chose to wait as long as she did because, in the interim, she learned a lot. Her journey through illness led her back to school and study. She studied to become a natural health consultant, learned a great deal about techniques including visualization, guided imagery and body-mind connections. And in time, she opened a practice to help people deal with life-threatening illnesses.

In the practice, she tries “to help people use what they have in their own minds and bodies,” she said. “I want to offer them different strategies and tools.”

And even if they will not live longer than they would otherwise, it is important “that they are able to do something to help themselves.”

Wener writes from the point of view of a patient — but also an educator and a therapist. The most difficult part of the book project — she began in 2012, writing longhand — was reliving in her memory the experiences of being ill, she said. In addition to the cancer, there were other illnesses, including many bouts of bowel obstruction and a stubborn case of *C. difficile*. Remembering it, “I would be suffering,” she recalled. “I would be constipated, bloated, have pains, get bronchitis. I got physically sick. I sat and cried a lot.”

But it was therapeutic.

“What happens when you go through a traumatic ex-



HOWARD KAY PHOTOGRAPHY

Susan Wener, with husband Jonathan, in 2013. Her new memoir about her cancer battle has been released.

perience is that you numb yourself,” she said. “You try so hard to hold yourself together and to be brave. And with distance, you start to thaw a little bit ... this book was cathartic for me.”

Wener says the book is for people who believe they could benefit from reading of the experience of someone who has been ill and has found a way to cope and thrive. Resilience is “about living through the stuff that you're given and making the best of it, about creating a life even if you are in pain, even if you are suffering,” she said.

Memoirs are, by definition, about the self — perhaps illness memoirs more than any other kind. “When you're sick, it has to be about you,” she said. “I think that part of the problem with people who are ill is that they have to take care of themselves.”

But what transports books like *Resilience* beyond mere narcissism, what imbues them with value, is if they resonate with a wider audience.

Illness is a deeply personal experience and, in that way, it can be isolating.

“I find people are afraid to talk to others,” Wener said.

She said people have told her that in reading, “they felt that they were heard, that somebody understood what they wanted, what it was like to travel through illness, that they were hopeful.”

Sometimes, people sit around and they wait — wait to get better or to get sicker or for their doctors to tell them what to do. *Resilience* “is about having a more active role,” she said.

The main message of her book is “Let's get patients self-responsible. Let's talk to

doctors so they understand your motivations and why you are trying to do what you are trying to do,” she said.

It's important for doctors to remember that they're not just treating a disease — but treating people living with a disease, she said.

Cancer happens to the entire family and not only to the person with the diagnosis. Her three daughters, for instance, all grew up to be “really strong women, all involved with helping people.”

Wener acknowledges that the remission of her cancer might have been spontaneous. But it is her belief that her attitude toward her illness made a difference — both to her and to the people in her life.

She remembers a conversation during her illness with her eldest, Jacqueline, who was just 19 at the time. “If you die, I want you to know that you live inside me, and all the lessons you've taught me will carry me through my life. I will always hear your voice.”

She acknowledges that it can be frustrating for some physicians and surgeons when patients choose paths that veer from those adhered to by conventional medicine. But it is their choice.

The decision not to have chemotherapy showed her how much she was changing. “The old Susan would have crumbled under the mounting pressure,” she writes.

“She wouldn't have wanted to disappoint anyone. I finally realized that I did not need to

please anyone other than myself ... This was my life and, therefore, these would be my choices.

“I was prepared to deal with whatever consequences I had to face ... I went from reading books about cancer to reading books about health and well-being. I no longer wanted to be defined as a cancer patient.

“I felt responsible to, and for, myself. My attitude affected my conduct, and it encouraged me to continuously strive toward health and well-being.”

Wener practised meditation and visualization and sought treatment from a massage therapist, an osteopath and a doctor of Chinese medicine. In the book, she describes other treatments she sought — and the sometimes remarkable results.

And yet she chose not to discuss these with her doctors.

“Unless doctors learn to listen in a non-judgmental manner, they will never really know what goes on with their patients behind closed doors,” she writes.

“Are we so arrogant as to believe that we have all the answers?” she asks. “Are we so sure of ourselves in the West that we think no other system of medicine can possibly work?”

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