
REFLECTIONS



I wanted to get away from it all, and now I have to spend a week with someone dying of metastatic breast cancer!

Everything happens for a reason. . .

Mary O. Schueller, MSN, RN, AOCNS, CHPN

In winter, as the temperature plummets and the hours of daylight diminish, I begin to think about a vacation getaway to a warm location. My preferred destination is one with a very relaxed pace and lots of sunshine. The thought of a brief reprieve from work and all things cancer is an added bonus.

One particular year, I made the decision to book a week-long Caribbean cruise. In an effort to keep the price reasonable, I decided sharing a cabin was a must. Because none of my family or friends could accompany me that particular week in March, I decided to let the cruise line assign a roommate. I had grown up in a family of seven children, lived in a college dorm, and was used to having lots of other people around, so surely I could survive a week with just about anyone!

I boarded the ship and was first to arrive at our cabin. I proceeded to settle into my “home-away-from-home” for the week. Having cruised before, I was immediately relaxed and in a vacation mode.

Several hours later my roommate, Angie, arrived. The first thing I noticed about her was her delightful English accent. She was soft-spoken, petite, blonde, and older than me. As she unpacked, we began to get acquainted with each other. I learned that she was from Wales. Of course, she wasn’t familiar with Wisconsin, and I thought, “Good . . . we’ll have something to talk about for a week!” She asked me what I did for a living, and I told her that I am an oncology nurse. She stopped in her tracks as she was unpacking. She paused. Then she quietly said, “Well, that’s wonderful.

It must be fate.” She continued, saying, “I have breast cancer. It’s spread to my bones. I came on this cruise because my doctor tells me that I’m going to be dying soon. Taking a cruise is something I’ve always wanted to do.” She then set out her medication bottles, one by one, on the vanity in our cabin. My first thought was, “OK, God, this is a cruel joke. All I wanted to do was get away from it all (especially my work and cancer!), and now I have to spend a week with someone dying of metastatic breast cancer!”

After the initial shock wore off, I realized that divine intervention was truly at work. As it turned out, Angie and I spent a wonderful week together. In addition to enjoying the scenic Caribbean locale, beautiful weather, and wonderful amenities of the cruise ship, we discussed the challenges of living after being told, “You have cancer.” We talked about her treatment regimen, and I discovered how similar it was to that for breast cancer patients in the United States. We talked about death and how she was preparing her son for the day that would come. She shared things with me that she probably never would have shared with another roommate.

I listened and learned. She helped me to understand how precious good health is and that it should not be taken for granted. She gave me a glimpse into the importance of relationships with family, friends, and God when faced with a serious illness. She reinforced the positive impact nurses can

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have as they provide end-of-life care. She was a prime example of someone who lived each moment as if it was going to be her last. She was serene and not morbid.

At the conclusion of the cruise, we parted ways and vowed to stay in touch. I returned to work with a renewed passion for oncology nursing. I was more attentive to the opportunities I have to make a difference in the lives of my patients. I was also more cognizant of what great teachers our patients can be if we take time to really listen to them.

Months later, I had the opportunity to travel to the British Isles on another vacation. Although the purpose of the trip was

not specifically to visit Angie, I decided to arrange the itinerary so that I could visit her in her hometown. As we ate a delightful dinner together in Cardiff, I could not help but reflect on the irony of the whole situation. Initially, I was unhappy to have to spend my vacation time with someone with cancer. Now, I was seeking it out!

When a Christmas card I sent to Angie months after my trip went unanswered, I realized that she must have died. I thought about how lucky I was to have met her. But most of all, I reflected on the greatest lesson I learned from knowing her: Everything really does happen for a reason! ■

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