



Ask the Survivor

By Erica S. Goldman-Brodie

Erica S. Goldman-Brodie, a retired schoolteacher, part-time teacher-mentor, and author, lives in Riverdale, New York, with her husband, Rabbi Joseph Brodie. She was diagnosed with stage IV clear cell endometrial carcinoma on September 10, 2004, and has been in remission since June 1, 2005.

Since becoming a survivor, how have you taken charge of your own physical health? Are you more proactive in taking care of yourself?

I've found that walking on the treadmill is calming and releases tension, not to mention promotes weight loss. I also keep track of my food and exercise on a great cellphone app that helps me manage my nutrition on a pie chart. It doesn't lie even if I'd like to lie to myself!

I've also learned that early treatment can save a great deal of aggravation and that it's my responsibility to tell my doctors of any changes. But truthfully, there have been times that I've waited longer than I should have or been dismissive of symptoms. I'd like to chalk this up to benign neglect, but I'll admit it's possible that it's my way of dealing with post-treatment anxiety.

How has your life changed since retirement and how have you stayed busy?

I used to think I would never retire and even dreaded the idea. I loved teaching and after 37 years it still brought me great joy and satisfaction. It wasn't until I started treatment that I took some time off and ended up discovering a whole new experience of living outside of teaching.

Now that I'm officially retired, I take interesting courses and make frequent trips to the beautiful New York Botanical Garden with my husband. We've also become members of museums, attend concert rehearsals during the day and, best of all, we can meet friends whenever we want.

Much to my surprise, I truly love retirement. My husband jokes that he doesn't know how we had time

to work! So as much as I loved teaching, I'm enjoying retirement at least as much.

How has survivorship and getting older affected your friendships and relationships?

When I was first diagnosed, I spoke to a friend who is a cancer survivor. She said, "If you asked me now whether or not I'd want to relive my life with or without the cancer, I'd answer, 'WITH!'" At the time, I thought she was truly crazy! Looking back, I think I know what she meant. Not only do I have a very deep appreciation of the past 11 years of life, but I've also looked back upon my entire life with so much more gratitude and appreciation than I ever had before.

Three close friends were like Elijah the prophet, always showing up unexpectedly when needed most, while I was in treatment. They checked in on me daily, came with me as my head was shaved, attended appointments, and even made jewelry especially for me, and were always able to make me laugh during treatments. We still meet regularly and go through hoops to make sure that we can all be there. It's a tonic like no other.

To celebrate my 70th birthday, I recently contacted two high school friends. Unbeknownst to me, they had not seen each other since we graduated in 1964. My memories of them were confirmed; they were as lovely, fun, articulate, and caring as I had remembered. The several hours together melted away the many years of absence.

That encounter inspired me to reach out to people in my life now and people who had previously been in my life to recognize and salute their importance to me. It's been so rewarding.

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preached that the place where people truly connect is pain. We do not always need to be talked out of it or told everything will be OK. Now I'm in the last stage of treatment: a daily pill that should reduce my chance of reoccurrence by 40 percent. There are side effects, but I thank God for early detection.

It wasn't that long ago that people were afraid to say the word "cancer." It was the "Big C." But we're in a cancer awakening.

How do you make cancer normal and not awkward? It's neither by ignoring it nor by fawning over it. When we learn that our friends and colleagues, neighbors and sisters have been afflicted, we can meet them in their place of pain, affirm who they are, and accompany them as best we can on their journeys.

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Has your philosophy of life changed as a cancer survivor?

My husband recently had open-heart surgery and thankfully, he's fine. During his and my own health scares, I had a renewed appreciation for modern medicine and its practitioners, who are able to prolong the quantity and the quality of life. They didn't do it alone; friends, family, and community all sustained us. As I prayed for Joe's survival — as he had done 11 years before for mine — I realized that our human, mortal life is finite and living and sharing an ethical, love-filled, love-giving, and love-getting life is priceless!

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Cover Bridge Photo
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Produced by the
Department of Communications

Bridges is a publication of the
Cancer Survivorship Center at MSK.

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Wendy Bonilla at 212-639-5007 or
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