



## ~ Personal Reflections ~

### THREADING THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

*Navigating through the world of conventional and alternative medicine*

by Brian O'Donnell

In the past four years I've had two serious medical crises that required a choice of how to treat these conditions - using conventional medical treatment and/or alternative approaches. It goes without saying that to make life altering choices when you are deeply thrown is difficult. One's usual capacities are shaken and at times unavailable. Yet oddly, in just such a time, new capacities and resources can be revealed. The usual structures of thought and feeling can be more porous and fresh possibilities can enter.



The first diagnosis, which I received about 4 years ago, was prostate cancer. This was determined not only by a blood test but through a biopsy of the organ. I was completely surprised as I was relatively young for such a diagnosis (56). I also prided myself on living a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise, good nutrition, spiritual practice and a healthy balance of work and rest did not make me immune to this occurrence.

My urologist strongly recommended a radical prostatectomy. This is the surgical removal of the prostate, major surgery that can have very challenging side effects including incontinence and impotence. I made it a part time job to explore the literature on the disease and treatment options. I also decided to get other opinions. All told, I consulted five different medical specialists to ascertain my options.

I visited a well-known specialist in treating this condition without surgery. He recommended radiation, which basically destroys the prostate without the vagaries of surgery. Yet this method also has its own possible deleterious side effects. I even visited the doctor at the University who is most recognized in the approach of "watchful waiting" which is the idea of not intervening surgically or radiologically but to keep a close eye on the cancer as it may be slow growing and not need any treatment. Even he recommended surgery or radiation as I was so young and would tolerate the treatment better and the possibility could be that the cancer was more aggressive as I was younger.

This perspective was compelling to me as he was the expert in this option of watchful waiting or active surveillance. I decided to go ahead with conventional treatment and

chose radiation. I was configured for the procedure, an experience very similar to the procedure itself, which was scheduled in one month's time. I was ready and set to follow this protocol.

At the same time I was exploring alternative methodologies. I prayed to be guided to whoever might be able to help me. I saw a number of well regarded energy healers; I intensified my nutritional regimen; I increased my Pathwork sessions and I had a Native American medicine pipe healing ceremony. A number of other practitioners were recommended to me but in meditation I didn't feel a resonance. I learned to listen and respect my guidance. I went to whomever the guidance directed, no matter how outside my paradigm and I declined whomever my guidance directed no matter how highly recommended.

A significant and profound realization came to me in the midst of the Native American healing ceremony. It was augmented in my the work with my Pathwork Helper. I could surrender to whatever was being asked - even if that meant my death. I saw that healing does not have a particular outcome and may not mean a "cure". I understood that the desire for a cure can be an egoic impulse to remove a symptom so as to feel better, certainly understandable, yet quite different than a healing , which is a deep surrender to what is - an opening and inquiry into what may be out of balance and the willingness to pay the price to re-establish this balance no matter how uncomfortable. I came face to face with my fear of dying. I embraced it in such a way that it didn't have control over me, in that moment of my journey. I was released from my decision being shaped by fear. I didn't want to die, in fact the crisis activated strong impulses to live more fully, yet if this what was being asked I could yield.

A background to this exploration was the fact that my brother also had prostate cancer. He had had surgery and this did not abate the cancer. He was slowly slipping away. So the reality of this disease and its toll was never far from my awareness.

One morning in the few weeks before my radiation, and shortly after the healing ceremony, I had a meditation that clearly indicated something had shifted and that I should get another blood test and reconsider my treatment. I questioned this, as it seemed so predictable for someone in my situation - to deny and avoid the upcoming trauma and discomfort. I also hesitated asking my urologist for another blood test as he may also suspect my motives. To his credit he listened and agreed. The blood test came back dramatically different. The blood values were now in the low normal range. The urologist was surprised.

I called and canceled my radiation and the radiologist was taken aback and said I was making a big mistake and "you will be back in a year, only worse off!" This was challenging to hear and yet I felt the rightness of my decision. It wasn't made from fear. I was willing to undergo the treatment. I was willing to meet whatever might come my way. I was also willing to trust my own inner authority. This took some fortifying as I had to contend with all these doctors urging me to pursue conventional notions of treatment. (In the past few years since my diagnosis medical opinion is evolving around the recommendations of testing and treatment for prostate cancer.)

It has now been four years and my tests numbers have bounded around some yet have remained in the normal range. I'm aware that these numbers may change again. If so I'm open to considering con-ventional treatment. This may be exactly the healing agent that I

require.

In the Fall of 2011 another medical challenge occurred. I had sharp stabbing pains in my gut that lead to a diagnosis of diverticulitis. This was confirmed by a CT scan. Once again the resounding chorus of conventional opinion was to have surgery to remove the diseased sigmoid colon, which is about 18 inches long and no small matter. This had been my fourth attack in the last year and the conventional recommendation is to remove the sigmoid after two severe bouts.

The science of this disease seemed to me more established than that of the prostate. There were not competing medical specialists vying for their prescribed methods as there are with prostate treatment. So I didn't seek a second medical opinion. Also the pain was quite palpable unlike with prostate cancer where there are no symptoms.

Yet I also wanted to check in with alternative treatments. So I made the rounds again of energy healers and alternative practitioners. Some were convinced I could use herbs or healing to treat this condition. Some were neutral. One told me during the consultation that any surgical invasion of the body was counter productive, only a few minutes later catching herself and admitting this was her bias. She asked inside herself again and came back and said that surgery might be helpful. I felt so grateful as this was the only practitioner, alternative or conventional, to admit their bias and to look beyond it.

Another alternative practitioner told me in a detached manner that he detected liver cancer while scanning me. I had mentioned that the CT scan had revealed lesions on my liver. He suggested that I not go for a scheduled MRI to further discern the nature of these lesions. Instead I should do more treatments with him. "The MRI will only confirm the cancer and they will urge you to treat it medically when I can treat it this alternative way."

I was completely undone with his diagnosis and his clinical manner of delivering such devastating news. I spent several days believing I was going to die.

Again I was called to my inner authority. When I quieted myself enough to listen to my inner voice I decided to go ahead with the MRI. It revealed, after painstaking days of waiting and numerous missed calls from the lab, that the lesions were benign cysts and needed no treatment.

I chose the sigmoid surgery. I had a skillful and compassionate surgeon, yet the surgery was strong medicine indeed. One year has passed and there are scant traces left of this treatment. I had it done robotically and so the scars are almost invisible and I am in better shape than I have been in years as I was suffering with a diseased bowel and didn't know it.

What did I learn from these medical challenges? I learned that both conventional and alternative methods have their place. Each practitioner, with their particular world view, can be both helpful and blinded by their strengths and prejudices. This commitment to their structure of understanding can allow for depth of learning and practice yet it can obscure other equally valid yet unknown perspectives.

I learned that disease can be a doorway to awaken inner authority, as well as lead to submission to the egoic forces of fear and the need for certainty.

When we feel shaken and unsure the temptation is to turn ourselves over to the "experts". The true expert lives within us and can guide us uniquely in every situation and decision.

The essential point for me was to turn within and trust my own inner "doctor". Of course this can be easily misunderstood and misused to rationalize a fear based decision. The price to pay for trusting this inner knowing is that I had to open to any course of treatment, alternative or conventional, before I could truly hear what my guidance was leading me to. If I could accept something beyond my preference I could more faithfully trust what the deeper intelligence was revealing. If I could relax grasping and aversion, which is no easy task especially when it is life and death, I could open to the medicine of the soul.

*Brian O'Donnell, Helper Great Lakes Pathwork and around the world.*  
©Brian O'Donnell 2013