

## We Never Walk Alone: My Testimonial Cancer Trip by Gary Wagner

Numerous people have told me I should put my cancer journey, of a year and a half, on paper. My initial reaction was how would it benefit others. I determined that considering how much it has improved my faith it may have a similar effect on those who already know God. I further hope that those words may have a positive effect on some that just don't get it.

There are those that may feel sympathy for me. Thank you but that's not the reason I wrote this. I am hoping anyone reading this will be drawn closer to God.

Many people who get a cancer diagnosis become very reclusive. I have done the exact opposite. Anyone who asked how I was doing got the whole picture complete with answered prayers, God given strength and more.

It almost seemed like I was bragging about having cancer. Now wouldn't that be silly? In reality, I was bragging about God and what He could and had done in my life.

I couldn't imagine how my wife could get along without me, for that reason I had no doubt that God would lead me through this to cancer free result. I further gave my pastor, Sweiss Ubels, permission to use this story in anyway that it might be helpful to others. For that reason he has kept the congregation advised every step of the way.

As I attempt to put this story on paper I will try to include everything play by play. Some of it may be a little boring, although I will try to prevent that. Some issues may be a little unpleasant but that is part of the story and I need to include them so that you realize how important God given strength was to a positive outcome.

I certainly couldn't do this verbally. I get too emotional. There are many parts that are better left where I buried them. However, I need to dig them up so that you will know that only God could have brought me to where I am now, cancer free.

It all started in early January 2016. My bowels had been a roller coaster for months. My family doctor, Dr. MacKinnon, sent me to Kentville to see a surgeon and have a scope done. When we met with the doctor and I told him my story, he didn't think I needed a scope done. When my family doctor was told this, he was not very happy. On his demand, a scope was done and a tumor was discovered. Had Dr. MacKinnon not insisted a scope be done, the cancer would probably not be known until it was too late. We were not prepared for this but I don't think anyone is ever ready to hear the word cancer.

After the tumor was found, a CAT (CT) scan and MRI were ordered. I had the CAT scan

on January 20, 2016. The MRI was scheduled for January 27th. I got a call the day before cancelling it. I told my wife one of two things has happened; either we've had a miracle or the cancer is bad enough they can't help me.

We went to Kentville to talk to the surgeon on January 27th. He told us that besides the bowel, cancer had spread to my liver and he could do nothing for me other than chemo. I probably had no more than two years to live.

We found out later that my cancer was “stage three”. Further, that cancer travels from one organ to another through the blood stream. Once it's in the blood, it can go anywhere.

I very much want to emphasize that we do not believe in coincidences. For one to pray for something, have that prayer answered, and then call it a coincidence is an insult to God.

That Wednesday night when we got home from Kentville, Jane (my wife) and I prayed for a chance. Not for a cure but for a chance to fight it.

The very next morning, we got a call from the Cancer Centre in Halifax to come in the following Monday morning to see a Medical Oncologist. Anyone who knows anything about the medical system, knows in order to see a specialist, you need to be referred. This can take days or even weeks. We were not referred. We asked who sent us and they had no record of a referral. It certainly wasn't the doctor in Kentville for when we told him we were going to Halifax, he was mad “What are they going to do for you that I can't do” was his response. Put in unquestionable words, we were referred by God.

The oncologist wasn't very positive. However, he said they meet once a week to discuss the new cases that have come in and he would let me know if someone thought they could help. Further he would only call if it were possible. I told him I would do whatever was asked of me. I just wanted a chance.

Two things were done initially. First of all, our Pastor and Elders came to our home and anointed us and prayed over us with the laying on of hands. Further, on someone's suggestion, I started a “Blessing Book”. No matter what happened on a given day, I tried to find something positive to put in it. There were times I got a bit slack with this but when I was loyal in writing, it helped.

A little over a week after meeting with the oncologist, they called for me to come back in. This was only going to happen if they could do something. When we went in they thought surgery may be possible. They would start me on chemo and I would get a call from the surgeon.

In order to put chemo into the body, they put a receptor called a “port-a-cath” under the

skin on the shoulder and inserted into a vein in order to receive the chemo needle. I, of course, got very anxious to get things started. I needed this port-a-cath put in before they could start chemo. After waiting what seemed like forever, I called the oncologist's nurse to inquire about an appointment to install the port-a-cath. A couple of days later, I had an appointment. I will tell you here, you need to be your own advocate. If things are moving too slow don't be shy in calling. They are incredibly busy and it is easy to get overlooked.

When the chemo started, we knew it was going to be a three and a half month trip. However, there was no way of knowing what side effects I would have. As an end result, I was one of the lucky ones. I had no hair loss or weight loss which is very common. Nausea and vomiting are also common. I had none of the latter and very little nausea. Chemo will affect the mind's clarity. They call it chemo fog. It is also very tiring.

Chemo day in Kentville was always a long one (7-8 hours). Initially, there was all kinds of paperwork. Then there were two different bottles of stuff they IV'd into my port. Then there was one bottle that I took home with me. Two days later, that was removed in Annapolis Hospital. This was followed by a two week wait to regain strength. Bloodwork results allowed me to continue chemo without interruption. Many people had to postpone because the numbers weren't good enough. Another blessing. God making me strong.

Ten days after starting chemo I met with my surgeon. He said there were a total of eleven spots on my liver and the only way to get rid of the cancer was with three and a half months of chemo followed by surgery which would remove over half of the liver. He said he would like to give me better survival odds but he could only suggest 40% chance of beating it. If the chemo didn't help, he couldn't.

I told Jane when we started all we could do was to put one foot in front of the other until we got to the end. When I asked God for help and didn't take the reins myself, things went okay.

There were undoubtedly going to be many trips where I wouldn't feel like driving. Some for physical reasons, others for emotional. As Jane didn't drive, we would need drivers. Those who volunteered became very dear friends. I won't mention them here as I know they would prefer to be anonymous. I will tell you that they sat in on the doctor's appointments in order to be totally included. We never had to cancel an appointment because we didn't have a driver. In some cases, they stayed overnight to get us there for surgery the next day. To this day, they continue to be there. We had so many people praying for us that I often said I could feel people praying and I sincerely believe that to be true. We are so thankful and grateful for all the prayers.

We, of course, were put on the prayer chain. Sweis, our pastor would call me Thursday mornings to ask what we were praying for specifically today. I remember one time in

particular, I was waiting for a vital appointment that was slow to happen. I called Sweis shortly after 9 am to say that I got into my appointment. That was ten minutes after they prayed for it. There were so many events like this that certainly made up for the bad spots.

A little over ten years ago, Jane had cancer (sarcoma) on her leg. Of course, it was a hard situation. There was one occasion when she was going for a CAT scan prior to surgery and she was very nervous. In her mind she said "sweet Jesus". The response that came to her mind very clearly was "everything will be alright. My first chemo day when we went in the chemo lab , the first thing we saw among many other donated signs was one that said "everything will be alright".

Chemo day was very frustrating as there were so many delays. Something that should have taken a half hour would take two. It certainly added to the tension but God gave us the strength and patience to get through it.

Yet at the same time, there were good parts too. We met a number of dear people. I remember one lady in particular. I do a lot of adult coloring to pass the time. When she saw this, she commented that it looked like fun. So I told her where she could get what she needed. When we went back two weeks later, I had a coloring book, sharpener, and colored pencils. I had them behind my back when I asked if she had gotten any. She said no she didn't have any. I said, "Well, you do now". This opened a door for much conversation. I found out she had pancreatic cancer and the prognosis wasn't very good. I'm not in the habit of praying with strangers but when I asked how she felt about God, she said she wasn't sure what to believe. We talked for a while and I suggested she should get in touch with a local pastor. When I asked if she wanted me to pray for her, she was very excited about it. I hope things worked out for her as I never saw her again.

God gave me the strength to be positive minded most of the time. Of course bad things happo but if I could relate them to the good times it made them easier to live with. When they got ready to start my chemo each time, they would wait for Jane to pray before they turned it on. I had trouble with my port-a-cath which delayed things each time.

I've had chronic low back pain for twenty years. As a result, sitting in one position in a chair for seven hours was a killer. This affected by attitude and made it very easy for me to get impatient. It is also another side effect. Chemo increased the bowel roller coaster. I was continually taking a pill to slow it down or get it going again.

I've looked back over my notes just now. It is apparent that there were many days that I did a sell job on myself. Half way through my first chemo trip, I found a note saying "I feel like crap today". It is always easier to feel better than you are in reality if you continue to to tell yourself and others that ask "I'm not doing too bad today".

People will say “why me”. However, when you sit in a chair for seven hours in a chemo lab and hear some of the stories and watch bald four or five year old kids come in, it is a lot easier to say “why not me”.

There were two things that made the road easier to take. One was how super the nurses were. The second was I had no choice. I had to have chemo to have a chance to beat this ugly disease. Of course, at the end, I had to have a CAT scan to see if it worked. The results were “significant improvement”. Now it's time to see my surgeon (June 20, 2016).

There is no doubt in my mind that I have been blessed to have two surgeons that, in my opinion, are tops in their field. God put the right surgeons in my path and it was their God-given skill that got me where I am.

After the CAT scan, I met with my liver surgeon. There was nothing simple about the surgery (July 15/16) which he did successfully. It was his talent that got me on the recovery road.

Although the bowel was the primary cancer area, the liver was very volatile. He explained to us his plan. The chemo had reduced the cancer from eleven spots to three. He would be taking out a little over half the liver. It is well known that the liver is one organ that will regenerate itself. There was one spot he didn't think he could get this way. Therefore, he would have to “cook it”. In other words, to burn it with radiation. If he missed one bad cell, that would be the end.

This, by all opinions, was a big surgery and for two or three days afterwards, there was a lot of pain. Although I knew nothing about it at the time, they OD'd (over dosed) me with pain killers and I stopped breathing. They had to rush me to ICU to get me going again. Of course, Jane was scared to death. We confirmed this when I was being discharged. Jane asked the discharging doctor if he knew what happened the day after my surgery in recovery. He said, “Yes, I was there and quite frankly, you were over dosed”. God certainly continues to bless us for this could have ended the fight way too early.

Of course, pathology was done on my liver after the surgery. It showed my liver was free of cancer. Now it's time to get ready for the bowel cancer with an additional three months of chemo.

I went back to chemo four weeks after my liver surgery on August 16, 2016. I always got blood work done before chemo to make sure the numbers were okay. When my nurse came to me with my file, she said, “You have an awesome liver”. All my liver numbers (enzymes etc) were perfectly normal. Even the ones that weren't normal before the surgery. Talk about being blessed. They took out over half my liver and now it is better than normal.

Here we go with another three months of chemo. Nothing dramatically different than the first time other than it seemed obvious that my body was getting tired of it. It just became a countdown. Every trip was one less trip. I also seemed to get more tired. However, the positive attitude was still there with God's help. He gave me the strength to fight this awful disease as we headed for a successful outcome. In spite of being tired, I maintained my weight right to the pound, which is unusual. Further, our relationship with the chemo nurses became closer.

After chemo, I met with the surgeon that would be doing my bowels. The story here will be a long one but I will first tell you this. I will never forget her compassion and skill. She will be following me for five years. I certainly am not upset over this for I totally trust her and she has shown that she always has the time for me.

When you are reading this book, you will notice I use "we" as much as I do. Whatever is going on, Jane and I do it together. However, something happened that changed this for the following five or six months. In November, Jane fell twice which very much affected her mobility. She fractured her hip, her wrist and three ribs. She was big time bruised and it certainly appeared like she had a concussion. My bowel surgery was scheduled for December 19, 2016. Not only could she not be with me, I sure didn't like the thought of leaving her home alone. We were able to hire someone to be with her for five days during my surgery. As she was only getting around with a walker, it gave me some comfort to know she wouldn't be totally alone. However, we couldn't get anyone beyond this as it was Christmas time. In the process of trying to find out why Jane fell, they discovered a mass in her head that was putting pressure on her optic nerve.

They believed this to be benign. Still they wanted to check on it for size in six months. If it was unchanged, then it likely could be ignored as it may have been there for years. It caused an additional concern until an MRI on September 14, 2017 confirmed that it hadn't changed in size. Thank you, God! On top of this, Jane lost her only child to cancer at age 50. It was quite obvious that Christmas wasn't much of a celebration this year. Further, this was going to be another big surgery and I wouldn't have her with me.

My surgeon has a reputation for being able to remove a bowel tumor arthroscopically. Of course, this was my hope. What I didn't know was that the tumor was the size of a cantalope after chemo had shrunk it. Needless to say, I woke up with an ostomy bag. I sure wasn't expecting this nor would anyone be happy to have one, albeit reversible.

As with the other surgery, there was pain. The surgery had been done on a Monday. That Friday, I was hoping to be released as Jane would be on her own. The resident doctor said he wasn't comfortable letting me go home that day. If I stayed another day, they would try to get rid of the catheter and see how I felt. They did release me that afternoon (Christmas

Eve) without the catheter. Now I was home with Jane but I didn't feel like getting out of bed so I was no help to her after all.

That night, I started urinating uncontrollably. I found out my bladder wouldn't empty. I was getting what was called overflow: whatever ran out was because there wasn't any room for it. On top of dealing with that, on Tuesday my ostomy bag blocked and whatever I ate, wouldn't go through the system. Therefore, I had no choice but to call an ambulance. Initially, I was taken to Middleton hospital. They put a catheter in and then put a tube down my nose to pump out my stomach. What a rough trip that was. It's hard to see this as a blessing but as much as I wanted to be home that's not what needed to happen. I obviously needed to be in the hospital and God gave me the strength to put up with what they had to do.

Once this was done, an ambulance took me to Halifax. I knew I wouldn't see my surgeon as she was taking time off from Christmas to New Year's but her team of residents certainly knew my case. After being on the stomach pump for two days, a doctor came in who was not part of this team. He said he was going to remove the tube as he thought pumping me out was done. I should have known better as this was a big mistake. The ostomy was still blocked and because the stomach contents had no where to go, I vomited for five hours. After this, the nurse came in to put the tube back in. They had no trouble doing it in Middleton but this nurse couldn't do it. She called another nurse. After trying for what seemed like a long time, she announced she thought she had it and pushed in extra hose. This came up my throat and coiled inside my mouth. Obviously, I was having a gut full at this point and said "you must have someone here that can do this". They got another nurse who had been around quite a long time and she got the tube in my stomach within thirty seconds. Although it irritated my throat, I was glad to finally get it in.

As I mentioned earlier, I have chronic back pain. The worst thing one can do is to lay in bed 24/7 but I had so many IVs and pumps that it made going for a walk difficult. By the time I got up and unhooked everything, I was too tired to walk. My back pain was radically worse than the post surgical pain. It was purely God given strength that kept me going.

The day following this tube fiasco, I did get a pleasant surprise. About 9 pm, I saw someone come around the curtain. It was my surgeon. I said "What are you doing here? You are supposed to be on vacation". She said, "I came in to check on you." She sat down on the edge of the bed and listened to me and responded compassionately as possible for what seemed like half an hour. She didn't have to hear it for she already knew the story. She was simply trying to make me feel better and it worked. I can't imagine how many specialists would take time out of their busy schedule to do this. I know one thing. No matter how long I live, I will never forget this doctor. If they taught bedside manner in med school, she must have gotten an A+. To anyone reading this, it should be very obvious what I mean by God putting the right people in my path.

I finally got home from this trip after eleven days in the hospital. My ostomy was now working and I had a better idea of how to deal with it. However, I still had my catheter and would for almost three months. The VON were stopping every four to five days to help change the ostomy bag until I could get used to doing it on my own.

My surgeon called shortly after I got home to say pathology showed that all the cancer had been removed with the tumor. They call it clean edges. They take samples around the perimeter of where the tumor was and check for cancer cells. She couldn't take much because the tumor was so close to the rectum and she didn't want to leave me with a permanent ostomy. This pathology report meant that there were no cancer cells where the tumor was. However, it didn't mean that it had not gone somewhere else. She also said I may need radiation and chemo. I was real upset over this. I thought once this tumor was gone, treatments would be over.

I had appointments with a radiation oncologist and a medical oncologist at the end of February, 2017. The first said radiation would only make it worse. I didn't need the treatment and it would only leave misleading scar tissue. The medical oncologist said more chemo would be overkill. Now we'll see if my surgeon agrees as I have an appointment with her two weeks later. When I met with her, she said that they were experts in these two fields. If they felt that way, it was fine with her. Another item of good news was that although my ostomy was reversible, I was still going to have it for six months. After an examination, she said that because of how I had healed, she would put my bowel back together early. Instead of six months, I would have it for only three. Needless to say, when I left the appointment with her, I was on cloud nine. No more treatments and the ostomy would be reversed in half the time.

One thing I had to deal with was still having the catheter. I had an appointment on the way home with a urologist. What an absolute bully! When he allowed time to talk, he argued with me. What he wanted to do was to remove the catheter right there in the office and let it go for 24 hours. When they tried to get rid of it in Halifax, they would only let me be without it for 8 hours for fear of infection. I did agree to try it the next day for eight hours by having the VON come in. He didn't think it would work and it didn't. He announced that I would have it for life. I finally got rid of it a month later by working with the VON and my family doctor.

However, the two weeks following my appointment with this urologist, I was very depressed. My wife said she didn't understand why I was so down. I was told I didn't need any more treatments and my ostomy was going to be reversed in half the time. Perhaps I need to see a therapist. I said, "you might be right. Just give me a couple of days". When I went to bed, I prayed to God and knew exactly what was wrong; I've taken the reins back and I'm trying to run the show. I had proven that I don't do that very well. I asked Him to

take over and give me His strength to deal with things as they come. The next morning, I got up totally changed. I had my positive attitude back.

I got my appointment for the ostomy reversal on March 20. Everything went okay other than it didn't happen on March 20th. My surgeon was going to do a surgery first then do me at 3 pm. I ended up getting done the next day for her first surgery lasted twelve hours straight (6 am to 6 pm). She was so tired when I saw her at 6 pm. I can't imagine how a surgeon can work that long. Most people have no conception of what these doctors go through. It certainly gives me an appreciation for their efforts. Further, the support staff these surgeons have are incredible both in effort and compassion. These are the front line you get when you call and they are super.

Now with all surgeries and treatments behind me what is left is the CAT scan on April 30th to see if the cancer has shown up anywhere else. Cancer has to get into the blood stream to travel to another organ. Although all cancer was surgically removed from the liver and the bowel was still not a guarantee, but praise God, I am cancer free!

Since that CAT scan, things have been fairly good. I'm still working my way back and my strength is returning. My bowels, I'm told, may take a year to get back to normal. Yet they are very close to it by following my surgeon's recommendation and taking Metamucil every day. Six months have passed since that CAT scan and I have another on October 30, 2017. Still cancer free! All glory and thanks to God who has been with me the entire trip.

I've had one surprising thing happen. My last chemo was a year ago. Before I got cancer, my hair was almost white. Within the past two weeks, it has started turning back to the normal dark brown color. It is now about three quarters brown.

Please don't get the idea reading this that I am preaching. I'm not nor do I want that job. So many people wonder why some prayers get answered and others do not. I certainly can't answer that question. There have been many of our friends go "home" in the past few years. Some with the same cancer that I had. I do know that Jane would have a hard time managing without me both physically and emotionally. For that reason, I truly thought our prayers would be answered.

We have had our troubles but when we look at the "half glass full", we have been blessed so much in many ways. I'm not writing this as a map for you to follow. I'm hoping that by putting my experience on paper that it may help you or a loved one be better prepared to deal with a bad situation.

Written with the best of intent.  
In Christian love,  
Gary Wagner

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