

## ARTICLES

# Seeds of Hope, Blossoms of Meaning

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2005 Mara Mogensen Flaherty Memorial Lectureship

**T**he connections that we all share in this community of oncology nurses are rich and palpable. Few professions have this sense of camaraderie. Regardless of whether we provide direct patient care or are researchers, educators, or administrators, we all are bonded by a common intention: to reduce the burden of cancer and to improve the quality of the lives of those affected by cancer.

This article essentially will be divided into two parts. For the first part, I will describe some of the healing programs in which I have been involved over the years: specifically, the group Path to Healing With Cancer; the organization Retreats to Renew: Clarity and Creativity for Healing; the nonprofit organization Virginia Thurston Healing Garden; and staff renewal retreats at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. The second part will describe the parallels between extraordinary patients with cancer and extraordinary oncology nurses. Highlighting research on spontaneous remissions, I will describe similarities between patients with cancer who have experienced remarkable recoveries and oncology nurses who thrive and shine after years of working in the field. This will be illustrated through the stories that I received from oncology nurses across the country. Through my own experiences and the stories of other nurses, my hope is that the seeds will be planted for you to move forward and to embrace a holistic approach to living fully and taking care of the body, mind, and spirit—for your patients and for yourself.

## Healing Programs

“It’s about life, not cancer”—that was the motto for the group called Path to Healing With Cancer that I began in 1999. We met monthly during the course of four years at an American Cancer Society facility, Hope Lodge, located in Worcester, MA. Hope Lodge is a beautiful restored Victorian house that serves as a “home away from home” for patients with cancer and families from around the world who come to the Boston area for cancer treatment. My friend and colleague, Elana Rosenbaum, LICSW, cofacilitated the group with me. Elana is a clinical social worker, a lymphoma and stem cell transplant survivor, and an experienced mindfulness meditation teacher. The two of us complemented one another in leading the group as we each brought our own personal experiences and professional skills.

Unlike other kinds of support groups, we did not spend a lot of time talking about or dwelling on cancer. From 6–8 pm,

we would participate in guided mindfulness and loving-kindness meditations, gentle body movement, and art and writing. There were opportunities for open dialogue during the first and last half hour. At the end of two rich hours of self-reflection, creative expression, and group sharing, participants had an opportunity to informally connect and receive a 20-minute chair or foot massage or Reiki session. Trained and certified professionals, each who had a loving presence and true desire to heal and provide service, would volunteer their time to this group month after month. Participants so appreciated this “bonus” at the end of the group. Receiving a massage was a perfect way to end the evening.

Feedback from participants in the Path to Healing group was consistently positive and affirming. We would hear comments such as, “This group is my haven. Two hours isn’t enough time. I wish we could do this for a whole day or a weekend.” These words resonated with Elana and me and provided the impetus for us to start Retreats to Renew: Clarity and Creativity for Healing. Based on the same premise and using similar activities as the Hope Lodge group, Retreats to Renew conducts full-day and weekend retreats for patients with cancer and families. Our work later expanded, based on observed and solicited need, so we also conduct retreats and training workshops for healthcare professionals. The retreats and professional trainings usually are held at lovely locations surrounded by the beauty of nature.

Speaking of the beauty of nature, another program that I have been intimately involved with is the Virginia Thurston Healing Garden located in Harvard, MA. Founded in 2000, the mission of this nonprofit organization is to provide education, individual and group support, and complementary therapies to women with breast cancer, without financial barriers. A guiding principle



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