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COMPLEMENTARY GIFTS

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I fell asleep while driving my car on the freeway – for the second time in as many days after feeling quite ill for a number of weeks in March, 2000. My doctor thought I had been suffering from the flu, but my symptoms were becoming more and more severe, and I could barely get out of bed in the morning. After my second scare on the freeway, I knew this was more than a case of the flu.

I revisited my internist, and he ordered lab work. Result: A very aggressive case of Hepatitis C (HCV). Since he was not familiar with the treatment of Hepatitis C, I made an appointment with a liver specialist at UCSF, who upon seeing my lab work ordered a liver biopsy for the very next day. At that time, my liver enzymes (ALT) were at a level of 1200 (the normal range is 17-31). When the specialist reviewed the pathology report of my liver biopsy, damage to my liver was already detectable. She asked me if, by any chance, I had been in the hospital in January of that year. Indeed, I had been. Her rationale for asking was based on the fact that my biopsy showed I had genotype 1a of the Hepatitis C virus, the strain that commonly comes from hospital infections, often from unsterile equipment. Further, she was able to deduce from the biopsy that I had contracted the virus just two months previously.

A second liver specialist was recommended to me as the “best” hepatologist in the country, specializing in HCV. His practice is at Baylor, and for as long as I was physically able, I traveled there for my routine doctor appointments with him. When I became too ill to travel, I was referred to a liver specialist at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. At the time of my first appointment with this doctor, my liver enzymes were still in excess of 1000, and my viral load (the amount of virus in the blood) was over 32 million! As a result, he immediately prescribed the treatment of Interferon/Ribavirin, although he told me that the chance of cure for me would be less than 17%. This combination drug treatment is extremely debilitating and exacerbates the flu-like symptoms of HCV. The treatment protocol for my aggressive case of HCV was to be for 52 weeks. I suffered side effects, including severe muscle pain, nausea, vomiting of most food and water, severe depression, and migraine headaches. After three months, due to these side effects, I discontinued treatment.

It was at that time that my physician referred me to the Institute of Health and Healing, the “complementary/alternative medicine” (CAM) arm of California Pacific Medical Center. Since I was having so much difficulty with medical treatment, and since I was not responding to it, he told me that there was nothing that “traditional” medicine could do for me to eradicate the

disease. He gave me a very poor prognosis, but he believed that the Institute for Health and Healing (IHH) could effectively assist me with my HCV symptoms.

I proceeded to make weekly appointments with the Director of the IHH. Our work together involved a therapeutic process of unraveling my life and seeking answers to such questions as: What events/behaviors had led to my illness? Why had I gotten the disease that I had? and Why had I gotten it when I did? My physician suggested I should think of my life as a pie chart divided into four quadrants: career, relationship, health and joy/abundance. The optimal goal was to have all four quadrants in balance. Because my entire life was wrapped up in my career, and had been so for approximately ten years, I saw that my life was extraordinarily out of balance. My career quadrant as a very highly successful real estate agent took up the bulk of the pie, with very small slices left over for relationship, happiness and health. I had to admit that my marriage was suffering as was my health, and I certainly had no joy in my life. I saw that I was working around the clock to prove my success as a person. For the previous four years, I existed on two to four hours of sleep each night. I was physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually drained.

A breakthrough for me came through this therapy as I learned to look at my disease metaphorically in the context of my life. I realized that I had allowed the toxins of my career to virtually kill me, just like the toxin (virus) that was now in my system, attacking body and draining my life force. It was evident to me that I had been unable to bolster my own self-esteem, and I realized that I was looking to others for approval to “fill me up.” For that reason I became an overachiever, striving for success and recognition from outside sources. Through CAM therapy I learned personal boundaries, self-acceptance, forgiveness and unconditional love, and through these measures I began the path to healing.

Six months into this process, my liver specialist encouraged me to give medical treatment another try. Due to pressure from him, as well as from my family and loved ones, I began my second round of treatment.

Knowing that I would experience the same side effects that I had the first time, I added further CAM treatments to my regimen. In addition to the therapy with the Director of the IHH, I enrolled in energy medicine courses and scheduled weekly acupuncture treatments. Indeed, the drug regimen was grueling, and I found that nighttime was the most difficult time for me in terms of its side effects. It was at night that I especially felt the gloominess that comes with the dark of night. I felt alone – as if the whole world was peacefully sleeping – and I was in such pain from muscle aches and headaches that I couldn’t sleep. Intuitively I turned to hot baths and aromatherapy. I also burned candles and played soft music while I soaked in the tub. Almost nightly I would light a fire and meditate, write poetry, practice energy medicine on myself or listen to guided imagery tapes. I would also journal for hours about what I would do to help other people once I was cured. I began publishing a newsletter for the chronically and terminally ill, entitled *C is for Courage*TM.

I was soon to realize that I was growing personally and spiritually by leaps and bounds. I hadn’t been happier in years! One afternoon I had an overwhelming sense of well-being and wholeness in spite of the fact that I carried the sentence of a life-threatening disease. Two nights later during a session of guided imagery utilizing energy healing, I *knew* without a doubt I was cured. It occurred to me, however, that it was immaterial whether or not my body was *ever* cured. It simply did not matter in the least, for my spirit was fully nourished. I was healed on the *inside*!

Interestingly, and to the surprise of everyone, including my physician, I was in fact, cured of the Hepatitis C. Today my ALT is 12, and my viral load is “undetectable.” Who can prove scientifically whether it was the medicine, the CAM, or a combination of the two that was responsible for cure? I do *know* one thing for certain: While the medicine may have cured my body, CAM healed my mind and spirit, and for me that is the most important gift of all.

My healing path continues, and CAM has become an integral part of my life. I devote time each and every day to one form of CAM or another. I currently serve as Chairman of the Community Board of the IHH, as a volunteer chaplain at a nearby hospital, and am enrolled as a doctoral student at HOLOS University studying integrative medicine so that I can better share my own experience and the various healing modalities of complementary-alternative medicine with others. Illness provided me with a gift that enabled me to make a course correction in my life and to open my heart to others. I am now able to see that we all have challenges in this journey called life, and though a cure for life’s ailments may not exist, we can certainly know healing and wholeness.

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