

## My Journey with a Diagnosis of Triple Negative Breast Cancer

*Introduction: In this article author Pauline Martin describes the very difficult yet finally successful overcoming of the challenges of the diagnosis and treatment of an aggressive breast cancer. Challenges that attacked her physical body, her emotions, her spiritual life. Through Pauline's journey she describes first her confusion about God, and then returns to her dependence on God, and shares some of the emotions she experienced. She describes the blessing of family and friends. She witnessed the deepening of personal relationships with family and friends, and watched as some made recommitments to Christ. Pauline was supported through her illness by many family members and friends. Although we may not have a spouse, multiple supportive siblings or children,, we all have access to that same Healer and Comforter, the source of all Wisdom, our God, through prayer in Christ's name. This article also reminds us of the painful and sometimes very lonely and confusing struggle that patients we care for may be going through.*

Triple Negative Breast Cancer is a relatively uncommon and aggressive type of cancer. This type is determined by the absence of specific cell receptors. These cell receptors are estrogen receptor (ER), and progesterone receptor (PR); and the protein called human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2). Triple negative breast cancer cells lack all three of these receptors which is how it gets its name. The absence of these receptors makes it a more difficult cancer to treat and cure.

**I found a lump:** In July 2022, I felt a lump in my left breast so I consulted my doctor as soon as I could get an appointment. She referred me for a mammogram and on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022, I had the mammogram and on September 1<sup>st</sup> my doctor called and told me that I needed a biopsy because the results of the mammogram showed that the lump was suspicious. At that time, I was not worried because a few years before I had a suspicious lump and the biopsy came back negative for malignancy, showing that it was a simple cyst, which was aspirated without difficulty.

**Biopsy done:** This biopsy was done on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October my husband and I went on a cruise vacation to Europe that we had scheduled earlier. While away, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, I received a voicemail from my doctor's secretary, informing me that my doctor would like to see me to discuss the biopsy results. There and then I knew it was not good news but decided I would enjoy the rest of the vacation. I returned the call at the end of the cruise on Friday, October 14.

**Bad news:** Bright and early on October 17<sup>th</sup> I turned up at my doctor's office. When I entered his office, I could see he was uncomfortable, as he didn't do the usual chit-chat. He looked down at the paper he had in his hand and said, "How are you doing?" Then he proceeded to say, "It's bad, I am going to send you to the Charles Le Moyne hospital for follow-up." He never said the word cancer nor did I ask any questions.

I knew it was serious because the very next day someone from the hospital called and gave me an appointment to meet with the oncology surgeon on October 19<sup>th</sup>.

**Cancer hospital, and I need chemotherapy:** On 19th of October, I arrived at the hospital centre. The doctor was quite calm and caring. She remembered me from the time I had the biopsy some years ago. She explained that the oncology center offers prevention, screening, investigation, complex treatment in haemato-oncology, radiotherapy and surgery, clinical research, end-of-life support and palliative care. She examined my breast and told me the lump was too big to do surgery first, so I would need to have chemotherapy to reduce the size of the tumour before the surgery.

**I don't want to take chemotherapy:** At first, I was resistant to the idea that I had to take chemotherapy. In the 1980s I worked as a nurse in the chemotherapy department and observed the negative effects of those chemicals on the patients who were receiving chemotherapy treatment. This experience made me vow to myself never to undergo that therapy if I was ever diagnosed with cancer. After all, I had been doing everything right in my life: I ate healthy meals, I exercised quite regularly, I never drank or smoked.

**Confused and angry: why me?** But I was confused, angry, blamed myself for not doing enough and felt somewhat ashamed that I must have been negligent or done something wrong to cause the cancer. I felt I had disappointed my children and caused them worry about my wellbeing. I worried I would now become dependent on my husband to be my caregiver. I worried that I caused my siblings to worry about my health and wellbeing. I spent time arguing with God.

**Delayed treatment; tumour grows.** All this negative thinking caused a delay in starting the required treatment. In the meantime, the tumour grew larger and larger. Deep down, I knew all these thoughts were not true but they came up in my mind anyway.

**A change of heart, mind, spirit:** After some reflection, I realized that the enemy was playing with my mind. I decided to be compassionate to myself. I found the serenity to accept that which I couldn't change. Then I was able to focus on placing my trust in God and sought to understand the purpose and meaning of why God allowed this illness to happen. My purpose is to know and to love and worship God and seek to fulfill God's purpose and bring glory to His name. I was praying one day and asked God directly if He could reveal His purpose and He said, "it's for my glory." After hearing that I found peace and calm in knowing that God has a purpose and He is always with me.

**Sickness is the acid test of spirituality:** I later read in the booklet, *"Uniformity with God's Will"* written by Saint Alphonsus Ligouri (page 24): Sickness is the acid test of spirituality, because it discloses whether our virtue is real or sham. If the soul is not agitated, does not breakout in lamentations, is not feverishly restless in seeking a cure, but instead is in submission to the doctors and to superiors, is serene and tranquil, completely resigned to God's will. It is a sign that that soul is well-grounded in virtue. What of the whiner who complains of lack of attention? That his sufferings are beyond endurance? That the doctor does not know his business? What of the faint-hearted soul who laments that the hand of God is too heavy upon him?

**In the midst of discomfort and nausea, a renewed mindset:** On December 11, 2022 in the midst of the throes of my discomfort and nausea from the effects of the chemotherapy, I had a renewed mindset and instead of having a pity party, I prayed! Dear Lord, I thank You for waking me up this morning, I love and adore You. I thank You that other than the breast cancer, I have physical, relational and most importantly spiritual health. You gave me a good life, but I desire more time to live to serve You and to be a light and salt to others and to see Your glory on this side of the living. I especially want to see my grandchildren grow deeper in faith. Lord, I thank You for healing me in body, mind and spirit. Thank You that there will be no negative side effects of the chemotherapy. I thank You for shrinking the tumour. I also thank You for my son's new kidney. (My son was awaiting a call for a kidney transplant for 4 years and he finally got the call on May 27th 2022). Your tender mercies are greater than love and they are new every morning. Oh, I love and praise You God! I realized that the things that make life more bearable are the presence of loving connections to God, my husband, my children, my friends and my siblings and not the fact that I had cancer.

**I asked myself: what has this been teaching me?** As I pondered, I asked myself, is there anything I can learn from this experience that might have value, and that helped me to experience cancer as something that is not just cruel, painful and destructive and senseless, but forced me to focus on what I am grateful for? I am grateful that my children have grown closer to me. My oldest son years ago in his teens had surrendered his life to God and was baptized in our church. However, after leaving to go to university he declared that he was an atheist and did not acknowledge anything I would say to him about the existence or goodness of God. However, since my diagnosis during phone calls he started to say "Mom I will pray for you" and often ended our conversation saying, "God bless you." My second son never strayed from the Christian faith, lives in Toronto and requested that we share our daily devotion over the phone and we have been having devotions together and praying regularly for quite some time now. My youngest son, the one who had the kidney transplant and lives in Victoria BC has recommitted his life to the Lord, has started to go to church and appears to be growing spiritually. When we speak over the phone, he often reminds me that God is good and merciful. Praise be to God!

**Change from focus on the illness, focus on God's faithfulness and the many things to be grateful for:** Therefore, rather than focusing on my situation I focus on the Lord and His faithfulness, being assured that no adversity comes our way unless God can use it to achieve His good purposes. I am grateful that all my 7 siblings demonstrated their love and care for me. They called regularly to check on my progress. One volunteered to keep the lines of communications open between my friends and loved ones to spare me the fatigue of the constant communication and updating of my progress as the treatments continued. To my delight two of my siblings came together to spend 2 weeks with me; one travelling from Jamaica and the other from Toronto. During that time, we laughed and talked about childhood memories. One of my sisters cooked some of my favorite foods every day that they stayed with me. We had daily devotions and prayed together, played scrabble, a favorite board game. This made me realize how much I am loved and accepted by my sisters. This realization

contributed to my happiness and wellbeing as they showed so much grace to me. My husband got a chance to relax, especially when he had to leave the house knowing that I was not alone.

**Does suffering fit with the image of our loving Father?** I came upon a devotional, "The Source of our Adversity" by Charles Stanley. He writes: "When we experience hardships, we usually wonder why God allows these painful situations to come our way. It just doesn't seem to fit with His role as our loving heavenly Father. We struggle to reconcile our suffering with His love for us and His power to prevent or stop it. To understand what's going on, we need to consider the possible sources of adversity. For us to accept that God allows--or even sends--afflictions, we must see adversity from His perspective. I learned to focus on the Lord and His faithfulness rather than on the pain of my experience. As believers, we're assured that no adversity comes our way unless He can use it to achieve His good purposes. God's purpose is not to destroy us but rather, it's to stimulate our spiritual growth. In His great wisdom, He knows how to take an awful situation and use it to transform us into the image of Christ and equip us to carry out His will."

I was able to identify with Charles Stanley's devotional comments. I don't believe I would ever have seen the Goodness of God in that way had I not travelled the journey of cancer diagnosis and treatment!

My treatment is now over, after having had 17 rounds of chemotherapy, 14 rounds of Immunotherapy, partial mastectomy, 6 treatments of radiation. I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future and I continue to give God the glory. Although we can't see all the specifics of God's plan, we know that His goal is to use our adversity to supply something we lack so we can be mature and complete. So don't waste the opportunity. Even though the experience is painful, rest in the Father's comforting arms, and let Him do His perfect work in you.

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Pauline trained as a nurse at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. After graduation she travelled to Glasgow, Scotland where she trained as a midwife and then returned to Jamaica to practice as an obstetrics-gynecology nurse. A few years later she immigrated to Canada and worked in Montreal in nursing in neurosurgery, and then in pediatric ENT nursing. After obtaining her BA specializing in Community Health, she worked for many years as a School Health Nurse and was also under contract to McGill University School of Nursing working as a preceptor for McGill nursing students. After many years, this field of work led her to study Counseling Psychology at Adler University where she obtained an MA. Since 2008 Pauline has been practicing as a psychotherapist at the Isaiah 40 Foundation Christian Counseling Centre where she has the wonderful opportunity to integrate her Christian faith with her counselling. She helps people address mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, grief, addiction among others.

