

Illness as Initiation: An Unlikely Heroine's Journey covers a year in the life of the author, Jann McGuire. She was diagnosed with Stage III non-Hodgkins lymphoma, causing dozens of tumors. She used medical treatment, alternative healing resources, as well as personal and community spiritual practices, to achieve recovery. Her husband suffered a stroke as she completed treatment. The journey included his care and recovery. The book stresses mental, emotional and spiritual care during medical treatment.

Illness as Initiation: an Unlikely Heroine's Journey

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Illness as Initiation

An Unlikely Heroine's Journey



Jann McGuire, D.Min.

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Introduction

LABYRINTH

*Come, it is a miracle!
A tortuous passage, yet clearly marked,
That recalls our Journey.
The journey that began in a time/place when/where
We and they and all of space-time were together in one tiny center,
All potentiality.*

*Winding toward the center,
Mundane orientation falls away.
The Minotaur waits to devour dark daily habits.
A new realm reached, I'm delivered to my own sacred story,
Circling out like Ariadne's thread,
Secrets totally revealed.*

*From the still point at center,
All my relations gather round and dance,
Rippling out like water from the place through which
I have fallen into dark radiance.
Blinded, now I see clearly what to leave behind
For the moment, I rest safe. Secure in Now.*

*The moment delivers me back to awareness
Of sweet Earth's support, bearing me all my life.
Here I undertake to pursue the outward path,
Lightly, dancing unburdened as I return,
Prepared to meet the challenge that waits:
To serve the immense Journey.*

I'm a cancer survivor. Eleven years ago I completed chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I wrote about this experience with the

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hope that others facing cancer diagnosis might find my story helpful for fully living their lives at such a time. I pray it lessens a reader's fear.

I knew from the time of diagnosis that having cancer would lead me to deeper insight, no matter what the outcome. Though I aspired to be a healer, I hadn't suffered a serious illness since childhood. I knew that this event, and how I chose to relate to it, would provide valuable learning coming through direct experience.

As if Life wanted to deepen the lesson, on the day I endured my last treatment, and was celebrating that it was over, my husband Fred suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. He needed full-time care for four months following his stay for ten weeks in the hospital and rehabilitation center. His illness altered our lives much more profoundly than my cancer had. I include my struggle to come to terms with the changes in our relationship, in my life and work.

For six years prior to my diagnosis, I studied holistic healing methods such as bio-energetic (hands-on) healing. Now I researched lymphoma, the western approach to treating it, and possible alternative methods, including nutrition, to assist healing. I wanted to integrate my doctors' treatment with these other modalities. Maintaining this approach and a good relationship with medical personnel was at times a challenge. I wanted them to focus on me as a whole person, not just on the disease.

I had the good fortune to belong to a spiritual community with fellow energy healers. We met regularly to worship and meditate. We shared and celebrated events in our lives with rites of passage.

From my youth, I was religious. I attended church, prayed daily, studied the Bible and other sources and kept dream journals in an attempt to stay open and responsive to Divine guidance. These practices became more important to me as I faced cancer.

My book describes in detail the medical and alternative resources I accessed and the personal rituals I observed while on this journey. For me, it was important to bring my whole being to this challenge: body, mind, emotions and spirit. I hope my practices will be clear for anyone who might benefit from their use.

Chapter 1 Warning Sign

AFRAID

*Like a small burrowing animal,
Safe in its cozy earth home,
Feeling the first tremor, my heart pounds.
Hearing the roar of approaching doom,
Time slows and only terror remains,
Forming a hard lump in my throat,
Girdling my belly like steel.
Not knowing what is coming,
Unable to flee or fight,
I wait.
Knowing only the inevitability of change.*

The April morning held all the beauty of spring's promise. I rejoiced in it as I exercised in my small backyard pool. After showering, I glanced at the clock to calculate how much time I had before my pacemaker checkup with the cardiologist.

Drying my hair in front of the mirror, I noticed that a large lump had risen above the right collarbone at the base of my neck. With my fingertips, I gently probed it. This same thing had happened a month before. That frightened me into consulting my primary physician, Dr. Reddy. He was concerned by its size and location and ordered a chest x-ray and blood tests. The results were normal, and the lump went away.

I felt no fear this time, only wondered what was causing this. I decided to ask my massage therapist to lighten up a bit on deep tissue work. The sessions with Teresa over the last two years were excruciating, but I always felt marvelous afterwards. The treatments

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alleviated the chronic neck and shoulder pain I'd suffered for decades, so I continued.

Eating breakfast on the patio, I enjoyed the wild poppies and larkspur bursting with gold and blue where they proliferated in the back part of the garden. My husband Fred previously grew vegetables there, but now spent his gardening time at our mountain cabin and maintaining our daughter's house.

* * *

In the cardiologist's office I sat on the end of the examination table with a cord draped around my neck. One end held a small electronic device that rested above my left breast. The other end of the cord led to a computer that beeped as Dr. Sagerreddy read the print-out it emitted.

He turned with a smile, appearing to enjoy this technology and his expertise, and told me everything looked fine. I enjoyed being in the presence of this handsome, dark-skinned young man, and was glad that it was he who had solved the problem of dizziness and fatigue caused by my slow heart rate three years earlier.

We were exchanging pleasantries when the doctor's sharp eyes fell on the lump at the base of my neck. He inquired about how long it had been there.

"I just noticed it this morning. It happened once before and it went away."

He asked, "Are you having any night sweats?"

Laughing, I replied, "I stopped taking hormones, so I have hot flashes, but not what I'd call night sweats."

He kept pushing. "How is your appetite? Have you lost weight?"

It occurred to me that his demeanor was more serious than it had been three years earlier when he came into my hospital room to recommend that I have a pacemaker.

"You need to see Dr. Reddy as soon as possible. Why don't you stop by his office when you leave here and see if he can work you in today? In fact, I'll have Eunice call him right now."

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When I stopped at the counter to arrange for my next pacemaker check, the young woman handed me an appointment card. “Dr. Reddy can see you now if you go right over.”

“Thanks, Eunice. I’ll see you in July.”

I thought this was a waste of time, but since the two doctors’ offices were in the same medical complex, it was an easy walk across the parking lot to Dr. Reddy’s office. There were three people ahead of me, and I inwardly groaned that I hadn’t brought my novel. Picking up the local newspaper that I’d perused earlier, I turned to the puzzle page, and started filling in the crossword.

After half an hour, the nurse called me through the door to a hallway with a scale next to the receptionist’s office. Doors on the other side of the hall led to examination rooms. Stepping on the scale, I was surprised that I’d lost five pounds. “Guess those workouts are doing some good,” I thought.

A young, beautiful Hispanic nurse took my temperature and blood pressure. As usual, both were lower than the norm.

Dr. Reddy, a specialist in internal medicine, past middle age, looked tired. I imagined him being called to the hospital during the night. Bald on top, with a graying moustache, he was so soft-spoken that I had to listen to him with undivided focus. I liked the fact that he almost always touched me on the back behind my heart as he said hello. To me, it meant that he was a natural healer who got information through his hands as well as his head. With the same serious expression as the cardiologist’s, he said that he was arranging for me to see a surgeon to schedule a biopsy of the lump.

“But Doctor,” I said. “This happened a few weeks ago, and it went away.”

“Yes. But it came back. Swelling in this particular place rarely happens for benign reasons. I thought maybe it was just a transient condition, but since it came back, we really need to find out what is causing it.”

I reluctantly agreed to see the surgeon and to go to the hospital laboratory for another blood test.

As I stopped by the desk for the lab order, I mused on the number of Indian doctors who had settled in Porterville. Reddy was a very

common name in southern India. Dr. Sagerreddy had combined two of his names to distinguish himself from my primary doctor and his wife, a pediatrician. I wondered that there was no Hindu temple in town.

The blood test required an eight-hour fast, so I had to wait until the next day to go to the lab. I decided to stop by my daughter Suzanne's house before driving back home to Lindsay, ten miles north.

As I drove into Suzanne's driveway, I felt a surge of regret at the sight of the yard that my mother-in-law had kept beautiful for so many years. The grass in front was dead. Fred had sterilized the soil and filled the space with wood chips.

As I climbed out of the car, my mood lifted at the beautiful sight of the Sierra Nevada in the distance, still bearing some winter snow. The back of the house was less depressing. Pecan, walnut, orange, peach and pomegranate trees still bore good fruit year after year. There were weeds, but everything was green, and it looked nice.

I found Suzanne in the small vegetable garden she kept at the back. She sat on a low chair, its webbing frayed and its aluminum frame dented and scarred. We'd celebrated her fortieth birthday a few weeks earlier. Suzanne was present in a new way but it probably wasn't because of the birthday. For five months she'd been having seizures again after twelve seizure-free years..

The epileptic attacks first began when she was four. They were mild and fairly well controlled by medication until she began puberty. After that, Suzanne had grand mal seizures that were never well controlled with medication. When she was twenty-eight she opted to have brain surgery. The seizures stopped, but she suffered from auditory hallucinations and paranoia and was hypersensitive to sound. These symptoms interfered with her sleep and appetite. She attempted suicide several times, and lost weight until she was skin and bones.

She was barely in touch with reality when the seizures started again. On Halloween night, she ran out on the street to try to escape the old dreaded aura of an imminent epileptic attack. Fortunately, someone saw her collapse and called an ambulance. The next day, Fred and I found her still unconscious and on life support in the intensive care unit, registered in the hospital as a Jane Doe.

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We grieved the return of her seizures, but welcomed Suzanne's personality back. It seemed that the terrible attacks were the price for having our daughter in touch with reality.

I was glad to see that she was continuing to gain weight.

Suzanne looked up and smiled as I approached, shaking her heavy golden-brown hair off her face. She put out her cigarette and stood to give me a hug. Her blue eyes matched the clear sky, and didn't hold the fearful look that characterized them before Halloween.

Stooping to hug her smaller frame, I lifted my shoulder against the tickles of her kisses on my neck. The dogs, Blackie and Curly, excited to see me, clambered for pats, tails wagging furiously. I stroked them as I made small talk about the plans she had for her garden this year. Suzy loved being out there, and didn't seem to mind the heat that would send me fleeing for air conditioning when summer arrived.

As we turned to go in the house, I said, "Why don't you go home with me? Your dad should be back from Blue Ridge soon, and we'll go out for Mexican food."

Her expression brightened, "Good! I'm starving!"

While Suzanne showered and changed clothes, I gathered dirty laundry and cleaned the kitchen, mentally acknowledging a compulsion for cleanliness and order. In this and many other ways, my daughter and I were very different. I looked around the house that my parents-in-law, Fred Sr. and Rosa, had built with their own hands in the 1930's. Fred was born in what was now the dining room. He and I bought the place from the other heirs after Rosa's death. Fred had spent a lot of his time here since he retired from teaching, maintaining it and making improvements.

Suzanne emerged, fresh and sweet-smelling. "Can you bring me home tonight, or should I take clothes and medicine for overnight?"

"Plan to stay, if you don't mind getting up early tomorrow. I have to come back in the morning to have blood drawn at the lab." I went into the bathroom and got the clothes Suzanne had removed, and put them in a laundry bag. I used the facilities, washed my hands and quickly cleaned the lavatory.

When we arrived home, Fred was already there, wavy gray hair still damp from the shower. His bushy beard dripped as he gave me a

greeting peck. He'd worked hard that day, raking leaves from around our cabin to comply with the fire code. He was delighted to see Suzanne.

We walked the few blocks from our house to downtown Lindsay. La Hacienda's food was inexpensive and very satisfying.

At dinner, I showed them the lump and told them the doctor wanted me to have a biopsy. Fred looked surprised. "Really? Are you worried?"

"No. You know I'm in good health. I've never felt better."

"And how was Dr. Ever Ready? Is your battery still going and going and going?" Fred's memory device for Dr. Sagerreddy's name had stuck in his mind as an amusing substitute, and that's what he always called him.

"He's perky as ever. He practically forced me to see Dr. Reddy. I think he's convinced this lump is Something Serious." With my fingers, I made quotation marks in the air.

Suzanne chimed in. "I have an appointment with the neurologist tomorrow. Can one of you take me? "

"Sure, I will," I answered. "Since I have to go to the lab anyway you can go with me. It shouldn't take long. Then I'll go with you to the clinic."

I took another homemade tortilla from its wrapping, mentally counting calories. Then, remembering that I'd lost weight, I decided not to worry about that or anything else while I enjoyed my shrimp in garlic sauce -- *camarones al mojo de ajo*.

Chapter 2 Prayer Request/Diagnosis

NARROW PATH

*Is there an end to this tunnel?
Is there a way out?
Which direction leads there?
Should I ascend or descend?
From what am I being birthed?
Into what new world?
Am I the mother or the child?
I perceive only the narrow passage.
Now I sense the path spirals: a labyrinth.
Relief, to know the journey is both inward and outward!
That which draws me in also pushes me out:
Not to know.
Not to do.
Not to be.
But to become.*

Two weeks after finding the lump at the base of my neck, I lay on the massage table, feeling Chris Faulconer's warm hands holding my feet. Warm waves of energy flowed up the tense muscles of my legs and torso. My friend and healing teacher was sixty, a year younger than I. Chris's gray curls, pleasant smile and large bosom gave her a wise fairy godmother appearance.

After a time, I felt myself relax as I concentrated on the physical sensations. Chris said, "It takes awhile for you to get your energy grounded into your feet, doesn't it? That's the way it is with people who love being in their minds." She moved to the side of the table, holding my right foot with her right hand, her left hand on the side of my hip.

“Imagine fresh clear red energy flowing into your foot and pushing all staleness out of your entire leg through imaginary holes in the back of my left hand.” I enjoyed the warm waves that emanated from Chris’s hands.

After a few minutes, Chris murmured, “That feels complete,” and walked around to the other side of the table. She repeated this procedure on the left leg.

The healing went on, with Chris moving up my torso, her hands channeling warmth from the hip joints to the middle of the belly, from the belly to the center of the chest. She moved to my hand and swept energy up the arm to the shoulder on each side. Finally, she sat at the head of the table and slipped her right hand under my neck, her left hand hovering above my throat.

The heat in Chris’s hands increased, and she said, “Put your attention on the lump at the base of your neck. Listen for a minute, and see if it has anything to say to you.”

I felt a familiar constriction in my larynx, feeling inadequate to express what I wanted to say. I spoke without knowing what was going to come out. “It wants to scream.”

“Well, then, go ahead and let it scream.” From above my head, Chris put both hands under my neck, pulling with enough tension to stretch it slightly.

A sound more like a growl than a scream came from my throat. I felt I needed to clear something that almost gagged me. I continued forcefully clearing my throat, until finally a high shrill scream burst forth, releasing the constriction.

“Good, good!” Chris murmured in her beautiful, low voice. “Keep listening.” She cupped one hand over the swollen lymph node and made a scooping motion. Because I had studied with her, I knew she was imagining taking the energy that emanated from the scream and depositing it in an imaginary vessel of fire at my side. Her hands moved underneath my neck, overlapping and supporting it on either side. “Is there anything else?”

Tears flowed down my face, more from straining my throat than from emotion. I rested, waiting, enjoying the warmth of Chris’s hands, “Even though I believe I’m healthy, I need to find out what this lump

is. And I need to pray and ask other people to pray for me.” My voice sounded strange to me, like I’d been drinking.

Chris laughed. “That seems obvious, doesn’t it?” She took her hands off my neck, walked to the foot of the table and ended the energy healing session as it had begun, with her hands on my feet, grounding me back in the present.

I laughed, too, feeling the shift back to ordinary consciousness. “Thank you, Chris. Your sessions always make me feel better. I realize I haven’t wanted to go through with the biopsy but haven’t been able to say that. Now I can just do it.” I got up and reached for the two glasses of water I’d put on the side table before the healing began. I sipped from one and handed Chris the other.

Chris, who had been working in her stocking feet, was putting on her shoes. She stopped long enough to take a drink. “Yes, you have the common problem of not being able to talk about your feelings.”

“Half the time, I don’t even know what my feelings are! How can I talk about them?” I snorted. “It’s amazing. I’ve been in Twelve Step recovery so long and still this comes up! Thirteen years ago, I wrote in the front of my *One Step at a Time with Al-Anon* book, ‘Recovery is being honest about my feelings,’ a quote from my first sponsor.”

Chris flashed her bright smile. “You know that we learn in spiraling cycles. What goes around always comes back around, only on a deeper level. Just do what you said you’d do.”

“Okay. I’ll pray. Asking other people to pray for me is harder. It takes a little more humility than I like to exhibit, but I’ll do it. Thanks, Chris.” I handed her a check for the session, and we hugged goodbye at the door.

Chris was part of an intimate local circle, the only ones who knew that I was facing a biopsy. Fred and I studied energy healing and Native American Spirituality with this group. When we first met Chris, she was our teacher, coming from southern California for weekend courses. Recently she’d moved to the area to take over as director of the Fernald Center, where we met and studied. Having a spiritual community had always been important to us, and we were grateful for this group that supported our newfound interests.

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* * *

As I sat at the computer to write an e-mail to my far-flung family and friends, I felt great. Smiling wryly, I remembered that the first and most important step in any healing is for the one receiving to ask for it. I knew that my prayer request would be honored by hundreds of e-mail correspondents of various spiritual traditions.

I heard the front door open and Fred came in. He stood behind my chair and read over my head, rubbing my shoulders. Smiling up at him, I noticed how tired he looked. His face was streaked with dirt.

I shot a barrage of questions. "How was your day? How is Suzanne? How'd you get so dirty?"

"I rented a tractor and turned under the weeds at the back of the property. Suzanne felt well enough to help some by hoeing near the house. How are you feeling?" He studied my eyes.

I hated to see him look so worried. "I feel great. Chris gave me a healing. I'm announcing to the world that I want them to pray for me. What do you think?"

"Good idea." He turned toward the kitchen. "What's for dinner? I'm starved."

* * *

The response to my prayer request was overwhelming. I was on an e-mail list that served colleagues with whom Fred and I worked as community organizers in the seventies. They lived all over the world, but stayed in touch because of friendship and shared values. Good wishes and helpful suggestions arrived in message after message.

I created a paper sculpture to display these written encouragements, spiraling curls of rainbow colors cascading from around the top of a lamp. I copied the e-mails in colored pens, and attached them along with get-well cards, to the spirals. To me, these good wishes formed a net to surround and support me as I faced what was to come.

Like a sponge, I soaked up all the suggestions for prayer and healing practices that came my way, and continued to play with my usual spiritual practices: journal writing, dream recording, tarot readings, meditation, celebrating the phases of the moon, inspirational

Passage: Illness as Initiation

reading. A tinge of desperation entered as time for the biopsy approached.

One suggestion I received through e-mail was that I take a friend with me to medical appointments, to take notes and ask objective questions. Kristi McCracken, who was on the Fernald center board with Fred and me, went with me to talk to the surgeon who was scheduled to perform the biopsy. She sat nearby as I listened through a fog and struggled to respond to the doctor.

Since making this appointment, another lymph node on the left side of my neck had become swollen. The doctor touched it, asking questions about it.

Kristi got out of her chair, pointed to the much larger lump on the right side, lower and more toward the front of my neck. "Isn't this the one Dr. Reddy ordered the biopsy for, Jann?"

"Oh. Yes, it is." I was amazed that I wouldn't have noticed if the surgeon planned to biopsy the wrong lump. How grateful I was for Kristi's presence and objectivity.

* * *

Chris met Fred and me at the surgery center on the day of the biopsy. She said a prayer, and laid her hands on me, transmitting healing energy. Then the nurse said she and Fred would have to wait outside.

The surgery was out-patient, with local anesthesia, so I listened as the surgical team talked about last night's television show, feeling the pressure and pulling at the base of my neck, very near the jugular vein. I knew that I was fortunate to live in an advanced society with advanced medicine, but something in me resented everyone and everything about the hospital.

When Fred and I arrived home, Patricia Roome, another Fernald colleague, was waiting with hugs and smiles.

"Hey, Patricia." Fred said. "Did you come to mow the lawn?" It was an ongoing joke between them.

"No, Fred." she said as she got a picnic basket out of her car. "I just thought you might like some fried chicken before you come to mow

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mine.” Her short blonde hair framed her agreeable face. Though she had health problems of her own, she looked for ways to be helpful on her good days.

Still shaky from the anesthesia, I made my way to the couch. Fred and Patricia’s voices came from far away.

* * *

After answering the ringing telephone, and hearing the surgeon’s accent, I concentrated on understanding his words. “The pathologist’s report isn’t complete, but you do have lymphoma. The tumor I removed was a primary tumor, not spread from somewhere else in your body.”

My vision sharpened as I listened to his words and looked out the window at the back garden. The roses were suddenly brighter. The leaves on the orange tree appeared greener and shinier. I took in a large breath, thanked the doctor, and wondered why I felt so well.

Fred looked grim when I told him, but he wasn’t surprised. We both had sensed this was coming. “Don’t worry. I feel perfectly well. This can’t be far advanced.”

Fred took me in his arms and stroked my hair. “But you have to admit it’s scary.”

I nodded into his chest and grimaced. “It’s just so hard to know how to approach this. One of my teachers had lymphoma on her leg, and they burned it so bad with radiation that she was crippled. It’s not the cancer I dread. It’s the treatment!”

The dream I had the night before popped into my head. It was about me and our oldest son, a scuba diving enthusiast. I pulled back from my husband’s embrace and smiled into his eyes, feeling excitement and hope.

“I dreamed I was diving in the ocean with Scott. I wasn’t afraid at all, just awestruck with wonder and anticipation. The ocean wasn’t cold and I wasn’t afraid.”

Looking puzzled, he asked. “What do you think it means?”

“This is going to be an adventure, Fred. I’m going on a journey of the deep.”

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