

‘It is rare to find a book that is a true spiritual companion in the midst of illness and suffering. But Gillian Straine’s beautifully observed book offers empathy, compassion and deep solace to those who are walking the lonely and dark path that cancer often brings. Few spiritual writers can turn their own experience of suffering and depletion into something wholesome and sustaining for others. This book not only manages that but also does so with realism, authenticity, wisdom, grace and hope. This is a profound and practical book that nourishes and nurtures – soul and body alike. Gillian Straine has given us a gem to treasure.’

*The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy,
Dean of Christ Church, Oxford*

‘When I found out that I had cancer, I felt like I was being plunged into a different world where I didn’t know the rules or how to find my way around. *Cancer: A Pilgrim Companion* offers people with cancer and those who love them a map for the journey they are about to undertake, and wisdom from a guide who has been there before them. Gillian writes with honesty and empathy from her own experience of cancer and from the healed scars it has left her with. She points us towards the death and resurrection of Jesus as the story that makes sense of what is happening to us, and that gives us hope for meaning and redemption from the pain and loss of cancer treatment. This profound book will be an anchor point for people facing a diagnosis of cancer and the people who will accompany them through it.’

*Jenny Baker, author of Equals, Chair of
the Amos Trust and marathon runner*

‘In *Cancer: A Pilgrim Companion*, Gillian Straine reflects on her journey as a young woman diagnosed with a blood cancer. She does so in a way that is rich and profound. Now ordained, Gillian weaves together a narrative of theological, biblical and liturgical depth earthed in human experience and the story of God in Christ. I can see this book being of great help to those who are making – or have made – such a journey for themselves or shared it with a loved one.’

The Rt Revd Lee Rayfield, Bishop of Swindon

‘Gillian Straine has produced a deeply personal and searingly honest theological reflection on her own experience of joining what she calls the “cancer community”. While tackling major themes such as “meaning” and “vulnerability”, she explores the “gift of cancer” – which is the way in which it exposes the myth that we are truly in control of our own lives. Her recurring emphasis on the importance of relationship and her use of pilgrimage as a metaphor for her own journey makes this a valuable and readable book of practical guidance and encouragement for fellow travellers. The message is clear and simple: God is with us, and there is hope.’

*The Rt Revd James Newcome, Bishop of Carlisle and
the Church of England’s lead bishop on health*

The Revd Dr Gillian Straine is Director of the Guild of Health and St Raphael. An Anglican priest, she also has a doctorate in physics from Imperial College London and is the author of *Introducing Science and Religion: A path through polemic* (SPCK, 2014). Gillian was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 21 and has been in remission since 2002. She lives in London with her husband and two young children.

CANCER

A pilgrim companion

GILLIAN STRAINE



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*This book is dedicated to Jeff Horn and all the staff at
the Haematology Unit, Aberdeen Royal Infirmary*

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam

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Acknowledgements

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Finally, I thank my husband Gregory for his endless encouragement and support as this book took me back to some difficult places from which I occasionally needed rescuing. Thank you for making me laugh, for supporting me and for putting up with me.

A beginning

All cancer journeys have a beginning. Normally, a beginning is a positive moment, one where a new start is made and there are plans and dreams and hopes. A beginning conjures up images of the first green buds of spring, or an adventurer setting out on a new expedition. A beginning contains new possibilities. But the beginning of a cancer journey is quite different.

There is usually a place in time and space that can be identified as *the moment*, the instant when and where it all began. The journey through cancer might be one that you are taking yourself, or one that you are taking as you accompany a family member or friend who has the disease. As a pastor, you might be stepping in and out of the cancer journeys of your flock, and journeying with them in prayer as part of a network of care. Whatever the circumstances of the journey it will have had that beginning.

Perhaps it began in a stab of worry that sent you to your doctor. Or it was the unexpected late night telephone call, or the nervously expected and dreaded call from the hospital, too soon to be good news. Perhaps it was the moment when the doctor said, 'I'm sorry, but . . .' Perhaps it was when you told your child, or parent, or partner 'the news'. Perhaps it was when you cried for the first time, or held someone else as they cried. Whenever and wherever that moment happened, that was the beginning of your cancer journey, one you had no choice but to begin.

The beginning of a cancer journey is unlike any other beginning that you might have made. It is impossible to underplay the dizzying effects, the initial confusion and disorientation. All your plans for the future come under scrutiny in the light of a diagnosis of cancer. The firm foundations of life and the hoped-for future are shaken and made unstable by the illness. Other previously important concerns pale into insignificance as the mass of cancer

parks itself firmly on top of us. It appears to change everything, and it seems as if its gravitational pull distorts all aspects of our life's trajectory, creating chaos everywhere – in our relationships, work, finances and happiness. There is nothing that cancer doesn't affect as it squashes life and clouds the horizon.

The weight of cancer is the fear that it stirs up. Fear of the future, fear of the treatment. What will it do to my body? How will I cope? How will everyone else cope? When will I be back to 'normal'? And these fears cascade out, affecting all those whose own lives orbit the one with the disease. The fear that cancer causes is the ultimate fear, the mortal threat under which we all live, brought nearer and into sharp focus by a disease that has blundered into our life uninvited.

As the cancer diagnosis hurtles around your life it may initially produce all sorts of damage. It breaks down order and disturbs your foundations. It casts dark clouds over your future plans so that it may seem hard to see clearly ahead any more. Previously sunny skies are replaced by clouds, and rumbling away is the thunder of rightful anger and honest grief at what has been lost. As the burden is shouldered and carried out to be shared with loved ones, the effects of cancer ripple into the community that surrounds the one who has been diagnosed, washing up on some quite unexpected shores, and bringing to bear on the person who is ill in both positive and negative ways.

This is the beginning of the cancer journey, an expedition defined by loss, uncertainty and fear. But it is only the beginning. There is a journey to be made, a difficult journey undeniably, but it is your journey. It is your path to tread and yours to define despite its unwanted incursion into your life. Unashamedly, and wisely, it is to our faith that we particularly turn when we are facing hard times and difficult journeys.

The Christian faith has often been understood as a journey or a pilgrimage on earth to heaven, one in which the faithful seek in the travelling to understand the divine and then use this knowledge to influence how we live. Looking back through the history of people who have thought about God, we can see a constant tug of war among theologians between ideas of the 'up-there-in-heaven'

Creator God, knowing all and all-powerful, and the ‘down-here-on-earth’ God, seen particularly through Jesus. So it is too for the individual Christian who seeks to find a balance between the Creator of the universe and Jesus who joined us on earth, loving and laughing, suffering and dying. Working this out is as much the job of the theologian as it is for us who balance our complicated lives, believing or even merely suspecting that the life of faith taps into something more powerful than we can put into words, however clever.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life have been used for centuries as places where human beings can understand not only Jesus and God, but also our own lives. We see Jesus alone and abandoned in the Garden of Gethsemane asking God to take away the cup, asking for his future to be different. We read of Jesus’ suffering on the cross, demanding to know why God seems to have abandoned him. And we have the eyewitness accounts of perhaps the strangest event in human history, the resurrection of Christ, with his curiously unrecognizable body. The threefold journey, also called the Paschal journey, is the focus of Holy Week and Easter, but it is also more widely a place of reflection as we seek to understand our own lives, and particularly our suffering, in the light of faith.

One of the greatest gifts of the Christian faith is its explanation of suffering, and its attempts to answer the haunting question: if God loves us, why does he allow us to suffer? For me, the question is answered through accompaniment. We are not simply flung a few theological answers to ponder; nor are we invited to see suffering as a test, or this life merely as a ‘vale of soul making’. The answer is the offer of a companion, a fellow sufferer. For God sent his only Son Jesus Christ, so that all who live and believe in him will never be left alone in their suffering. Our sufferings have been taken into the heart of God through Christ, and it is to his life that we may turn to understand our own sufferings, our journeys into places that we do not wish to go.

This book is designed as a companion on your cancer journey. Its threefold sequence of diagnosis, treatment and outcome mirrors Jesus’ own journey from the Garden of Gethsemane,

through the cross, to the resurrection. In each phase, we shall consider the physical, psychological and social burdens of the disease, and draw on the wisdom of Christian faith to find solace, encouragement and direction.

I shall draw on my own experience of cancer, both treatment and recovery, and my experience that deep meaning is to be found on the pilgrimage through cancer. As an Anglican priest, I have accompanied many people on their cancer journey and have seen the power of the journeying metaphor and the extraordinary hope and grace that flourish even in the darkest of places when stories of suffering are told. The cancer journey took me somewhere I did not want to go, but it was also a journey that allowed me to glimpse the resurrection truth that suffering does not destroy. Indeed when Easter Day dawned on my remission I was able to see that all was not loss, but that glimmers of new creation and possibility gave meaning to my experience of cancer. For the risen Christ confirms the unexpected, that even a body with scars and a head full of worries about relapse gives rise to God's delight, and is given a mission in this beautiful and fragile world. That is the hope on which this book is founded.

Whether you are on the journey yourself, or are walking alongside someone as a companion, as a Christian you have the possibility of inviting Christ along on the journey. And so the cancer journey, though frightening, becomes a little less lonely; it can begin more like the beginnings we are used to, full of plans and dreams and hopes.

Matthew's account of Jesus' journey is bookended by a key thought given to those who accompanied him. In Matthew 1, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him not to be afraid, for the birth of Jesus has been foretold by the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel", which means, "God is with us" (Matthew 1.23). And then in the final chapter of the Gospel, we hear the echo from the beginning: the angel greets the women at the empty tomb and says 'Do not be afraid' (Matthew 28.10). Jesus' journey was encircled by the command not to be afraid; it is a message that we are wise to pack in our bags as we begin our

A beginning

own journey, comforted by the final words of the Gospel of Matthew, offered by the risen Christ: 'And remember, I am with you always' (Matthew 28.20).

For we do not journey alone, but with the One who saves us, who bears our souls for us, and whose Spirit prays within us. This knowledge can never take away all fear and doubt, but it frames our journey. God is with us. This is the faith. Even when we are in pain, fearful, anxious, doubting or angry, God is with us on the journey ahead, leading and lighting the way. So let us begin our journey together, with courage to face whatever comes, knowing that we are always surrounded by God's love and light, no matter how dark it gets.

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

*Thomas Merton*¹

1

The landscape

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

Psalm 139.1

The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day,
to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night,
to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by
night.

Exodus 13.21

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Psalm 119.105

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor
powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all
creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8.39

Introduction

Cancer is often described as a journey and, as with all journeys, before setting out it is important to know as much as possible about what lies ahead. If the journey was, for example, a hike in the mountains, we would first plan our route and try to gather information about what it might entail. We would need to pack for our expedition, and remember a map and a compass to guide us, a torch in case we got lost and some extra food to keep our energy levels up. We would check the weather, and ensure that we had the skills to face what lay ahead. We might also take advice and talk to those who had followed the route before us. And finally, as all good mountaineers know, we would tell others where we were going and might even invite along a friend to travel with us. In this chapter we shall pack our bag for the journey through cancer, hoping that in doing some preparation we might be a little more ready for the challenges which lie ahead.

The journey that we are about to begin is not one that we have chosen and our destination is unknown. But it is an expedition nevertheless, one that will take us into a strange world, and it is a journey that has the potential to change us. For we may not have chosen to embark upon it, but we do have choices about how the roads ahead are navigated. This book offers guidance to transforming the journey which begins with a cancer diagnosis into a pilgrimage into the knowledge and love of God.

The English term ‘pilgrim’ is derived from the Latin word *peregrinum*, meaning a foreigner, a stranger, someone on a journey or a temporary resident. The idea of pilgrimage is part of most world faiths; for example the Haj pilgrimage, an important element of the Islamic faith, or the Christian journey to the shrine of St James the Great in Santiago de Compostela; it appears to be a feature of human nature to desire what pilgrimage can bring. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, pilgrimage links to the call of Abram by God to take his family on a journey into a strange place to find the Promised Land (Genesis 12.1ff).

The word ‘pilgrimage’ is used to mean so much more than a simple journey from A to B, or a means of transport to a special

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