

THE
CASE
FOR
HOPE

*What I Learned on My Journey from
Cancer to Wellness: We Can Heal*

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To my wonderful husband and daughters
and those curious about healing.

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Introduction

The Case for Hope was born of necessity. When I was diagnosed with brain cancer (glioblastoma) in 2011, my world stopped. According to my doctors and the statistics, I would not survive it. Of course, it was devastating, but after some time, I started to consider something else: hope. Hope that I could beat it and live a healthy life again. Hope that I could discover how I got in this situation in the first place and learn from it.

With those ideas in mind, I asked myself two basic questions:

1. *If just one person can beat this disease, why can't I?*
2. *Since we naturally heal ourselves all the time with cuts, colds, and broken bones, why can't I heal this, too?*

These questions created hope in me. And although hope is not a strategy in and of itself, it can be the spark that creates action, and action can create change. In the case of illness, change can occur when we learn about and use healing tools and find balance and wellness in our lives.

By being curious and feeling compelled to find a way to beat my abysmal diagnosis, even with the traditional medical treatment I was going to receive, I began to learn about the many facets of healing through the mind, body, and spirit. One discovery would lead to another and another, like alchemy. In this way, I stepped into a mystery that changed my entire life.

Among other things, I was learning that healing isn't just about surgeries and drugs. In fact, many people heal without any of that. But for me, I began to see a whole spectrum of healing that was directly affecting me in every way for the better.

What I was discovering was miraculous, really. Over time, I created a list of healing options I found and used. Ultimately, I

learned that others fighting against the odds were using similar tools to help themselves heal. Eventually, I started to share this information with others in need. I thought that everyone should know. The result is *The Case for Hope*.

This book is dedicated to anyone who might want to learn about the powerful healing connections of the mind, body, and spirit. It's for those fighting illness, their supportive friends and families, and those who are simply looking to live a better life.

My goal was to write a book that was easy to understand and full of facts about the insights and practical methods I had discovered, how they help us, and how to use them. I added examples and stories to keep the information interesting and relatable. I wanted to share these tools so people could know that self-healing is “a thing” and that we can heal many aspects of ourselves with a little guidance in the right direction.

For example, during my healing journey, I learned that extended periods of stress can help create illness. Stress is a big problem for a lot of people. When we use tools to help release or avoid the stress reaction, we give our immune system a great gift toward healing.

I also learned that cancer thrives on sugar and that we can make simple changes in our diet to minimize the problem. I learned relaxation techniques like qigong—an exercise developed in ancient China—and breathing exercises that encourage our blood flow and immune system to thrive and fight illness. I learned that spirituality is not just important, it is vital to living fully.

As *The Case for Hope* begins, in Chapter 1, I share my story, my emotional reaction, my spiritual discovery in the midst of the shock, and the final call-to-arms to fight the illness. This is where the learning began. Ultimately, it is a universal story of healing, as I am not the first and certainly won't be the last in this position.

Chapter 2, “Key Concepts,” provides an overview of the potential causes of illness and how healing is generally treated in the United States. Here, we are introduced to the concepts of mind, body, and spirit; the importance of understanding our stress reactions; common

challenges with some traditional doctors; and the importance of making positive changes in order to heal.

In chapters 3 and 4, “The Body: 9-1-1” and “More About the Body,” I discuss the importance of learning about and reminding ourselves how to improve our wellness using powerful tools like simple breathing techniques, quality sleep, clean water, exercise, the many gifts of healthy foods, and dealing with toxins in our lives.

In chapter 5, “The Mind: Moving Energy to Heal,” I point out the many tools that are available to improve health almost immediately by reducing stress and creating a healthier, more balanced nervous system—which, in turn, supports the immune system. These powerful tools include qigong, meditation, guided meditation, prayer, visualization, massage, yoga, acupuncture, music, joy, writing your thoughts, and spending time in nature.

Chapter 6, “The Spirit: Going Deeper,” offers an opportunity for deep exploration into the most fundamental aspect of yourself—your soul. Much understanding and growth can happen when we ask for spiritual help from others so we can grow, learn, and heal. As I discuss the need for support from the inside out, I delve into the sticky areas of perspective, judgment, forgiveness, the releasing power of connecting to the soul, and the many gifts that can be found there.

Finally, chapter 7, “Putting It All Together,” discusses the aggregate benefit of incorporating all aspects of healing—mind, body, and spirit—to enhance our health, joy, balance, and spiritual awareness. This overview of the concepts in the book is meant to remind you that you can begin creating your own path of healing using the methods discussed in these pages.

It is possible for us to improve our chances to heal, recover, and stay well when we engage with healing tools. This information can be good for anyone.

The message in this book is as simple as it is big: We can heal.



Chapter 1

Waking Up

Awakening is not changing who you are but discarding who you are not. —Deepak Chopra

It is possible for an event, such as a frightening diagnosis, to awaken us from what we once considered normal, daily activity. It can enable, or perhaps force us to consider our priorities in a different way. We might start with our daily habits, our work life, personal health and our spiritual existence. Alarming events can create an opening to something much deeper in ourselves—a fresh look at our lives. It's a strange reality that for some of us, getting sick might be the only way to wake us up.

What Just Happened?

I am sitting alone in the employee lounge at the MRI facility, waiting for my husband to take me to the hospital. I scan the area. It's replete with extra office supplies—toilet paper, tissues—and a couple of outdated magazines. Clearly, they put me there for my privacy, but also for theirs. In that tortured moment, even I could see that a sobbing woman in the waiting room would probably not be great for business.

I had a moment to think about the news that had been thrust upon me just moments before: “Mrs. Dickenson? I am sorry to tell you this, but your MRI shows that you have a large tumor in your brain. It is cancer, and you need to get someone to take you to the hospital right away. We can't let you drive.”

To my credit, I said all of the right things initially. Something like,

“I understand what you are telling me. Are you sure it is cancer? OK. Well, I appreciate that. I needed to know.”

I guess I was in shock. But once the message started to filter down to my emotions, I became a bit of a mess, just like millions of others before me who’ve gotten similar news. My inner monologue went something like this:

Really? This is what I get? Forty-four years old? This is too soon to die! I have two beautiful little girls, my wonderful husband. This cannot be it.

The sorrow set in deep.

At the hospital, doctors confirmed the diagnosis. Brain cancer, grade 3 or 4—the latter being the most aggressive and most likely to spread through the brain quickly. They told me they would have to take a biopsy to be sure which one it was. They explained it was bigger than a golf ball and located above my left ear. It was definitely brain cancer, and fast-growing. I would need to have surgery immediately, and then radiation, and then chemotherapy. Somewhere in the flurry of information, I got the picture that people really die from this—a lot of people. Most people. It was horrific.

Symptoms

I guess it shouldn’t have been such a surprise, since I had been experiencing problems for several months. I mostly noticed them while I was working as a lawyer at the law firm I cofounded. I had been practicing law for twenty years, spending most of my time as a transactional lawyer, managing partner, and frequent public speaker on legal issues. (A real snooze, I know.)

Five years earlier, my then-partner and I had decided to leave a well-known firm and take with us a hundred lawyers and staff in a negotiated exit. We were told that we were the largest female-owned real estate law firm, at least in the Southeast. In our new firm, I easily worked seventy hours a week. And I did that for years.

I used to enjoy my work more, especially my clients, but in 2007

and 2008, when the infamous financial breakdown occurred, the challenge and responsibility of managing the firm under those conditions got harder. I began to love it less. In fact, I started to hate it. I had to attend to events that kept me away from what I loved most—the clients and the personal connections. I started to change, and the years of stress began to show. Suffice it to say, I'd been on a tough road for several years before I was diagnosed.

Before I knew I had cancer growing in my brain, I had noticed small things. Like my computer at work seemed painfully bright, so I kept summoning the IT staff to do what they could to reduce the light. I also began to experience extraordinary fatigue and took naps in my car at nearby office parks before I came in to work or after lunch. I was exhausted, even though I was sleeping full nights.

But the worst problem was that I was having trouble finding words, and I was having difficulty reading. I'd have a word on the tip of my tongue, but it wouldn't come. I'd say things like, "What's the name of that restaurant we love so much?" or the mundane "What's that fruit that has spikes on it?" (starfruit). I was doing this all the time—but not just for mundane things. I'd forget some of my big clients' names. Or even toward the end, I could not recall the names of some of the lawyers and employees in the firm.

I'd force my staff and family into a spontaneous game of modified charades. I could describe the people or things but was not able to name them. I'd get annoyed by my victims' lack of quick responses as they tirelessly tried to figure out what in the world I was looking for. Obviously, as I would learn later, the part of my brain that controls memory was being pressured by the cancerous tumor, limiting my ability to recall basic names and words. All the while, the tumor continued to grow at a fast pace.

In addition to the memory issues, I began to have problems reading quickly. In fact, if I didn't have a lot of time to read something, I would grab one of the other lawyers to read it for me. Now, my ability to receive the information they read to me was pristine. I knew exactly how to handle the problem or issue. I was quick to remember previous situations and their details. I was also able to communicate

the information in a very cogent and lucid way and explain what it meant and what we needed to do about it. That was not a problem. The problem was that I just couldn't read it very well for myself.

I went to a neurologist, a doctor that studies the brain, and told him about my symptoms. After a cursory assessment, his pronouncement was, "Most lawyers are stressed right now." He suggested that stress might be the cause of my word-finding issues and slow reading. He wasn't too concerned. Almost as an afterthought, he ordered an EEG, a test where electrodes are attached to the head to measure brain-wave activity. It would be administered at home for three days.

Much later, I came to understand that it was, among other things, primarily a test for seizures. Apparently, the doctor suspected that might be what was going on with me, although he did not say as much at that time. Regardless, the company that was supposed to administer the test was not immediately available because they were moving. They told me they would get back with me when they could. It was mid-March when we talked, and I warned them I would be traveling for business in May. Of course they were ready to perform the test just as I was ready to go on my business trips, which forced me to delay the test further.

Because of the neurologist's nonchalant reaction to my symptoms, I figured the problem was my eyesight. Maybe it was time for me to get those cheaters that everyone seems to need the day they turn forty. So I went to the eye doctor and tried to press him on my other issues, but he assured me that it was because I was no spring chicken at the age of forty-four. All I needed to do was get reading glasses so I could see properly. As I left his office, I called my husband and tearfully told him the great news that I only needed cheaters to solve my problem. On a deeper level, however, both of us felt it wasn't over.

Armed with my new readers, I presented a speech at the annual seminar for fellow lawyers. The night before my presentation, as I was preparing my notes, I had the strange feeling that I was losing the information. I *knew* the information, but the more I would make notes in the margins, the more it felt like it was vanishing from my

memory. So I would make more notes in the margins. It was as if the information was new, and I couldn't hold on to it.

The next day, I was concerned, but with a standing-room-only crowd, I was hoping for the best. The first minute was pure agony as I shuffled with my written notes, struggling to make sense of them. I made a joke about my new cheaters and put my useless notes down. I performed the entire hour perfectly from memory.

Two weeks later, I had another speech to give for another annual professional group meeting. But this time, I was not so lucky. I couldn't perform even close to what I would have liked. Worse, it was obvious to my audience. Once I got home from the seminar (it was a six-hour drive), I demanded an MRI from my neurologist. I had to fight for it, too—my doctor was insisting that we try other procedures first.

I learned later that some doctors won't immediately arrange for MRIs because the tests are expensive, and the doctors don't usually make any money on them. Whether that was the case or not, I will never know. However, the tumor was growing quickly by then. I sometimes wonder how much damage would have been avoided if he had recommended an MRI from the outset. Regardless, my insistence finally bore fruit as he relented and ordered the MRI. So there I was at the MRI place waiting for my husband to take me to the hospital while fearing the worst.

Moment of Clarity

It turns out the greatest things in life aren't things at all.

On my first day in the hospital, I had a moment of clarity—and something was forever changed in me. I was crying with my next-door neighbor and friend, who also happened to be a nurse and had worked with brain-cancer patients. Coincidentally, her husband was a brain surgeon. He, too, was at the hospital, talking to the doctors

to help us out. Turns out, my next-door neighbors were extremely knowledgeable about brain cancer. You just can't make this stuff up!

My friend wasn't sugarcoating the situation for me. "This is bad," she said. "This is really, really bad." In her arms, hearing the truth, I said a prayer for the first time in a long time. Not sure I was doing it right, I prayed to God with all my heart to let me live. I promised to honor the covenants (yes, I really used that word) I had made to my husband and children to prioritize them and myself, and to change my life to focus on the things that really matter. It was so clear. That was my path, my earnest promise, and I would honor it.

With that, everything in my life outside of my family melted away in importance: my firm, my work, my accomplishments. I had no pride associated with those things. This clarity allowed me to see how I had been mismanaging my life. I had been out of whack. I had not known how to fix it, so I just kept moving forward the way I always did. I had spent so much time focusing on my work even though, ultimately, it meant nothing to me. I had the profound sense that I already had everything I needed and wanted.

Although true, my new awareness was strange, and I was surprised by it. It seemed to foster an immediate restructuring of my life. By calling out for help in prayer and seeking my truth, I received a deep sense that there was something bigger for me. There was a path I could follow.

Later that night, a battering rainstorm pounded my hospital windows like a freakish car wash, strangely mirroring my emotions. I wondered, as they do symbolically in the movies, if the storm was an omen, representing bad things ahead, or maybe it was a cleansing, offering an opportunity to try this life thing again in a different way. I had no idea which one it was.