

Before the Beginning

“Awaken Heart” was the title of the poster placed just outside the room where physicians review medical charts and dictate letters at our cancer centre. I stopped between seeing patients, curious to absorb these words set in a background of a powder-blue sky. As I read further, my mind seemed to expand and a feeling of calm, mixed with excitement and possibility, came over me. The poster was an advertisement for a stress reduction course offered by Dr. Timothy Walker, a local psychotherapist. Somehow I knew my life was about to change.

At that time, in 1998, I lived in two worlds. Early in my career, as a busy oncologist with a young family, working and teaching at a University hospital, I spent most of my time taking care of people who often shook with fear during their first appointment with me. Through really listening to them, and providing clear information and a treatment plan, I did my best to be a competent and compassionate physician. At medical rounds, in front of my colleagues, I was viewed as a promising physician-scientist.

But my inner world was much richer. I had started to facilitate a weekly cancer support group with the clinic social worker and knew of a space where peace and love seemed to grow, even in turbulent times. I learned healing was possible in a person’s life regardless of what was happening on their x-rays. I yearned for a way to marry these two worlds, to empower people by integrating the science of conventional medicine with the wisdom and experience arising in the support groups.

With poster in hand, I immediately set up an appointment with Dr. Walker. I learned Tim had studied mindfulness-based stress reduction with Jon Kabat-Zinn and had been teaching meditation and many other healing techniques for years. Tim drew on the vast teachings of the world’s spiritual traditions to present an inspiring message which is simple to understand and universal in appeal.

But what was most striking at our first meeting was his presence. Tim’s company brings a feeling of spaciousness, an expanded feeling of compassion and joy. It reminds me of being with some of my pediatric patients who are wise old souls in young bodies. With them, as with Tim, it’s as if the rest of the world falls away and time comes to a standstill. Tim taught me how to meditate and, over the last decade, his teachings continue to have a profound effect on my own spiritual growth.

During our first few meetings, we dreamed up a weekend cancer support group called the “Skills for Healing Weekend Retreat” and I began to garner support. The stars aligned. The hospital provided a wooden-floored ballroom free of charge. The Canadian Cancer Society donated \$2500 so we could provide lunches and offer the retreat for free. We pinned up and mailed posters far and wide. I hummed with excitement as the big day approached.

The First Retreats

On a Friday evening in 1999, fifty strangers, with all types and stages of cancer, sat in a huge circle of chairs looking anxiously at each other. Tim and I probably appeared just as nervous as we stood up to introduce ourselves. I asked for a volunteer to be the first in the circle to tell a bit about their cancer story and to focus on what was most difficult.

A bright-eyed woman put up her hand and accepted the microphone. With her first few words, the bubble of anxiety surrounding the group disappeared, immediately replaced by a container of compassion. The intense energy of deep caring continued to grow and envelop our group, through our tears and laughter, as we sat, listened, and learned from one another.

By Sunday afternoon, gone were the furrowed brows of Friday evening, and people sat back in their chairs, their bodies relaxed and their faces shining. They exchanged phone numbers and email addresses as they made plans to get together again. I floated out of the ballroom at the end of the retreat, so grateful to have been infused with the love of these wonderful people.

After the first retreat, I figured I had just had a once-in-a-lifetime experience created by bringing together a unique group of old souls. Tim and I organized a second retreat six months later with some trepidation as to what would happen. But when we gathered in the circle, the same loving energy permeated the ballroom and the same magical transformation of forty strangers becoming one community occurred. At the end of the second retreat, an elderly chaplain in attendance commented that, in his thirty years of hospital ministry, he had never experienced the Presence of God as he had during that weekend.

Drawn to Share with Others

Tim and I have gone on to facilitate over 25 retreats in fifteen cities, across Canada and abroad, and the experience has been the same every time. Given the opportunity, it seems we humans naturally and deeply care for one another.

The feedback from the retreats has been tremendous. The high scores on the evaluation forms and follow-up questionnaires are telling, but don't match the stories of people transformed by the retreats. Their willingness to take the next steps on the healing journey fills my heart with joy.

Because Tim and I have witnessed the benefits of teaching this integrated approach to over a thousand people, we now want to share this with a wider audience. We have formed a registered charity called the Healing and Cancer Foundation, hoping to freely offer the teachings to as many people as possible. We've videotaped eight retreats, creating documentaries and educational sets. We've transcribed the interviews and weekend footage of dozens of ordinary yet extraordinary retreat participants. We are continually awed by their lived wisdom and willingness to share the intimate details of their lives.

Reading this Book – Being at a Retreat

This book closely follows the experience of attending a 'Skills for Healing Weekend Retreat.' The chapters more or less alternate between the 'teachings' presented during the weekend and the true stories of people who have attended our program. You will 'listen' to the lectures and talks, learn from the experiential exercises, and sit in on both large and small group discussions. You will 'meet' people who will tell you their stories of how they have worked with the issues being discussed in each section.

The book is divided into four parts, approximating the material presented during the weekend.

Part One, from Friday evening, is called "Empowering the Body." It covers a powerful and integrated approach to a cancer diagnosis, bringing together the best that conventional medicine has to offer with other practical and effective ways to empower yourself physically. Also included is clear advice about how to negotiate the medical system and the science supporting healthy lifestyle choices and the

mind-body connection. Following this scientifically-proven advice and practicing the recommended healing skills maximizes the chances of recovery from cancer.

Part Two, titled “Settling the Mind”, parallels the Saturday morning agenda, and covers mindfulness-based stress reduction and the power of loving kindness. You will learn how to recognize your unique stress reaction and tap into the relaxation response. Tim explains mindfulness and teaches meditation in a way that is simple yet profound. Practising the skills taught here is invaluable in unleashing your body’s innate healing potential.

Part Three, “Reframing Distressing Thoughts”, covers the material taught on the Saturday afternoon of a retreat. The content is a unique combination of modern psychology, mindfulness and loving-kindness. Using multiple real-life examples, we teach how to develop a different perspective of your most difficult situations by drawing on your innate wisdom and kindness. Learning the skill of ‘reframing’ can have a transformative effect on how you feel about your life.

Part Four, “Reclaiming our Wholeness”, offers the experience of a Sunday at the retreat. During this time we introduce the concept that looking at your fears directly and embracing ‘negative’ emotions can open the possibility of healing your life at a deeper level. Recognizing that your wholeness already exists, we present ways to nurture your inner light on the spiritual path.

I’m excited to offer this book to you because it includes and goes beyond my perspective as an oncologist, and presents a practical and integrated approach to the cancer diagnosis. This book focuses not only on physical healing, but also healing that occurs on the psychological and spiritual levels, and your capacity to transform the cancer journey into a journey of the spirit. This book is grounded in love - love for self, love for others, and love for life itself. With mindfulness you can cultivate the energy of loving-kindness to weave love and meaning right into the fabric of your life.

Perhaps, most importantly, I want to share with you the inspiring true stories of many of the retreat participants who have touched me so deeply. These ordinary yet remarkable people have integrated the philosophy of the weekend’s teachings into their lives, and demonstrate such courage and resilience through their struggles and triumphs. Each story is different, yet there are universal themes that go beyond the personal stories into the realm of possibility – releasing healing energies that can profoundly affect every aspect of your life.
