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# InfoMine

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## Cancer Broke All My Pencils (Final Issue of InfoMine)

by Marilyn Herasymowych

“A transformation of consciousness is something that opens a door for us. It’s almost as though we are in a small, enclosed, dark room. We feel constrained, we feel limited in some way, and then the door swings open — and suddenly there’s a sense of possibility where there might have been none before. There’s a sense of having options where we didn’t perceive any before. And there’s a change in perception, especially in terms of scope.”

— Sharon Salzberg, a master teacher of Buddhist Vipassana meditation, quoted in **Living Deeply: The Art & Science of Transformation in Everyday Life** by Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Tina Amorok of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (2007)

I have been a co-writer and managing editor of the **InfoMine** newsletter since November 1994. In March 2009, I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and have been struggling with a number of difficulties ever since. As a result, I have been unable to write any new **InfoMine** newsletters. After the last of the reserve newsletters was published in December 2009, I was unable to write anymore, and so publication of **InfoMine** stopped.

But writing continues as a form of therapy for me. Because of all that has changed in my life and work, I have found writing to be very helpful, both to me and to those who read what I have written. Therefore, I have decided to

replace the **InfoMine** newsletters with a blog called [www.cancerbrokeallmypencils.com](http://www.cancerbrokeallmypencils.com). This will be the final publication of **InfoMine** both in paper format and on the website.

If you have been reading the **InfoMine** newsletters over the years, and you decide to read the blog, you will notice that Henry Senko, my husband and partner in MHA, have used the same learning and thinking processes in how we have dealt with cancer and the fallout from being diagnosed with cancer. New postings on the blog occur every week to two weeks, and you can be updated on new postings as well as other MHA Institute events by registering on our website at [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca). Currently there are five postings on the blog, so it’s a perfect time to start reading them.

Before I was diagnosed with cancer, I was a person who never believed that I would be ill. I was an energetic and optimistic person who had a plan to be healthy right up to the end. Up to my diagnosis, I had many people in my life who had been diagnosed with cancer, including dear friends and family members. Some of these people continue to fight and live with cancer to this day. Many have died as a result of having cancer. But until I experienced cancer first-hand, I didn’t really understand what having cancer meant, or what living with cancer would do to transform my life.

As soon as I was diagnosed, I started writing about what was happening to me. Writing was one thing I loved to do, and it would be writing that would be my most helpful therapy in dealing with the curveballs that cancer would

throw at me. In November 2009, while I was recovering from chemo treatments, I invited Emily Tipton to come to Edmonton to attend a course taught by Valerie Mason-John called *Life into Fiction*. It was at this course that Emily and I decided to write a book together on this experience. In June 2010, at Valerie's course called *Unlocking the Muse: Meditation and Creativity*, we asked Valerie to help us to write our book.

Valerie suggested that we start by writing a blog, and asked us to think of a title for this blog. Emily and I agreed, and we decided the blog would be called *Cancer Broke All My Pencils*. This title came from a conference that Henry and I had attended in the late 1990s in Ottawa, at which Douglas Cardinal spoke about his work and how he dealt with change. In the mid-1960s, Cardinal, a famous Canadian architect of international renown, saw the future of architecture was in the computer – specifically the computational power of computers. In order for him to continue using his organic curvilinear designs on a larger scale, he would need the help of software that was not yet invented, software that Cardinal himself would help to develop and then beta test, software called computer-aided drafting and design or CADD for short. Cardinal would need one more thing. He would need his architectural and engineering staff to embrace this new way of working.

But his staff did not easily accept this change. They were far too comfortable with their drafting tables and pencils. So, Cardinal removed all of the drafting tables from their offices and broke all their pencils. It was like Cortez, who burned all his ships while in the middle of

conquering the Aztecs, thereby preventing a retreat to Spain.

Like Cortez, my experience with cancer would burn all of my ships, and like Cardinal, it would break all of my pencils. There would be no way back to the way it was. And like Cardinal's staff, I would not easily accept my new situation. I too was very comfortable with the life I had been living before being diagnosed with cancer. I would stubbornly hold on to everything I thought my life was supposed to be, including how it was supposed to be after cancer treatment. It would take me over a year to finally realize that the experience of cancer had truly broken all of my pencils. There was no way back to my previous life. I would have to build a completely new life and way of living with cancer.

Although I now live with my broken pencils, my new future is not about living amongst the wreckage. When cancer broke all of my pencils, surviving was all that I had left. Now I want a life. What that looks like is yet to unfold for me.

In the meantime, I write this blog to better understand what has happened since my cancer diagnosis, and to create a new life, a life of living and not just surviving. One of the ways in which I can find healing is to have a strong sense of purpose, something I had before the diagnosis, and something I have lost since I became ill. This blog is an attempt for me to regain a strong sense of purpose.

To discover deeper learnings, I will recount what has happened to me, and what I have learned as a result of travelling this path called cancer, treatment, and recovery. My story might touch you because you yourself have cancer or you know someone

who has cancer. Or, it just might be a story that resonates for you for some reason. My story might disturb you. Or you might find that you do not agree with me or what I have done. Regardless of what happens for you, I hope that this blog might help you to look at your own life, and what your feelings tell you about yourself and the life you wish to live. Whatever the reason you are reading this blog, you are also welcome to respond to what you have read.

“...dramatic and lasting change for the better springs from *radically shifting your perspective of who you are*. Great external changes often come out of this shift in perspective. You may well find that as meaning and purpose become more clear to you, things that are out of alignment in your life gradually (and sometimes quickly) fall away. But the most fundamental change is within you; it is a profound shift in your perspective, where you direct your attention and your intention. This most essential change, the one from which all other changes spring, is a change in your worldview and your perception of what's possible. Transforming your consciousness may be the most important thing you can do for yourself and the world.”

— Sharon Salzberg, a master teacher of Buddhist Vipassana meditation, quoted in **Living Deeply: The Art & Science of Transformation in Everyday Life** by Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Tina Amorok of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (2007)

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