

Note from Linda: This article was first published in the June 2004 edition of NINK, the newsletter of Novelists, Inc.

Newton's Law and Us— For Every Action, We Bounce Back...

What Sir Isaac Newton didn't know when he explained his law of action and reaction, was that he was also explaining the nature of writers. We, writers, have a proven track record of bouncing back after we're knocked down either personally or professionally. Sometimes we can't tell which part of us took the hit.

We rejoice in our good news and continue to write. We suck up the bad news—albeit while moaning and groaning--and continue to write. With each experience, we get stronger and learn more about ourselves. And we don't give up, not even when we get slammed by a freight train we never saw coming down the track. Sure, we may pause, maybe take a short break or a longer one, but most of us don't walk away from this roller coaster ride. We are writers. We are stubborn. And I contend that this stubbornness is a positive trait for us. It has literally saved my life.

Can you remember your very first royalty check? Were your hands shaking as you grasped the envelope? Mine were. Almost ripped the damn thing in half. Sweet validation! Sweet intoxication--getting paid for what I love to do. Did you cringe when you read the actual amount on the check? I did, and immediately went into my moaning/groaning mode wondering what had ever possessed me to work for less than minimum wage. And then I wrote three more books and committed to four after that while keeping my day job, because I

wanted to write more than I wanted to do anything else. Stubbornness builds careers!

Did your editor love your last proposal? Were you going to contract before she suddenly left the house and left you with an unsigned document and a hollow feeling inside your gut? And darn it--your gut was right. The new editor just doesn't go for the storyline... I know some of us have walked this path--and then went on to write more books. Writing is what we do. We don't walk away.

What moment in our business could be more memorable than receiving "the call?" How many rejection slips had you collected by then? How many manuscripts had you tucked under your bed? I had five. And then the phone rang, and our worlds changed. From unpublished to published. Even now, I get goose bumps. We all remember the moment although what we actually said on the phone is up for grabs. Hopefully, we were coherent. But because I've been there, I know that the event and its afterglow was one of unfettered joy.

Except that, for me, the afterglow was cut short. Soon after receiving "the call" three years ago, I received another. The biopsy was positive. I had breast cancer.

But nothing, not even the Big C, was going to stop me from having the career that I wanted so much. That I'd worked toward for so long. In the beginning, I told no one in the industry about my condition. Certainly not my editor, even though I adored her and still do. Not anyone in my RWA chapter because news has a way of spreading.

By unlucky coincidence, one of the Harlequin editors was coming to town for a conference a few days after the doctor's call. I had committed to having dinner with her and another writer on Friday evening. I remember sitting at the table making conversation. I remember where we ate because we had white glove French service—so different from the service in my usual haunts. But mostly, I remember thinking about the pro's and con's between a mastectomy and a lumpectomy. I had the rest of the weekend to decide.

As I sat in the restaurant chatting, the front and back of my mind were in two very different places. But I pulled off the dinner like a Broadway star. Or perhaps I was the heroine in a novel with enough motivation to reach my goal. Motivation coupled with stubbornness.

Surgery. Chemotherapy. Radiation. Wonderful doctors, but writing saved my sanity. Writing, as well as teaching my homeless adult GED class. When your mind is engaged, you don't think about yourself. When you can keep to your routines, your life remains "normal." Creating a story--characters, plot, and the myriad details needed to build a world--was better than a support group for me. Being with my students each day and meeting their academic needs engaged my brain fully. Algebra leaves no room for extraneous thoughts!

Do you remember the national conference in New Orleans? The heat? The humidity? I had taken my last chemotherapy treatment three weeks earlier. I sweltered in my wig, but no one knew except my roommate and three others from the West Houston chapter. By that time, I knew I needed some emotional

support, even if it was just a simple, "How're you doing, Linda?" What I got was a lot of compliments on how great my hair looked!

I could have easily stayed home, but I had an appointment to pitch a project not only to my editor but to the senior as well. Nothing, but nothing was going to prevent me from keeping that appointment. I'm a writer, and writers write--preferably with a contract!

My editors liked the concept. I got the contract a year later after the Denver conference. This is when I learned that sometimes being stubborn is a good trait. It's our catalyst for bouncing back in this writing life, and it can pay off.

After the New Orleans conference, I relaxed the secrecy and started to tell others about my breast cancer. And that's when I learned the true lesson of this experience. The McGuffin materialized when I learned about love in its fullest sense. Friends and strangers bestowed their love and blessings on me without end. Bouncing back became almost easy.

Picture the following scene. My students--homeless, poor, in recovery, racially mixed, and badly in need of writing instruction—held an impromptu prayer meeting led by an intrepid woman who surprised me to silence, which is pretty hard to do. She gave me no warning, but closed the classroom door, announced her agenda and started beseeching the Lord on my behalf. Preaching, beseeching, and invoking. She preached to her classroom congregation. She beseeched God. She invoked Jesus. She prayed aloud and she prayed loudly. She paced, she pointed, she claimed the whole floor. Her

words flowed without hesitation. (Why couldn't she do that in an essay?) And the others were on their feet, backing her with their "Amens."

Now, I'm a nice ordinary Jewish girl from New York who merely happens to be living in Houston, Texas. To say I felt overwhelmed by this outpouring would be an understatement. Talk about a fish out of water! What did I know about being the object of a heartfelt African American prayer service? I knew nothing about the prayers, but I felt the warmth and love in that room on that day, and I've never forgotten it.

It helped me to bounce back. Needless to say, all my graduates received autographed copies of my books. They were so proud of those signed books, so proud of their teacher. I hope they were prouder of themselves.

I will always be a writer. So will you. And like you, I will write until I have no more stories to tell. I suspect, however, that we'd all have to live several lifetimes for that moment to come. In the meantime, I intend to live this lifetime with my fingers on the keyboard. After all, we're a stubborn bunch, and we make a habit of bouncing back and moving forward with our chins up. It's in our nature. And if he'd thought about it, I think Sir Isaac would have agreed!

Health Links for You!

Knowledge is power! The information that follows about ovarian cancer as well as the web links on breast cancer and women's health was compiled with the expert help of medical librarian, Patricia Anderson of the University of Michigan.

Ms. Anderson is an expert on using the Internet to find health related information. She is the co-author of the newly published, "The Medical Library Association Encyclopedic Guide to Searching and Finding Health Information on the Web."

**Ovarian Cancer General Information:*

Risk factors: -Genetic predisposition

- Personal or family history of breast, ovarian or colon cancers
- Increasing age
- Undesired infertility

Ovarian Cancer Facts:

- All women are at risk
- Symptoms do exist and can be extremely vague, yet increase over time
- Early detection increases survival rate

- A Pap Smear DOES NOT detect ovarian cancer

Ovarian Cancer Symptoms:

- Pelvic, abdominal or back/leg pain or discomfort
- Vague, but persistent gastrointestinal upsets such as gas, nausea and indigestion, diarrhea, loss of appetite, unexplained changes in bowel habits
- Frequency and/or urgency of urination in absence of an infection
- Unexplained weight gain or weight loss
- Pelvic and/or abdominal swelling, bloating, pressure and/or feeling of fullness
- Ongoing unusual fatigue
- Menstrual disorders, unusual vaginal bleeding, pain during intercourse

When to Ask a Doctor:

- Constant or gradually worsening symptoms—more than 2-3 weeks

****78% of patients with early stage ovarian cancer report symptoms. Most common are: abdominal or pelvic pain (35%), bloatedness (32%) and vaginal bleeding (20%).**

Ovarian Cancer Links:

CancerBACUP:

- <http://www.cancerbacup.org.uk/info/ovary/ovary-5.htm>

Johns Hopkins:

- <http://pathology2.jhu.edu/ovca/symptoms.cfm>

National Ovarian Cancer Coalition:

- <http://www.ovarian.org/>
- <http://www.ovarian.org/pages.asp?page=symptoms>

National Health Service (UK):

- <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>

American Cancer Society:

- http://www.cancer.org/docroot/lrn/lrn_0.asp

*Newly diagnosed with cancer? Start here:

American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR): Cancer Resource Manual (For Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patients):

- <http://www.aicr.org/resource.html>, or call 1-800-843-8114, ext. 80

Barbara's Book: A Notebook Guide for Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patients:

- <http://www.newcancerpatient.net/>

Bloch Cancer Foundation:

- Letter to All Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patients:

- <http://www.blochcancer.org/articles/letter.html>

- 12 Questions for a Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patient to Ask Their Physician:

- http://www.blochcancer.org/articles/12_QUESTIONS.html

Steve Dunn's Cancer Guide:

- <http://cancerguide.org/>

* Breast Cancer Links

American Cancer Society (ACS): Learn About Breast Cancer:

- http://www.cancer.org/docroot/lrn/lrn_0.asp

CancerLinks: Breast Cancer:

- <http://www.cancerlinks.org/breastcanlinks.html>

CancerLinks: Entre Mujeres (Spanish breast cancer information):

- <http://www.cancerlinks.com/Mujeres/>

MedlinePlus: Breast Cancer:

- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/breastcancer.html>

National Cancer Institute (NCI): Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool

- <http://bcra.nci.nih.gov/brc/> or <http://cancer.gov/bcrisktool/>

Women's Information Network Against Breast Cancer (WINABC):

- <http://www.winabc.org/>

* Cancer Links

American Cancer Society (ACS):

- <http://www.cancer.org/>

Association of Cancer Online Resources (ACOR):

- <http://www.acor.org/>

National Cancer Institute (NCI): Cancer Topics:

- <http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinformation/>

* Women's Health Links

American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP): Family Doctor: Women:

- <http://familydoctor.org/women.xml>

MedlinePlus: Women's Health Topics:

- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/womenshealth.html>

National Women's Health Information Center: 4woman.gov:

- <http://www.4woman.gov/>

Planned Parenthood: Women's Health Information:

- <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/WOMENSHEALTH/>

Society for Women's Health Research:

- <http://www.womens-health.org/>

Conducting your own search on the Web? Here are some pointers:

- Use quotation marks to group words as phrases in a search, try different words to describe the same idea, and use an advanced search option like the one on Google, to more carefully define what you want.
- Try different strategies. A patient who wants info about cancer could be overwhelmed with millions of results. Instead, search for "breast cancer treatment" or any other specific type. A patient with a rare condition might instead need to search on a broader term for the group of ailments most like his or her own.
- When a search produces some good results, but also a bunch of oddballs, pick a word from the oddball results, add it to your search terms with a minus sign in front of it and your next search will exclude that idea.