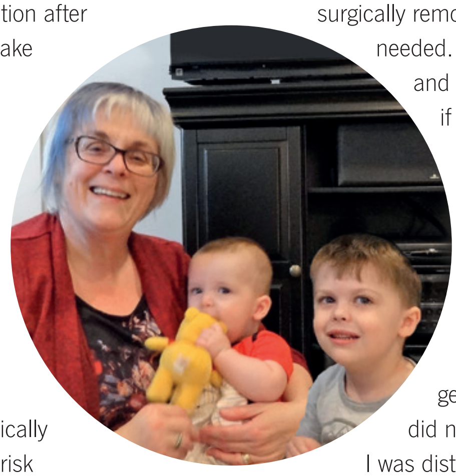
It’s complicated

Finding balance in your life doesn’t always come naturally

A lymphedema diagnosis that came with an important lesson from the Universe

By Angela Dunphy

My journey with lymphedema is part of my journey with cancer. I believe there’s something to be learned from most any situation, and I needed to learn balance. At 45, I was working over 10 hours a day, and most weekends, in a demanding, intense environment. That suited me, as demanding and intense could also describe me. My idea of balance was a long walk on the weekend and then a great vacation after months of too much take home work, too many boardroom meals, and too many after hours meetings. Then, after months of going to doctors and having bone- and mind-numbing fatigue, came the cancer diagnosis. Uterine cancer, statistically uncommon given my risk factors, but treatable. Just a glitch in my life, an enforced rest. Surgery, no big deal. Even better, it was early stage, so my healthcare team and I figured a quick return to normal.



The first hint from the Universe was that the incision took four months to close, and no one knew why. Four months of daily bandage (or stuffing, as I like to call it), changes. One of the many tests trying to determine why the healing was so slow showed a slightly enlarged lymph node, which turned out to be cancerous. More tests, since Stage 1 uterine cancer shouldn’t have made it to a lymph node, particularly in the groin. It’s really disconcerting when your oncology team is puzzled. Odd, though they called it—and continue to call my health—complicated. The node could not be surgically removed, so radiation was needed. Then more radiation and chemotherapy, because if it “recurred” there, we had to be thorough. Lesson learned? Nope – I worked through treatment, despite a good sick leave policy. When the radiation oncologist said I would get lymphedema, I not only did not really understand, but I was distracted by the possibility that the radiation might also destroy my hip. I thought the lesson I was supposed to learn during this was acceptance—the key to serenity, of course.

Lymphedema in both legs appeared on a hot summer day when I escaped work for a lunchtime walk. I’m lucky, because one phone call got me to a Certified Lymphedema Therapist (CLT) in the cancer treatment center. Compression, drainage, exercise, nutrition – got it! Did I see the bigger lesson? Not yet! Back to overworking in an environment where values had shifted, and I no longer fit in as well. My best shot at a boundary was “I won’t respond right away to email sent after 10 PM.” Yoga and meditation helped, but I brushed off having to use walls to keep me upright and parking in the visitor area to make it to the car at the end of the day. By the next morning, I could move again, so how serious could it be?

Intensive lymphedema treatments followed flares, but I still did not heed my healthcare team’s advice to consider stopping work. How could an accountant be unable to work? Never mind the pain or being incapable of moving my legs after a day of work. Finally, after a regular visit to my CLT resulted in a very serious conversation about taking care of my “dynamic“ lymphedema before it got worse, I was off work. The sudden halt to my normal life was its own challenge, but I needed to deal with this condition. So, I did the research, along with my sister who had now developed arm lymphedema after her own cancer diagnosis, talked to my CLT, and experimented. And, I began to commit to the lesson of the necessity of balance. My life had been unbalanced for a long time, and now every day- sometimes every hour-needs mindful balance. Walking must be followed by leg elevation. Spending time with the joy of my life, my grandsons, requires rest and elevation. If I must shop in stores, an hour is my maximum, and then legs must be elevated. If I go somewhere where I will be seated for more than 90 minutes, legs must be elevated before and after, and I will need

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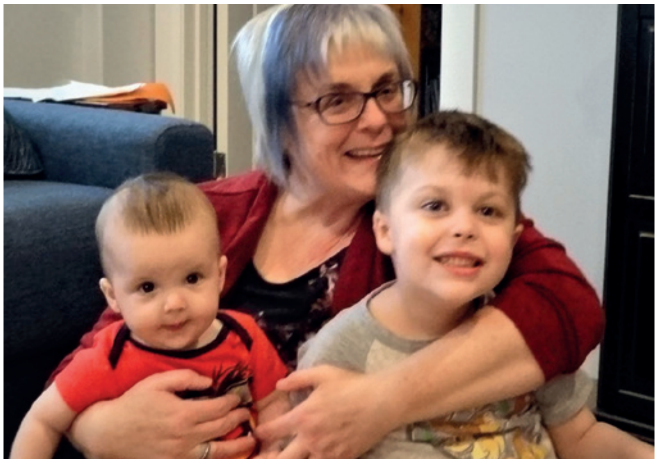
to use “Doc Oc”, my pet name for my CircAid Juxtafit compression garments, which I use at night when needed. Every day, I choose how to spend my non-elevated leg time. It’s finite, and on a bad day can be minute. For instance, if I want to cook a meal that has me standing cutting veggies, then even a quick grocery store run is out of the question that day. Unless my sous chef, also known as my husband, steps in!

Lymphedema isn’t the only dynamic thing about my health. There’s always something happening health wise that seems to stem from cancer treatments. For me, balance is crucial. I am blessed with a husband who has willingly taken care of most of the household chores, a supportive family, and a wonderful healthcare team. I live in an area where lymphedema treatment is easily available, and I have health insurance to cover garments and treatments. With all of this, I still find it a challenge to manage lymphedema.



As I journeyed through my lymphedema circumstances, I wondered how people without those resources managed. Discussing this with my CLT, Jean Ann Ryan, led to me joining others to form the Lymphedema Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (LANL). We are an active organization, this year seeking to establish a working relationship with the government to ensure that training in lymphedema diagnosis and treatment is established in all healthcare regions of the province, and to become a registered charity. As President, I am heavily involved in these and other initiatives. LANL is very lucky to have the support of local businesses, with two garment providers giving discounts to our members, those providers and compressions suppliers funding our annual Public Forums, and a local gym holding Aqua Lymphatic Therapy sessions. And yes, sometimes I need to be reminded to seek balance with all the work necessary for the Association. So, Dear Universe, lesson mostly learned, but I would appreciate only gentle reminders from now on.

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If you would like to submit your own personal experiences, please contact us via email:
canadalymph@live.ca
Be sure to put “Personal Perspective” in your subject line.

Letters to the Editor...

I found your magazine in a waiting room and was pleased to learn it existed. I am an 11-year stage three breast cancer survivor and up to a few months ago had no association with lymphedema. I plan to subscribe to your magazine.

Brenda Wark,
Pictou, Nova Scotia

What a wonderful magazine. We are lucky to have this publication in Canada – as there is so little information about lymphedema for patients and the medical world.

Dorothy Mallett,
Edmonton, Alberta

Once I have read Pathways, I pass it on to my family doctor. He appreciates me keeping him up to date on lymphedema and is genuinely interested in the magazine.

Robert Williams,
St. John’s, Newfoundland

We would love to hear from you...

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