
CHAPTER 1
THE MEETINGS

*“Put down the weight of your aloneness...
Everything is waiting for you.”*
— David Whyte, *Everything is Waiting for You*

It is late afternoon and outside the one-story building shadows lengthen on a garden of plants and flowers. There is a small stream, a pool, and a splashing fountain. Inside the building a wide bank of windows separates a well-lit conference room from this outside scene. A group of 30 men and women sit on chairs drawn into a circle.

A woman seated in the circle has just started to speak. She does not notice a tissue she twists with her hands has become moist and is beginning to fray. “I’ve been coming here now for several weeks.” She pauses and readjusts to face two women seated to her left, “This is my fourth time.” Each of the women she addresses has spoken about themselves just a few moments ago so the appearance is one of a conversation. The woman speaking continues as if addressing only these two, “I’ve been listening to the troubles all of you are having, but really didn’t think I had anything to say.” These past weeks, when invited to speak, the woman just shook her head and kept silent.

The speaker looks haggard and nervous but now seems determined to explain herself. She recounts the discovery of her cancer last year. Treatment is ongoing. Around the circle several others begin to nod their heads knowingly in agreement with what she says. The woman stops twisting the tissue in her hands. She surveys the rest of the group circle, seeming to make a last determination before revealing something. “So that’s what’s

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been going on with me. I've lived alone since my husband left. There isn't anyone else except my son." The pause is long, "And he's in prison." She waits, glancing down at her knees then back up, scanning the faces around her again. There is no movement, no perceptible change, so she continues, "He's been in there for two years. I go to see him whenever I get a chance." She speaks a little faster now as if wanting to finish, "It was for robbery and somebody got hurt... he's supposed to be in there for another five years."

Still nobody speaks. The woman's face suddenly crinkles. Tears make her eyes sparkle, "I don't know what to do about him." Tears are running down her cheeks, "I'm so ashamed!"

After a pause another woman across the room speaks softly but firmly, "It isn't your fault."

The woman who has been telling her story looks up, tracing the source of this unexpected comment. She dabs at her eyes and stops crying.

"He'll do his time and have to start over when he gets out," says a man in the group. He gives a nod as he speaks, suggesting some personal experience. "You have to let him find his way." He looks directly at the woman, "What you need to do now is take care of yourself."

Around the circle most of the heads begin to nod in agreement with this last comment. Members of the group sense that after these weeks of silence the woman speaking has released her great secret. This is the something that held back her participation. Several others offer anecdotes from their experience these comments have brought to mind. The group's facilitator makes a comment identifying several others in the room known to have this woman's same type of cancer. An exchange about experiences with treatment evolves and the conversation shifts to a more clinical theme.

That discussion ends and attention turns to the man seated next in the circle. He begins to speak about his own situation. The woman who has just finished revealing her secret is silent again but is visibly relieved. Her dark imaginings of being rejected because of her son's crime are ameliorated. She looks up, not down, and follows the sequence of reports given by others. She ventures several comments as the conversation moves around the circle, attention focusing first on one person then the next.

This interaction exemplifies much of what the group Renewal is about. The conversation above could have been any time during the years we've met or now. The impact of serious illness confronts people every day.

Let's jump right in. Here is Renewal from the members' perspective. As an exercise one Monday we spent the meeting getting clarity about why

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people were there. I as moderator asked for input. Here are quotes from the conversation that day with people saying what they wanted:

- I want to know, is conventional treatment enough?
- I've become confused. I've come here to sort these things out.
- I want more structure. I want psychological help because I don't think conventional treatment is enough.
- I want to know.....
- What I've learned is....
- I'm angry!
- I don't have cancer but it's in my family. It might happen to me.
- I want to learn how to live with cancer.
- I'm looking for a better source of information.
- My physician is not a source of hope. I want some group hope, group faith. I want to avoid negative behavior.
- I like to be comforted, have support and acceptance, and to let go!
- I'm concerned about whether I will "make it" or just die.
- I'm told my situation is hopeless; therefore I must look for alternatives.
- Where do I look for alternatives?
- What I thought I knew is all changing.
- Is it easier to be the person who is ill or the one living with someone who is ill?
- My husband has immune deficiency [with his cancer]. He puts up a good fight just to protect his job.
- How do we keep a [family] life going?
- How can I live with chemotherapy?
- I want to learn about the mind-body connection.
- Until I came here I had only met one person who survived cancer.
- [With indignation] What do you expect from us, miracles?
- [From a member who read a lot] What will bring about healing and personal transformation? I want to catch the "bloom of the present moment" [Thoreau].

How is that for defining the problems? And all in one afternoon! We might plausibly take this list as an outline for creating the rest of the book. In a way I have, but most answers come out in the personal stories of Renewal members, not from me. These are the issues; these were the kind of things on people's minds. That day was years ago but these are still pertinent comments and questions. They are what this book is about.

We need to preface our story by reminding ourselves of the rarity of support groups for cancer patients thirty years ago. Information about ill-