NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Angels in the radiation lab

Claire Bangasser | Jul. 31, 2012 Soul Seeing

I read an essay in the spirituality journal *Sacred Space* by a woman who sees God's presence in the oncology ward where she works. It reminded me of the times I spent in a radiation lab after my breast cancer operation. I'll always remember the kindness of the nurses, how gently they treated me. They moved around like angels who had chosen to become human for those of us who needed them.

I learned to use my radiation time to pray for those I did not like, for those who had hurt me, to be an angel to them as the nurses were to me. My prayer began as I passed through the lab doors and descended to the basement where the radiations took place. I sat in a windowless room where other patients also waited their turn. When mine came I paced into the radiation room, lay down on a slab under a huge light and let the nurse arrange me so the rays would hit the fresh scar on my breast like a laser beam in a James Bond movie. I was left alone with the buzzing machine, and I prayed for those whom I had let break my peace over the years. Those quiet moments felt like a direct line to God.

I came to this kind of praying first by the grace of wisdom, and later, more profoundly, through suffering.

Before my diagnosis of cancer I had an inspiration to revisit Taizé, the monastic prayer community two hours from where I was staying in France.

Like Samuel, who had been called to visit Eli to learn what to do with his life, I had been listening for God's voice to tell me for a long time but hearing only silence. So I decided to drive to Taizé and leave a note in the prayer box: "Here I am, Lord. What can I do for you?" A few days later I heard the "still, small voice" asking me to pray for others. Mine would be a ministry of intercession.

Then cancer barged into my life, seizing center stage, scaring me out of my wits. Thoughts of the future were like coming attractions for a horror movie. Suddenly I could make no plans. At first I fantasized I'd just go to the hospital in the morning, have the cancer removed, and go home fine in the evening. My surgeon said, "It's not a cold you have, Claire. It's cancer. Face it or it will not let you go."

How does one face cancer?

It was cancer that faced me after the operation. I was in my hospital bed waiting for the results, wondering

whether metastases had multiplied under my armpits. How bad was it really? Would I need chemotherapy? Would there be years of suffering?

That night I stayed awake in the dark. On a similar occasion, a friend had experienced a luminous encounter with Christ, which filled her with hope and joy. I had just the opposite experience. I had always imagined that the day I'd die I would behold a basket of flowers representing all the good things I had done in my life. That night I found my basket empty, like the Weyerhaeuser tracks of clear-cutting in a forest I discovered the first time I visited the Pacific Northwest.

In the darkness of my room I could hear and feel only my beating heart. And I realized from my depth: "Oh, even my heart is not mine, God! It is really yours. I have nothing I can call my own." That was a moment when angels spoke for me.

Before returning home I learned that my cancer had not spread, that I would only need radiation therapy and a single drug. God was giving me a second chance. How grateful I felt then! I rushed to confession and told my priest all that I had discovered that night of dread.

And I asked: How does one repair broken relationships? How does one fix a life? I began to know: Everyone is called to a ministry of intercession.

Cancer was a changing agent in my life. It was as if a part of me had died on the operation table, poisonous pieces of anger being surgically removed from my heart and marrows of goodness injected in their place.

My prayers for others in the radiation lab were just a beginning. It still is not easy for me to forgive, to let go, to move on. I need to do it "seventy times seven" times, as Jesus counseled. I need all the time that is left to me and won't waste one day. My life is no longer the wasteland it once was. It is a radiation room filled with angels. For this I am infinitely grateful.

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Source URL (retrieved on *10/28/2016 - 19:10*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/soul-seeing/angels-radiation-lab