

## **WTE Column of Jan 3, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Cancer Patient Could Use Support"**

Are you a cancer survivor with a complicated family history? If so, I'd like to hear from you, on behalf of my cousin in Germany. Your testimony might help lift her spirits.

Edith (who was named after me) was going to visit next summer; to this end, she'd enrolled in a refresher course of conversational English. We visit each other every few years. Our children traveled back and forth during college.

Days before Christmas Edith confided, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and is scheduled for surgery in early January. Long-distance travel was out of the question. She'd be in chemo, come summer.

When I googled ovarian cancer, I located a 2013 government report that focuses on survivors' health needs. I found that OvCa it is the deadliest of gynecologic cancers; hence, its wake greatly influences psychosocial health. The article cites research on quality of life, social support and relationships, self-image and sexual functioning, psychological distress, fear of death/recurrence, and personal growth and coping.

As with other forms of cancer, physical complications and side effects significantly affect survivors' psychological wellbeing. Feelings of isolation are common; thus, relational support is critical. Many survivors report low levels of sexual activity and satisfaction, potentially straining spousal relationships. Added to that are high levels of distress, depression, and anxiety. On the other hand, some survivors report spiritual growth and strengthened personal relationships. The article urges increased awareness for survivors, their loved ones, and health-care providers.

On my mother's side of the family, cancer is a trans-generational recurrence. My grandmother died at 38 and her daughter, my mother, gained but a couple of years age-wise. When I detailed this history to a physician, he responded, "We'll have to watch you, won't we?" His words only confirmed my trepidations. I was doomed.

I shared the doomsday thoughts with a pastor, who gave me a good talking-to. "Forget your family history," he said. "You have your own life to live." His words offered a glimmer of hope. Perhaps I would live to see my children grow to adulthood, after all.

My brother who lived near us in California was not so lucky. He succumbed to cancer when his youngest was eighteen months old.

Yet in Germany, my father and his sibling (the only one surviving into adulthood), his sister Anna, mother to my three cousins, attained high age. My dad lived to almost 82; his sister was close to 90 when she passed.

My cousin's husband is retired from the railroad. Their two children have children of their own. One resides in Switzerland; the other, several hours' north of my cousin's hometown. Edith and spouse care for two foster children, preteen sisters who've been part of the family for years.

In recent conversation Edith mentioned the German publication of “Healing Code.” She has urged its technique onto loved ones. Its premise: Practice the code, invite God into your life, and Truth shall make you free. When someone in need receives—or sends—loving thoughts or prayers, it benefits the recipient as well as the sender.

In my mind, prayer equals forgiveness, but forgiveness is tough to come by. We who yet live are the walking wounded. At the hands of parents, teachers, siblings, we suffered injustices great and small, often passing them to our own children. I suspect, my cousin carries the burden of the unforgiven. Unforgiven because she was born a girl when everyone expected a boy.

Edith lives in the village of her birth, domain of her younger brother, Hermann. Inge, her older sister now widowed, resides in a village a few kilometers away. Disputes concerning the sister’s only child’s ne’er-do-well boyfriend keep Edith from talking with Inge. Feuds over her selling an inheritance isolate her from Hermann. The fault lies wholly with her siblings, says Edith. I think when one feels unforgiven, saying “I’m sorry” is not in the cards.

Hermann is a successful businessman who pushes himself to ever greater achievements. He’s highly respected in the community: as service-provider and employer, as previous officer of the men’s church choir (until recently, the village was strictly catholic), as former president of a soccer club that recruits village males, boys to middle-aged men. In this community of 1200, Hermann’s presence carries weight.

When Hermann was born, the village was still largely agrarian. Informed by errors of prejudice that valued male work while negating the contributions of women and girls, the entire village celebrated the long-awaited heir to the family business and -name. Until their respective marriages, Inge and Edith were exploited as handmaidens, their work in the business left uncompensated. Their mother, similarly encumbered, may have consoled herself that she was helpmate to an alpha male.

During my visits I’ve sought to reconcile the three siblings, to no avail. It makes me despair over my legacy to my own children.

And yet: At a time when every village child bore the moniker of a saint, Aunt Anna named her second-born after her brother’s firstborn in faraway East Germany, a girl baptized protestant. What was Anna trying to tell her village, her husband, her offspring? Back then, no Saint Edith appeared in Vatican annals, though it does now. What has been lost in squabbles and pigheaded silences? Might I yet contribute to a cousin’s spiritual growth and strengthened personal relationships?

Please take time to email your thoughts and experiences, English or German. If you don't write email, you may send hard copies c/o The Wyoming Tribune Eagle, 702 Lincolnway, Cheyenne, WY 82001. View snapshots of my cousins on my website’s recent News Log.