



By Caryn Sullivan

THE SILVER LINING IN A CLOUD OF CONTRAST

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Over Sunday morning coffee I read about Bridget Tierney, the Stillwater physician's assistant who, late in 2006, told friends and co-workers that she had first breast, then brain cancer. For about a year she convincingly lived the lie. Since cancer took both my parents and threatened my life, this story hit me in that raw place that will likely never heal and left me churning.

Almost five years ago, I looked my young children in the eyes and told them I had breast cancer. While they didn't fully appreciate the implications, I surely did. I'd been on the receiving end of that conversation when my mother, not yet 50, told me and my young siblings that her colon cancer had spread to her brain and could not be cured. Years earlier, my father had died of lung cancer. So having lived through the real deal, I had a visceral reaction to Bridget Tierney's fabrication.

I can't understand the mind of a total stranger. So I can only wonder how a physician's assistant could not only tell such a dreadful lie but enact it, too. It's hard for me to fathom how one could participate in the emotional Breast Cancer Three Day, walking side by side with cancer patients, pretending that she, too, had heard the dreaded words "you've got cancer;" how she could permit her friends and co-workers to host fundraisers; how she could have friends drive her to fictional chemotherapy appointments, and more.

As I read the article I kept waiting for a tenable explanation. I didn't want to believe Tierney had concocted a scheme to obtain money or attention. Ironically, I kept hoping that she had another type of medical problem — one treatable with psychiatric drugs, not chemotherapy.

If her act was not volitional it would be less of an affront to those who rallied around her and to strangers like me who have experienced the grief associated with cancer. I not only sympathized with her supporters, I also identified with the patients who trusted her with their medical care. I imagined their disbelief when they learned she was feigning a deadly disease. I could only imagine how I'd feel if one of my medical practitioners masqueraded as a cancer patient. Unfortunately, there were no answers.

When I read about how generously people responded to Tierney's charade, I was struck by the contrast between her behavior and their kindness. And I concluded that was the silver lining in an unsavory story. People respond to a cancer diagnosis (of their own or a loved one) with myriad emotions. Some people get angry, some become scared or fatalistic, some feel guilty and some become resolute.

Some folks become the patient's backbone, while others disappear, perhaps because they don't know what to do or say or because they can't cope with the gravity of the situation. From what I read, Tierney's cohorts' response was laudable.

When I received my diagnosis, my husband, family and friends responded with a call to action, much like Tierney's supporters. They found the best medical care, prepared meals during my chemo treatments, helped with our kids, and more. Every bit of support made the experience more tolerable. Grateful for my gifts, I've tried to pay it forward when friends have been similarly stricken.

When confronting cancer, one can look at the glass as half empty or half full. Last fall I heard from a friend who'd recently been diagnosed with a very treatable form of breast cancer. She related how friends and family had immediately assumed a doomsday mentality when they'd heard her news. She felt that precious emotional reserves she needed to prepare for her treatment were hijacked by some who sought emotional support from her. And she didn't want to hear about the casualties. She urges others to understand that patients need a lot of support and positive energy from those around them to maintain the fortitude necessary to win the battle.

I've settled down since I first read the Tierney story. I'd like to think the generosity of spirit displayed by others is a powerful antidote to her breach of trust. In this era when we toil to manage our own demanding lives, it's easy to find reasons not to get involved in others' problems. It's certainly possible that in the future some will react to this story by choosing not to aid a truly needy patient. With cancer so rampant and its treatment so taxing, I'd also like to believe people won't abandon those who need them because somebody somewhere misled her friends.

As to Bridget Tierney, I hope she finds the professional help she needs.

Caryn Sullivan lives in Mendota Heights with her family. Her essay "Dancing with Despair" is featured in "Special Gifts: Women Writers on the Heartache, the Happiness and the Hope of Raising a Special Needs Child" (Wyatt-Mackenzie, July 2007). Her column appears occasionally on these pages.