

"Enlightening.... All too often, medical professionals focus on facts and figures... but may lose sight of the patient in front of us. Abbe's book helps us remember this and guides us through an experience that is unique for each individual. I highly recommend this book for patients and families undergoing the sometimes confusing, often fearful, and yes, at times even joyful, process of cancer care."

- Dr. Bruce Mathey at North Puget Cancer Center, Peace Health United General Medical Center.

"Cocoon of Cancer is a poetic, poignant, and scientifically accurate memoir. Abbe's Caregiver's Tips add insights to those who will identify with similar thoughts and feelings."

- Dr. Fred Appelbaum, Executive Vice President, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center Executive Director & President, Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.

*"One cannot help but fully enter [the authors'] world as life around them at home and in the hospital evolves. Similar to Helene Hanff's post World War II book, **84 Charing Cross Rd**, today's **COCOON OF CANCER** evokes the same intimacy of interchange, recording the candid tenderness and fears that surface for Abbe and Jim... This book will be a source of comfort, support, and information to couples entering the foreign world of high-tech cancer care while preserving their sense of family."*

~ Dr. Stewart B Fleishman, Founding Director, Cancer Supportive Services, Continuum Cancer Centers of New York, part of Mt. Sinai Health System; Author, *Learn to Live Through Cancer: What You Need to Know and Do.*

Other books by Abbe Rolnick:

River of Angels (2010) • *Color of Lies* (2013)

Abbe Rolnick
with Jim Wiggins

**Cocoon of Cancer:
An Invitation To Love Deeply**



Cocoon of Cancer: An Invitation To Love Deeply/ Abbe Rolnick with
Jim Wiggins, First edition.

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Cocoon of Cancer: An Invitation to Love Deeply Abbe Rolnick with Jim Wiggins

Awe has to do with grace: The ability to see, feel, and act with broad appreciation. If this is faith, then faith is synonymous with god. Would Awe have form and rules?



Finite ends, but infinity still exists. So my friend, lover, and infinite man, another day in Paradise begins.

What we know keeps us sane, until time opens and reveals more nuggets of knowledge.

What we know keeps us humble, until time opens the door.

What we know keeps us on the path, until we walk through.

I wish I could speak for all those with cancer, all those in pain. I speak for myself and hope others can benefit.

- Abbe Rolnick

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Janet and Garth, we hope to pay forward as you two have with the lending of your condo to us for seven months.

Karla, you kept Jim's business going. Thank you for your help.

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And to my editor Sara Stamey, publicist Alice Acheson, and illustrator Barbara Defreytas, your talents helped give form to our words.

Caregiver Tips, Questions I Still Ponder, and Questions the Reader Should Ponder are included at the close of this manuscript. These are meant for all caregivers, the inquisitive, cancer survivors, and readers who would like to open discussions among themselves or with loved ones.

Prologue

This is what we knew before we knew my husband had cancer: In October of 2013, Jim slipped on the last rung of a ladder while watering in the greenhouse that held his precious orchids. Jim considered the soreness that followed a nuisance. Two days out on his annual elk hunt, he returned home early with pain so severe that his legs crumpled. He could not bend or twist. X-rays and a doctor's diagnosis stated he had osteopenia, one collapsed vertebrae, and a few fractures. The doctor's advice was to rest for a month and add calcium and vitamin D to his diet. Simple.

Strong, healthy, and stubborn, Jim never complained. He rested. He hurt. He knew he would heal, he always had. We left on a planned trip to Africa in December. Three weeks of what the safari guides call the African massage—ruttled roads—kept Jim in pain. He photographed the lions, hippos, rhinos, and giraffes, until all he could manage was to sit and watch the magnificent birds of the Serengeti.

Home again, Jim held on to the belief he would heal. Somehow he felt guilty of exacerbating the pain through our African adventure. He waited until finally the pain was too much, and three months later he returned for more X-rays. I got the call, the one every person dreads. "Abbe, can you come home? I have cancer."

False Healing February 19, 2014

In the oncologist office as they perform a bone marrow biopsy on Jim. I sit on the sidelines, avoiding seeing the procedure to keep from fainting.

I love Jim Wiggins

I love Jim Wiggins

I love Jim Wiggins

I love Jim Wiggins

I don't want him to die. I want to live with him forever and be the best wife, friend, and lover. I want my life to be entwined with his blue eyes, his soft hands, his exuberance with nature, his passion. I love the way he loves me.

I will not be selfish.

I will give all that I can.

I will write and touch others' hearts for him.

I am here to give more love.

I am a conduit of joy.

I will not suffer. I will enjoy and give Jim all my humor and my crazy bits of wisdom. I will keep our connection.

I might be scared, but fear isn't anything to be ashamed of. Fear makes me grow, if not taller, then deeper. My heart expands with the "L" words: Love, Like, Listen, Luck, and Laughter.

I place a pen between my lips so I won't offer my thoughts when Jim is listening or talking to the doctor. I want to scream my thoughts...but I smile, pretending I can find the humor, kindness, and grace. I want no regrets.

I focus on keeping the calm as the storm swirls. And to remember best intentions, not an easy task, to keep Jim comfortable.

Lots of kissing...

**Dinner at the Wiggins/ Rolnick Home on
February 19, 2014**

Haiku from Jim

Home from our doc talk.
Dinner, digesting the day
Can't speak, overwhelmed.

John calls, how are we?
Two thoughts are all I can say,
Eating, have cancer.

**Email from Jim,
February 20, 2014**

Hello all, more of the story:

In October I “broke” my back but did not realize it. Went hunting, and my back hurt so bad I had to leave early. Returned home and went to the doctor in early November and had an x-ray done. The doctor said I had a compression fracture in my 4th lumbar, and osteopenia. So he put me on some vitamins and drugs. Hobbled through November and then went to Africa, where the rough roads did not help the back pain. After returning home I waited a few weeks to see a doctor and finally saw one in early February.

This is where the story changes. All this time I thought I was on the mend, but when I had an MRI done the doctor said I had more cracks in my vertebrae, and some of the vertebrae were reduced in size, in other words the damn things were disappearing. I then had a blood test (this all happened yesterday), which showed a high level of protein cells, and I was anemic. With this information, the doctor now believes I have Multiple Myeloma. He then took a bone marrow sample from my hip, and the results from that test will be available tomorrow. I have an appointment with the doc to go over all the results, which will confirm if I do indeed have MM. I do suspect I have MM, and if so, I will start on chemotherapy soon. Not sure what other therapies he'll prescribe, but will find out tomorrow. I'll let you know what I find out. Abbe and I have a lot of talking to do to make sure our lives are in order for what is coming at us.

M & M no longer evokes the image of candy, but multiple myeloma.

**Email from Janet,
February 20, 2014**

Jim and Abbe,

I am so sorry to hear about the Multiple Myeloma diagnosis. Garth and I will keep you in our prayers for the biopsy to be negative for the MM. I am so glad you have each other for support and that you are such a positive, optimistic couple. And don't forget all the rest of your family and friends who love you and are pulling for you, too. There will be lots of prayers being said and loads of great Karma filling the atmosphere on your behalf.

Love and Peace,
Janet and Garth

**Email from Abbe to Frances,
February 22, 2014**

Life has its twists and turns. This bend of the road is a sharp one—especially with the speed. Jim's fractured back turned out to be not a fracture caused by natural causes. While we thought he was healing, the plasma cells in the bone marrow multiplied too quickly and overtook his normal blood cells. This caused anemia and leakage of an acid that is eating away at his spine and other bones. They call this multiple myeloma. He is in Stage Three—the most advanced for this type of cancer. We start chemo on Monday, and if we can get the readings down from 80% to 10%, Jim will have a stem cell transplant, where they harvest his stem cells, and after radiation and more chemotherapy the harvested

cells are replaced inside Jim. All this takes place at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Care Center in Seattle. That would happen, if we are lucky, in about three months. Jim is Jim, not complaining, looking at this as a scientist.

We will carry on our lives as close to the normal as possible. However, Jim is in pain, tires easily, and is very vulnerable to catching germs. So we invite our friends to call and pop in when we are home. I'll be here most of the time (home) with short jaunts to Robeks to make sure all is well with the business.

We are lucky that our home, life, love, family, and friends are so wonderful.

Best always,
Abbe