

## **Ordeal**

**By  
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I'm of an age when you become somewhat vulnerable to certain natural realities in life. What happened to me this past summer may not be unusual as far as the bigger pictures goes, but whenever something life threatening gets personal, it becomes very significant.

My doctor called me on my cell phone while I was at work one day. What the doctor said to me that day turned my world upside down in a flash. He informed me, without any hesitation, that I had cancer. He wanted me to come in and discuss the various treatment options that were available. A whole series of feelings and emotions were unleashed in a torrent. The untimely news began my rapid descent into darkness and fear. It was my version of the Inferno or Orpheus descending into the underworld. I needed to get a hold of myself and make some decisions fast.

Within a few short weeks I went through a whole series of dramatic changes; from disbelief, to denial, and finally to acceptance. I went from crawling into a dark hole of despair to reaching out and sharing my feelings with family and close friends. Along the way I learned several important things about myself. I have a greater understanding of what it means to face a real crisis. Of the several medical options that were available, I chose the one which I believed to be the best suited for my personal situation. This was something that I vacillated on for several weeks. I prayed hard on this and the same answer kept coming to me, usually in a dream. I was filling myself with knowledge. I sought advice and attended valuable support groups. Time was running out. I had already committed to a surgical procedure in the hope of ridding myself of cancer. However, with the surgery date approaching like a freight train, I found myself continuously sinking into despair. Intellectually I could understand what I was facing but there was still a level beneath reason and logic that filled me with dread. Fear was consuming my life. I

couldn't relax. I needed to take action and gain control of this thing that I had no control over. Prayer was never lost on me during this time. I burned a trail straight to the gates of heaven with prayer. I then asked the Creator to guide me to the right decision.

Exhaustion set in but I got very little relief because it was hard to get the sleep that my body required. Whenever I did fall off to sleep I would awaken suddenly from some wild dream – usually dripping in sweat. Anxiety consumed me. I knew that I had to get out from under this terrible dark shadow, but how? In one dream that I had, I was working in a garden. I was trying to bring life to long neglected plants. Some choking weed was taking over and was killing these plants that I cared for. The more I struggled, the harder it became to fight off these weeds. I finally woke up, exhausted. It was several days later when I was worrying about what would be the right procedure for me. What course would give me the better chance of survival and lead to full recovery? It came to me one afternoon when I was fretting over my situation. It was as if the clouds had parted above me and the light was made to shine once again. I had to cut this malignancy out of my body just like I had to cut the weeds from my dream garden.

There was a moment when I began to accept my situation and sought council from friends whom I have shared many spiritual adventures with over the years. For many years I have been involved in Native American ceremony and ritual. I belong to a Tiochpaye, a Lakota Sioux term for Medicine Circle. I am the Fire Keeper for my own Circle. As a Fire Keeper, I am responsible for tending the fire that heats the sacred stones that we use in our Inipi, or Sweat Lodge ceremony. My Tiochpaye leader, Horse, reminded me that I could derive strength for any ordeal from my relationship with the fire and the rocks which have befriended me over the years. The lava rocks and fire are closely related to the sun that is the spiritual source of all the energy and light on the planet. Before beginning your ceremony, you must first offer tobacco to the lava rocks and the fire. Done ceremonially with reverence, this offering announces your intentions and releases the living spirits within the fire and stones so that they may assist you with your prayers. This was a good lesson for me and helped me to face my ordeal later.

Horse instructed me to make a series of prayer ties for four consecutive days before my surgical procedure. He reminded me that I was not alone and that he would be with me, my Tiochpaye would be with me, and all the spirits that I have ever prayed to for so many years would also be with me. In

following the Red Road and giving yourself over to ceremony you are opening up spiritual channels for yourself. According to Native American beliefs, spirit exists everywhere and we honor all those spirits each time we do a ceremony. By honoring the sacred rocks or the fire and the four directions with tobacco, you are honoring the living spirit which inhabits all those places. Prayer ties are tiny pinches of tobacco placed inside small pieces of colored cloth and then bundled together and joined in a long string. The cloth is usually in the seven sacred colors which represent the four directions. Red is for the East direction, the land of the eagle; White for the South direction and the Woman Nation; Yellow is for the West and the Thunder Beings; Black is for the North direction where the Ancestors dwell. The colors green and blue represent Mother Earth and Father Sky respectively. The color purple is to honor the spirits. You add a prayer with each pinch of tobacco. Your prayers are private. They are between you and the Creator. If you are preparing yourself for a particularly conspicuous ceremony, like one of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Oglala, then you will be required to make no less than 405 prayer ties. Making prayer ties is like saying your rosary if you are Catholic, or meditating with your prayer beads if you are a Buddhist. What I noticed while making prayer ties during my time of crisis was that the process forced me to focus and center my being which delivered me from my anxiety. Whether Spirit was working for me, or the fact that I was engaged in a repetitive process, it is very much like chanting a healing mantra. The process works!

Several strange things happened to me in the days before my surgery. My cousin called me and wanted to give me a gift that his brother Richard had left for me before he passed away. He had found in Richard's house, a badger skin rolled up in a bundle next to a photograph of us together. This was mind blowing! The badger is a strong medicine totem animal. Badger lives underground in a den. According to medicine cards that my wife Ismana read for me, the badger has knowledge of healing herbs which sustain him throughout his life. Also, badger is a notorious fighter. My cousin Jimmy, an outdoorsman, told me that our badger is the equivalent of a Tasmanian Devil; A fierce fighter that understands healing! This was very intriguing. For me it was as though my cousin was reaching out to me from the other side and offering me support for what I was about to go through.

One morning my cat Bandit came in for breakfast with spider webs hanging from his whiskers and ears. He is very funny whenever this happens to him yet he somehow manages to conduct himself with great dignity. It was soon

discovered that an enormous spider was working on a huge web outside my house. Part of this creation was attached to the ground. It continued to be broken either by myself or when my cat passed underneath it throughout the day. In spite of this continued harassment, the spider persisted in its labors and created a beautiful work of art that seemed to work very well for her. When the spider was repairing her web one night I actually approached it and watched her very closely for a long time. She wasn't at all bothered by my presence. She seemed to have everything figured out. I certainly didn't. What I remember of the spider was that her round back was ivory colored with markings in the shape of a human skull.

A Sun Dancer from my circle called a sweat lodge a week before I went into the hospital. His name is Gentle Heart. As a Sun Dancer he has made a four year commitment to participate in one of the most important sacred rites of the Oglala. The Sun Dance is a ceremony held each summer. In this rite, the Sun Dancer make a personal sacrifice on behalf of all the people, and through this sacrifice, all the people gain understanding and strength. There is a great amount of ritual and preparation involved in the Sun Dance. It begins with a series of Inipi (sweat lodges) and a Hamblechia (Vision Quest). In this ceremony, the Sun Dance leader with his assistants, will pierce the skin on the chest of the dancers. He will then place wooden pegs through the skin of each dancer and tie them to rawhide ropes which are attached to a center tree pole. This tree is sacred and becomes the center which receives the prayers and sacrifice of all the dancers. The dancers will pray and dance in the sun until they fulfill their commitments.

Gentle Heart instructed me to bring my personal medicine and to make a series of tobacco ties in particular colors. Medicine, as he was referring to in this case, are all those objects which are held sacred and used in ceremony. Your personal medicine may be some object that may have great power and significance. It may be a feather that was given to you in ceremony by a medicine person, or a sacred amulet or stone that someone has prayed over and used in ceremony. I placed my badger skin on the altar that day. I brought along an eagle feather that was a gift after I completed a vision quest. This was to be a very special lodge. I invited two of my closest friends who had never attended a sacred sweat lodge ceremony before. It was their first time and they wanted to be there to support me and I really welcomed their support. Two original members from my circle were unable to attend because they live out of state. They did ceremony and offered prayers for me long distance from their homes. The rest of my ceremony

consisted of a close circle of friends whom I have done ceremony with over many years.

Many good blessings came to me during my ceremony. A lot of prayers were put up for my healing. My friend Sarah spoke about how she prayed to the Virgin Mary for me. I was reminded of something that I learned in Catholic school long ago. It went like this: If you are ever seeking help from Jesus, sometimes it's best to go through his mother first because Jesus cannot refuse any request from his mother. I became very close to my rosary after that and said a lifetime of Hail Mary's in a few short days.

On the night before my operation I got very little sleep. Ismana drove me to the hospital early the next morning. It was dark when we arrived, around 5:30 am. I was certainly not ready and not looking forward to any of this, yet I was resigned to what was going to happen in a few short hours. On reflection, much of this seems very dream-like. Much of it was pretty routine: Dress down. Climb into a bed. Take my pulse. Attach tubes with needles into both arms. I had prayed and asked the Lord for help. Now, it was out of my hands. I had to give it all to the Creator and trust in my surgeon that he would make the right decisions about me. Ismana held my hand down the long hallway and into the elevator. She gave me a reassuring kiss and said goodbye at the Operating Room door. Said she would see me later on the other side. Oh yeah!

After my surgery I went through the kind of living hell that nothing prepares you for. Pain! Panic! Everyone is doing their best and you have access to plenty of pain medication, but still your body and mind go spinning right out of control. First, pain would trigger panic. Is this how it's going to be, I would ask myself over and over. I had to figure a way to push through all of it. I went back to my teachings and would recall my prayers and visualize ceremony. The words of friends and teachers took on significance because I accessed their power. Gentle Heart said that I was already fine, even before I went into the hospital. My friend Michael, a Sundance leader was convinced that I was healed before my surgery because he had prayed for me at his Sundance and that's what the spirits told him.

The pain in my lower abdomen was a natural part of healing. I envisioned my organs and cell tissues going through a post traumatic cycle of healing in order to restore their normal functions again. Something about that would trigger other thoughts and feelings. I would think about the Sun Dancers

hanging on the tree for four days in the hot sun. This became my version of a Sun Dance ceremony. Somehow, I got to a place where, whenever I felt pain, I would ask the Creator to let me do the suffering for someone else, to relieve their suffering and make their life easier.

The pain cycle would begin deep inside my lower abdomen and shoot across my body like lightning. My internal tissues and organs were slowly knitting back together. White blood cells were rushing to the injury site and lining up to protect me from infection like armed bodyguards. My body was in turmoil because it didn't understand what was happening. Suddenly, I remembered the spider that once set up residence outside my house for a brief time. The spider that had built a web in my garden was now grabbing my organs and pulling my insides back together with her delicate web. Of course that spider was never afraid of me. She was on a mission right from the beginning because she was sent there to protect me.

Spider stories abound in every Native American culture throughout Turtle Island. I'm most familiar with spider medicine from the South West and the land of the Diné. Spider is sister and ally to Changing Woman. In some stories Spider is Changing Woman. According to Navajo legend, Changing Woman is the supreme feminine deity. She is also known as White Shell Woman and Turquoise Woman. Changing Woman stands for peace, renewal and creation. Highly regarded by Navajo holy men, she is the creator of the first human beings and all of the animals which she made from her own skin. She is the destroyer of monsters – in this case, those inner demons resulting in irresponsible and otherwise harmful actions committed against other people, all the creatures of the world, and the planet itself. The demons that I carried at that time lived in dark places deep inside of me. For weeks I could not escape from the fear of gradual and painful decay until life was taken from me.

Spider Woman is her sister and ally. Spider is big medicine! Spider is a protector and keeper of knowledge. Spider likes to bring order to discord. You can see that notion manifested through the intricate webs she designs - one of the highest examples of form married to function. She is involved in creation myths, helping people when they are in trouble and she usually dwells in dark places where she holds many secrets. Spider inhabits dreams and women recognize spider as a spiritual guardian of newborns. Dreamcatchers in the shape of spider webs are placed around nurseries to protect babies from bad dreams and evil spirits. Also, spider is a creative

inspiration for all the talented weavers that live in the Southwest and create those marvelous hand woven rugs. Spider's great lesson for the people is to always walk in beauty and to never give up in your endeavors. According to Cherokee legend, Water Spider brought fire to the people to keep them warm in the winter and to help them to see at night. Spider seemed like a perfect ally for what I was going through and I welcomed her presence.

Throughout my recovery, I prayed constantly and reflected on the many teachings I had received. I focused on everything positive. I put my energy into all the things that I was going to accomplish after I regained my strength. Once my mind would go to someplace positive or my spirit would embrace the sacred, I could feel my anxiety level drop. On a real practical note, this strategy would relieve my stress and gave me a way to deal with the intense amount of discomfort I experienced. Whenever this happened, it opened up the channels for real healing to occur.

There were many questions yet to be answered. I prayed for recovery so that I could continue doing creative work for the rest of my life. It is more than something I just have to do, for me it is a calling. I attended healing ceremonies after my procedure. This was more for my spiritual healing because the physical healing was taken care of already. A Yuwipi ceremony was sponsored by Ismana. The young man in charge is a Sun Dancer and Yuwipi Chief. The Yuwipi ceremony is very important and one of the seven sacred rites of the Oglala, like the Sun Dance and the Inipi or Sweat Lodge ceremony. It is a ceremony held over several hours in complete darkness. A Yuwipi is a healing rite requested by a person who is in need of healing and/or direction in their life. It is a ceremony conducted by a person who has received the ability to communicate with the spirit world. He must also apprentice for several years with an established Yuwipi chief. A great many people from my circle attended to support and receive healing from all the spirits that were called in during this ceremony. I was visited by a spirit and received healing. A spirit announced to everyone in attendance that I already knew what I was supposed to do for the rest of my life. The spirits had already told me. This helper spirit said that he was going to visit me some time later, probably in a dream, to confirm what I already knew. I was instructed to continue praying and to participate in ceremony and to continue making my prayer ties.

Once I was diagnosed with cancer it was all over. I felt that a veil of darkness had descended upon me. This was very unlike me to be affected

this way. There was a renewal sweat lodge with Horse our medicine circle leader. Another important message was brought to me at this time. The strong warrior woman in charge of bringing in the ancestors told me that they were speaking to her. The ancestors revealed to her that they were leading me out of the darkness with the light they hold. It is because of my relationship with them that I always carry this light as well. I totally got that connection and it is something that I embraced with my whole being.

Thirty days after my radical prostatectomy I was due for a follow up visit with my doctor and also an additional PSA check. I prayed hard for a PSA result that came in below level one. My close friend Larry took me to my appointment. Larry has been with me for a long time. Larry did ceremony with me before my surgery. He assured me all along that I was going to be fine. It was comforting to know that he had such confidence in me. At the office I was shown to a room and left alone for a few minutes. My doctor finally walked in with a folder in his hand. He shook my hand confidently and smiled. He began to talk. "Well the first thing I want to say is that you are cured of cancer. You have negative cancer according to your latest PSA test." I was silent. I couldn't believe what I had just heard. This was the same doctor who told me that I had cancer only four months earlier. When I first tried to speak and thank him I choked and broke into tears.

I am still undergoing my long recovery from radical prostatectomy. My doctor told me that it would take me several months to heal properly and he also told me not to push it. I'm following his advice because he has been right so far and I trust him. I could always speak openly with him and get a straight answer. He encouraged me to do my own research and he returned my calls whenever I had questions. I had a great support group beginning with Ismana, my wife and closest friend. The love I received from my family and friends influenced my successful recovery more than I can ever imagine. Friends from work sent me cards and e-mails. I have two friends who put my name up for prayers at their church where they attend weekly service. A whole congregation of strangers was saying prayers for me.

At some point its all going to fall back on me. I'll take over the maintenance and direction of my life, which will hopefully be long, happy and fulfilling. Right now, I consider it a reason to celebrate if I can wake up each morning, drag myself out of bed, and greet the day only to enjoy all of the many blessings that life has to offer.