



JAMES CARROLL

## Readers Write

# LESSONS

**A BIOPSY AROUND THANKSGIVING** showed I had early endometrial cancer. Just a few days before Christmas I had a hysterectomy. Now it's almost New Year's, and I'm still making my way around the house painfully, holding my belly.

What lessons have I taken away from this brush with mortality? For starters, that recovering from abdominal surgery hurts like hell. That nothing — not work, nor holiday shopping, nor social commitments — is so important that it can't be put on hold.

That my husband loves me whether or not I have a swollen, scarred abdomen. That it's OK for me to let other people handle things for a while.

That it's a good thing to have medical insurance in this country. That when someone tells me he or she is ill, I should say something, even if it's just "I don't know what to say." That I may be peeling little bits of bandage adhesive off my belly and arms for the rest of my life.

That painkillers are not a crutch but a useful and necessary tool. That loose, sloppy sweat pants are a wonderful invention. That the cat doesn't really care where I've been, as long as I come home

to pet him.

That most problems in life, including having your car totaled by a speeding moron, are small concerns, as long as no one gets hurt. That although I may judge myself harshly, my friends are much more generous in their assessments, and I should probably pay more attention to them.

That come New Year's, there's nowhere I'd rather be than sound asleep in my own bed beside my husband.

*Name Withheld*

**WHEN I WAS IN FOURTH GRADE, THE** art teacher passed out crayons and asked us to draw a picture of the most beautiful thing we could imagine.

I started with a thick forest beside a lush green meadow. Above it I drew a blue sky, wispy white clouds, and a yellow sun. And in the middle of the meadow I placed a sleek silver rocket ship, pointed skyward, bearing an American flag.

This was in 1961, near the height of the space race. Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had orbited the earth, and the U.S. was trying desperately to catch up. Meanwhile I had finished the *Hardy Boys*

series the year before and was deep into *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*.

The art teacher stopped behind my desk. "Is that really the most beautiful thing you can think of?" she asked.

I got the message. Since that day my artistic endeavors have been limited to doodles.

*John Unger Zussman  
Portola Valley, California*

**WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN, MY BLACK** Angus heifer won the Reserve Grand Champion prize at the Dodge County Fair. Sally was a beauty, built low to the ground with a straight back and weighing just 845 pounds. She was so tame that she would follow me around the farmyard without a halter.

In the ring, when the judge came up behind Sally and placed his hand on her back, she didn't flinch. A shampoo a week and a healthy serving of beet pulp had made her coat sleek and shiny. She looked stunning in her white leather halter, required for the judging. But it was her quiet, sensitive eyes that I liked best.

A week after Sally won, Dad, my old-

est sister, my brother, and I traveled to the Omaha Stockyards, where Sally was to be sold with other top prizewinners from around Nebraska. Each year steakhouse owners came to bid on the champions. Johnny's steakhouse bought Sally.

From the catwalk over the pens, I caught sight of Sally as a yardman moved her toward the slaughterhouse. I called to her. She stopped and looked up at me. Then, prodded by the yardman, she moved on.

"Time to go," Dad said.

By the time we reached our old station wagon, I was sobbing. My sister held my hand in the back seat.

"If you don't understand what this is all about, you're no daughter of mine," Dad said into the rearview mirror.

We stopped for a hamburger on the way home. I choked mine down under my father's watchful eye.

My dad taught by example. If he ran over a jackrabbit on a dark night, he stopped and threw it in the trunk, and we cooked it for supper the next day. He taught me that death comes for every living creature. It isn't always pretty, or easy. But it comes. So every creature's life should be valued and honored.

When the check from Johnny's steakhouse came in the mail, I put the money in the bank and forgot about it. A few years later I had enough to pay for four semesters of college.

A couple of years ago, my brother handed me a cardboard box. Inside was the white leather halter that Sally had worn. It had hung in the barn for more than forty years.

"I thought you might want this," he said.

I did.

*Marilyn Hoegemeyer  
Cushing, Minnesota*

**I WAS HEALING FROM MY SECOND** miscarriage and spending early mornings and sun-streaked late afternoons planting my garden. While I sowed seeds in neat black rows of humus, inside I felt bereft and barren.

That spring it rained almost every day, on top of a wet winter. I watched most of my seedlings die, rotting under the burden of too much moisture. At the time

I was reading *Romeo and Juliet* with my freshman English students. I thought of Friar Laurence's words about how Mother Nature's womb is also her "burying grave."

One day my five-year-old son Owen and I were cleaning around the roots of our rhododendron when we found the stiff, curled-up body of a hedgehog. It had apparently crawled beneath the shrub to die. Having already weathered the deaths of two potential siblings, Owen cried for days about the inexplicable demise of "Hedgie." He and I buried Hedgie and talked frequently about dying and how death makes way for new life. I tried to explain to him that death, though we don't always understand it, is nature's way. At the time he could only nod through tears and mutter, "Poor Hedgie."

Every year a family of black-capped chickadees makes its nest in a dilapidated, barn-shaped birdhouse left behind by our home's previous owners. Though the birdhouse is an eyesore, we haven't taken it down, because we get so much

enjoyment out of watching these wisps of feathers build their nests and tend to their young.

During the few clear spring evenings, we dined on the patio and watched the birds bring sticks and grass and paper wrappers to insulate the house. Once the nest was built, the two mates took turns darting into the underbrush to gather food for the baby chickadees, whose insistent squawking kept their parents busy. Owen was eager to lift the lid of the tiny house and see the baby birds, but I explained that we should not disturb the nest.

By the end of May we no longer heard the babies' inchoate cries or saw the gray-and-black blur of the parents. From past years we knew that, once the babies were strong enough to fly, the entire family would leave the house and not come back until the following spring. Owen and I couldn't wait to get a look at this year's nest design, but we decided to give it one more week, just to be sure.

On a warm Sunday evening we pulled

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Letters	July 1	December 2004
Hero Worship	August 1	January 2005
Apologies	September 1	February 2005
Grace	October 1	March 2005
Small Victories	November 1	April 2005
On The Edge	December 1	May 2005

the house down from its perch and peeked inside. The smell was the first indication that all was not well. In the nest were three decaying corpses. Two had died with beaks open, as if in midcry. Maggots filled the bottom and sides of the nest and spilled out of the eye sockets and beaks of the dead baby chickadees. I could hardly bear to explain to my son yet again about the cycle of nature.

After a moment, Owen asked, "Where are their parents?"

"I don't know, Bud," I said.

"I'm sad that our baby birds died. We should bury them next to Hedgie." He sighed. "But look, Mommy, the birds are making life for these maggots."

It is now almost fall. Owen and I speak often of our "year of death," and he reminds me that nature's way means that some things live and others don't, and maybe next year the baby birds will live to fly away. Pregnant again, I smile at the thought.

*Laura Gibson  
Oreland, Pennsylvania*

**IT WASN'T MY FIRST TIME INSIDE** Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in upstate New York. I had been making regular visits over the previous year to conduct workshops as a volunteer "trainer" with the Alternatives to Violence Project. This particular visit was unusual, though, because it was the first time I had been called in to meet with "inside trainers" — i.e., inmates — to plan an upcoming workshop.

On my regular daytime visits, I entered through a side gate adjacent to the classrooms where our workshops were held. This meeting took place in the evening, however, and I soon learned that things were different on the night shift.

The other trainers and I, accompanied by armed prison guards, were let in at the main gate and marched across the open prison yard — which, thankfully, was empty. As we made our way across the yard, however, inmates in their cells began to hoot and jeer. We couldn't see their faces, but their taunts rained down on us from above.

We arrived, somewhat shaken, at our designated meeting room and went to work with the inside trainers — con-

victed felons, yes, but men with whom I had developed bonds of friendship over the course of a year.

The meeting passed quickly, and it was soon time for us to be escorted out. Flanked by armed guards once again, we made our way across the prison yard. This time, however, the yard was full of prisoners.

We walked in a tight formation through the crowd. I was frightened until I looked up and saw two men from the workshop walking as close to us as the guards would allow. They were watching out for us the only way they could. As soon as my eyes met theirs, I felt safe.

I know this doesn't make any sense. Here I was with armed men guarding my every step, and the moment I made eye contact with a pair of convicted murderers was when I felt safe? It isn't logical. But all the guns and bullets in the world will never make me feel as secure as friendship.

*Dee Nance  
Aurora, New York*

**WHEN I WAS ABOUT FOUR YEARS OLD,** my mother enrolled me in a swimming class at the community pool. This was before the days of parent-child classes, and I didn't like being dropped off by myself. I didn't like the lessons, either.

On the first day, I quickly discovered that I could not float. I lacked the necessary body fat. The instructor encouraged me to arch my back and lift my tush, and for a moment it looked as though I had pulled it off, but then I exhaled and sank toward the turquoise bottom of the pool.

I was a little better at kicking, but I couldn't stroke or breathe correctly. My hands wouldn't stay cupped, and my arms windmilled wildly. I blew out when my head was above water, and breathed in when it was below.

At the end of the lesson, the instructor took me out to the deep end, holding me close to her face. Once there, she stopped and tossed me up and away. I was expected to swim the two or three feet back to her, using the techniques I'd learned. Instead I sank to the bottom, bobbed to the surface, and, with much sputtering and gasping for air, dog-paddled into the

safety of the instructor's arms.

At the end of the lesson, my eyes burned, my sinuses stung from chlorine, and my belly was bloated with pool water. I sat wrapped in my beach towel, shivering and hiccupping, and waited for my mother to pick me up.

I never did master the breast stroke, but I learned how to swim and am not afraid of the water. The confidence I gained from those lessons enabled me to enjoy many sunny days frolicking in the ocean waves, swimming in the neighbor's pool, and water-skiing on the lake. It also gave my parents peace of mind.

Just three months before I was born, while relatives were in town for the holidays, my seventeen-month-old brother had managed to get past all the adults and out to the edge of the lake on which we lived. In the warmer months, he loved to splash and play with the ducks there, but that day was cold, and the ducks were gone. He drowned.

*Jodi Macaulay  
Los Angeles, California*

**AN ORPHAN, MY GRANDFATHER LIED** about his age to join the army and fought in the trenches in World War I. He was captured by the Germans, escaped, and was recaptured. When the war ended, he returned to Florida to work as a field hand and sharecropper. He eventually married my grandmother and settled down on a farm outside Rush Springs, Oklahoma. They raised four children and survived the Depression, dust storms, and the Second World War.

Papa's demeanor gave no indication of the difficulty he had known. He was cheery and playful with his grandchildren. In fact, when I was a little girl, I had a hunch that Papa just might be Santa Claus. He didn't have a lot of money for gifts, but he was generous and loving. On his farm he let my brother and me pet the animals and explore at will. We ran barefoot in red-clay silt so fine it felt like powder. The only real dangers were yellowjackets, bull nettles, and fresh cow patties.

One hot summer day, Papa took my cousins, my brother, and me with him to run errands. As we were headed back to the farm, we drove past some people



working in a cotton field. Most of them were Negroes. One of my cousins started making fun of them, and we all chimed in. I don't remember exactly what we were mocking. It may have been their dirty clothes, or their skin color, or the work they were doing. I do remember that a shadow fell over Papa's face. I had never seen him look so serious. He pulled over and told us to wait for him in the truck.

When Papa came back, he told us that we were going to pick cotton. He gave each of us an enormous sack. We were not to return to the truck until we had filled our bags.

I was excited at first. It was fun to see the white puffs we kept in a glass box in the bathroom growing from a plant. I figured it would be easy to fill a sack. As I started down my first row, sweat began to drip off my bangs into my eyes. The sandy clay soil stuck to my legs. The tough points of the dry outer pods scraped my hands. I was dismayed by how little of the bag my handfuls of cotton fiber filled.

A woman with a scarf on her head

stopped picking to look at me. There was neither animosity nor friendliness in her expression. I was used to adults addressing me in a cooing, comforting way. I thought perhaps this woman would put down her bag and help me fill mine. I was just a little girl from the city. Surely she would want to help me. But she returned to her own work.

I walked up the embankment to Papa's pickup, dragging the heavy, mostly empty bag behind me. Papa gave me some water from a metal canister.

"I'm hot," I said.

"Yep, hot out today."

"I'm scratchy."

"Better get back out there if you're going to fill that bag before sunset."

I stood still, surprised that I was being held to this bargain. Papa wasn't supposed to be this hard on us — certainly not on *me*.

As I started back down the embankment, I saw that there were other children, Negro children, in the field. They didn't have their own bags, but were pick-

ing cotton and putting it into the bags of the grown-ups. Those kids worked a lot faster than I did. Didn't the sun bother them?

I started picking again, slower than before, careful to avoid the hard stems and pods. The sun dropped only slightly in the sky. When I saw Papa coming toward me, I felt sure he had relented. Instead, he took my bag and emptied it into my cousin's. He told us that we could both fill the one bag.

I grew tired and sunburned and picked even slower now. The Negro kids were still working at the same dogged pace. I had not seen any of them take a break. There was no hint of play in their task.

Finally, when we had picked just enough for the cotton to reach the mouth of the bag, Papa emptied our pickings into a field worker's sack. That man turned and began to pick the rest of our row.

We followed Papa up to the pickup and crawled into the cab. I was too worn out to feel relief. As we drove away, I looked back at the field. No trees, no shade, just the red waves of silt and cotton plants. Papa didn't say a word: no praise, no criticism. I've never forgotten that lesson.

*Cheryl J. Poole*

*Waltham, Massachusetts*

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