

“There are some things we have to experience for ourselves, go through alone to learn it.”
– Anne Schettino, Summer 1996

Cancer is something that has been a big part of my life for the past 16 years. My father, Frank, was diagnosed with prostate cancer when he was 58 and luckily had surgery and had no further need for chemotherapy or radiation. Thankfully, few years ago, his urologist told him that he didn't need to go anymore for his annual check-up – good news for him. Sixteen years, prostate cancer-free is enough to say you're in remission. Unfortunately, a year after my father was originally diagnosed, my mother, Anne, was diagnosed with colon cancer, had the tumor removed, a colon resection, chemo and radiation and went into remission. A year later it returned, and further chemotherapy ensued. Almost a yearlong battle with that cancer put our family through an experience we would never forget. But it wasn't the experience of the fight with cancer that was so important; it was the end of it that was. When my mother began to accept the fact that her life was coming to an end, it became clear to me that this was an experience that not many people have the time to have or even want to have. Towards the end of her life, she was bedridden and immobile and did a great deal of meditating and reading. We moved her downstairs in our home and she was alone at night a great deal. I asked her if she didn't like being so alone all of the time. Her reply was the quote I gave at the beginning of this essay. I will never forget it because it embodied the journey she was traveling toward the end of her life; something she now had to do by herself.

Interestingly, reading John Dewey's thoughts on experience and thinking in *Democracy and Education* for a graduate class on Dewey's philosophies, immediately

made me think of this interaction with my mother. It may be that I have always seen this experience of my mother's, and hence my experience of it through her, as the ultimate experience of learning in anyone's lifetime - facing the end of your life. In fact, if there were an experience that Dewey might agree were the end of the "experience and education" continuum it may be this one. What would be the future implications of this experience of experiencing the end of your life? Perhaps leaving behind those you love, or what you can do to comfort them. But would you be able to see the ramifications of those present experiences? And therefore, would it be a true experience since it was not brought through the experience continuum to fruition? Also, what lessons are there to learn in this experience of experiencing the end of your life? Dewey's idea of continuity is that present experience informs future decision making, so if you are having this experience, there must be some future that will come next in order for there to be a purpose to this present experience. Ah, but that is exactly what my mother was trying to tell me that she *couldn't* tell me. Although she was able to share with me what she was going through to some extent, how she was feeling, perhaps, or the ideas she was grappling with – it was practically impossible for me to share in this experience with her to the extent that I could understand the implications of her decisions, actions or attempts at making peace with herself in order to be OK with the fact that there was no future to be had. Without going through her mind every step of the way, this was why it was by definition and its nature a necessarily isolating experience.

Dewey states "the measure of the value of an experience lies in the perception of relationship or continuities to which it leads up" (Dewey, 1916, p.140), which again is a very depressing thought in the context of my mother's most valuable experience to bring

peace to her life. In one way, since her experience was leading up to sadness of her leaving this world, most people would have a difficult time measuring the value of her experiences as worth much. Their perception of the continuity to which it was leading up would be to the inevitability of her mortality and perhaps the grief of those she would leave behind. However, I can extend her experience to my own within hers since Dewey believes that sharing experience is the social aspect of education. I have learned a great deal about mortality, spirituality, personal well-being and peace from my mother's experience. In fact, through her experience I have been better equipped to handle more experiences since her death, so I owe her a great deal. Two years ago, I was diagnosed with a meningioma, a brain tumor in the meninges (the fluid surrounding the brain). As my oncologist keeps a watchful eye and I stay on medication for the pain, I am thankful every day that all is well. I do know that whatever the outcome of my health issues, my overall status of my well-being is not connected to the existence of that tumor. I know this from experiencing what I did with my mother. However, with my father's more recent unlikely battle with breast cancer and stage IV lymphoma, I keep going back to my experience with my mom and how much I value the experience I had with her. Without her insight and guidance, I would be so afraid of so much in my life right now. Dewey states, "When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences" (Dewey, 1916, p.139). I believe both my mother and I did this in our own way. She experienced the inability to control what was happening to her, she acted in her acceptance of that, she did many things (including writing her own funeral mass service) and suffered the consequences. I experienced seeing the tremendous pain, humility and struggle that she dealt with, but in the end was

at peace and the consequence of that is that I am at greater peace for it in my life and am eternally grateful.

When I visit my dad now, I keep in mind my experiences with my mom, and all the different transformations I have witnessed of him throughout his treatments, but ever with a smile, his courage and his jokes. I keep in mind Dewey's final statement on experience and thinking, "For we live not in a settled and finished world, but in one which is going on, and where our main task is prospective, and where retrospect – and all knowledge as distinct from thought is retrospect - is of value in the solidity, security, and fertility it affords our dealing with the future" (Dewey, 1916, p.151). So I continue to look forward with hope and security, but think back to the past, from what I have learned from valuable experiences and continue to agree with Dewey's keen insights on learning, and realize that the continuum of education is one that does not have to rest within the heart and mind of an individual, but can be shared in order for it to have extraordinary meaning.

Dewey, John (1916). *Democracy and Education*. The Free Press, New York, NY.