Face to Face with Cancer

Soo Ewe Jin & Angeline Lim

First edition
April 2002

Second Edition

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Second edition
December 2004

抗癌心路历程

作者：徐友仁．林芳兰

Chinese edition
June 2006

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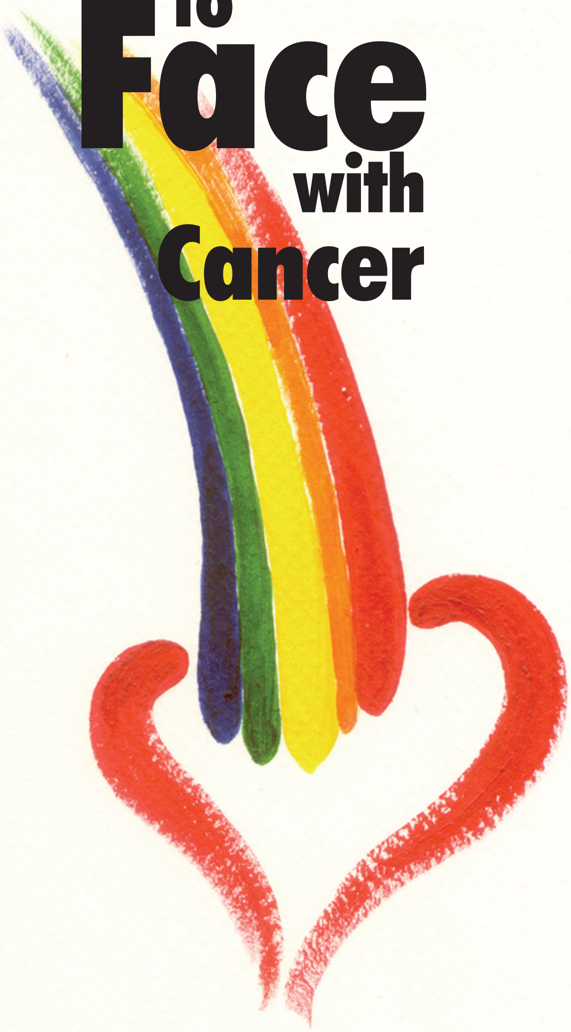

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Face to Face with Cancer

By Soo Ewe Jin & Angeline Lim

Third Edition 2006

Revised and updated
with great rejoicing

NOT FOR SALE

First published in 2002
Second edition 2004
Chinese edition 2006
Third edition 2006

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About the Authors

Soo Ewe Jin and Angeline Lim have been journalists for most of their working lives. They have, however, taken breaks from their careers to be full-time homemakers.

In 1999, during his turn as homemaker, Ewe Jin was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal carcinoma or nose cancer.

This book records their experience in dealing with the illness and is dedicated to all cancer patients and their caregivers.

It was first published in April 2002. A revised second edition was published in December 2004 and a Chinese translation came out in June 2006.

The publication of this book is made possible through the generous contributions of various people who have all chosen to remain anonymous.

The Soos have two sons, Kevin and Timothy.

Special Thanks

- to family and friends, whose love, kindness and generosity helped us survive our journey
- to Dr Chang Chee Wah, our caring GP and friend
- to the teacher-doctors, medical officers and interns at Universiti Malaya Medical Centre (formerly known as Universiti Hospital)
- to Professor Umapati Prasad, whose work has inspired his students to be ever alert to this particular cancer
- to the wonderful team at the Oncology Clinic of the Damasara Specialist Hospital during Ewe Jin's treatment: Karen who always greeted us with a reassuring word; ever-cheerful nurse Julie; Ms Yap and Noorjayadi, the dedicated staff in the radiotherapy room;
- to my doctors: oncologist Dr Gurcharan Singh Khera, who patiently answered our questions and allayed our fears; and ENT specialist Dr Awal Hassan, ever patient and gentle
- to *The Star* for kind permission to use the articles on pages 30-48
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- to our anonymous sponsors: a special couple from Damansara Utama Methodist Church who sponsored the first edition; a special couple at Emmanuel Methodist Church who sponsored the second edition; another special couple from EMC who sponsored the Chinese edition; three anonymous individuals who sponsored this third edition; and a special individual who made a love gift to the Emmanuel Care Centre for children with disabilities after going through his cancer journey.

To God,
our Healer,
Rock
and Salvation

Spreading the message...

When the second edition of *Face to Face with Cancer* came out, we were asked why we did not write a new chapter to tell people what has been happening in our lives since.

We thought publishing some photos and updating portions of the first edition (including correcting grammatical errors) would suffice, since the book is not so much about us but a story of hope and encouragement.

And that is how people have used it. We have seen with our own eyes how total strangers read the book in oncology wards, nodding their heads in agreement to something we wrote.

This book, like all books, is meant to withstand the test of time. Although the first round of people who got the book were our friends, we were thankful that total strangers from near and far were reading it.

Once, a friend called us up all excited because someone had read out our poem, *The Rainbow* (p10), at his church to encourage people who were facing crises. The speaker said someone had passed him a copy of the book and he felt that message was timely and thus wanted to share it.

When Angeline was in Cameron Highlands once, various people there were thrilled to see her because our book apparently had made its way to the mountains when one cancer patient took a copy from a hospital and passed it around.

The doctors have referred patients and caregivers, of all ethnicities and religions, to us on various occasions and we are thankful that God has used us to pass on this message of hope.

We knew when we first decided to publish this book that we would have to do our part when called upon. We have tried our best to be faithful to this calling, not only through this book, but wherever we are given the opportunity to share and to encourage.

For this edition, we decided to write this brief introduction plus a short postscript on *The Amazing Journey of A Little Book*. The rest of the book stays the same as what was published in the first and second editions.

Once again, we would like to appeal to everyone who reads this book to pass it on. A book like this is of not much use if it stays in the cupboard or on a shelf. Share it, and you can be a part of our amazing adventure.

To God Be The Glory.

Ewe Jin & Angeline
October 2006

Contents

Preface to the first edition

A diagnosis of cancer is like a death sentence, striking fear in even the bravest among us. When Ewe Jin was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal carcinoma or nose cancer in 1999, we began a new journey that taught us many lessons.

Along the way, the outpouring of support from family and friends overwhelmed us. The journey also put our faith in God to the test, and changed our perspective on life. And finally, it made us unafraid to face death, when the time comes for each of us.

In this booklet, we share our thoughts and feelings throughout the radiotherapy treatment and in the months that followed. We offer no suggestions for alternative therapies or miracle cures. Rather, the purpose of this book is to tell cancer patients and caregivers to take heart, for others have been down that road.

Radiotherapy and chemotherapy affect individuals differently and we believe there is no common tale to tell. But this is our story, and it has a happy ending! Our conclusion is this: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

To those who are battling cancer without the benefit of being able to leave everything in Higher Hands, we pray you will come to know our God, who saw us through our darkest hour and still sustains us today.

Ewe Jin & Angeline
April 2002

Preface to the second edition

When we published *Face to Face with Cancer* in April 2002, we did not quite expect all 2,000 copies of the booklet to be taken up within the year.

The booklet was distributed mainly in cancer wards. Friends given the initial complimentary copies requested for more. Strangers from near and far contacted us by e-mail to request for the booklet.

Although an e-book version resided on our website at www.geocities.com/ejsoo for easy download, many still preferred the booklet itself.

And so we have decided to print a second consignment. Once again, our dear friends are sponsoring the production costs so that it can be freely distributed. It is our hope that a Chinese version of this booklet will be published one day.

We have also taken the opportunity to correct mistakes (mainly in spelling and grammar) which appeared in the original.

We are also including further cancer-related articles written by Ewe Jin, the main one being his testimony in April 2004 after he was declared cancer-free by the doctors, five years after its discovery.

Once again, we would like to give thanks to God for His Healing Mercies and for sustaining us to this day.

Ewe Jin & Angeline
December 2004

Preface to the Chinese edition

The first edition of *Face to Face with Cancer* was published in April 2002 and a revised second edition published in December 2004.

Many people had approached us about the possibility of having a Chinese edition. In the preface to the second edition, we expressed the hope that such an edition will be published one day.

Praise God, this has become a reality.

We wish to express our sincere thanks to a special couple frm our church, Emmanuel Methodist Church, Petaling Jaya, for taking on the challenge of finding us the translator, and giving the necessary financial support to have the translation done.

Furthemore, the cost of printing 2,000 copies of this Chinese edition is fully sponsored by them.

We wish to thank Jerome Moo for his excellent work on the new cover design.

To Sweeng, whose bilingual skills allow her to design all three editions, thank you for always being there for us.

To Koh Sun Chun and Cham Tham Seng, our bilingual friends, thank you for the final touches here and there.

Although both of us do not know how to read or write Chinese, we hope this book will be helpful to those who need such material in this language.

Once again we thank God for his Healing Mercies and for sustaining us to this day.

Ewe Jin & Angeline
June 2006

From our journals

A diary of the journey

I remember April 19, 1999 like it was yesterday. That was the day I was "zapped" in radiotherapy or RT, the first of 35 sessions spread over seven weeks, daily except for weekends. It has been five years since.

Today, the NPC or nasopharyngeal carcinoma – nose cancer in common terms – is in complete remission.

During my treatment, my weight plunged dramatically. Now my old pants fit snugly around my waist once more. During RT, my taste sensations all but disappeared. Today I can taste everything I eat and even my salivary glands seem to be cooperating.

The past five years have seen me go from highs to lows as my health hung in the balance. Most of all, it has strengthened my faith in God, who healed me. Here is a brief record of my weeks of treatment written during the journey itself. The thoughts of my wife, Angeline, are interspersed between my recollections.

⏩ **Discovery and pre-treatment stage:** In the middle of November 1998, I experienced nosebleed and a blocked ear. Ordinarily, I would never have consulted the doctor for such seemingly small problems. But for some reason, I went to see my GP friend, Dr Chang Chee Wah. He referred me to the ENT specialist at Universiti Hospital (now known as the Universiti Malaya

Medical Centre) to have the symptoms checked out, "just to be on the safe side". A biopsy turned out negative, and gave my family and me a chance to celebrate the "good news" with a Thanksgiving Christmas Party. In March 1999, when the ear pressure problem returned, a second biopsy was recommended together with a CAT scan and I was told to collect the results on April 15.

▶▶ **April 15:** The doctors at UH told me that I had cancer. It came as a shock to me that the cells had evolved from benign to malignant in a matter of four months. The good news was that my cancer was in Stage One and was 100 per cent curable. The people at UH knew what they were talking about. After all, the resident expert on nose cancer is Professor Umapati Prasad, whose lifetime of research into this particular cancer has won him accolades in Malaysia and globally. I thanked God for a GP who doesn't take chances. Because it would have taken a few weeks for me to get my turn at UH's radiotherapy clinic, I asked for options and was referred to the Damansara Specialist Hospital under the care of Dr Gurcharan Singh Khera.

▶▶ **April 16:** I went to DSH to prepare for radiotherapy, 35 sessions over a seven-week period. I was fitted with a white plastic mask that looks like a fencing mask, which is screwed on to keep my head in position each time the machine zaps me. My boys remarked that I looked like Darth Vader!

⏩ **April 19:** RT began. The first session was like a carnival. I was accompanied by my wife Angeline, my fifth sister and her husband who happened to be visiting from Penang at the time. The staff were courteous and encouraging and I thanked God for leading us to this place.

I got to know the other patients and their caregivers. One patient travelled each morning from Nilai; another came from Klang. Compared with them, I am practically within walking distance of the hospital. But our sojourn into the radiotherapy chamber is more or less the same: three minutes each at the most.

The first two weeks were a breeze. Staff at the clinic dubbed me the "most cheerful patient". That was before bacteria and fungi began to party in my throat.

(Angeline's thoughts at the end of Week Two)

We were generally upbeat because Ewe Jin's cancer was in Stage One and had an excellent chance of being cured. He was undergoing radiotherapy, and we were grateful to be spared the ravages of chemotherapy.

While we counted these blessings, our hearts went out to other patients whom we had befriended in the oncology clinic – those in Stage Two or Three who had tougher battles and, worst of all, those who were alone in their suffering. We didn't know what the purpose was for this twist of events in our lives. What we did know was that we had developed an empathy with other cancer patients which one can't possibly acquire looking in from the outside.

⏩ **May 1:** The toughest part of the RT was Weeks Three to Five. My throat was attacked by bacteria and fungi that caused a serious infection. I was only able to take Enercal (a high-energy food drink) and juices, and my weight dipped steeply. My entire throat area hurt so much that even taking fluids was torturous. I felt nauseous most of the time.

In the first two weeks, I was guzzling down so much water that they could not refill enough bottles for me. In Week Three, I struggled to finish even one.

⏩ **May 7:** I coughed up blood and vomitted in the bathroom. I lay on the floor, drained of energy. At the time, my fifth and seventh sisters were in town as well, and I felt really bad that they had to see me in this state. Finally, I decided to get myself admitted to the hospital for a one-night stay, to go on the drip.

Well, just another day in the life of a cancer patient undergoing radiotherapy. The drip did its job and after that my throat improved gradually. But skin on my cheeks and neck began to look like a really bad case of sunburn. People would stare at the angry burn marks.

(Angeline's thoughts at the end of Week Three)

Nausea. A throatful of ulcers. Excruciating pain. It is beginning to be obvious to me that we were in this for the long haul. Ewe Jin was admitted into hospital last Friday to go on the drip. The doctor gave us the option and Ewe Jin decided to go for it. It was simply too painful for *him to even drink. We had a host of questions, all of them bewildering to us, but oh-so-routine to the doctor. Yes, just one day on the drip would be enough to get Ewe Jin back on liquids. No, the sore throat won't go away, until the therapy is all finished. Yes, he should regain his confidence to eat again, and bear with the rest of the treatment.*

Any other questions? No, it doesn't really make a difference how the food is taken - an all-liquid diet is okay, as long as it's high calorie, high protein. Any other questions?

Treatment at the hospital was five-star. The nurses were incredibly cheerful and the medicines worked like a charm. I stayed one night with Ewe Jin and helped untether him from the tubes when he needed to go to the toilet.

Saturday he was discharged and Sunday morning he was bright and perky. Then in the evening the pain came back. Ewe Jin's brow furrowed into a frown. And I snapped. Don't swing up and down like a yo-yo, and don't take me along with you, I said unreasonably.

⏩ **May 9:** Today is Mother's Day. I woke up feeling great, went to church and met with many concerned church members who had been praying for me. I could drink my whole bottle of water. When I came back, I even managed to consume some porridge. The ulcers will not disappear overnight but I think it is now under control. The doctor has given me all sorts of medicine to minimise the discomfort, including local anesthetic administered in jelly form. Through it all, I was sustained by the love and concern of family members and mentally wished all mothers in the family a Happy Mother's Day.

(Angeline's thoughts at the end of Week Four)

We were now in the middle of the therapy. Stage One completed, said the radiologist with a smile. Well, the middle seemed to be fraught with mood swings, like a rollercoaster ride. There were so many ups and downs in a day, I was feeling exhausted from the ride.

Usually mornings held lots of promise. Ewe Jin would feel like he could lick this thing. He'd go about the house doing his usual chores. Come noon, he'd slow down. By afternoon he would retch. And my heart would sink again.

It was a period of contradictions. I was too distracted with Ewe Jin's medication to bother with small things - housework, personal grooming. Yet at the same time, small things became so very important.

Mother's Day was yesterday. Ewe Jin was too tired to "orchestrate" gifts from the boys. A friend's daughter gave me a rose, another friend's child gave me a bag of potpourri. Somehow, it meant a lot that these friends shared their Mother's Day gifts with me.

Unexpected gifts of cash and kind from friends brought a lump to my throat. I'd get teary-eyed when family members came to help out - fetch the kids, mop the floor, be around. When Ewe Jin smiled or cracked a joke, it was enough to make me cry. I guess emotions are heightened by tiredness and insufficient sleep. When it's all over and I look back on that period, I'd probably feel silly about being so emotional. At that point, all I knew was I had to work extra hard just to stay on an even keel. Maybe Stage Two would have fewer crests and troughs. I sure hoped so.

▶▶ **May 19:** Today, I completed Dose No 23, with 12 more to go. I can confidently say that I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I talked to a fellow patient, a very nice 50-something Datuk, who told me that "radiotherapy is a breeze compared to chemotherapy" which he had to endure after they removed one of his lungs because of his lung cancer. This man is not even a smoker. Another young chap I spoke to had the same ailment as me, but his was at Stage Two when they found out. I did my best to encourage everyone I met at the clinic. I was indeed blessed to always have a "mini-entourage" with me when I went for treatment. Financially, we had enough to meet whatever expenses so far. Jesus is my Anchor in every Storm. A car passed by me with this sticker on the windscreen. How true indeed!

(Angeline's thoughts at the end of Week Five)

The countdown had begun. Just 10 more therapy sessions to go! We saw the light at the end of the tunnel and suddenly even bad days were bearable. But it was also at this time that my body decided it had taken enough punishment and gave in to a full-blown bout of flu. Spiritual strength is more important than physical strength, but it would help to have both!

These days, Jin smiled a lot more, and the boys were glad to "have their Pap back", even if he was "thin like a prairie dog", as Tim observed. We've had to entertain visitors by the dozens. I guess I was glad Jin had that many concerned friends. Still, it was exhausting. People have tried to be helpful, and some have actually been. In *retrospect, what would have helped the most would have been a listening ear, no advice; and yeoman's services – cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, fetching the kids, pairs of hands and feet when I needed them! I thank God there were people around who were sensitive to my needs.*

This week, I also received a card addressed to me. Not Jin and me. Such a little gesture, but it meant a lot. Here's to all caregivers to the sick around the world. I think they all deserve medals.

⏩ **June 4:** Hurray, last day of RT! I celebrate by giving out little teddy bears to the doctor and staff of the Oncology Clinic. The next checkup is in a month's time but it will be at least a year before the all-clear can be given. I have lost 10kg from Week One. Seems like a good slimming programme, radiotherapy!

⏩ **June 7:** It's our 13th wedding anniversary and also the day when we go to UH to take the results of my liver and bone scans. Everything is clear – the cancer has not spread! I will still have to go for check-ups every six months, and record five years of remission before I am officially pronounced "cured".

The rainbow

The day before therapy began, we decided to treat ourselves to a seafood dinner before I had to observe dietary restrictions. As we sat rather gloomily in the restaurant that early evening, I looked out and was surprised by the sight of a rainbow, clear and bright, even though there was not a drop of rain. To me, that was a sign of God's promise that He would see me through this journey. I wrote this poem soon after.

A heart so burdened
Unanswered "whys"
Turmoil within
Despair and sighs

Spirits battered
Thoughts running wild
Then a voice beckoned:
Look up, my child

There was my rainbow
Lighting up my way
God's sign to me
On a clear, dry day

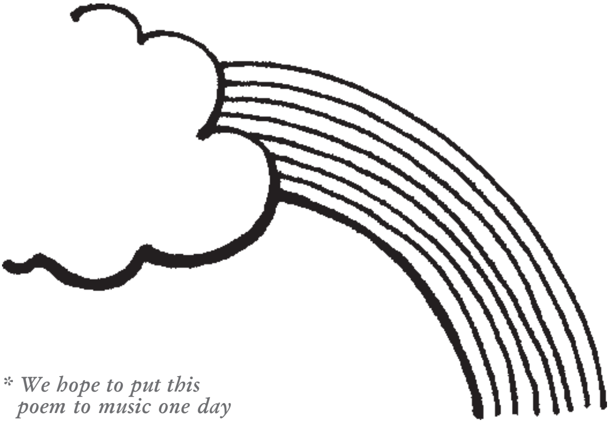
Be at peace, my child
Have no fear
You think me distant
But I am ever near

I will send my angels
To soothe your tired soul
Rest in me, my child
You won't walk alone

A promise made
A promise claimed
Thus began my journey
To my rainbow's end

Ahead there was
Both sunshine and rain
Yet, joy released
Despite the pain

There was no pot of gold
At my rainbow's end
But God's promise of life
Round every bend



** We hope to put this poem to music one day*

Thoughts on my journey

Never alone

Throughout my seven weeks of treatment, I never went to radiotherapy alone. My wife Angeline was my constant companion. Besides her, Woo, a school friend, met us there most mornings, quietly encouraging me, giving me lifts back and running errands for me.

Other friends also rallied around me. It was such a joy to have family members from Penang (sisters, in-laws, nieces and nephews) who travelled all the way for the privilege of accompanying me to the room where I was zapped by the linear accelerator.

Kevin and Timothy came along once during the school holidays and were given a tour of the room. Tim asked the radiotherapist, "What if you make a mistake and hit my father in the wrong place?" Well, we trust that God saw to it that it didn't happen!

I made many friends in the clinic. Most were in worse shape than I was. We encouraged and prayed for each other. There was no class distinction, no racial divide, no religious barrier among the patients; all of us were comrades-in-arms.

The radiotherapy sessions last only a few minutes or so. But there were always extra minutes in the waiting room for all of us to fellowship with one another. But after treatment, the rest of the day, I had to be taken care of "like a baby". Thank God, I was never left alone during this period. Apart from sisters who came down from Penang to "mother" me, here in KL, Angeline's sisters took turns to take leave from work to "babysit" me and the boys whenever my wife was at work.

Encouragement from all over

I rejoice at all the cards, letters, faxes, e-mail and flowers I received... so many that I have lost count. And the visitors! As hard as we tried to keep the news from non-family members, eventually word did get out. We had a constant stream of visitors, from the headmistress and teachers of SK Sri Kelana (the boys' school) to neighbours, former colleagues and old school friends.

Friends with whom we shared a common faith also came to pray for me to be healed. A very dear friend who himself was going through a journey far worse than mine, insisted on visiting to give me support and some money that had been raised for him through a public appeal. I cried when he left my home after his visit.

At last count, we received love gifts amounting to RM12,000. Our medical bills totalled RM7,000. We joked that we had "made a profit", but in fact we had spent it all on incidentals like supplements and special foods. The financial support that poured in from family and friends ensured that we were never in need and we were spared an extra worry. It must be noted that throughout this period, I was a full-time househusband, without any company medical benefits to tide me through.

Help also came in kind. When my computer went on the blink, a friend immediately called up the computer shop and asked the man to fix it and put it on his bill.

This same friend brought me 10 CDs to listen to. As for the PC, in the end, the man from the computer shop replaced parts for free and even brought grapes for me.

I was given more fruits than I could possibly eat. I really appreciated the regular supplies of green apples and carrots that my niece Audrey, who was staying with us at the time, juiced for me daily. Friends took the boys off our hands regularly and ensured that they had some activities for the school holidays. A couple tracked down hard-to-get prescribed medication for my throat infection.

Others came by with home-cooked meals, chicken soup and flowers. Thank you, all, for being sensitive to our needs without even being asked!

Need for support

After we finish treatment, what happens? There is a sense of release, yet restraint in our joy because with cancer, there are no guarantees.

I felt led to lend my support to fellow cancer patients and visited the hospital often even after I had completed my treatment.

Once, I went along with a friend of mine who had just started his radiotherapy. It was nice to meet up with familiar faces among those who are still undergoing treatment.

I think it would be great to have a support group that meets up occasionally to help each other along. It is an encouragement just to know someone has been through the same ordeal and survived it.

One fellow NPC patient whom I met on the street lamented, "What's the point of living? I can't taste anything!" I told him that when I finished my RT, I had expected to be able to enjoy my food again. Of course, this did not happen immediately and I was very disappointed. The problem was that I had expected my taste buds to be back at 100 per cent, but this is not possible. When I realised that and scaled down my expectations to say 70 per cent, eating was no longer a problem.

Gradually, God gave me back me my sense of taste and I am now able to enjoy my food as much as before. I hope to be able to share experiences like this with fellow patients so they will be encouraged to push on.

I would also like to point out that looking beyond ourselves is good therapy. As a patient, I did my best to express appreciation for everything that was done for me. After my discharge from hospital, I wrote a letter to commend the staff on their cheerfulness and efficiency. The hospital director, in turn, wrote to thank me for the note – apparently, it is not common for patients to say "thank you"!

Take time to laugh

About a year before I was diagnosed with cancer, in a rare moment of greed, I fell prey to a door-to-door salesman who convinced me that I was the luckiest person in the neighbourhood. For a mere RM80, I could participate in a draw that might just win me a 29-inch TV set. Now, who could let an opportunity like this pass by? (My better half would have, but that's a different story.)

Anyway, in the incident that brought out the best in him and the worst in me, I picked an envelope. Unfortunately, there was no TV set for me.

Instead, I had "won" the opportunity to buy a juicer for RM300, supposedly 50 per cent off the usual price. I paid him and took my "prize". Boy, did I get a shelling from my better half that day.

Then as I underwent my radiotherapy sessions, this juicer that entered my household through such an interesting episode was my lifesaver.

With the opportunistic fungi still causing havoc in my throat, it was practically impossible to take anything solid in. Since I started treatment, I have had juiced carrots, green apples, celery, spinach, pears, bananas – you name it. The juicer has been useful when I needed to blend all sorts of stuff into a yucky mess that babies love to throw onto the floor.

So, to the salesman who ripped me off that day, thank you!

A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. – ***Proverbs 17:22***

Letters to loved ones

Sisters are extra special to me because I am their only brother. I am the only thorn among the eight roses. My fourth sister passed away of cancer in 1983 at the age of 34.

Dearest Sisters,
I hope you all don't mind this common letter for today. I shall write and call each of you individually later on. I know that all of you are very concerned about me. I thank you for that.

When I got the test results yesterday, I was shattered! Thank God Angie was there. She is indeed a tower of strength for me. We of course had to put on a brave front when we got back. I am sure you all understand why. I told the boys about it and they took the news quite calmly although Kevin looked a bit teary-eyed.

As my doctor and very good friend told me: "I'll be honest with you - there's no way anyone can feel great about news like this. So I'm not going to patronise and tell you to look at things on the bright side etc etc. Right now things seem so unfair, I mean, why a nice guy like you? Why not some other slime ball of the day?"

Pyschologists have broken down the human grief reaction into nice neat little portions. Upon hearing bad news like this there are five stages;

1) Denial – "naaah, this can't be happening...just a bad dream.."
2) Anger – "why me? Why not ..(favourite villain)"
3) Bargaining – "must be some mistake here...must be some way out of this.."

4) Depression – "omigosh! I'm a goner..."
5) Acceptance – "well, what to do... got to take it... not so bad after all..."

I think it helps to know what's at the end of the tunnel the moment we go into it. There's no way out but through it. There's seldom a soul who can skip stages 1-4 and arrive at stage 5 just like that. Well meaning friends and relatives sometimes try to deny us the experience of the early stages and hurry us along to stage 5 which they think is best for us.

I think all stages are necessary for any person to come to terms with this kind of misfortune, and I should take my time to get through this. And the same for you people too.

So I won't tell you not to feel lousy about it. Go ahead and feel lousy about why it is happening to a "nice brother" like me (Ahem!)

BUT and here is the big BUT, I will win this fight. The following are the facts:

1. Not all cancers are the same. Cancer sounds like a dangerous word but there is a world of difference between a slow-growing cancer like NPC (which I have) and some other types of cancer. To put it in perspective, this is the "best" type of cancer I can possibly have.
2. The UH doctors say in the past 15 years, all those patients who were diagnosed with this NPC at Stage One were completely cured. Not a single case of relapse in the past 15 years. So I am facing excellent odds. The cancer spe-

cialist at Damansara Specialist Hospital where I will be doing my therapy confirmed that my scan showed an excellent situation.

3. UH is actually a world-renowned centre for treatment of NPC and treatment guidelines worldwide are derived from experience from this hospital. Prof Umapati Prasad is the world authority on this form of cancer.
4. I am getting very good advice and I know that over the next few weeks, many well-meaning friends and relatives who know about it will be recommending me all sorts of alternative treatments. The doctor tells me to resist the temptation to try alternative therapies like Chinese medicine.
5. What are the side-effects? Not as bad as chemo of course so you won't have a bald brother or one without a nose! But a lot of my taste sensations will disappear and of course my diet will have to change a bit. But not to the extent that I will look like a sick person in the house. I can cook the food I need and make it fun. I do not want to be treated like a patient at home so Angie and I will need some time to adjust the eating patterns which hopefully Mama will be able to fit into.
6. I have not spent that much money so far. Up to this point, I have spent under RM1,000 at UH. At Damansara, the treatment itself will come up to around RM4,000. So it's not going to be terribly much. We have the funds right now. Over

the long term, when I run out of Enercal or Vit B or whatever, I will let you know.

7. All of you are aware of my policy to give and to receive always with an open and grateful heart. So I will not even try and stop you all from doing what you want to do. But for the moment, please do not overwhelm me with your generosity. Sometimes, I think having a chat with you all may be all I need. So please call, write, e-mail often!

With much love
Brother Jin

A letter to my mother who returned to our family home in Penang for the duration of my treatment as we felt she should be spared the agony of watching the process. My father passed away of cancer in 1987.

Dearest Mama,
I know that you are very concerned about me. As you always say, "Not concerned, how can?" I thank you for that. I write this letter to reassure you that all is well. Maybe not 100 per cent yet, but I am certainly getting better by the day.

The treatment is going fine. By the end of this week, I would have completed 25 doses, with only 10 left to go. The doctor checks me every week and he is very happy with the progress I am making. I am really in good condition although I am a bit tired sometimes. This is a normal reaction to the treatment.

I want you to also understand that I am not fighting this battle alone. God is with me all the time. This is the God I believe in and He is such a wonderful Friend. When I am weak, He is strong. I know that you have seen with your own eyes, as you lived with us, how much we trust in this God who is our Provider. We never worry about tomorrow because we know He will be there for us.

Sometimes we cannot understand life because strange things happen. But how wonderful it is that whether in good times or in bad times, we have someone we can rely on. Each night I pray that God will see me through this and that my family will emerge stronger. I also pray that God takes care of you and everyone else in the family.

I know sometimes we argue. But I want you to know that our quarrels never change the fact that I think you are the most wonderful mother I can possibly have. Take care of yourself at all times. I know you are in good hands in Penang. I am in good hands in KL, so don't worry.

With much love,
Your son, Jin

A letter to my sister-in-law and brother-in-law who surprised me one morning with a lovely bouquet of lilies.

Dear Han & Dom,
When I woke up and saw the lilies, I was immediately reminded of this passage in the Bible:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

"If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." – *Matthew 6:25-34*

Thanks for brightening up my days.

Love,
Jin

Around the time I was going through my journey, a dear friend Faizah Hashim, was fighting a battle with breast cancer. Her fortitude and approach to life inspired me tremendously. She would always say, "It's not how long we live, but how we live." Rocky, a remarkable and dear friend, showered her with amazing love throughout the journey. We shared our thoughts with one another and I felt a great sense of loss when she passed away.

Dear Faizah,
How are you? My radiotherapy was completed almost two weeks ago. And each day, if I succeed in eating something more than Enercal, I feel like it is *Hari Ini Dalam Sejarah!* I am beginning to get back into the swing of things.

Yesterday, I took the boys to the club for a swim and although I didn't swim as long as I used to, it was wonderful to watch the boys enjoying themselves. I think that was the one thing I – and the boys – missed most during my RT – doing so many different things together.

But the boys never complained and were quite happy to do their own things at home, allowing me to rest and recuperate.

I have been receiving many letters and cards and I am reminded that cancer is not a one-card ailment. As a patient, I value each and every card I receive but I really treasure the repeat ones because it is nice to be continually remembered at times like this.

I really marvel at your optimistic outlook and I know that God will definitely take good care of someone with so much to live for.

Rocky visited the other evening and we were looking at some old pictures, of when we were back in school, having a barbecue by the beach, and our trip to Taman Negara.

The trip to Taman Negara was really special. It was just the two of us and something neither of us will ever forget. I don't think Rocky can because when we were lost and climbing up a hill, he was the one who carried my haversack and pushed me to our destination, when I wanted to give up. He even had to force me to eat so that I would have the strength. We had a wonderful time there.

Throughout this period of treatment and recuperation, I often have to dip into my treasure box of memories. Memories of relationships with my family, my wife, my children, my friends, etc. You may have recently read my "looking back" article about my father, whom Rocky knows very well too. My dad was a friend to all my friends and often went fishing with us.

And each time I think back, I recollect and I smile and I am filled with a very nice warm feeling. I read once in a book about marriage that it is important for people to store up treasures of the heart. My wife and I follow that advice because we find that when we think of all the nice things we do for each other, and also that people do for us and with us, we get rejuvenated.

There are many people who prefer to dig into a box of nasty memories filled with regret and bitterness. Not for me. I think if such a box exists for me, it must be pretty empty. Of course, I have had my share of bad experiences and terrible events, but I refuse to dwell on them. I only like to think of all the good things that I have been blessed with.

This is a new journey for us. As someone who loves to write, I recently started a journal about my journey. My story and yours can be written with humour, intrigue, anticipation, sorrow, pity, adventure, tragedy, suspense, poetry or song. The choice is really ours. I want to encourage you to also put your thoughts in writing because I believe your story will definitely be able to touch someone one day. That is the power of the written word.

Rocky tells me your final chemo is sometime in July. I end my radiotherapy on June 4. So the light at the end of the tunnel is there for both of us. I wish you God's continued blessings for a full recovery.

Well, anyway, I am just rambling on…. Just wanted to hear from a comrade-in-arms. Most of the time in life, we cannot do everything that we want to, but sometimes, doing just that little bit may be enough! It's certainly better than doing nothing.

Well, I do hope you are okay and that you are keeping your spirits up. We remember you in our prayers.

Your friend, Jin

Published writings

The following three items are condensed from articles written by Ewe Jin and published in The Star *under the pseudonym Anon in 1999. Writing proved highly therapeutic during this journey.*

When opportunists strike

(First published in The Sunday Star, Oct 31 1999)

Crises invite opportunities. They also invite opportunists. My doctor tells me that the white spots around my throat are precisely that – opportunistic fungi taking advantage of my weakened throat area to wreak havoc on my entire eating and drinking regime.

"We are not interested in getting rid of them. This is not what we are fighting," he said by way of assurance. "But I can give you some medication to minimise the discomfort. You must understand that it is all part of the turf."

The turf is radiotherapy. 35 sessions in all. Daily, except for weekends. That's seven weeks. I am now in Week Three and some of the side effects are beginning to take hold – the parched throat, the dry skin, the nausea. With the growing physical discomfort, I know I am beginning to be a pain in the neck at home.

My cancer is in Stage One and fully curable. According to the professor at Universiti Hospital, they have had a 100 per cent success rate in the past 12 years for all the cases caught at this stage. I thank God for His mercy that Friday afternoon even as my world collapsed.

If you go to UH often enough, you cannot help but be impressed by the professionalism of the doctors. They are very thorough. And sometimes, you have to sit amazed as a bunch of them, including medical students, probe your case.

I am glad they were thorough because tests in November the previous year had showed up nothing. But in less than four months, the biopsy results had changed from benign to malignant.

UH is not only the country's foremost authority on NPC; it is in fact a world-renowned authority. NPC is rare in most populations of the world. However, it is the most frequently occurring tumour in broad stretches of south-eastern China particularly in Guangdong Province.

Chinese who reside or whose ancestors were from southern China, that is, those who speak the Cantonese dialect, exhibit very high risks. I am Hokkien and despite having lived in Petaling Jaya for nearly 20 years, Cantonese is definitely not my lingua franca. Do you hear that, cancer cells?

In contrast to the hustle and bustle of UH, there is a five-star hotel feeling at the specialist hospital where I was referred to for radiotherapy. The doctor is a kindly man who confirms the generally positive prognosis.

In a matter of days, I am known by name to the nurses and the radiotherapists. They tell me I am their most cheerful patient. I thank God that He has brought so many cheerful people into this environment for me.

Of family and friends

(First published in The Sunday Star, Nov 14 1999)

My two boys hug me more often these days. We have always been a "hugging family", but their hugs mean so much more to me now and I guess they realise that I need the comfort of their touch.

No 1 is 12 and about to be officially registered by the National Registration Department. He is wise beyond his years. He does well at school both at studies and in his extra-curricular activities. Now he doubles up as my secretary at home, screening calls to make sure I am not disturbed when I am resting.

No 2 is eight and very carefree. He reassures me daily that nothing will ever happen to the "best father in the world". His prayers are so sweet they make me cry.

My wife is wonderful. She was there when the results were made known to me and handled all the preliminaries with full efficiency. For someone so used to letting me do everything for her, it was an eye-opener for me, indeed, that she will be able to cope no matter what.

I know that life will never be the same again. No matter how positive the prognosis, a question mark will always remain. If it is tough for me as the patient, I know it is doubly tough for my spouse.

And then there are our families, two huge ones on both sides stretching from Penang to Singapore and Australia, too. They were all naturally worried but did their best to put my mind at ease.

I thank God for all my family members from the oldest to the youngest. In these past few weeks, I have received so much encouragement from so many. They also helped in cash and kind because I am unemployed and am not covered by any medical insurance. It is a burden lifted off me to know that my medical expenses have been taken care of so soon. I know I am not alone.

Treasure at the end of the rainbow

(First published in The Sunday Star, Dec 12 1999)

Readers might have noticed by now that my previous articles had a sense of immediacy about them. You are right. They were penned day-to-day. During the course of radiotherapy, writing proved to be therapeutic and I tried to put all my thoughts down whenever possible.

But it is time to end my story for now. And I'm glad to say it has a happy ending – real treasure at my rainbow's end.

It has been six months since that fateful day and my oncologist has just pronounced me to be "in complete remission."

I almost hugged him but caught myself as I could see he was not a sentimental sort of person.

Outside the consulting room, there were no such inhibitions. The radiotherapist, who was a constant joy and encouragement during treatment, gave me a real big hug. In the months after my treatment ended, she continued to stay in touch. The concern she showed me was really exemplary.

As the news filtered out (hastened by e-mail) I could say the whole world rejoiced with me. And so too did my fellow patients, even though some of them are still struggling, while others have had to embark on additional courses of chemotherapy. As a community, we really did care for each other.

I remember my many talks with one Datuk, a non-smoker, who had lung cancer. We shared stories from the heart. Then there were the two elderly women who took their treatment very much in stride and continued to beam radiance.

One patient, a remisier, shrugged his shoulders when I noted that since the market has improved, so must his income. I know what he'd much rather have than a windfall: his sense of taste.

I told him that anything is possible. Earlier, doctors had warned me that up to 50% of my taste sensations will disappear "for good." But thank God, I did gradually regain my sense of taste. It is sheer joy to be able to eat and not have everything taste like paper!

I found out that each patient reacts differently to treatment. Not only that, they have different recovery rates, too. I lost 12kg and am having some trouble putting it back on. But focusing on the physical aspect, I feel, is both tiring and unnecessary.

The important thing is I feel well. Sure, some days I still struggle with getting my food down, but on the whole, I know I am very much better today than six months ago.

When I think of some of those critical days, I can only thank God. It is not easy when we are in the midst of hard times to tell ourselves that "all things will pass". But they do.

There is a danger, too, that after an experience like this we become "overnight experts" on it. I will be the first to tell you that I am not. But I have learnt many valuable lessons and have simply tried to share some of them through my articles.

I leave you with this bit of advice from someone in the Internet community. Of the countless pieces of advice that came my way, I found this to be the most sensible.

The Ten Commandments for cancer survival

1. Thou shall regard the word "cancer," as exactly that: a word. Nothing more, nothing less. For its original meaning has changed mightily over the years, as have such words as smallpox and polio, all once dreaded ailments, now non-existent as maladies. And thus shalt go thy cancer. The answer shall come to those who shall be present to hear it. Be present when it comes.
2. Thou shalt love thy chemotherapy, thy radiation, and thy other treatments even as thy-

self, for they are thy friends and champions. Although they exact a toll for their endeavours, they are oft most generous in the favours they bestow.

3. Thou shalt participate fully in thy recovery. Thou shall learn all the details of thy ailment, its diagnosis, its prognosis, its treatments, conventional and alternative. Thou shalt discuss them openly and candidly with thy oncologist and shalt question all thou do not comprehend. Then, thou shalt cooperate intelligently and knowledgeably with thy doctor.
4. Thou shalt regard thy ailment as a temporary detour in thy life and shalt plan thy future as though this detour had not occurred. Thou shalt never, at no time, no how, regard thy temporary ailment as permanent. Thou shalt set long-term goals for thyself for thou WILL verily recover and thy believing so will contribute mightily to thy recovery.
5. Thou shalt express thy feelings candidly and openly to thy loved ones for they, too, are stricken. Thou shalt comfort and reassure them for they, too, needest comforting and reassurance, even as thou doest.
6. Thou shalt be a comfort to thy fellow-cancerites, providing knowledge, encouragement, understanding and love. Thou shall give them hope where there may be none, for only in hope lies their salvation. And by

doing so, thou providest comfort for thyself, as well.

7. Thou shalt never relinquish hope, no matter how thou may feelest at that moment, for thou knowest, in the deep recesses of thy heart, that thy discouragement is but fleeting and that a better day awaits thee.
8. Thou shalt not regard thy ailment as the sum total of thy life but as merely a part of it. Fill your life with other diversions, be they mundane, daring, altruistic, or merely amusing. To fill your life with thy ailment is to surrender to it.
9. Thou shalt maintain, at all times and in all circumstances, thy sense of humour, for laughter lightens thy heart and hastens thy recovery. This is not an easy task, sometimes seemingly impossible, but it is a goal well worth the endeavour.
10. Thou shalt have enduring and unassailable faith, whether thy faith be in a Supreme Being, in Medical Science, in Thy Future, in Thyself, or in Whatever. Steadfastly sustain thy faith for it shall sustain thee.

By Paul H Klein

Source: www.lymphomation.org

The following articles were written after the first edition of this booklet was published. They are included here to give an insight into my thoughts in the continuing journey.

Giving life to hope

(First published in The Sunday Star, Sept 8 2002)

I was having a chat with my oncologist during my last regular check-up and decided to point out to him that his name would be mentioned in a soon-to-be-published book of my journey with cancer.

He was pleased with the acknowledgement but even more pleased that I wanted to share my story with others.

"You know, we can tell our patients everything but somehow it's never quite the same until they hear it from those who have been through the journey themselves," he said.

He is right, of course. A cancer ward is like no other meeting place on earth. Here people put aside race, religion, rank, gender, prejudices and what-have-you to share their experiences with one another.

"I have lung cancer but I haven't smoked a single cigarette in my entire life," a 50-something Datuk told me once.

There was no tinge of anger in his comment. He never lamented how cruel or unfair life was. Instead, he was always full of encouragement in those days when we were together. "Brother, compared to chemotherapy, radiotherapy is a breeze," he would tell me.

"Have you heard of this drug that helps produce saliva," another patient asked me. "I bought the whole stock-lah. Anyway, I can afford it because of the insurance policy I bought just before I was diagnosed with cancer. My company already takes care of my treatment so this is a bonus."

I smiled. I wished I had such a policy. The bottle of water I carry around to this day is a permanent reminder of the attack on my salivary glands during treatment.

During the latest visit to the oncology clinic, the ever-friendly radiotherapist Ms Yap took a look at the bottle and asked, "Still need it?" I replied: "Small price to pay, especially when I can taste everything now!"

"That's really a positive way to look at things, Mr Soo," she gushed.

I believe she is my No. 1 fan. During my treatment, she labelled me the most cheerful patient, even at the most difficult stage when burnt marks and ulcers made it near impossible for me to even smile.

Of course, there is always a flip side to all the good cheer and positive vibes that people like me experience. I have had days when I just wanted to scream at loved ones.

Days when I just broke down in tears. Days when I looked upwards and questioned my faith in a loving and righteous God.

But over time, those incidents pale in comparison with the joy I feel each day just to wake up and know that the sun, as always, has risen.

Three years after my journey with nose cancer began, I am, medically speaking, in total remission.

Friends marvel at my miraculous cure and for those who used to look at me with rather worried looks, it appears as though my "death sentence" has been commuted and they can get on with their life.

They forget, however, that I can also die from many other things. I never forget what the first team of doctors at the hospital told me, "You have a higher chance of being killed in a car accident than dying from this cancer."

But why talk about dying? All of us have to go one day anyway, not just cancer patients. So I have always preferred to talk about living.

What is life like to you? Do you wake up each morning and lament about how cruel and unfair life is to you because you missed out on one promotion at work?

Do you worry so much about tomorrow that you forget to live for today?

It did not take cancer to wake me up to this reality. But the cancer certainly helped heighten my awareness towards such simple truths of life.

I know that by coming out in the open with this short piece and also in the book *Face to Face with Cancer* which my wife and I have put together, I will surprise many who have been interacting with me these past three years and never knew about my situation.

If they are surprised, then I am happy. Because, at the end of the day, I would have contributed somewhat to clearing the misunderstanding that when cancer strikes, all hope disappears. Isn't this a lovely thought?

A salute to friendship

(First published in The Sunday Star, Oct 20 2002)

Early last week, I tried to get through to my friend in Penang to wish her a happy birthday. After many attempts, I finally got her on the line and the first thing I said to her was, "How can you be working so hard on your birthday?"

"No problem," she said in her most chirpy voice. "Some problems in the office, so must fix them. By the way, the chemo is getting along. My last course is on Oct 23 and a few days later, I am off to Shanghai for a working holiday.

"Don't want to miss this chance. Have to make sure that I will be fit for the trip. Company-paid business trip usually means a working holiday. The part on working may hold just a little truth; holiday, well…."

This is her sixth repeat round of chemotherapy for her breast cancer and while her spirits have waxed and waned over the years, her zest for life has never diminished.

"It's not how you live … but how well you live," we would remind each other occasionally.

Closer to home, another friend with breast cancer has just completed a second round of chemotherapy. Like my friend up north, she too has a zest for life that is truly inspiring.

Some time ago, when she was told that her condition may require her to be further treated, I was one of the first people she called. But it was not to tell me about her condition. Rather, she wanted to remind me to take life easy and not let stress get to me at work.

How wonderful that even in her moments of anxiety and pain, she could find the time and the will to reach out to friends.

Much further away, a most gentle and dear friend who is almost 80, is happily taking care of her granddaughter in Italy.

She too is a breast cancer patient who has fought her battle with a cheerful spirit and a resolute faith in God. Each time she comes back to Malaysia to visit her other family members, she will always bring back something for my wife and me.

Her visits are timed to include her regular check-up with the Malaysian oncologist, the same one I visit. And we will exchange notes and she will tell me, in her grandmotherly way, that her breast is well. And I will, in turn, tell her that my nose is fine.

Experiences like these warm my heart and I am sure are effective shields against naughty cancer cells seeking to make a return.

Still, the harsh reality despite the many wonderful cancer patients I have had the privilege to interact with, and the stories I am privileged to share, is that some of them do die.

While some are fortunate to get physical cures, for which we are thankful, the most important thing must surely be the healing process that comes about when we or our loved ones undergo such journeys.

This is the healing of the heart, of friendships rejuvenated, of unspoken words finally spoken, of love declared.

I believe all of us cancer patients benefit tremendously from the comradeship of family and friends, and even total strangers, who come to us not to watch us die but to hold hands with us on our journeys of life.

During this Breast Cancer Awareness Month, may I salute my three friends and all others with the same ailment. And also to those who care for them and surround them with love.

Life is a celebration!

(Unpublished writing, October 2003, written after celebrating my birthday on Sept 25)

I turned 44 late September. My birthday was celebrated by a group of people much older than me. It was an evening of good food, warm fellowship and spiritual music. I thought such events were only for octogenarians and pastors. Whatever happened to the usual boys night out?

There were a few other celebrations after that. Lunch with my staff, tea with another section, and a few quiet dinners with close friends. A friend remarked that I seemed to be like some public personality where the celebrations never seem to end.

Life is a celebration. And why not? In early September, my oncologist pronounced me in good health. Another six more months of complete remission and we can pop the champagne, he said. I thanked God for His grace and His mercy.

At my birthday do, I told everyone what I wished for: that three dear friends present that night would enjoy good health and be healed physically, completely. One suffered from leukaemia, another had lung cancer, and the third had just had a heart operation.

Life is a celebration. Why? These friends epitomised life. Sure, they had their problems, but they never allowed their problems to get in the way of life. For those of us who have been given notice of our damaged physical condition, we often declare that "it is not how long we live but how well we live".

We have a choice. Do we still have time for our friends and family? Do we withdraw from life completely or do we go out and live life to its fullest? My friend with the lung cancer is now a rejuvenated person because of his new granddaughter whom he proudly carries around the neighbourhood.

My friend with the heart operation has just left for Melbourne to visit her brother. And the one with the leukaemia continues to sing her heart out whenever she has the chance.

Life is a celebration. The day after my regular check-up with the oncologist, I received an e-mail from a former teacher currently in Singapore who came down with breast cancer. She talks about her impending "valley experience" but hope shines eternal. "You did it, and so will I!" This teacher spent a lifetime inspiring and bringing out the best in her students. I pray she will be able to draw from these moments in her battle ahead.

I cannot help but observe that many with healthy body and mind don't seem to be able to appreciate life as a celebration. There are bills to pay, the Joneses to keep up with, the stress that builds up in the rush to succeed. Where is the joy in their footsteps? Where is the song in their heart?

Many with able mind and body do not have time to drop in on an ailing neighbour or even reply to an urgent call from an old school friend. When colleagues fall sick, we pause in shock and promise to take life a little bit easier. Twenty-four hours later, we are back with a vengeance.

How can life be a celebration if we do not pause to take in the beauty of life? Each morning, I wake up at 6.18 (that's the time the alarm goes off for me to take my elder son to school).

The sun rises from a typical urban skyline of rooftops but just a slight tilt upwards, and the beauty of the heavens is obvious. Colours changing hues, as Don McLean sings in *Vincent*.

I see the beauty despite my urban surroundings. Sure, it is nice to escape to the rolling hills and secluded seashores. But there is already beauty in my midst. And as I go forth each morning, I promise to see the beauty within each and every person I meet. Yeah, life is a celebration. Or am I just being melancholic because I turned 44?

Remembering dear friends

(First published in The Sunday Star, May 2 2004)

In early April, my doctors declared me cancer-free, five years after my nose cancer was first detected and treated.

Modern-day communication tools like the handphone and e-mail ensured that I was able to transmit this wonderful piece of news far and wide.

I was touched by the many replies from friends and relatives who had been with me through this very personal journey. Rejoice, they say. Let's celebrate. Indeed, we have. There have been a few celebratory dinners already, with more to come.

On April 26, I lost a dear friend. She had been fighting breast cancer for almost the same length of time I had battled my nose cancer. Her struggles were often tougher than mine.

But repeated rounds of chemotherapy never dampened her spirit. She was a fighter to the very end. In the midst of her anxiety and pain, she would always find the time and the will to reach out to her friends.

She was one of the first I sent an SMS to and she responded with great joy. "This Easter will be even more meaningful for you," she wrote. "Let's get together to celebrate."

Yes, I said. It's a date. But we were not meant to keep our appointment. The last time I saw her was over the Christmas period when she came by with some gifts, including a book on Japanese craft for my wife.

"The moment I saw the book, I knew who would appreciate it most," she told us. My wife was delighted and promised to make something from the book for her. It is now too late.

On the first day of 2004, I also lost another dear friend in Penang to cancer. We had kept in touch via phone calls and e-mail, but I felt it was time to meet up to rejoice in our friendship. I had booked my bus ticket for an overnight trip to my hometown. But a few hours before I left Kuala Lumpur, I got a call that she had passed away.

I went ahead with the trip anyway so I could meet up with her boyfriend, who has been one of my closest friends from schooldays. At a roadside cafe somewhere in Bayan Lepas, we chatted for hours into the early morning. We were remembering a friend who taught us so much just by her mere existence.

Her spirit might have waxed and waned over the years, but her zest for life never diminished. "*It's not how you live but how well you live,*" we would remind each other occasionally.

These are friends who gave so much of themselves to help make this world a better place. The cancer was never used as an excuse for self-pity. In fact, it spurred them on passionately to make a difference. They have left this world at an age which most people would consider to be the prime of their life.

God didn't promise
days without pain,
laughter without sorrow
or sun without rain.

But God did promise
strength for the day,
comfort for the tears
and a light for the way.

And for all who believe
in His kingdom above,
He answers their faith
with everlasting love.

I am also of this age and I wonder at times why the physical healing I received was not extended to them. All I do know is that we have experienced a higher level of healing that gives us a peace that passes all understanding.

Life has its share of joy and sorrow, so we are told. Amidst my joy, moments of sorrow like these tug at the heartstrings. I find writing to be therapeutic but perhaps the writer of the little poem reproduced on this page expresses best the message of hope that transcends all these moments. The poem is on a plaque that sits on my office desk.

Lessons from a caregiver

Strength to climb mountains

By Angeline

It was a whole new world, surreal and cold. Sometime in April 1999, Ewe Jin and I stumbled unceremoniously into this new dimension called oncology.

There is no party-pooper like cancer. There seemed to be only losers; it's just a matter of how much you lose. It may be taste buds, hair, organs or loved ones.

Through this storm of physical trauma and emotional upheaval, we were fortunate to have a supportive network of family members and friends and, above all, an unwavering faith in God.

Ewe Jin was diagnosed with NPC or nasopharyngeal carcinoma by doctors at the Universiti Hospital in Petaling Jaya. The cancer, fortunately, was in Stage 1.

The prognosis was good. "Mr Soo, you have a higher chance of being knocked down by a car than dying of this," one doctor cheerfully put it to us. "Anyway, in the past 12 years, we have had a 100 per cent recovery record."

Ewe Jin was put on a 35-course radiotherapy treatment. We opted to do his therapy at the Damansara Specialist Hospital because there was a long waiting list at UH.

When we first walked into the Oncology Clinic at Damansara, we saw for the first time the reality behind the cancer statistics. The patients ranged from young to old, Muslim to Christian, Datuks to plain Pakciks.

We got to know many of them. Some were in Stage Two or Three, battling a more tenacious brand of malignant cells. Our hearts cried out especially for those who seemed to be all alone in their suffering.

I wondered, was there any purpose for this twist of events in our lives? No doubt we will discover in due time. For now, we are just thankful that God remained faithful to us and saw Ewe Jin and me through this journey.

In the past months, we also gained some insights into how to respond to crises in ways that will help rather than hinder.

Prayer

As soon as we "raised the alarm", family and friends prayed with us and for us. It is an immense source of comfort to know that this huge cloud of supplication for Ewe Jin was and is still going up daily to our Heavenly Father!

I must say, though, that Ewe Jin and I have our own convictions about physical healing. We have prayed for sick friends, too, and we know from experience that for every person who is healed through prayer, at least one other is not.

(I would like to differentiate physical healing from a healing of the spirit, which we believe comes to all who seek it.)

So where does it put God when physical healing does not come? Do we blame the person's faithlessness? Is God so petty that He will not heal if there are doubts playing in our minds? Is God so powerless that little obstacles can get in the way of His healing?

In Ewe Jin's case specifically, Ewe Jin and I have full confidence that he will be totally healed. But this is based on the doctors' prognosis as much as it is on faith in God. If it were a case of Stage Three cancer, say, would we be so quick to say it is God's will that he is healed?

Ultimately, Ewe Jin and I believe that "God is in His heaven and all is right with the world". For us, come healing or disease, God is still in charge. We will trust Him fully to unfold our lives for us according to His plan.

Prescriptions

In the short span of two weeks, we were overloaded with advice on diet, medication and cures.

We accepted them in the spirit they were given, with love. However, the point is that we had been told in no uncertain terms by the doctor that we should stay clear of alternative cures for the duration of radiotherapy.

Therapy is tiring and trying for both patient and caregiver. And having to listen to endless stories about how a neighbour or colleague was cured by wheatgrass juice or some other herb can wear us out. We don't really want to know the details of someone else's cancer at that point. This is truly a lesson for me. Previously, I proferred such advice whenever someone confided in me that a loved one had cancer. Now I know I should just listen, for that is what helps more.

Presents

Although Ewe Jin did not hold a permanent job then, we told everyone we could manage financially. Still, when cash was quietly slipped into our hands or banked into our account, we were grateful.

We appreciated a half crate of green apples given to us for juicing. And a regular supply of home-cooked dhal curry. And vitamins to keep our resistance up. Cards and letters also gave much comfort.

In short, thoughtful presents given from the heart are always a balm to tired spirits.

I must also share the instance when Ewe Jin's throat took such a battering from the X-rays he was unable to swallow even liquids. He was admitted into hospital to go on the drip.

The one-night stay in hospital set us back by RM1,200. We deliberated over whether we should ask family and friends for help. After all, the Bible says ask and you will be given. Then we remembered, it says to ask God, so we simply brought our needs to God.

Within three days, the cash came in three parts – RM500, RM500 and then RM200. What perfect arithmetic! What a wonderful God!

We learnt to depend only on Him to provide, and are still learning this daily.

Presence

Unlike presents, your presence is less straight-forward. To be frank, Ewe Jin and I found some people's presence uplifting, others' strength-sapping.

Before you visit someone with cancer, ask yourself the purpose of your visit. Don't go if it is just to reassure yourself that your loved one is all right.

In all likelihood, the person may be fighting the disease well but side-effects of therapy are beginning to show – perhaps mouth blisters, scorched skin, a sore throat and so on. In such a condition, having to reassure visitors is no easy task and really unfair on the patient!

On the other hand, Ewe Jin has a friend who showed up each day at the oncology clinic where his radiotherapy was administered. This friend simply waited with Ewe Jin, read his newspaper, then went off when the session was over. These visits became a part of his schedule.

He didn't fuss over Ewe Jin's progressively obvious side effects. He simply offered support by being there.

This experience has taught me that when visiting a patient, your presence must give support and comfort, or else it defeats the purpose. When in doubt, ask first. If your presence will not help, the caregiver will tell you. Postpone the visit; you can do your part in other ways.

Learning is a life-long process. It was certainly a steep learning curve for us. Despite the discomfort and inconveniences, I believe we have come out the richer for it.

On July 4, Ewe Jin was scheduled to read scripture in the KL Wesley Methodist Church, where we worship. He thanked the church for its prayers and support.

He had come a long way. So have I. And we both know that we would never have made it without the enduring goodness of God.

A word from the patient

On the Sunday just before I found out about my cancer, the sermon was about how God never gives us strength in advance. When we need to climb a hill, the pastor said, God will give us the strength to climb a hill. And when we need to climb a mountain, God will give us the strength to climb a mountain.

As I went through this tumultuous journey, it was truly the Lord who sustained me at each turn. God not only sustained and strengthened me but He ensured that Angeline was my pillar, my fortress and the tree planted by the water that refuses to be moved.

She surprised all of us with her efficient running of the household and making sure that this interference caused the minimum amount of disturbance to our family. Angeline climbed hills and mountains. She forded raging rivers. With her by my side, I was able to concentrate on my treatment and recovery. Thank you Lord for such a wonderful wife!

"Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." – Jeremiah 17:14

"I am the Lord who heals you." – Exodus 15:26

This article was published in Wesley Tidings, the church newsletter, in 1999

Of happy endings

Ewe Jin's thoughts

When we first thought of putting this booklet together, I wondered if my story was worth the telling. What's so special about my journey? Many have travelled this road before. Many have written more inspiring books.

But I am convinced that my story is unique in its own way. I lost my fourth sister and my father to cancer. I had travelled alongside them on both their journeys and each time it was different.

When my sister was diagnosed with cancer, all of us in the family were shocked and we were left groping very much in the dark. When I look back on her final months, I realise that she was seeking answers that none of us could provide then. As the faraway brother, I could do little more than send back money and make the occasional trip to see her. I was there when she breathed her last but felt helpless that I couldn't do more.

When my father was diagnosed with cancer, I was able to offer some comfort. I had found God by then and just knowing that He cared and would take care of my father made the journey a bit more bearable. I spoke to my father of my faith and was there when he, too, breathed his last.

Having watched two loved ones go this way, it was a wonder that when it came to my turn, I did not feel that death had come a-knocking at my door. Rather, with the promise of eternal life assured, I faced my journey with a confidence that only faith could provide.

I remember how so many times, I looked at the worried faces of my visitors and I would tease them, "Why look at me as though I am going to die?" They asked me for the secret to my peace and I would reply, "Trust the doctors, and have complete faith in God."

When cancer struck in 1999, I was on the brink of getting back into the workforce. But the job that was supposedly guaranteed to me did not come. Although I was disappointed at first, I realised later that my return to work had been temporarily suspended by a Greater Power because I had to go through this trial first.

Did I pass the test? I cannot give an answer but I do know that I would have failed miserably if I did not have a Personal Saviour for comfort and for guidance. I clung to the belief that "we are never given more than we can bear".

Exactly one year later, when the effects of my radiotherapy were long gone, I was able to get a job at *The Star*, where I am currently employed.

Wonders never cease. This booklet had to be condensed so that you can get a quick tour of what I went through and I had to leave many stories untold. What made the difference and why was this journey so special? The answer is: God made the difference.

Angeline's thoughts

We licked it. We *all* did: Ewe Jin, I, our boys Kevin and Tim, our huge extended families, many faithful friends – and, most of all, a loving God who is the source of our strength and hope. Now, three years after Ewe Jin was diagnosed with cancer, he is in complete remission.

As the main caregiver to Ewe Jin during his illness, I often found myself on a roller coaster, emotionally. It was an uncomfortable ride, as I am basically a matter-of-fact kind of person and not given to great shows of emotion.

A major personal battle was learning to "walk the talk", so to speak, and put my trust wholly in God. This was not easy even after many years as a Christian. Ewe Jin had been my pillar of strength in everything, from career decisions to paying the bills. It was a frightening experience to suddenly discover there may be cracks in the pillar.

I also worried about being left to bring up the children alone. This was a dreadful thought, not least because Ewe Jin has always been a participative parent and does more than his share with the boys.

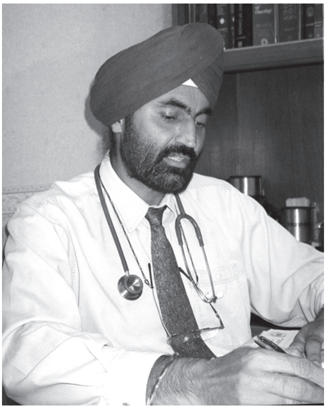
I felt as if I was walking a tightrope with no safety net below. More than once, I collapsed in tears of despair when I had time to be by myself. The going seemed too hard to bear.

Only when I was totally drained and could no longer carry my burden in my own strength, did I surrender and let God take over. And when I did, how sweet was the relief that came! I no longer worried about the "hows" and "what ifs".

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" – 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Yes, the journey was rough. But through it all, God proved ever faithful. With Him by my side, I can face anything – even death.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." – Psalm 23:4



My doctors, my friends: Dr Gurcharan, my oncologist, and Dr Awal, my ENT specialist, who continue to monitor my condition on a regular basis.

And great rejoicing

I wrote this the week after my doctors gave me the five-year all-clear report on April 7 2004. It was indeed an emotinonal day for me even as I was prepared for the good news. I brought my camera along to take pictures of myself with Dr Gurcharan Singh and Dr Awal Hassan.

The God that healeth me

On June 7, 1999, I wrote in my journal: It's our 13th wedding anniversary and also the day when we go to UH to take the results of my liver and bone scans. Everything is clear. The cancer in my nose has not spread! I will still have to go for check-ups every six months, and record five years of remission before Iam officially pronounced "cured".

On April 7, 2004, my doctors at Damansara Specialist Hospital declared me cancer-free, exactly five years after it was discovered and treated. I had been in remission all this time but the five-year mark is considered crucial from the doctors' point of view. God the Healer, of course, works on a different timetable and His assurance of my healing came very much earlier. But I am glad that the doctors can medically prove what He has promised. Although the news was expected, the day still proved to be quite emotional for me.

I sent out the SMS while still in the hospital and the replies came back fast and furious. I was very touched that friends really shouted with joy upon hearing the good news. Some of you may have already heard my testimony, and some of you might have already read the book written by my wife and me entitled *Face to Face with Cancer*.

Five years ago, I was full of questions as to why I had to battle the Big C. Today, I believe I have no reason to doubt that the trial I had to go through has strengthened me tremendously. I thank God for it. This is my testimony.

The Journey: *I Am The God That Healeth Thee*. How many times I had listened to Don Moen sing this song. God Heals. We all know that. But healing must not be limited to just physically healing. I am fortunate in that respect but I must also say that in this five-year period, I have also lost friends to cancer. My wife and I have our own convictions about physical healing.

We have prayed for sick friends, too, and we know from experience that for every person who is healed through prayer, at least one other is not. (I would like to differentiate physical healing from a healing of the spirit, which we believe comes to all who seek it.) So where does it put God when physical healing does not come? Do we blame the person's faithlessness? Is God so petty that He will not heal if there are doubts playing in our minds? Is God so powerless that little obstacles can get in the way of His healing?

In my case specifically, our confidence is based on the doctors' prognosis as much as it is on faith in God. At all times, we believed "God is in His heaven and all is right with the world". For us, come healing or disease, God is still in charge. I have learnt to trust Him fully to unfold my life for me according to His plan. Though I went through suffering in the early days, I also know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

God The Provider: At the time when I was undergoing the journey, I was enjoying one of my stints as full-time father. This meant that I was not covered by any company scheme and everything that we had to spend on had to come from somewhere else. God's providence shone tremendously during this time. All bills were taken care of with the generous donations from family and friends.

Perhaps this was best exemplified when I had to be warded one day and the bill came up to RM1,200. Where was the money going to come from, we asked. Already we had been given so much for the anticipated bills but this was unexpected. We knew if we called up people, they would respond but we decided to get down on our knees to pray instead. Over the next three days, three cheques came in, two RM500 cheques and one RM200 cheque. Talk about God the perfect mathematician.

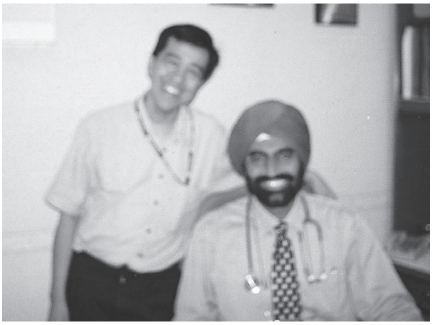
The Purpose becomes clearer with the benefit of hindsight. My experience has certainly made me a better counsellor to those who are beginning the same journey. I am able to offer advice that is practical and useful, and speak words of comfort that don't sound hollow. I guess it's a bit like being swimming a coach who gets into the water with his students, rather than just shouting instructions from the poolside. In fact, the nurses at my onco's clinic have my phone number handy, and they give it out to new patients who are distraught and need someone to talk to. I count that as a privilege, for in helping others in this way, I myself have been truly blessed.

And finally, **the Perspective** I have gained is one of Thankfulness. There are a million things we should thank God for the moment we wake up each morning, but too often we take them all for granted. I try to impart this attitude of thankfulness to people whose paths cross mine. I have given my *Cancer* booklet to colleagues who are burdened by job problems,or friends going through a rough patch, and each time they call back to say that my story has helped them to take a step back from their problems and to realise that they are really very fortunate indeed.

Yes, cancer does have a way of making other problems seem small!

A day of celebration

(April 7 2004)



Epilogue

Dr Gurcharan and Dr Awal were equally thrilled about my visit on April 7, which roughly marked the five-year period of total remission when the doctors could say with confidence that the cancer had been kept fully at bay. They even waived their professional fees that day. Back home, I was pleasantly surprised that my family had prepared a cake with the words "No more cancer, Praise God!" to celebrate the day.

Don’t quit

Don’t quit when the tide is lowest
For it’s just about to turn
Don’t quit over doubts and questions
For there is something you may learn
Don’t quit when the night is darkest
For it’s just a while till dawn
Don’t quit when you’ve run the farthest
For the race is almost won
Don’t quit when the hill is steepest
For your goal is almost nigh
Don’t quit for you’re not a failure
Until you fail to try.

What cancer can't do

It cannot cripple love
It cannot shatter hope
It cannot corrode faith
It cannot eat away peace
It cannot destroy confidence
It cannot kill friendship
It cannot shut out memories
It cannot silence courage
It cannot invade the soul
It cannot reduce eternal life
It cannot quench the spirit
It cannot lessen the power of the
resurrection.

Why must I bear this pain? I cannot tell
I only know my Lord does all things well
And so trust in God, my all in all
For he will bring me through, what e'er befall

Words of comfort

“The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in Him my heart trusts; so I am helped.”
– *Psalm 28:7*

“For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from Him comes my salvation. He only
is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly moved.”
– *Psalm 62:1-2*

“Fear not, for I am with you, be not
dismayed, for I am your God; I will
strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my
victorious right hand.”
– *Isaiah 41:10*

“I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though
they die will live, and everyone who lives
and believes in me will never die.”
– *John 11:25-26*

“For God so loved the world that he
gave His only Son, that whoever believes
in him should not perish but have
eternal life.”
– *John 3:16*

Salient information about NPC

Nasopharyngeal carcinoma (NPC) or nose cancer is more common among the Chinese and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. If detected early, it can be cured. It usually affects adults above 20 years.

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS

a. Nose: blocked nose, mucus and bloody discharge.
b. Ear: buzzing sound, reduced hearing, pain.
c. Neck: one or more lumps
d. Throat: hoarseness, difficulty in swallowing.
e. Central nervous system: headache, double vision (diplopia).

RISK FACTORS

a. Virus: Ebstein Barr Virus
b. Diet: excessive intake of salt-cured foods.

PREVENTION

Reduce intake of salt-cured foods.

TREATMENT

Radiotherapy or chemotherapy
More information about NPC can be found at our website at www.geocities.com/ejsoo via a special focus on NPC written originally for *The Sunday Star* by Ewe Jin.

Postscript

One year after the discovery of my cancer, and when I felt ready to rejoin the workforce, I was offered a job at *The Star* as editor of *The Star Online*.

For that I am truly thankful to the former Group Chief Editor Datuk Ng Poh Tip and Senior Editor, Education, Leanne Goh.

At the time, Angeline was also employed in *The Star*. She is currently back home again as a homemaker, while I have since been appointed as Editor of *The Sunday Star*.

Our boys are all grown up: Kevin is 19, and doing a psychology degree at a private college, and Timothy is 16, still in secondary school.

The pictures on the right are specially for those who asked why we did not include our pictures in the first edition. As you can see, we are pretty much normal.

Celebrating 20 years of marital bliss at Cape Rachado, Port Dickson, June 6 2006

Kevin and Timothy, our pride and joy

The amazing journey of this little book

Face to Face With Cancer is just a little book. It can be read in one sitting. It can be finished while one waits in the oncology ward to see the doctor.

Many have read the pdf version online. Most prefer the hard copy version which has also been passed on from one person to another. I am glad that very few people have kept it to themselves for sentimental reasons, or because they know me and my wife.

When the first edition came out in April 2002, we wondered if the print run of 2,000 copies was a bit too ambitious. They were all gone within the year. Edition Two came out in December 2004. In one year, the 2,000 copies printed were all gone.

In June 2006, the long-awaited Chinese translation of *Face to Face* was published, and we started to distribute them in places where patients and caregivers wanted such material in Chinese. The print run was 2,000 copies and our good friends at Setiakawan Printers added another 300 copies free

The books went even faster and just after two months, we found that we had very few copies left.

Our first edition was published with the support of a couple from the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) and the cover was designed by a dear friend Sweeng Hoo.

Our second edition was published with the support of a couple from the Emmanuel Methodist

Church (EMC) and the cover was designed by Ruslan Abd Rahim.

The Chinese edition was published with the support of another couple from EMC and the cover was designed by our very talented friend Jerome Moo.

The financial support was given freely and anonymously by all these good people who felt that something good will come out of this little book.

When the Chinese edition appeared, many asked for the English version as well but I told them that it will have to wait. In the meantime, I encouraged them to download the pdf version and to photocopy as many copies as they need.

At the first function where I introduced the Chinese edition (even though both my wife and I are non-Chinese literate), I was again asked for the English version. I told them, "God-willing, it will be available before the year is out".

When I went home that day, I was surprised to receive a cheque for RM3,000 from an anonymous person who had sent it via the doctor who gave him a copy of the book some months back. His request was that more copies be published and freely circulated.

Hardly another week passed by and I received a cheque for RM500 from the family of a cancer patient who had been touched by the book when it was read and translated to her in Chinese some years back and had asked when she would be able to read one in Chinese by herself.

Before I could even make arrangements for a fresh round of printing, I was pleasantly surprised by another RM3,000 cheque from a friend in Penang who had also found the book useful when he went through his journey.

Since all these financial gifts were specific to printing *Face to Face*, I had to figure out what would be the best way to do this.

So we decided that we should print 3,500 copies of *Face to Face* (English third edition) and another 1,500 copies of the Chinese translation. The balance of the money will be kept in trust until there is a need to replenish the supplies.

I hope that anyone reading this book now will not start sending us money again because we know that whenever the need arises, someone will respond.

If you feel moved to give, pass on your generosity to a patient, a caregiver, or a cancer support group. You can also do simple things like remembering the nurses who helped you through the journey.

I also wish to put on record that a generous contribution of RM1,000 was made after the Chinese editon came out by a dear friend who was undergoing his cancer journey.

He gave the money to the Emmanuel Care Centre for children with disabilities. This fine gentleman is aware of my wife's voluntary work at the centre.

I thank God that He has truly made this book to be an instrument of blessing to so many people. – ***Ewe Jin***

In September 2004, Prof Umapati Prasad was bestowed the title of Emiritus Professor by Universiti Malaya. Prasad spent a lifetime at Universiti Malaya Medical Centre (formerly Universiti Hospital) until his retirement in 2003 charting new pathways into research on nose cancer. He is acknowledged as the foremost expert on NPC in Malaysia and globally.