Drops of FORTITUDE

Find Your Inner Strength During Cancer Treatment

HOLLY J. BERTONE

Dear Cancer Survivor –

I know how long those days are – sitting in your lounge chair and being injected with chemotherapy. I know you are scared. I know you are frustrated. I know you are angry. I know you are sick of being sick. I've been there. And that's why I'm here.

My "Drops" series is just for you. I am writing them to you friend to friend. These are meant to provide drops of inspiration for your heart and soul while the drops of chemo are battling your tumor.

I knew that it was my calling to write this series. As I reached out to fellow survivors to hear their stories, my heart broke with each conversation. Words cannot describe how painful it was to hear their stories, but my hope is to turn heartbreak into inspiration for you. One drop at a time.

Love and hugs from your Warrior Sister,
Holly Bertone

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Drops of Fortitude

When I was in high school, I joined the track team to help me stay in shape for field hockey, which was my "real sport." Ok, I confess, the real reason I joined the track team was a cute boy in his gym shorts. A runner I was not. But it was fun to be on the team. In my four years on the track team, there was one race that stood out.

I remember the race like it was yesterday. It was one of those April afternoons where it was freezing cold, and it had started to snow. We wore our uniforms over our sweatshirts and sweatpants to stay warm. Most of the track meets were fun. Because of the adverse weather, this one was brutal. We all wanted to go home.

To say I was the slowest runner on the team would be an understatement. My race was up – the two-mile run. The gun sounded, and we were off to a fast start. Eight laps around the track with the snow storm becoming worse each lap.

Everyone had finished the race ahead of me. By a good half lap. No surprise. I rounded the corner on the last quarter lap and sprinted to the finish line. The race was over and standing at the finish line, I was mentally already inside the warm school bus heading home. The official looked at me and said, "You have one more lap to go."

"What?"

"You finished seven laps. You have one more to go." I looked at my coach hoping for a bail out. Did I mention it was freezing cold and snowing?

"Well, get running!" No sympathy from the coach. Sigh.

I put one foot in front of the other and ran my final lap. By myself. In the snow. With everyone watching.

I finished the race with pride and dignity, and icicles growing on my hair. My mother congratulated me for having fortitude. It was a rough lesson to learn, but one I never forgot.

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I weep for this generation of kids entering adulthood without experiencing any kind of trials in life. We are raising a generation of children who believe that everyone gets a trophy just for showing up. You and I both know that this couldn't be further from real life. What happens when you get cancer? A trophy isn't going to help you battle one of the most horrible diseases you will ever encounter. A trophy isn't going to give you the fortitude to wake up every day and fight with every last ounce of energy you have.

Up until this day, what challenges have you had to overcome? What has prepared you to battle cancer? If you have had challenges in your life, I congratulate you. If you have led a fairly charmed life up until now, you are cutting your teeth on a big one. What are your inner resources to cope? What are your inner resources to fight? What are your inner resources to battle this horrible disease? What are your inner resources to wake up every day?

Cancer is life altering. Cancer will rock your world. Cancer will change everything. Cancer will make you weaker. Cancer will make you stronger.

Cancer sucks. But you have a choice. Every day. You can drown yourself in cancer's misery and be a victim. Or you can be positive and get through it with fortitude.

There is an honorable space for the "boo hoo" and the "woe is me." I'm not negating any of that, because the hurt, the anger, the frustration, and the hate you feel toward cancer are completely normal and acceptable. What I am saying though, is that you need to find a good place to land the majority of the time. You need to live in a positive attitude and have a positive outlook. The "boo hoo" and the "woe is me" isn't going to change the fact that you have cancer. It isn't going to get you through it.

What is going to make you want to fight? What is going to make you want to get through the darkest hours? You know what I'm talking about. When the cancer and/or chemo hurt so much that you wish you were dead. I get it. I've been there. But you can't linger there. You have to fight. You have to. For yourself. For your loved ones. Find it. Own it.

Don't wait until you find yourself there. Think about it now.

You are in this place for a reason. Don't ever ask why. You will never know why. The answer doesn't exist. Instead, ask yourself "what." What can I do to get through this? You have it inside of you. You just have to find it.

Fortitude isn't only about having a positive attitude. While that certainly helps, fortitude is a state of mind. According to Merriam-Webster, fortitude is "strength of mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage."

We've all heard the poignant but cliché story of the little boy who helps the caterpillar out of its cocoon and now the new butterfly can't fly because its wings are not strong enough. The moral of the story is that you need to struggle to fly on your own. Or something like that. Your cancer struggle is YOURS. Yes, people can help you. Yes, your doctors will give you medicine

to get better. But the cancer is YOURS. And it's YOUR decision what you are going to do with it. Do you want to be a victim? Or do you want to have the fortitude to fight?

While I will be focusing solely on the last example, here are three ways that you can find your fortitude:

1. Faith and Prayer
2. Meditation
3. Inspirational Stories

1. Faith and Prayer

It doesn't matter what faith or religion you subscribe to, the concept is universal. We all have a God or higher power we look to, either daily or in times of struggle. If you already have a strong faith, you may use this to help you. You may pray, read scripture, and fellowship with others of similar conviction. You may look to God for strength and healing. Your faith may take a turn in a different direction.

You may question your faith. You may ask God why this happened to you. You may abandon God. He won't abandon you.

If you aren't particularly religious, cancer may bring you closer to God. You may lean on Him more than you ever thought you would.

About a month after I was diagnosed and the boo-hoo's had subsided, I came to the realization that breast cancer was God's gift to me. I know that God loves me very much, and everything is in His will. The majority of women under the age of 40 who are diagnosed with breast cancer have an aggressive kind of cancer. Mine was "lazy." The statistics were against me. It had to be a gift. And I knew that some way, somehow, God wanted me to do something with this gift. This brought tremendous peace to me during my treatment and empowered me to look beyond the pain of the day to the greater outcome.

2. Meditation

I'm not big on meditation and I don't know much about it, so I will not spend time here. But I do know that a lot of cancer patients practice meditation to help them through treatment. Keep an open mind about it. Try it out.

3. Inspirational Stories

Inspirational stories focus on real people, whether they're people you know or stories you read in a book. They don't even have to be about cancer. People who have overcome challenges in their lives can help to inspire you.

My mother is the queen of fortitude. At the age of 25, after being sick for many months and seeing many doctors, she was diagnosed with Addison's Disease, a rare disease which affects the functioning of the adrenal gland. Because her adrenal gland does not function properly, she has to take a daily dose of a cortisone steroid to replace the cortisol deficient in her body.

She was told that she would never get pregnant. She gave birth to me. She was told that she wouldn't live much more past the age of 30. At publication, she is 68 years-old and going strong. For many years, the majority of her days were relatively normal, but as the disease progressed, so did its effects on her body. My mother has spent more nights in a hospital than she can count. She has endured a mini-stroke and heart problems. Her health on any given day is hit or miss.

She lives every day to the fullest. When given an opportunity to travel, her bags are packed. I remember when she took a once-in-a-lifetime vacation with my father and some friends to an island resort that did not have any medical facilities or a regularly scheduled flight off the island. Family and friends were worried about something happening to her while she was there and not being able to get life-saving help. She was perfectly content to go on the vacation, despite the potential consequences. I got it. I mean, if it's your time to go, what better place than in a tropical paradise surrounded by people who love you? She doesn't let anything stop her.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I relied on this quiet strength that I had witnessed my entire life to help me get through the toughest hours. While my mother is the epitome of living a life of fortitude, our military wrote the book on it.

A United States Army Green Beret is one of the most tenacious fighting men on the planet. I didn't have to look any further than across the dining room table to interview my resident tough guy. The qualifications to become one of our military's elite are simply beyond the physical and mental capabilities of the average man. My husband, Carter, said that out of all of the training needed to become a Special Forces Officer, the US Army Ranger course offered some of the most grueling training.

"It was 72 days [58 currently] of pure suck." The goal is to train our soldiers under the same conditions as war. The stress of combat is replicated by a training program where they are exhausted, hungry, exposed to the outside elements, and under extreme stress. For the majority of training, the soldiers were allowed one meal a day and little to no sleep – conducting raids, ambushes, and reconnaissance patrols in the mountains of Georgia, swamps of Florida, and the desert of Utah. It will test every man to his limits. "Sixty percent of all Ranger school failures occur in the first four days.[i]" That's a lot of failure. They don't make it easy.

I asked Carter how he made it through. He thought for a moment and offered me this.

"In the beginning, I made up my mind that I was not leaving the course without a Ranger Tab. Nothing less was acceptable. I refused to quit. During the hardest parts of the training when the end wasn't in sight, I broke it up into increments to make it through the next patrol, or through the next six hours. That helped me take it one step at a time. I wanted to be recognized as the strongest link in the chain, not one of the weakest."

So how do you incorporate the physical and mental toughness of an Army Ranger or Green Beret to get through cancer? How do you endure treatment and push beyond your limits? There are a lot of similarities:

- Engage all of your enablers to help you accomplish the mission.
- Figure out how to do more with less.
- Execute a plan under severe distress.
- Understand that you will have all of your flaws open for everyone to see.
- Understand that it will become tougher on a cumulative scale.
- Use milestones to help you get through.
- You will learn to lead under miserable conditions, and it will set you apart.

I don't see much of a difference, do you? Rangers have a "creed" that they live by[ii]:

> **R**ecognizing that I volunteered as a Ranger, fully knowing the hazards of my chosen profession, I will always endeavor to uphold the prestige, honor, and high esprit de corps of my Ranger Regiment.
>
> **A**cknowledging the fact that a Ranger is a more elite soldier who arrives at the cutting edge of battle by land, sea, or air, I accept the fact that as a Ranger my country expects me to move further, faster and fight harder than any other soldier.
>
> **N**ever shall I fail my comrades. I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong and morally straight and I will shoulder more than my share of the task whatever it may be, one-hundred-percent and then some.
>
> **G**allantly will I show the world that I am a specially selected and well-trained soldier. My courtesy to superior officers, neatness of dress and care of equipment shall set the example for others to follow.
>
> **E**nergetically will I meet the enemies of my country. I shall defeat them on the field of battle for I am better trained and will fight with all my might. Surrender is not a Ranger word. I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy and under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country.
>
> **R**eadily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the Ranger objective and complete the mission though I be the lone survivor.
>
> Rangers Lead The Way!!!

It's easy to get sucked into being a victim and the "woe is me." But surviving cancer is bigger than you. And just like the community of Army Rangers, you have an entire community of Cancer Survivors who are your brethren. Here is your new creed to adopt:

Cancer chose me, I did not choose it. I will uphold the esprit de corps of my fellow Survivors.

Arriving at my treatments, I am expected to endure and fight as hard as I can.

Never shall I fail my fellow Survivors. I will partake in clinical trials to pay it forward. I will be strong and endure.

Courageously will I show the world that I am a Survivor. I will hold my head high throughout treatment and set an example for others to follow.

Energetically will I fight with all of my might to defeat cancer. Surrender is not a Survivor word.

Readily will I display the internal fortitude required to make it through treatment and be a Cancer Survivor.

Two of my favorite inspirational stories are "In the Company of Heroes" by Michael J. Durant and "Five Years to Freedom" by James N. Rowe. They are both Prisoner of War stories by these two brave servicemen and are a great testament to the will to survive extremely difficult and enduring trials. Michael Durant was taken as a hostage and Prisoner of War during the Somali Conflict (remember Black Hawk Down?) and James N. Rowe was a Prisoner of War for five years during the Vietnam War. Cancer will take you prisoner in your own body. Read about these men's fights to survive and learn how to find your own inner strength.

You don't need to look at the military or read great books for inspiration. Who are the people in your own world who give you inspiration?

My childhood friend Garnet was diagnosed with brain cancer at the same time I was diagnosed with breast cancer back in 2010. He was looking forward to getting his family life back to normal after his treatment ended. He has a young son and a very pregnant wife. Sadly, the tumor returned. Instead of shopping with his wife for a new stroller and painting the nursery like most dads-to-be, he was back on chemotherapy. I asked him, 'What gives you the strength to get through every day?"

Garnet answered, "My family gives me the courage to battle through, and it's in simple ways. I want to be there for the birth of my son, but I also want to be there when he goes to his first day of school. I want to be there when my older son graduates. I want to experience 'empty nest' syndrome with my wife when both of our kids leave the house. I want to embarrass my sons by making a fool of myself at their weddings. Milestones are a great motivator."

Cancer will make you feel like you are running that last lap by yourself in a snow storm. Look up, and focus on the finish line. Focus on being back in the warm bus when all is well in the

world. Whether it's getting through the next hour, through the next treatment, or to your child's graduation, these milestones will help you build the fortitude you need to make it through.

What gives you fortitude?

Who inspires you?

What are your milestones?

Cancer is tough. You have to be tougher. You have to dig deep and want it. Every day. When it hurts the most. I know what you are going through is horrible. Don't drown yourself in it. Pick yourself up, hold your head high, and be the beautiful person you are, inside and out. You are strong. You are beautiful. You have fortitude. You can do this.

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[i] Ft. Benning website (http://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/rtb/

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About the Author

Holly Bertone, PMP is an **author**, **blogger**, and breast cancer survivor and advocate. She is the President and CEO of Pink Fortitude, LLC and Editor in Chief at the inspirational blog **The Coconut Head's Survival Guide**. Holly holds a Masters Degree from Johns Hopkins University, a Bachelor's Degree from Elizabethtown College, and is a Project Management Professional (PMP).

Holly is an Ambassador for the Tigerlily Foundation, was accepted into the National Cancer Survivor's Day Speakers Bureau, and was named a 2014 Woman of the Year by the National Association of Professional Women. She is passionate about reaching out to breast cancer survivors, and also volunteers for organizations supporting our military veterans. In her free time, she loves to garden, hit flea markets, antique stores and yard sales, and drink a cup of coffee on her back porch. Holly is married to a retired Green Beret, is a stepmother, and lives in Alexandria, VA.

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