



FROM PASSIVE WITNESSING TO EFFECTIVE ACTION

## **A Guide to Dedicating Cancer Treatments**

### ***The Treatment Dedication Project***

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*My name is Kaethe Weingarten and I have been diagnosed and treated for cancer three times, in 1988, 1993 and 2003. I wrote this guide to give people who are undergoing cancer treatment something that they could do that would be meaningful to them, to others and to the world. We tend to think that the treatment period is a time out of our lives. We think of ourselves as diminished and vulnerable. But, being in treatment may actually be a good time to consider what is important to us and to do something, however small, about what we care about deeply.*

*During my most recent round of treatment for cancer, I dedicated each radiation session to a person or cause I wanted to honor. I honored them by taking my treatment in their name. Preparing to dedicate the treatment, doing so at the time of the treatment itself, and communicating with my dedicatees about what they meant to me was one of the most significant, hopeful, and comforting experiences of my life. I have prepared this guide to help others dedicate their treatments. I hope that you will join me in creating a national movement of treatment dedication, embodying the belief that no act is too small, no person so diminished, that she or he cannot make an offering that matters.*

This guide is intended to help people who are being treated for cancer. Cancer treatment is often a disturbing, lonely, and uncomfortable time. Whether we are surrounded by family and friends who offer us loving support or are relatively alone in the world, we often lose a sense of meaning and purpose during this period. The disruption of normal routines and the difficulty of predicting how we will feel make daily life tough. Cancer treatment can be an overwhelming experience.

At the same time, many of us are aware that we are indeed fortunate to live in a time and place in which potentially life-saving treatments are available to us. Knowing this softens the distress, but it does not erase it.

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This guide is a resource for those of us who have found ourselves diminished in our capacity to lead our lives as we had before, but yearn to do something that can make a positive difference. The steps that I describe are suggestions, not prescriptions. There is no right or wrong way to dedicate treatments. You will know what works best for you.

## **Steps to Dedicating Your Cancer Treatment**

The process of dedicating your cancer treatments involves asking yourself several questions and exploring the answers. Some people find that this part of the project is highly rewarding all by itself. Here are the questions:

### **1. Why should I dedicate my treatments?**

Dedicating cancer treatments is a way of making a positive contribution even when we are ill and feel low. After a diagnosis of cancer, many people feel helpless, despairing, meaningless, resentful, sad, and alone. These are states of vulnerability. We feel bad, both physically and emotionally. Dedicating our treatments can have a positive effect on these states of vulnerability, helping us feel moments of effectiveness, hope, purpose, gratitude, contentment and communion. These feelings are associated with resilience. We feel better in states of resilience than in states of vulnerability. Dedicating our cancer treatments may help us shift from states of vulnerability to states of resilience. It is worth a try.

There is another reason to dedicate our treatments. Many people and organizations that are doing good work feel isolated and unrecognized. When we dedicate our treatments to them, they feel less alone and more motivated to carry on. We can never know what positive effects may ripple out from our acts of appreciation.

### **2. When should I dedicate my treatments?**

Many of us are confused and upset after receiving a diagnosis of cancer. We may feel shock and be totally overwhelmed. These feelings are unlikely to last the entire time or to always be present. When things begin to settle down and you are a little more adjusted to all that you must do now, you can also consider whether dedicating your cancer treatments is something that will make you feel better.

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In the beginning stages of learning we have cancer, many of us can think of little else but ourselves and the effects our cancer will have on our loved ones or on our work lives. We may find it exceedingly difficult to think about anything but ourselves and the decisions we have to make. This early phase of cancer treatment planning is probably not a good time to undertake this project.

After we have made our decisions about what treatment to undergo, there may be a lull before the treatment actually starts. Or, treatment may begin right away and all the bustle of the consultations ends. A good time to take on this project is during a lull, or when you feel accustomed to the routines of treatment.

### **3. Can I do this alone or do I need someone to help me?**

Of course, you can do this project alone. But many people will find it easier to do it with a friend, a family member, or a volunteer, either at the hospital where you are being treated or at an organization that assists cancer patients, such as the Wellness Community. Many people undergoing treatment for cancer have trouble concentrating, and anything new feels like it is too much, even if it would be desirable. I have also written a guide for volunteers, to make it easier for you to ask someone to help you do this.

The Companion Guide for Volunteers will help someone assist you with this project. Volunteers -- who can be family members, friends, or trained cancer volunteers -- enjoy this project immensely. It gives them a sense of meaning, too. Often when people are ill, the people who are closest to them long to feel useful. Helping you with this project may be just what someone needs.

If you think it would be easier for you to work with someone on this project, you can think of it as giving someone an opportunity to feel useful and to feel that they are doing something meaningful.

### **4. How do I choose the person or cause to receive my treatment dedication?**

You may want to dedicate your treatments to a person or to several people who have been profoundly important in your life, people you love and admire for sterling qualities of theirs that have made a positive contribution to your life. This may be the perfect choice for you.

Or, you may want to choose a person or cause whose work in the world you want to honor. Making the choice is both the hard part and the interesting part of the project.

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How often do we step back and consider the causes or situations that we care about deeply? For some of us, when we give to charity we are expressing our commitment and respect for the organizations to which we donate money. But this commitment and respect may not arise from a place inside us that feels vitally important. The first step is to get in touch with what you feel passionate about. It will help you be able to say a sentence like this: “The work that this person or organization does is crucial to me.”

The following are some questions that may help you select your dedicatee:

- What are the situations I always seem drawn to?
- What are the television news stories about that I never turn off?
- What are the stories in the newspaper that I always read?
- What do my family and friends talk about that always captures my attention?
- What did I care about intensely when I was younger? Is this the same or different from what I care about now?
- If a genie came out of a bottle and told me that I had three wishes for myself and three wishes for the world, what three issues would I solve for the sake of the planet?
- If I could choose only one issue, which would it be? If I can't choose, what might this tell me?

I am imagining that you have now identified one or more issues or causes that are truly important to you. If you have had difficulty choosing, and you are doing this alone, perhaps you could ask someone to work with you on this. Some people learn what they think in conversation with another person. The next step is to find a person or organization that works on the issue that matters most to you.

Let's say the issue you chose that matters most to you is children's well-being or poverty or music. You may believe that the future of the world depends on the next generation, or that the world has the resources to make sure no one is poor, or that music soothes the soul. Now you need to find a person or organization whose mission and vision fit yours. You might want to dedicate your treatments to a neighborhood daycare center, a local homeless shelter or your church choir. Or you may want to recognize national or international figures or organizations that work on these issues. It is up to you. The following are a set of questions to help move from the abstract to the concrete.

- Do I want to focus on this issue at the local, national, or international level?
- Would I prefer to dedicate my treatments to a person or an organization?
- Would I prefer to select several people or organizations to dedicate my treatments to, or just one?

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With the answers to these questions, you have narrowed your choices. For instance you might be looking for a *local organization* that helps the homeless, or a *person* who works for peace all over the world. Now it is a question of finding a match for your interests. Ask yourself:

- Whom do I know who might be aware of organizations or people who match my interests?
- Can I, or can the volunteer who is assisting me, search the Internet to find a match?
- How do the mission and vision statements of the organization I am considering match my values, passions, and concerns?
- How does the person I am considering live out my values, passions, and concerns?
- Will I feel that my own mission and vision are fulfilled if I select this person or organization to dedicate my treatment to?

Don't settle on a dedicatee until you can answer the last question with a definite YES. Be patient. It may take days or even weeks to make your selection. This process is not meant to be frustrating but interesting. You will learn about what is being done in the area of your passion and you will also understand things about yourself during the selection process.

## **5. How do I notify the person or organization that I have selected that I am dedicating my treatments to them?**

Old-fashioned as it may be, I think it makes more of a difference if we send a letter to our dedicatees than if we send an email or make a phone call. Therefore, in this section, I provide examples of dedication letters, together with suggestions about how to write one. The first sample letter is to a local person. The second is to a national organization. The third is to a person who is internationally famous for his work in Africa and South Africa.

Betty Smith  
Orange Daycare Center  
14 Apple Avenue  
Any small town, State

April 14, 2004

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Dear Mrs. Smith:

I live a few blocks from your day care center and frequently watch you interact with the children in the center. I have always cared about little children and it makes me so happy to watch you take such good care of these children.

I am currently undergoing treatment for a recent diagnosis of cancer. I have decided to dedicate my treatments to you to express my admiration for the fine job you do and the loving way you do it. My treatments will extend for 5 weeks, starting June 3. Please know that during this time, I will be thinking of you smiling at your small charges and it will make me smile.

Please accept the dedication of my treatments as my way of expressing gratitude to you for making a difference for the children, their families and our community. I am proud to be your neighbor.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Alice Jones

Here is another letter.

Books for Children  
100 We Care Street  
Washington, DC

April 14, 2004

Dear Kind People:

I am writing to let you know that I have selected your organization to honor for your work distributing books to children. At the moment, I am undergoing treatment for cancer. This has given me an opportunity to reflect on what is truly important to me. I have realized that I care deeply about books and literacy. I did not know about your organization until I began to think about what was really meaningful to me. Then I found your organization on the Internet and read about all the programs you have. Your work is

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excellent and you do exactly what I think is important to do: provide books to young children and their parents and help them learn to read.

I will be undergoing treatment for the next 6 months. During this period, I will bring a children's book with me to each of my treatments to symbolize the work that you do. During my chemotherapy infusion, I will be thinking about the good work that your organization does and dedicating the treatment to you. I dedicate my treatments to you to show my appreciation for the work that you are doing.

Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,

Mr. Robert Booth

In the sections below, I take apart a letter and show the elements that I think make sense to include in a letter.

1. President Nelson Mandela  
Nelson Mandela Foundation  
South Africa

2. Date

3. Dear President Mandela:

4. I am an activist who is concerned about the effects of witnessing political violence and the experience of witnessing those suffering with AIDS.

5. The last few months I have been undergoing treatment for cancer. I have decided to dedicate my treatments to a person whose work I wish to honor. On Sunday, December 21, I will dedicate my treatment to you.

6. You have been an inspiration to me my entire life. Your name has been synonymous with the liberation of all people from all forms of oppression for as long as I can remember. Now people all over the world, and in South Africa especially, have the oppression of the AIDS pandemic. It is something that haunts me even at this distance. I have close friends and colleagues in South Africa who daily work to ease the suffering of those who have, live with, and care for those who suffer with AIDS. As someone who

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cares deeply about people who suffer with AIDS and cares about the families, communities and caregivers who witness their suffering, it has meant a great deal to me

that you have used your great wisdom and status to support those who face the AIDS pandemic with passion and commitment.

7. I have decided to take each treatment as an opportunity to share the blessing of treatment. On December 21 at 7AM I shall absorb the painful, healing beams in your name and in your honor.

8. Thank you for the work you do in the world, the person you are, and the hope you help others feel.

9. Sincerely,

10. Kaethe Weingarten

## **Components of Writing a Letter**

1. Provide the address of the person or organization
2. Date your letter
3. Use a salutation
4. Introduce yourself briefly

I chose to say I was an activist, but I could have chosen other characteristics of mine. I could have said I am a mother or an academic or an American. I then wrote what it was that I care about. Hopefully, then, early in the letter, he will understand why I am writing to him. He knows the role he has played in South Africa with regard to the AIDS pandemic.

5. What and when:

In this paragraph I tell him what I am doing and when. This paragraph lets him know that I have chosen him to dedicate my treatments to on a particular date. If I had dedicated all of my treatments to him, I could have written, "I will dedicate all my treatments to you."

6. Why you are dedicating your treatments to this person or cause

It is important to be as specific as possible about what it is that has led you to select this person or organization. You don't have to cover every reason for your selection, but the more specific you are, the more believable is your admiration.

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## 7. Repeat the dedication and express the heart of the matter

This is the place in the letter where you get to express what you are trying to do when you dedicate your treatments. For me, it was turning a painful experience into one out of which good could come. If I were having chemotherapy and were dedicating those treatments, I could have written: “On December 21 at 7AM I shall accept the chemotherapy infusion in your name and in your honor.”

## 8. An expression of gratitude

Again the trick is to be as specific as possible.

## 9. Closing salutation

## 10. Name and any other identifiers you want to provide

## **6. What do I do during my treatments that will make the spirit of my dedication come alive?**

I will pose some questions that will help you think of ideas that will suit you. Again, there is no right way to do this. Some people will stop right here. Having written the letter and sent it off will be enough for them. Others will want to create a meaningful ritual at the time of the treatments themselves. I found connecting my actual treatments to my dedicatees very helpful in providing a focus to each treatment. In fact, one day the radiation equipment broke and I couldn't go for treatment. I kept calling to see if it was fixed because I was so eager to dedicate that day's radiation to the person I had selected.

In this section, I am trying to help you decide whether you want to do something more than sending your letter as a way of linking your dedication to the treatment experience itself. If you do, this can be done at your home or at the treatment center, on a treatment day or on a day you don't go for treatment. It will depend on what you decide to do.

I suggest you try to answer the following questions: who, what, where, when, and how.

Who:

- Do you want other people to know about your dedication, or is this something you want to do on your own?
- Do you want the staff at the treatment center or your doctors to know that you are dedicating your treatments?
- If you want others to know, do you want them to participate in any way in your dedication activity?

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For instance, you could hand out a card to the technicians who deliver your treatment that tells them about your dedicatee. You could tell them that you would like to tell them about your dedicatee. Or, you could ask them to join you in a moment of silence while you think about your dedicatee.

## What

- Do you want to create an activity that acknowledges the dedicatee?
- Do you want to do something that helps others learn about the dedicatee?

For instance, if you belong to a church, you could ask your church choir to dedicate a song to your dedicatee once during your treatment period.

## Where

- Do you want to do something at your home or at the treatment center?

For instance, you could gather a few friends over to your house on the weekend before a treatment and ask those who come for suggestions of things to do and then do one that feels right to you with the group that is there.

## When

- Do you want to do something just before, during, or just after treatment?
- Do you want to do something at a time that is clearly separate from an actual treatment, for instance on a weekend between treatments?
- Do you want to do something that recognizes your dedicatee one time only or during each treatment?

If you are doing more than one dedication, do you want to do the same activity for each dedicatee or design something unique for each one?

## How

The how is really a creative assembly of what you have learned from answering the other questions. There is no end to the possibilities. Here are a few more examples.

- You invite your closest friend to light a candle in honor of the dedicatee before your friend drives you to the treatment center. At the hospital, you give your nurse a card that tells her what you have done and provides the name and address of your dedicatee.

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- You take the letter you have written to the hospital and read it to yourself just before you begin your treatment. During treatment you think about your dedicatee. During each treatment you think about your dedicatee.
- On a Sunday afternoon, you invite a few friends over to your home and they bring some goodies to eat. You sit in a circle around your kitchen table and read them the letter you have written. Each person says something to you about their response to your writing the letter and your choice of dedicatee. During the treatment itself, or just before, you read a short poem that is meaningful to you.

## **7. Will I hear from my dedicatee?**

It is impossible to predict who will and who will not respond to the dedications. In my case, about half of those who received my letters did respond. Of those who responded, it was clear that my choosing them as dedicatees meant a lot to them. Some people and organizations did not respond. They may not have known how to respond or they may have been so swamped with correspondence that they could not respond personally. It is important to undertake this project with no expectation that **you** will be recognized. It is really an opportunity for you to give recognition and appreciation to others.

## **8. Completing the Project**

The Treatment Dedication Project is a component of The Witnessing Project. We would love to hear from you. We are creating an archive of dedications and will post them on our web site. You can contact us at [www.witnessingproject.org](http://www.witnessingproject.org).