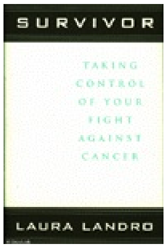
Survivor: Taking Control of Your Fight Against Cancer



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Publisher: Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998
ISBN: 0-684-84335-8
OncoLink Rating:

★★★

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Laura Landro is a senior editor in charge of entertainment, media and marketing coverage at The Wall Street Journal. She is hard working and successful, but her life changed when in 1991, shortly after her thirty-seventh birthday, she was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia. She penned this account of her experience, noting that this is not intended to be a heartwarming story of someone beating the odds, nor does it attempt to provide medical advice. She hopes to help the reader take an active and educated role in fighting their disease, stating that "Everyone has the right -- and the obligation -- to participate actively in the crucial medical decisions whose outcome will determine his or her survival."

The book takes the reader on a journey, which chronicles her fight against cancer, from her diagnosis to her life after recovery. The reader soon discovers that at each step along the journey, the author shares valuable lessons that she learned.

The journey begins with her diagnosis, when she found that one of the hardest things to do was to tell the news to family and friends. Her family, which consists of her supportive parents and two younger brothers, were strong and unified. Her boyfriend felt the same, and proposed marriage the day after she was diagnosed. Friends reacted differently: some are very forward and helpful, others don't seem to know what to say. What she learned from this is that if you are open about your illness, people generally want to help. She also began to keep a journal, noticing that it really helped to write down her feelings. She occasionally provides excerpts from her recordings.

The next step in the journey was learning about all the treatment options. She realized that while doctors can give you their advice, the treatment chosen is ultimately the patient's decision. Her advice is to do your homework, research your disease, and ask the right questions: "Knowledge, while terrifying, is power. If you are informed, you can't be patronized, intimidated, or pushed around by the health care system." She advises learning about your doctor and their professional background; she even called many experts, taping their conversations so that she could listen to them again later. Once she realized she needed a bone marrow transplant, she researched and visited many transplant centers, explaining that you have to go where you feel most comfortable with the physicians and their techniques, even if it's not close to home. Although she lived in New York, she chose Fred Hutchinson Hospital in Seattle. The author understands that while all this research was second nature to her, other patients may not know where to turn. She thus provides addresses and Web sites (such as The University of Pennsylvania's OncoLink).

After completing her research, the next step in Ms. Landro's journey was to make decisions, to choose the course of her treatment. Her choice was to undergo chemotherapy, followed by a bone marrow transplant. At this stage, she learned when to take charge and when to relinquish some control. She took charge and switched doctors: her doctor was unfriendly, and unwilling to take the time to answer her questions. Since she believes in educating yourself about your illness, she feels it is important to have a doctor with whom one can communicate. Thus, while it was intimidating and daunting to switch doctors, it was important to do so. She also gave up some control: she had always felt in charge, taking care of her parents and two younger brothers, but she realized she had to let them take care of her while undergoing treatment.

The final step in her journey against cancer was the actual treatment. She learned many lessons at this stage, and thus provides very valuable advice. She explains that talking to others who have undergone the same treatment is just as valuable as doing medical research. She mentions that talking to therapists about your emotions at this time is helpful as well; it is important to express your emotions. The author covers the importance of planning, for little things such as buying a wig before her hair fell out, to bigger issues such as what to do in the event of her death. She learned that while her employer and insurance company were helpful and supportive, she realized, upon meeting other cancer patients, that this is not always the case. She thus offers some advice on how to find financial assistance, or help with schooling for children. She also realized the value of keeping meticulous hospital notes for her own records, and her mother helped tremendously by keeping a journal when she herself was too weak to do so. Finally, she talks about being part of studies: her advice is that it is a good thing if you feel that it can help you, but if you ever feel uncomfortable with it, you should withdraw.

Ms. Landro recovered very well from her bone marrow transplant, and in this account, she teaches many lessons that she learned along the way. There is one more lesson she teaches, perhaps without even knowing it: optimism, and having a Survivor attitude, are very important. Her optimism and strength are apparent throughout this tale. For instance, it is remarkable to note that she doesn't linger on negative medical details. She talks about her first round of chemotherapy, and mentions that she was nauseated, but then goes on to spend just as much time discussing the few hours that she was allowed out of the hospital with her family. Another example is when she relates the fact that she was placed on the pediatrics ward. She talks about how difficult it was to see those children suffer, but spends just as much time describing their beautiful smiles. When discussing her room, she focuses on such blessings as the beautiful view. She is clearly a very grateful and strong person who focuses on the good things.

The book ends with a chapter on life out of the hospital, covering such issues as learning to take care of yourself (administering medications, changing IV bags, etc.), and the emotional difficulties one may face. She also offers a section entitled A Survival Guide, where she provides facts about leukemia, books to read, and Web sites. She concludes with a list of helpful resources. This book is valuable not just to leukemia patients, but to all cancer patients.
