

30 Days

Recently, I endured, tolerated, resented and accepted daily radiation treatments. Every day for 30 days, I would catch the GO train from Rouge Hill in Toronto and journey down to Princess Margaret Hospital.

On my first trip, I was dropped off at the GO station and proceeded to pay. As I walked into the kiosk, I wondered if I was dressed appropriately for radiation. Should I be wearing sneakers and a back pack? My thoughts were interrupted when the GO Clerk asked me if I had a PRESTO Card. I shook my head and asked her if I was considered a senior as I was 62 years old. She said not until 65. Both my arms shot up and I said, “woohoo in 3 years I can get the discount!!”. Somehow, my excitement seemed too dramatic. I was clearly running on adrenalin.

At 10:35 a.m. the booming GO train arrived. On time. There is something majestic and powerful about a train. I boarded it and immediately thought, “was the GO train always this clean and efficient?” I sat by the window and looked out. I was suddenly mesmerized by the lake. I looked out at Lake Ontario and saw a beautiful expanse of greyish, blue water with slight waves. There was a searing, glowing highpoint where the lake met the sky. I never really noticed how beautiful, inspiring and elegant Lake Ontario was. Did I forget Toronto was on a lake?

I departed the GO train at Union Station and walked upstairs and suddenly slowed my pace as I looked around. Was the Great Hall always so magnificent? I was captured by the high ceilings, sparkling lights, marble and bronze fixtures. I quickly googled Union Station and noted it was built in 1927. It’s been here that long? I have walked through Union Station a million times; never noticed how majestic, regal and surreal it felt.

I then took the subway to Queens Park. As I climbed up the stairs onto the street, I looked to my left and noticed Queens Park. What an important looking building! Did it always have statues around it? Is it actually a park? Do people really protest here? Why did I know so little about Queens Park?

I marched south on University Avenue and I passed patients, doctors, nurses, construction workers, students. Everybody seemed absorbed, determined and focused. As I continued down University, I noticed there were international flags of the world along University Avenue. I never noticed them before. There was also a sign that proclaimed Toronto General Hospital was voted the best hospital in Canada? Really? When did that happen?

As I walked past a sausage and hotdog vendor, a dapper-looking gentleman approached me and said,

“I am not going to ask you for money, but could you buy me a hotdog?”

I looked at this smiling gentleman and I thought how hungry he must be to ask for food. I couldn't let him go hungry. We walked over to the vendor and he said,

“Hello! My friend here would like to buy me a hot dog”. The vendor smiled a huge smile, winked at me and gave my new friend a hotdog. I paid. My friend smiled and put the hotdog into his knapsack. He waved good-bye to me. I waved back. And I thought to myself, since when do I buy hot dogs for strangers? But it felt good and warm to offer a tiny bit of kindness.

Then, I walked into Princess Margaret Hospital. What a lovely building. I quickly noted it was filled with sad people, happy people, tired people, helpful people and hopeful people. I proceeded to the reception area, registered and I sat in the reception area and looked around.

There was an enormous fish tank. A Pink Floyd poster up for auction. CP 24 glared from the TV. None of the patients made eye contact with other patients. I thought there should be flowers to brighten up the place. There was also an *End of Treatment Gong*. Everyone who completed their 30 days of radiation can hit the gong.

Finally, an upbeat and friendly technician, named Jill, called my name and I jumped up – like a prize winner on the *Price is Right*. She asked me Covid questions and how I was doing. She led me into a dark room, and bolted a custom-made mask over my head -- It felt like a pair of panty hose stretched over my head. She then asked if I wanted to hear some music. I gave her the thumbs up. She put on the Bee Gees.

Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother

You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive

I smiled underneath my mask. The whole process lasted less than 10 minutes and then I was on my way. Jill put on the Bee Gees every visit. And I smiled every time.

On my last visit, day 30, I was waiting my turn and I heard the End of Treatment Gong. I smiled because I knew somebody had finished their radiation treatment and could start a new beginning and be thankful for the wonderful care and treatment they received.

After my final treatment, I told Jill she was the best and that I never wanted to see her again and could I buy her a hot dog. She smiled and said no. She then asked me if I wanted to hit the Gong. I said yes and walked slowly over to the Gong. I struck the Gong with all my strength and immediately heard a number of people clapping. A new beginning.

I walked out of Princess Margaret hospital, passed Queen's Park; through Union Station and onto the thunderous GO train. I stared out at the lake and then wrote in my journal.

It took 30 days for me to slow down, not to multi-task, but rather to mono-task and to take in my surroundings. To really look at people and things around me. Not just to glance and make glib judgments. To enjoy the architecture. To see people. To have empathy. To smile. To enjoy gestures of kindness. To enjoy my coffee, the flowers, the volunteers, the doctors, the nurses, the technicians. And to enjoy a huge, impressive Lake. And it only took 30 days.

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