

No Longer Strangers: A Bulletin Board and Waiting Room Writing Project:

Interactive writing with patients, staff,
family, and friends.

An Art for Recovery© UCSF Helen Diller Family
Comprehensive Cancer Center
Project



Art For Recovery

Art for Recovery emphasizes giving public expression to the intense feelings that arise in illness and crises; nurturing the aesthetic sensibilities of patients, staff, visitors, and volunteers, creating safe havens for patients and staff to air their feelings and find support.

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For information about Art for Recovery please visit our website at <http://cancer.ucsf.edu/afr> or contact Cindy Perlis, Director, at Cynthia.perlis@ucsfmedctr.org or 415-885-7221.

The first time I stepped into the halls of the UCSF Medical Center at Mount Zion as an Art for Recovery intern in 2006, I was overwhelmed with feelings—fear that I wouldn't be able to help anyone, worry that I would be intimidated by the amount of raw suffering I would encounter, and concern that I would say or do the wrong thing.

What I encountered was a lot of love. Sometimes this level of illness and suffering brings with it an openness and intensity that allows people who want to, to unlock their hearts and let strangers in. And then you are no longer strangers.

That's how I got the idea for the project that has turned into this small book—to sit in waiting rooms and ask people to tell me what was on their minds, to listen, and write down the things they said. I also set up several bulletin boards, three in the hospital, and one in the Ida Friend Outpatient Infusion Center waiting room, where people, patients, family, friends, and staff could write down their thoughts and feelings in response to a poem or a prompt. The great majority of what is in this book came from the bulletin boards. As I listened and observed, I also wrote poems, as a way to capture the feelings and thoughts in my own heart. For me, a big believer in the mind-body connection, that's what healing is about.

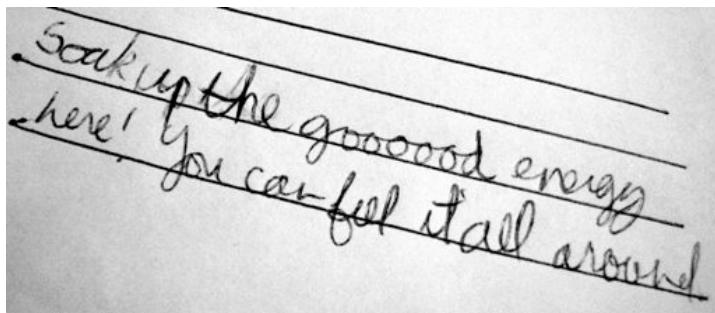
As you read these pages, I hope you will think of those you might see on the street or meet as friends who have been through a life-changing illness, those who may be very ill and not even look all that sick, or those who may have the tell-tale signs of progressing cancer. I hope you will think of the nurses and doctors who fight the battle with them, and who do their best to set the tone for the healing atmosphere inside the hospital. As said on one of the

bulletin boards, *Soak up the good energy here! You can feel it all around.* Know that someone cares even if you don't know them. And of course, I hope you will take something away for yourself, and maybe even write about it! The backs of the pages were kept clean and empty to offer you a space to write or draw.

A writing prompt is the beginning of a sentence or phrase that is meant to be completed. You will note as you begin this book, that it is organized with writing prompts at the top of the page followed by participants' written responses. I have interspersed my own poems written as a reaction to what I experienced in the waiting rooms. I have also included handwritten clips from the actual bulletin boards. My photographs will, I hope, complement the writing.

All the writing except mine is anonymous, and that has helped with the spontaneity of the responses. Any names used in this booklet have been changed or shortened.

Phyllis Klein, LCSW, Art for Recovery Intern
August 2007



No Longer Strangers:
Prompts and Responses
on Bulletin Boards and
in Waiting Rooms.

Prompt: Write a Song title

Responses:

Baby I must *confess*,
the first moment I saw you
in your summer dress...

My heart skipped a beat or *two*
I thought, "Is this love, can it be *true*?"
K., my soul's truth be told...

It's you forever and ever I long to *hold*.
Love, S.

◆
She's a beauty queen,
my beanbag in the street,
I take her down out to
the laundry scene.

◆
I've got stitches in my body
but a song in my heart.

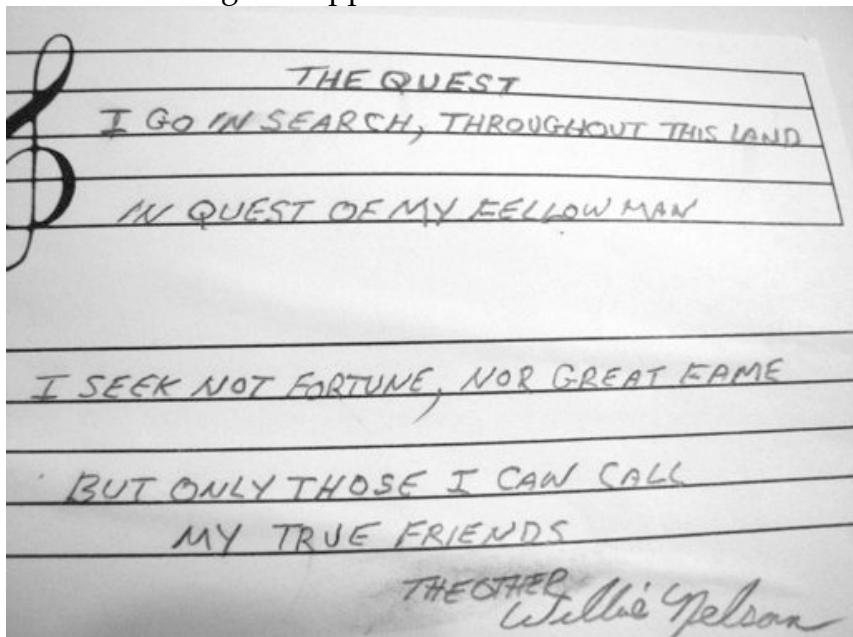
◆
I've got pain in my body
but strength in my soul.

The quest

I go in search, throughout this land
in quest of my fellow man,
I seek not fortune, nor great fame
but only those I can call
my true friends.

The other Willie Nelson

This song as it appeared on the bulletin board:



Prompt: What to do when lightening strikes...

Responses:

Wag your tail.



Duck!



Hang onto those you love and wait out the storm.



Oh my God, I have cancer! That's the lightening. Your life changes forever.



Lightening is both beautiful and dangerous. I am thankful for all the experiences in my life. One of the best was a lightning storm.



Do not lose hope. You are bigger than your cancer cells. You have cancer for now but cancer does not have you.

Prompt:
Write something kind to someone else here today...

Responses:

Thank you everyone for loving my mom.



Sandra and Maria you are angels sent from heaven to care for those in need.



Everyone in the hospital is a blessing. Thank you for everything.



Soak up the good energy here! You can feel it all around. Know that someone cares even if you don't know them. I pray for all folks in hospitals. You are not forgotten!



Prompt:

There are days when _____ is the only outlet.

Responses:

prayer and common sense

♦
whining

♦
crying

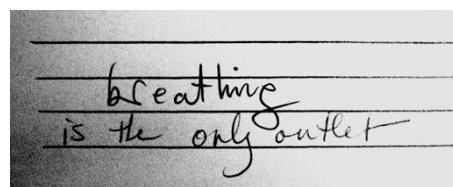
♦
knowing that there is more
than one outlet to use and
I can use many of them.

♦
reading

♦
art

♦
someone to listen to you.

♦
breathing.



Prompt:

Sitting in the waiting room is:

Responses:

at once a drag and hopeful.



time consuming.



like being in court waiting for the jury to finish deliberating.



boring.



amazing, you don't count on it, that's for sure.



suspenseful because you don't know what's going to happen.



so much "fun". I watch the people walk by. (in the admissions waiting room)



better with a friend than with my husband.

Thank goodness for friends, they're a cloud holding me up.
Girlfriends never go away like husbands do.

Language Infusions

The chemotherapy waiting room, a small area across from the large nurse's station is crowded today. Two children run around, patients, family, or friends wait to be called in for treatments. I've been carrying around a word-basket for weeks now. The timing seems perfect for this chance "group meeting". I tell them, "choose a word and tell me what it means to you"

Herman picks *symphony orchestra*, something he would like to learn more about—his ears know he likes jazz, and gospel music helps him relax, listen better, think about the lyrics.

Keri waits while her young sister gets a "fill-up", ten years with cancer, too many fill-ups. Be *passionate* about your life, love what you do and do what you love, she tells me, while her children beam their healthy energy around us.

Yellow is for the brightness in my kitchen, a woman says as she goes to start taxol today, and Renee picks the same word, says *yellow* makes her happy, reminds her of her old pickup, here with friends to pick them up.

Anne gets *praying mantis*, something she's been thinking about lately, maybe because of the prayer and also because it's a beautiful omen, "a good sign". She got really close to one recently and thought it might be praying for all the other insects in the garden.

Phyllis Klein

Prompt:

Imagine the sound of a rainbow
The color of music
The feeling of silk on your face

Imagine...



Responses:

My daughter "M" playing in the sand as a young child.
She'll be 20 in September.

◆
A day when there will be cures for many diseases.

◆
Peace in the Middle East.

◆
Sunshine, salt sea air, discovery, innocence.

◆
A bright rainbow that fills this hallway.

◆
Playing in the sand without a care in the world.

◆
Yosemite falls and the wind in the pines.

◆
being at a benefit concert where all the money went to cancer patients.

◆
the rays of the sun shining through Redwood trees.

◆
I am the best player in the NBA.

◆
I won the lotto.

◆
I'm home playing with my puppy.

◆
I imagine myself in a beautiful, caring, safe place. I am surrounded by competent, loving, warm, and intelligent people. I realize I am not imagining. I am there!

Prompt: What animals teach us.

Responses:

My puppy is *kokua* “the helper” in Hawaiian. He fills the empty moments. We are in life together, with unconditional love.

◆
My doggie teaches me to keep seeking love and affection even when you’re down.

◆
A squirrel taught me that if I store up my hopes to get through the winter of cancer, spring comes quickly!

◆
My dog Corky took care of me every day I was ill. He is gone now--I miss him. He taught me unconditional love.

◆
A bird that could not fly taught me it’s okay to be happy in my wheelchair. I can be happy, I will be happy and sing in my heart.

◆
An owl taught me that sleepless nights may not be the worst thing in the world, because you can also sleep during the day.

◆
My cat Calamity Jane always greets me at the door, like a dog, wagging her tail and rolling over for a belly rub. Every day except Thursday--chemo day. On that day she knows I don’t have the energy for belly rubs. She jumps on the bed with Mommy; remembers it’s nap day, teaches me

to be aware of other people's needs and not to expect anything in return. Just LOVE and lots of it.



Pets teach us how to be pampered.



My cat taught me just being is enough.



I learn to cat-nap from Angel, our cat, who also went through hard times.



Cats teach us not to be afraid of being solitary, dogs are about loyalty and love.



In life you learn not to lick the frogs.



My friend's bunny taught me I don't like bunnies.



Prompt:

My life becomes as simple as a patch of blue sky
seen through the window.

My life becomes...

Responses:

a gift from my Lord. I'm in his hands, and he is in charge.



best when I have such great care.



as it was. Lots of fun and activity. My cancer was the
“pothole” of life—it’s been repaired. We go on as usual.
Thank you for your efficient, kind care.



a different kind of poetry, a fluid, loving sacred dance of
limitlessness.



as clear as the new glass over the picture I have of you.
ever hopeful and strong, surrounded by the people I love.
a treasure of each and every moment.



full of goodness and amazing people who love me, who
inspire, and teach me.

Alicia Celestial

Alicia of the stars
and planets
finds this a splendid day to be in the hospital
safe in the care of the doctors and nurses;
Alicia climbs a mountain and it
wants to grow footholds just for her.

Alicia conquers her fear
of needles with several tattoos,
on her wrist a symbol of mastery
with wavy black line for go with the flow
and a spiral for don't freak out about the future.
On her hip opposite the main tumor,
butterflies, symbols of power.

Alicia carries what people have given her,
butterfly bead on her neck from her roommate,
painkiller popsicles for when the pain is bad,
pen and paper for writing things down.
This is just normal
everyday stuff, this cancer.

Alicia is on a mission
learning about surrender to her space-suit,
waters her garden and the roses ask
what they can do, offer to
give up their thorns.

Alicia wishes you would appreciate your life
not wait for something bad to happen.

Phyllis Klein

Prompt:

There are many kinds of acrobats.

My inner acrobat...

Responses:

Stretches my inner strength to test it.

◆
Helps to hold me together.

◆
Moves faster than my outer acrobat.

◆
◆
◆

Blessed are the flexible for they shall not break.

◆
For healing my acrobat I give him my heart and the heart of
my heart.

◆
Being an acrobat is finding a way to bring my soul, my
heart, and my mind together.

◆
Our acrobat selves twist, turn, bend, and stretch to the
challenges life brings.

for healing my acrobat
I give him my heart
and the heart of
my heart

Prompt: What the heart sees.

Responses:

Beautiful scarves everywhere.

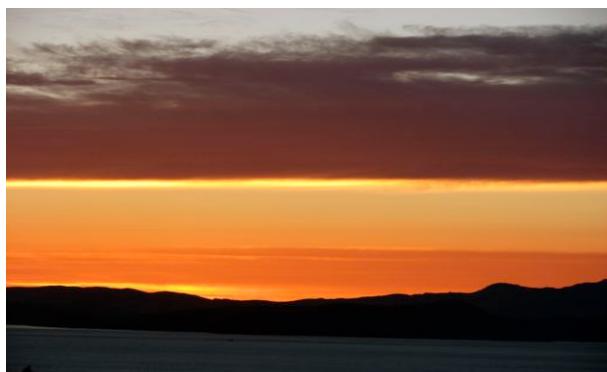
Sunsets reflected on the back of the city line.
The simple beauty of life.

Life in the laughter of children, my dog's hair, leaves
rustling in the trees in my garden.

My love S. light up my life even though she may be losing
her own.

Lots of courageous people.

Everything that goes on.



Love gets into us

Seventeen years ago
his heart knew he wasn't going to die,
even though the cancer had already flooded
the sea of his blood.

Seventeen years ago he swam into remission,
let his body take the easy path, like a river flowing
west to the ocean.

Today we meet, and I know there will be hundreds
at his funeral when it comes the next year.
I know his doctors will be weeping there,
and his six children. His wife of 55 years, now dulled
with the memory disease, will cry with confusion.

Friends will remember his prize-winning heirloom
tomatoes, the wicked ravioli, the way he looked at
you when you spoke to him, his faith in silence.
Devotion isn't too strong a word here,
with someone like this,
who listens the way a river carries a boat,
absorbing a little water as it travels.
Love gets into us.

Phyllis Klein

Prompt:

Love is like wildflowers or
water lilies. It's often found in
the most unlikely places.

I found love...

Responses:

in the beauty of nature, the stillness within
your heart.



when I wasn't trying to find it.



when I least expected it,
when I had given up hope of it—
it found me, it took me, it saved me.



when I opened my heart to others.



when I gave love unconditionally
when I learned to love myself.



when my hair grew back.



in the portrait my 4 year old drew for me. The woman is
bald but has heart stickers on pupils. She calls it, "Girl
with love in her eyes."

in the kindness of the nurses and staff. Thank you all!

♦
in the beautiful music played here as I walked in,
reminding me to appreciate beauty of all kinds.

♦
when my treatment ended.

I found love

when I least expected it

when I had given up hope of it -

It found me; It took me; It saved me.



Prompt:
How art heals



Responses:

By bringing my inside outside.

◆
By exposing yourself for everyone to understand.

Art is what you say it is.

◆
The ability to reach others without being in their presence.

◆
Writing means peace.

◆
Writing means releasing hurts, pains, joy, praise, and happiness into words. It means not hurting oneself by internalizing feelings, but letting things flow from you.

◆
My artistic self is an unbeatable, phenomenal force...with the goal of bringing joy to everyone who comes into contact with me.

Prompt:
My wishful wings will take me...



Responses:

and all other people with pain
and fly it away leaving them
painless.



where my mind is afraid to go and
my legs are too weak to walk.
to inner peace, tranquility, and comfort,

a pain-free place for all to share,
even if it's the finality of resting forever.

My beautiful wings...

are clipped and here I sit fighting
my healing time.
I despise being caged.

My warrior wings will take me...

to the place of light with grace and dignity.

♦
to the laughter of my children.

♦
everywhere there is to go.

Prompt:

Think big thoughts but
relish the small pleasures.

My small pleasures:

Responses:

A long walk in a small herb garden, touching, crinkling,
sniffing, cooking.



Seeing friends get well and leave the hospital.



Receiving phone calls from well-wishers.



Eating or dreaming about eating my favorite food—
chocolate!



Prompt:
Living with cancer is:

Responses:

a different milestone.

♦
a life you didn't expect.

♦
a question mark.

♦
hopefully at the moment I'm not living it.

♦
a life of remission and recurrence.

♦
kinda hard—seeing our mom sick and struggling. Seeing
her crying in pain.

In the Waiting Room

1.

"Mommy, does it hurt?"
She waits for chemo,
son in a stroller. Saw her
wince to pull off the cotton
after a blood draw,
sits in his buggy, chatting.
Munches on an animal cracker
as she goes to get her IV put in.
Hasn't had time for support groups,
another child at school today.
They keep her busy; keep her
moving through the territory of cancer.

2.

A mother and wife, husband
here for a whole day
with the doctors, it's melanoma.
Retired trucker--his lump announced
itself quietly. Married 50 years,
live on land given by his father, acre
with a stream, used to be wide-open
space, now developments
hover. Houses cram onto hills
like sailboats on the bay, becalmed,
unlike so many in her family,
cancer, so much cancer,
so many gone now.

They did the surgery near home,
one small spot was
reluctant to leave. Came here
for the experts,
didn't realize we are all experts
on how things move, come and go,
stay behind, or depart.

Phyllis Klein

Prompt: The Power of Rest

In repose...

Responses:

I reflect, remember, cry again, rejoice, re-live the joy, fun, laughter, and love.

♦
we connect with healing, light, and purity.

Resting means...

asking for a hug.

♦
sitting on the couch, cozy with a movie.

♦
having sex.

♦
letting go of fear.

When I'm tired of resting...

I try to do as much as I can in the least amount of time.

♦
I eat.

♦
I get up and dance, then take a nap.

Prompt:
If you were a THING, what would you be?

Responses:

I would be cancer so I could leave my son's body.



A tree, they give us oxygen to breathe. Be grateful for what trees give us—every living thing is precious and valued.



I'd be a rosary because I like to be touched.



I would want to be the sun so I could shine on "A" daily.
Every time he felt the sun he'd feel my love.



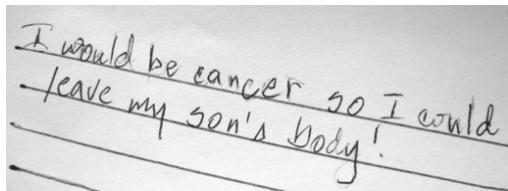
I'd be a big fluffy teddy bear so when you feel lonely I will be right there in the bed next to you and you'll have someone to hug.

If I were a door who could talk I'd tell people not to slam me.

I'd bring music recording that brings wholeness.

A mirror so people could look and see how special they are.

I'd be a cloud so I can be as carefree as can be and fly to anywhere pleasant.



Prompt:
What I would like to say to my doctor or nurse.

Responses:

Best Holiday wishes to everyone who brings hope to my Mom every day.

The wonderful people at UCSF/Mt. Zion make every mile of my 60 mile trek worth coming here.

You are all angels! Thank you for your presence and compassion.

Listen to me!

Never forget how much we appreciate your passion and commitment.

As I receive chemo, I notice all the hospital sounds around me—construction workers building something, people happily laughing, the sudden beep of the infusion machine. Although the sounds are in unison each has its own life. I am thankful that life goes on.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for taking care of me! Thank you for being a part of the process within my road to complete 100% health.

Thank you to my nurses Katherine and Maureen. I will remember you.

The staff at the infusion center is always professional, accommodating, cheery. This is integral to good healthcare. Great facility, great staff, I really like coming.
T. remicaid patient

Thank you so much for your well-informed professional care and cheerful disposition. I couldn't have gotten through this without you!

D. sarcoma patient

I love you. You are why I have hope. This is our journey.
A. sarcoma patient



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