



Interview Transcript: Pert

Pert worked in public relations. At the time of the interview, she was a wife, a mother and a grandmother. Pert passed away in March 2010.

Type of Cancer: Colorectal

Age at Diagnosis: 73

Year of Diagnosis: 2007

Treatment: Surgery, Chemotherapy and Radiation

Date of Interview: June 2009

My name is Pert Reid. I'm 74 years old. I live in Toronto, Ontario. I was diagnosed in late 2007 with colorectal cancer.

Coping

I'm quite an emotional person by my nature—you know, I laugh easily and I cry easily. But I decided fairly early on that I would take time a couple of times a day... I don't call it meditation, I just call it taking time. And I sort of think through the circumstances of my life and if I need to weep I do. If I need to make some notes about something I want to plan for, I do. And then I try to sort of set it aside.

Nearly everybody has problems from time to time and sometimes ongoing. And that if you find that it's sort of overwhelming you and that you're in a chronic state of upset and feeling anxious and panicky, then try to compartmentalize it a bit. Think of a box if you like. Imagine what the box looks like if you want to, if that helps, and try to take some specific time—and I don't take a long time, I take maybe 10 minutes twice a day. I've tried to look at this from the point of view of, "This doesn't suit me at all and if I had the choice I would have taken up needlepoint or something instead but since I'm dealing with it, it is what it is and I might as well cope with it as well as I can." And I'm a person who usually says, "I'll do the best I can," and then I do try to. Now probably not all the time, but I do try to.

A difficult procedure

I had internal surgery where they removed all the problem area, they thought, in my lower intestine. Then they rerouted my intestine around to my left abdomen and they cut a hole there, which is called a stoma. And basically the end of your intestine is just at that point, on your skin, and you wear what some people call a bag, but it's actually called a pouch. At first I was very cowed by the idea of having it. I thought, "Yikes, ick, awful, bad."

For the first couple of days after I came home from the hospital I was very on edge, wondering if it was going to explode off my body, or what on earth would happen and how would I deal

with it, and good Lord, heaven only knows, you know; my whole body would be spilling out all over the floor or something. But it turned out to be working fine. They trained me well at the hospital and much though I was horrified at the idea, I mean it just had never occurred with me, and I'd never known anybody who'd had one, at least they may have had one but I didn't know about it. It's been a lot less of a headache than I thought it would be. So I'm very pleased to be able to say that.

The dreaded hair loss

In my first phase of treatment with the concurrent radiation and chemo, I lost about half my hair. But I kept enough that I was able to manage. My hair was fairly long and I was able to manage fine and I think that I looked OK. However, just before I had the second treatment, over about a fourday period my hair just came out in wads. I would brush it and it was just a handful of hair, I would brush the other side and a handful of hair. I was just looking at it like, "I can't believe it." But I wasn't really—I was surprised, but I wasn't really surprised, let's say.

It's a bit unsettling when you're used to seeing yourself with hair to suddenly find you're as bald as a billiard ball. And I think psychologically that was hard for me for about a week. And that started about three weeks ago so I'm now two weeks past the worst of my upset and I'm not loving it but I'm fine. Do you know what I mean? I wish it wasn't so but as I say, I think the Lord was looking after me. I have a very nice collection of scarves that I didn't use very much so they're coming into use and I'm going to go back now and be fitted for a wig and I'll probably need it for sure. So that was probably harder on me than I imagined it would be and it seems a rather superficial concern but I guess everybody has ego and I think appearance is part of that. You know?

What I'd tell my best friend

I think my age has quite a lot to do with my attitude across the board. I'm 74, I'll soon be 75, and even in today's modern times, that's old, you know, and I realize that. So I think it gives me a slightly more cheery outlook, but I would say take heart because it's not as intimidating as you first imagine. There are lots of aspects of it that I would just as soon not have to be bothered with but try to do it a day at a time, try not to borrow trouble. I hope that you will learn to have lots of confidence in your doctors and if you don't, I would suggest maybe trying to find some other ones.

One of the things that I maybe underestimated slightly was coming home from the hospital after surgery, and probably the period after my first concurrent radiation and chemo, that I was a little bit weaker than I had expected to be. I think it's a good idea for people to shop ahead, have frozen foods available or make alternative plans with a neighbour to come in and help at mealtime. I know once in a while I would be in the kitchen trying to turn a pork chop and thinking, "I think I might faint," you know? So I think I've learned that lesson quite well.

Reflections

If I was looking at this very subjectively but hadn't been a patient yet, I don't think I could have had any idea of the breadth and length and depth of the experience. Because it is a very all-encompassing type of thing and that is partly literally the disease and partly the myth around the disease, I think. I realize I live in a good country, where I'm safe and I'm comfortable and I'm fed and I'm housed and I'm clothed and I have fun and a great family and friends and I have some health problems and we're dealing with them as well as we can. So I am very

grateful, I really am. I think there is no question that adversity helps to focus your thinking and you know, you do think about your priorities and you certainly can see what the problems are. And you can't anticipate the future and really there's not a lot of use in that. Why borrow trouble, I say. It's made me smarten up and I'm sure we all need that occasionally and I'm very grateful. I know I'm in a good place for my situation and I'm very pleased about that.