

Face to Face with Cancer

Two Journeys... God Always Present

By Soo Ewe Jin & Angeline Lim

**2009 Edition
Revised and updated**

Complimentary:
Not for sale. Pass it on.

First edition 2002

Second edition 2004

Third edition (Chinese) 2006

Fourth edition 2006

Fifth edition 2009

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*To God,
our Healer,
Rock
and Salvation*

A second battle with the Big C

(An introduction to this edition)

Soo Ewe Jin's journey with the Big C which began in April 1999 came to a happy conclusion five years later when doctors declared him in complete remission.

The story of his first journey was told through this little book which has gone through three editions in English and an edition in Chinese. A total of 12,000 copies has so far been distributed free to various cancer wards and support institutions over the years.

Just after the last edition was launched sometime in late 2006, his life took on another turn when doctors discovered a malignant lump on the right side of his neck. He had to undergo an operation, followed by chemotherapy.

In this latest edition of *Face to Face with Cancer*, Ewe Jin and his wife, Angeline, once again chronicle their journey with the hope that their story will serve as an encouragement to others and bring glory to God.

In putting together this edition, we had to struggle with what to retain from the earlier editions.

We decided to keep our journal of the first journey in its original context. In a way, this is like a journey back in time. We hope those who were not aware of our first journey will also be encouraged by this sharing.

One section we had to remove was that on our published writings. After officially becoming

a cancer survivor, Ewe Jin wrote a number of features about cancer, and also many heart-and-soul columns that he felt would encourage others in similar journeys.

Due to pressure on space and the fact that more people are now connected to the Internet, these articles, although not in this print edition, can still be read online through our website at www.geocities.com/ejsoo.

Special Thanks

- ▶▶ to family and friends, whose love, kindness and generosity helped us survive our journey.
- ▶▶ to Dr Chang Chee Wah, our caring GP and friend.
- ▶▶ to the teacher-doctors, medical officers and interns at Universiti Malaya Medical Centre (formerly known as Universiti Hospital).
- ▶▶ to Professor Emeritus Umapati Prasad, whose work has inspired his students to be ever alert to this particular cancer.
- ▶▶ to the wonderful teams at the Oncology Clinic of the Damasara Specialist Hospital during Ewe Jin's treatment. They include:
 - ▶ oncologist Dr Gurcharan Singh Khera and ENT specialist Dr Awal Hassan, the two doctors who became close friends, who took good care of him in both journeys;
 - ▶ In 1999, Karen Yong who always greeted us with a reassuring word; ever-cheerful nurse Julie; Ms Yap and Noorjayadi, the dedicated staff in the radiotherapy room;
 - ▶ In 2006-2007, nurses Aminah, Azura and Anita who administered the chemotherapy regimen with much professionalism and cheerfulness.
- ▶▶ to *The Star* for being such a caring employer and for its kind permission to use the articles originally published in the newspaper.
- ▶▶ to Sweeng Hoo, Ruslan Rahim, Jerome Moo, Norlidah and Lina Abdul Samad for the cover designs.

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- ▶▶ to a friend for helping us find two translators for our Chinese edition, Lai Wai Sinn and Ena Leong.
- ▶▶ to the following anonymous sponsors, without whom this book would not have spread far and wide at no cost to readers.
 - ▶ a special couple from Damansara Utama Methodist Church who sponsored the first edition;
 - ▶ a special couple at Emmanuel Methodist Church who sponsored the second edition;
 - ▶ another special couple from EMC who sponsored the Chinese edition;
 - ▶ three anonymous individuals who sponsored the third edition;
 - ▶ a friend in Penang who gave us the money way ahead for the publication of this edition.

About the cover

The photograph of the sky was taken outside our house in Kelana Jaya. The picture of a bald Ewe Jin was taken at Port Dickson where The Soos went for a short holiday before he resumed work after his treatment. The rainbow colours were digitised in to reflect the rainbow that appeared at the start of the first journey. Thanks to Lina for the cover design.

The amazing journey of this little book

Face to Face With Cancer is just a little book. It can be read in one sitting. It can be finished while one waits in the oncology ward to see the doctor.

Many have read the pdf version online. Most prefer the hard copy version which has also been passed on from one person to another. I am glad that very few people have kept it to themselves for sentimental reasons, or because they know me and my wife.

When the first edition came out in April 2002, we wondered if the print run of 2,000 copies was a bit too ambitious. They were all gone within the year.

Edition Two came out in December 2004. In one year, the 2,000 copies printed were all gone.

In June 2006, the long-awaited Chinese translation of *Face to Face* was published, and we started to distribute them in places where patients and caregivers wanted such material in Chinese.

The print run was 2,000 copies and our good friends at Setiakawan Printers added another 500 copies free.

The books went even faster and just after two months, we found that we had very few copies left.

Our first edition was published with the support of a couple from the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC).

Our second edition was published with the support of a couple from the Emmanuel Meth-

odist Church (EMC), our home church. The Chinese edition was published with the support of yet another couple from EMC.

The financial support was given freely and anonymously by all these good people who felt that something good will come out of this little book.

When the Chinese edition appeared, many asked for the English version as well but I told them that it will have to wait. In the meantime, I encouraged them to download the pdf version and to photocopy as many copies as they need.

At the first function where I introduced the Chinese edition (even though both my wife and I are non-Chinese literate), I was again asked for the English version. I told them, “God-willing, it will be available before the year is out”.

When I went home that day, I was surprised to receive a cheque for RM3,000 from an anonymous person who had sent it via the doctor who gave him a copy of the book some months back. His request was that more copies be published and freely circulated.

Hardly another week passed by and I received a cheque for RM500 from the family of a cancer patient who had been touched by the book when it was read and translated to her in Chinese some years back and had asked when she would be able to read one in Chinese by herself.

Before I could even make arrangements for a fresh round of printing, I was pleasantly surprised by another RM3,000 cheque from a friend in Penang who had also found the book useful when

he went through his journey. Since all these financial gifts were specific to printing *Face to Face*, I had to figure out what would be the best way to do this.

So we decided that we should print 3,500 copies of *Face to Face* (English third edition) and another 2,000 copies of the Chinese translation. We were also able to pass on the remaining RM1,000, with permission from this friend, to another person going through a cancer journey at this time.

Soon after the third English edition came out, our lives turned topsy-turvy again when we had to undergo a second journey.

During my recovery, another friend in Penang sent us a cheque to finance an edition that would include the second journey.

(It might be pertinent to note at this point that Ewe Jin's hometown is Penang and this book has been widely distributed there).

We knew that this little book has now been made complete because it includes experiences of an operation and chemotherapy as well.

But it has taken us quite a while to finally come out with this edition. The recovery process took much longer than expected and there were so many other things that distracted us from coming out with this book. We thank God we now have this book in print.

I hope that anyone reading this will not start sending us money again. If you feel moved to give, pass on your generosity to a patient, a caregiver, or a cancer support group.

I also wish to put on record that a generous

contribution of RM1,000 was made after the Chinese edition came out by a dear friend who was undergoing his cancer journey.

He gave the money to the Emmanuel Care Centre run by our church for children with disabilities. This fine gentleman is aware of my wife's voluntary work at the centre.

It has been 10 years since April 1999 and even as I continue to do my best to encourage patients and caregivers, I am ever thankful to God for making this book into a reality. He has truly used this as an instrument of blessing to so many people.

We have seen with our own eyes how total strangers read the book in oncology wards, nodding their heads in agreement to something we wrote.

This book, like all books, is meant to withstand the test of time. Although the first round of people who got the book were our friends, we were thankful that total strangers from near and far were reading it.

Once, a friend called us up all excited because someone had read out our poem, 'The Rainbow', at his church to encourage people who were facing crises. The speaker said someone had passed him a copy of the book and he felt that message was timely and thus wanted to share it.

When Angeline was in Cameron Highlands once, various people there were thrilled to see her because our book apparently had made its way to the mountains when one cancer patient took a copy from a hospital and passed it around.

The doctors have referred patients and caregivers, of all ethnicities and religions, to us on various occasions and we are thankful that God has used us to pass on this message of hope.

We knew when we first decided to publish this book that we would have to do our part when called upon. We have tried our best to be faithful to this calling, not only through this book, but wherever we are given the opportunity to share and to encourage.

One day, I was visiting the oncology ward and saw three women going through chemotherapy. One was Chinese, one Malay and one Indian. They happened to be reading the book at the time.

The nurses excitedly told them that I was the author because I was still bald at the time and they may not recognize me from the pictures in that edition.

The Malay lady smiled at me and, waving the book, said, “Your Tuhan is very good!”

I said, “Yes, and He loves all of you too.”

I could truly feel God’s presence in the room that day.

– Ewe Jin
(April 2009)

About the authors

Soo Ewe Jin and Angeline Lim have been journalists for most of their working lives.

They have, however, taken breaks from their careers to be full-time homemakers.

Ewe Jin's career in *The Star* from 2000 until now has seen him serve in various positions: as Star Online Editor, Sunday Star Editor, Special Projects Editor and his current designation as Deputy Executive Editor.

He has also previously worked in *The National Echo*, *The Malay Mail*, ISIS Malaysia, WWF Malaysia and *The Edge*.

Angeline, after leaving *The Star* in 2001, is a full-time homemaker and serves on a voluntary basis at Emmanuel Care Centre, a school for children with learning disabilities, run by their church.

Although trained as a teacher, she worked as a journalist in *Malaysian Business* and *The Edge* before joining *The Star*.

The Soos together have chalked up more than 16 years being full-time homemakers. They have two sons, Kevin, 21, and Timothy, 18.

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*From our
journals:
The second battle*

It began in November 2006...

A diary of our second journey

As with the first journey in 1999, Ewe Jin and Angeline faithfully chronicle the events and their thoughts in true journalistic fashion.

The lump and the op

Ewe Jin's story

On Monday, Oct 30, 2006, after taking a friend to see my oncologist for a second opinion, Dr Gurcharan Singh checked on a lump on my neck that had been bothering me for the past two weeks.

The week before, my ENT doctor, Dr Awal Hassan, had examined it and concluded that clinically, it was okay, but noted that only a full-fledged scan could give a conclusive result. My oncologist wanted me to do an MRI which I did the following day.

The MRI and ultrasound revealed a firm mass 2cm by 2cm. In the case of an infection, the mass would be more diffused rather than firm, the doctors explained.

My oncologist then said the lump is a 50-50 indication of cancer (because of my prior history) and before proceeding, he would like to discount the possibility. I did a bone scan, a CT scan for the lungs and a CT scan for the liver and kidneys.

It was a long process, reminding me of April 1999. My wife was with me all the time, of course, and we were indeed comforted by all the calls

and SMSes as we waited to do the procedures and see the doctors.

My onco, after analysing all the results, declared that “this is the best possible news” as there were no signs whatsoever of any cancer activity in any part of the body. The lump, however, has to be removed. On Nov 15, Dr Awal undertook the surgery jointly with an expert head/neck surgeon from Tawakal Hospital, Dr Solahuddin Kenali. (*Both Dr Gurcharan and Dr Awal have been taking care of me since my first journey.*)

The plan was to open up the neck, make a quick cut and send a sample to the pathologist for immediate examination. If there was no trace of cancer activity there, the operation would be simple and they would just remove the mass and close me up. If there was any sign of cancer cells, they would probe deeper and remove adjoining nodes and tissue.

The operation was expected to last for about 3 hours. As I had never been in an operation involving GA before, I was rather apprehensive but I knew God was with me all the time and He would see me through.

The anaesthesiologist, Dr Ibtisan Ibrahim, came by in the evening to prepare me for the operation. I told her to please be extra careful and make sure I wake up. She smiled and her demeanour put me very much at ease. She told me to take some tablets before bedtime so I could have a good night's sleep.



Early the next morning, I was wheeled into the operating theatre. I was happy to see Dr Awal, and he told me not to worry. I heard the nurses saying, “He looks like Dr. Tong.” I have heard that remark before. Apparently Dr. Sebastian Tong, the resident general & colorectal surgeon at Damansara, looks like me. I told myself I should say hello to him after I recovered from surgery.

We were ready. Dr Ibtisan looked at me and said she was about to administer the gas. Count to 10, she said. I counted 1.... and I was off to dreamland. The next thing I found myself being awakened. “Mr Soo, can you hear us?” My instant reply was, “Am I still alive?”

Angeline's story

►► **Nov 15 2006:** After getting all the clear scans two weeks ago, I was expecting Ewe Jin's biopsy to be clear, too. But it was not to be. When I was told by the OT nurse during the operation on Wednesday that the lump was malignant, it gave me quite a jolt. I had presumed it would be benign. And so what was to have been a 3 hour operation stretched to 7 hours.

(As an aside, the surgeon called me over midway through stitching Ewe Jin up to show me the tissue wrapped in a plastic bag, because the nurse had informed him that “the wife is anxious to see the specimen”. I had said no such thing, of course, having asked only for the biopsy result. Anyway,

the tissue was palm-sized and looked like a piece of liver.)

I didn't have time to pause and think in the busy-ness of the next two days. But on Friday morning, I finally realised the significance of the malignant lump. It actually indicated how close Ewe Jin and I came to a bigger battle.

It meant that there were already cancer cells just waiting to spread, but I believe a Divine Hand contained the cancer and kept it from getting to the bones, lungs, liver and elsewhere. And of course the timing was simply perfect. Our gracious Heavenly Father has spared Ewe Jin and me a much, much harder journey and we are ever grateful.

The surgeon has told us that they will do a biopsy of the tissue that was removed. If the margins of the tissue are clear, then most likely there will be no need for further treatment. But if malignant cells are present in the margins, the oncologist will decide on the next course of action.

We were schedule to see the ENT on Nov 22 to get the full biopsy result. The prayers, encouraging SMSes, gifts in cash and kind, offers to cook, and presence of family and friends, were a comfort to us. Through it all, we had God's peace. We saw up close and first-hand how wonderfully He provides for his children – and we are awed.

The biopsy results

We “broadcast” to family and friends the results from Ewe Jin’s biopsy: 10 out of 25 lymph nodes that were removed had cancer cells, others were clear. All other surrounding tissues (muscle, vein, glands, etc) were clear. The ENT was happy with the surgery and felt that no further treatment was necessary in the area.

What an unmistakable message from God that He is in control of this situation, as in every situation. His protection and providence in the past three weeks assured us that He loves us beyond measure. Above all, God’s presence was with us through it all. His “peace that passes understanding”, which was once a just cliché for us, has become a reality. And we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that our God is Real. And here are other blessings that have simply overwhelmed us:

- ▶▶ the fervent prayers of family and friends have given us much comfort.

- ▶▶ the gifts we received were so generous, we actually had surplus funds.

- ▶▶ some friends and neighbours offered to cook for us, so Angeline drew up a roster and we had wonderful meals from a different kitchen each day of the week, all cooked with love. We had never been so well fed!

Not quite over yet

While we would have liked to end our story at the previous section, a postscript is necessary. When we consulted the oncologist on Nov 29, he asked us to decide on whether Ewe Jin would undergo adjuvant chemotherapy.

This treatment is basically preventive, and is aimed at getting rid of any cancer cells that may be lurking elsewhere in the body. It is an optional treatment, since there is no way to tell for certain whether there is a real need for it.

We were caught off guard when the choice was put before us, as we had thought that our ENT and onco doctors had already arrived at a consensus of no further treatment. It felt as if, having just returned from a mountain trek and about to take a warm shower and put our feet up, we were told to start off again for another mountain.

However, after consultation with many friends (including doctors) and after much prayer, Ewe Jin has elected to go for the chemo.

The whole course comprises six cycles. It would begin on Dec 14, and if all went as scheduled, will finish on March 29, 2007. The cocktail consists of Carboplatin and Taxol. Three GCSF boosters would also be given each cycle. Ewe Jin would probably still have his hair at Christmas, but would lose it all pretty soon after that.

Of course, this development did not take anything away from the way God worked everything

out for us, from the scans to the operation and biopsy, in His perfect timing. We were grateful to have been spared a harder battle.

And as Ewe Jin put it, we knew that whatever mountain we were required to climb, we have our Good Shepherd to climb alongside us. We know He will never abandon us or forsake us.

Ewe Jin was very positive and said that this would complete his cancer experience (since the last time he only underwent radiotherapy) and would make him quite the “comprehensive guide” when he counsels and encourages other patients.

The chemo journey

Angeline's thoughts

I couldn't have asked for more in a patient. Ewe Jin is cheerful, positive, uncomplaining and healing beautifully. One month after his operation to remove malignant lymph nodes, we embarked on yet another journey: chemotherapy.

► **Dec 13 / On the eve of chemo:** Ewe Jin was much chirpier than I was on the 13th. I had been strong as I leaned on God but now standing at this doorway, memories of the first journey came flooding back and I faltered. Thank God for Jin's cheerfulness that saw us through the eve of chemo. Later on, I was assured that this will be a different journey, a different road from before, and there will be much to experience and learn.

*The tears come at last.
I am assured of His presence
yet anxious over the road ahead,
this familiar road
with all its crests and troughs.
I am overcome
by thoughts of overcast days
and an unrelenting bone-weariness.
In my weakness, Lord
is Your strength made perfect.
Your grace is sufficient for me.
I will lean on those Everlasting Arms.*

► **Dec 14 / D-Day:** I am up by 6.30am to pack sandwiches and drinks, but this is no picnic. Ewe Jin will have to snack and drink constantly during chemo. We are at the door of the oncology clinic by 7.15 and already there is a crowd. The nurse arrives at 7.30 and there is a scramble for numbers. We are number 8.

The blood test and then consultation with the doctor takes us up to 10am, after which we traipse up to the pharmacy to ‘order’ the cocktail – Carboplatin and Taxol. It is 11 by the time Jin goes on the drip. The cocktail includes pre-medications that quell nausea magically. Ewe Jin is ‘Most Cheerful Patient’, just as he was 7 years ago. It is a treat to see him, bag of poison emptying into his veins, encouraging the others in the chemo room.

The procedure that should have taken four



hours in fact stretches to six hours in the first cycle, because precautions are taken and the drip is adjusted to a slow speed. It turns out to be an all-day affair and it is past 5pm by the time we finish.

As we walk to the car Jin says he needs to visit the toilet. I wait in the car. After a while I get a call from him, gasping, "Come and help me..." I rush in to find him crumpled weakly on a chair and dripping in sweat. Diarrhoea is one of the side effects. I get an attendant to push him in a wheelchair to the door while I drove the car over, bracing for a long haul.

Jin was exhausted as the chemicals kicked in and slept immediately after a light dinner.

Ewe Jin's thoughts

My wife is still very much a journalist though she has long exited out of the profession. Her chronicles are an accurate reflection of not only what she went through, but what I went through as well.

I guess I have to live up to my reputation as the most cheerful and positive patient at DSH. All these years, I have been making regular visits to the oncology ward to meet friends and total strangers and do my little part to help. For those going through chemo, I found that I could not fully identify with them as I only went through RT. Now, I feel like God's purpose for me is to go through an operation and also chemo so I could

share fully all aspects of known scientific forms of cancer treatment.

But there is a sense of anxiety in me. I am human, after all, not Superman. Well, even Superman is vulnerable to kryptonite...

On the very first day the chemo was administered, it felt like a breeze, until I went to the toilet after the treatment was completed. The diarrhoea, the feeling of life being drained out of me... My first thoughts were, "Hey, is this what chemo really is all about? Have I been misled to believe that it would be easy?"

Questions, and more questions. At that point, I felt like I was about to climb Mt Everest and not just my beloved Penang Hill which used to be a regular hike for me back in my school days. God, not by my strength but by Yours. The reassuring promise from the Word of God puts things back in perspective. But I was tired.

As it turned out, and as the subsequent cycles would show, the diarrhoea was a reaction by my body in the first cycle only. I never had the problem again throughout the rest of my treatment.

Angeline's thoughts

▶▶ **Dec 15-16 / The cycle begins:** The next two days, none of the expected effects materialised – no aches and pains or nausea. Ewe Jin was fine and, thankfully, was eating well. My challenge has been to keep the nutritious, high-protein meals coming – no easy task for an uninspired cook.



But Jin hasn't complained once about the food, bless him. Generally, Ewe Jin has very low energy levels as his body deals with the chemicals that have been pumped in. No doubt it will be a quiet Christmas for the Soos this year.

▶▶ **Dec 17-20 / Easing in:** 'Cycle' used to be a neutral word for me. But with Ewe Jin's treatment being administered in cycles (six of them), the word now connotes many things – ascents and descents, highs and lows... and doing the loop over and over. Imagine a roller coaster with six gut-wrenching rises and drops, and you are seated in the front as the carriage trundles up for the first free-fall. In melancholic moments, that about describes my view from where I am.

But as we ease into the first week of Ewe Jin's chemotherapy, those moments are rare. Most days, I awake thanking God for the many blessings He sends my way – Ewe Jin's great appetite, beautiful skies (no haze), caring friends and family, strength for the day, both physical and spiritual.

We have been told that each patient reacts differently to the chemo drugs. Ewe Jin's body seems to be rolling with the punches and there are hardly any side effects except for the persistent tiredness. The diarrhoea has stopped. No nausea. The numbness in the extremities which we were warned of did not happen at all, and the first week passes by almost serenely. Many nights,

Jin and the boys, who are both on holiday, engage in Scrabble playoffs. How thankful I am for this normality of life.

▶▶ **Dec 21 / Low immunity:** The second week of the three-week cycle is when Ewe Jin's immunity plunges to its lowest. We are cautioned that any infection at this time could be life threatening. Although Jin loves company, I will have to play the bad guy and impose a 'No Visitors' rule for now.

On Thursday, we drive to hospital for a Granocyte booster jab – a marvel of modern medicine that sends his blood count shooting up immediately to help his immune system to cope. I watch to learn how to administer the shot on Ewe Jin's tummy. All I can say is, I'm glad I didn't choose nursing as a career.

We had a hearty banana leaf lunch after that. Ewe Jin is eating even better than before his treatment began. So far, it has been a very different road indeed from our first journey, and a good lesson for me to trust God to show me just the next step instead of peering anxiously into the horizon.

▶▶ **Dec 22-24 / Rashes, visitors and a turkey:** I learnt that you can't quarantine a free spirit. Ewe Jin blithely disregards my 'No Visitors' rule and his friends continue to drop by at a steady clip to see him. The most I can do is screen them for



runny noses and sore throats. A new side effect appeared on Friday: Angry patches of rashes across the body, with clusters especially around the elbows and knees.

On Saturday, we drive to hospital for Ewe Jin's second booster. The oncologist is away on leave, so we check with the nurse about the rashes. She says it is not uncommon among chemo patients and is probably an allergy to the drugs. In the afternoon, two of Ewe Jin's sisters arrive from Penang and cook up a storm in the kitchen – a welcome treat for all of us.

The following day is Christmas Eve. After lunch Ewe Jin's sisters return to Penang and he becomes noticeably moodier. The rashes bother him and he seemed to be breathing more heavily. A pall descends on the atmosphere at home. We all become snappish and sullen.

God knows our every need. That evening He sent angels in the form of the Chans with a special Christmas turkey delivery. Later, the Loos sent over a tub of delicious spaghetti from their Christmas Eve party. Our spirits lifted. We have the sumptuous fare for dinner, plus a bottle of sparkling grape juice from Audrey, Ewe Jin's niece who came to have a meal with us.

Our Heavenly Father has provided for all our needs from the very beginning of this journey, way beyond what we asked for. Our financial needs were taken care of unexpectedly. Friends and family rallied round with support.

The Kuas and the Ohs continue to deliver at least one nutritious dinner each week – they call it ‘meals on wheels’. The Kanas provide a constant supply of bean curd (high protein) and other goodies. Home brewed chicken essence is sent over regularly by Vivian and Karen. We continue to receive gifts of cheques and cash. And a great cloud of supplication rises to God each day on our behalf.

We feel so blessed, and very much loved.

►► **Dec 25 / A meaningful Christmas:** On Christmas Day, we skip Christmas service because a large crowd is expected and it is too risky for Ewe Jin to go. We also forego our traditional open house for the first time in years. The quietness is a sharp contrast from our other Christmases.

But the tempo picks up from noon. Kevin’s friends come over for lunch of leftover turkey and spaghetti, and a mouth-watering chicken pie from our dear neighbour Mahani. We order pizzas and have a great time. Ewe Jin enjoys Boggle and other games with the young people.

Two other families drop in and stay to chat about Ewe Jin’s new journey. In the evening, we join the extended Lim Clan for a scrumptious Christmas dinner, fellowship, carolling and gift exchange.

Chemotherapy naturally wouldn’t be on anyone’s Christmas wish list. But happily, it didn’t



dampen our spirits this season. Our celebration of God's love may be on a lower key than usual but, surrounded by family and friends, it is no less meaningful.

Ewe Jin's thoughts

I knew Christmas 2006 would be different. I wanted to reach out to my friends and the public at large. I wanted to share with them a heart-and-soul comment. So this was what I wrote in *The Sunday Star* on Christmas Eve:

The season for giving and forgiving

My house will not be so open this Christmas. But I know Makcik Mahani will still send over her special chicken pie. She has advised that, for health reasons, I keep this year's celebration low-key.

Over the years, this wonderful neighbour has taught me a lot of practical lessons, and much about the Malay/Muslim world. As have my other neighbours of different ethnicities and faiths.

We learn not only about the do's and don'ts of open houses, but also the rituals of births, weddings and funerals. The most important lesson of all is how to love your neighbour.

Through such interactions, our homes remain open to one another and not only during special occasions.

Today is the day before Christmas and, despite

the lingering headlines and reports of purported tensions in the country's fragile ethnic relations, I am thankful that my neighbourhood ticks in this special way.

I believe it is a spirit of sharing that keeps us together. We often offer to pick up something from the local grocery store, or pass around a ladder or a power drill, or allow our electricity or water supplies to be tapped during a kenduri.

When sharing comes naturally during good times, it also comes naturally during tough times.

I am currently going through a medical upheaval. And the neighbours have responded. They not only covered me with prayer but were quick with their practical help.

Immediately after my recent operation, various neighbours took turns to cook dinner for us. From full-fledged meals to chicken soup (so good for the soul), juices and snack items, they made sure that I was well taken care of. These muhibbah meals, cooked with much love, never tasted so good.

Tun Hanif wrote in his column Point of View (*Sunday Star*, Dec 3, 2006) that “before we start looking around to see what sort of people they are, look hard at our own selves first because they are, in the main, ourselves.

“Yes, my friends, you and I and our attitudes; you and I and our desires; you and I and what we do; you and I and how we have brought up our young; you and I who have chosen our parlia-



ment and allowed our public servants and the public to be what they are!

“For many of us, what has been our own singular contribution to our national unity other than to exist, to demand and to expect?”

Strong words, surely, but he has hit the nail on the head. Many who complain so much about what is wrong with our country live a life apart from the system that they are complaining about.

When I sent my children to the neighbourhood national schools, we got to know the teachers, the parents and the children. In the PTA, we shared our views and our concerns.

Through our involvement, both the primary and secondary school administrations, though predominantly Malay and Muslim, were always sensitive to the needs of the minorities.

After nearly 50 years as a nation, it is sad that we have to struggle to discuss such issues in the public domain, feeling like we are always treading on sensitive ground.

It is about give and take and perhaps this nation will move forward easier if we all emphasise on the giving rather than the taking.

Yes, we have our rights, but so does everyone else. And if we give generously in love, then all the ethnic and religious divides will pale into insignificance. If we give based on needs, there will always be enough to go round.

And, by the same token, if we had been subjected to unfair treatment or been hurt by insen-

sitive remarks, perhaps the answer is not so much about retaliation but about forgiveness.

This is Christmas after all. A season for giving, and forgiving.

May we all endeavour to give faith to those who have lost faith, hope to those in despair and love to those who feel most unloved.

Angeline's thoughts

▶▶ **Dec 26-28 / Another milestone:** Our dear friend Peter treated us to a fabulous Japanese lunch on Boxing Day. Ewe Jin still had a decent crew cut then. That evening, however, we found that his hair came off in clumps when tugged gently. So on Dec 27, the 13th day after chemo, we crossed another milestone: Ewe Jin went to the barber for a full shave. Bald is beautiful, he says. He is not quite a Yul Brynner – more like Telly Savalas – but definitely pretty cool.

We feel at peace right now despite the hair loss and persistent itch of the rashes. This is the close of the low immunity week, and Ewe Jin's temperature never did hit the critical 38 degree mark that would have set off alarm bells. Some well-meaning people have warned that the following rounds will be 'more toxic'. Well, we don't know what lies ahead but we do know without a doubt that our God is able to see us through every storm.

▶▶ **Dec 29-31 / Goodbye 2006:** Friday saw Ewe



Jin's spirits taking a slide, but he self-administered an extremely effective remedy – "Ikea Therapy". He bought four DIY shelves and spent the evening assembling the units and then rearranging his DVDs and magazines. Under RM200 for a neater living area and a cheerier patient – money well spent indeed.

The next day Nancy came to whip up a feast in our kitchen – fried chicken, stewed meat and chicken and vegetable stroganoff. We enjoyed tucking into a great meal prepared with love and flair.

Sunday is New Year's Eve. Ewe Jin read scripture in church today and was warmly welcomed by friends who had missed him the weeks that he was away. It is also Tim's birthday. Ewe Jin and I wanted to do something special for him because he had been so helpful and uncomplaining this holiday while all the medical attention had been on his father. We organise a modest barbecue attended by a few friends and favourite aunties.

Later that night, Kevin's friends come by to welcome the New Year at our house – with sparkling grape juice, a little wine and a game of bridge. No fireworks or gourmet fare, but once again we have a meaningful time with family and friends.

► **Jan 1-4 / New year, new beginnings:** Hello 2007. I have prayed for a kinder, gentler year. But even if that is not to be, above all, I have asked

for another year of drawing nearer to God. If I had known a year ago what 2006 held for me, I might have tried to run and hide. But as it turned out, I have learned to lean wholly on God, my Rock and my Shepherd. He has faithfully walked with me step by step, through fire and rain.

We had a peaceful start to the new year. Jan 4 sees the end of Ewe Jin's first cycle and his body seems to have fully recovered from the first salvo. We are now ready, both physically and mentally, for the next round on Jan 8. Having gone through one cycle, this is no longer uncharted waters for us. It was a little choppy at times, but our boat was never in danger of capsizing as God was with us in the vessel. In fact, with help from God and family and friends, we have managed to smile at the storm.

▶▶ **Jan 8 – Feb 1 / Thoughts in the Second Cycle:** I have never seen a cloud that wasn't breathtaking. Whether wispy, majestic, stormy, silver-lined, pink or gold – all have a beauty beyond words. Every time I look at the sky, my heart leaps up and I say a prayer of thanksgiving.

What have clouds to do with chemotherapy? Well, in this second cycle the weather has been exceptionally wet – and after each shower the clouds have been awesome, God's masterpiece on a brilliant canvas. To me, they have been a daily reminder that God is near and He gives me all good things to enjoy.



Besides the glory of the skies, good friends are also such a blessing – three of Ewe Jin’s pals came to relieve me from duty during the second chemo on Jan 8, so I could get Timothy home from school and also get some rest. Ewe Jin has gained 1.9kg since treatment began; another blessing! The second round went smoothly – no diarrhoea this time, but the tiredness persists.

On the fifth day, Ewe Jin’s rashes gave so much discomfort that we had to visit the doctor to get medication for it. The pills cause drowsiness and when Ewe Jin took the Kelisa out to run an errand, he crunched the door against another car. It was a good lesson to mind the warning labels on medicines. One thing that has been hard to handle was the mountains of unsolicited advice, at a time when we would much rather people just lent an ear.

I am more familiar with the pattern now: fatigue in the first week, low immunity in the second, recovery in the third, and then on to the next round. All told, it has been a peaceful second cycle – not half as intense as the radiotherapy regimen years ago – and we are generally upbeat.

Still, we’re not saints; far from it. Ewe Jin has his gloomy days and sullen moments. And so far I have averaged two tearful occasions per cycle. Those probably coincide with the hormonal spikes in my own perimenopausal cycles but I’m not keeping track; there are too many cycles to deal with as it is.

At this point in the journey, time seems to be almost at a stand still as Ewe Jin and I put everything on hold to concentrate on the treatment. Sometimes it can be excruciating, with things moving in slow-motion like in a John Woo movie. But I think God is telling us to wait upon Him.

I am thankful that God has kept His promises – of strength for the day, rest from the labour, light for the way, grace for the trials, help from above, unfailing kindness, undying love.

► **Feb 2 – 22 / Thoughts in the Third Cycle:** Three down and three to go. Crossing the half-way mark gave us a boost psychologically. But physically, this third bag of poison packed a hard wallop and took the wind out of Ewe Jin's sails. He was much more fatigued both in body and spirit and it was a full week before he bounced back, twice as long as in the earlier cycles.

I am grateful that he has been spared the discomforts of nausea and has gained another 2.3kg, truly a miracle. Still, the successive waves of drugs are taking a toll on his body and we are bracing for a similar effect in the next cycle.

Compared to radiotherapy, where the treatment was administered in quick succession over seven weeks, chemotherapy is quite a marathon. It is simply not possible to run it like a sprint. Indeed, the days are creeping by and just like in long distance races, there are many lonely stretches along the road. The crowd of visitors



who thronged the hospital room have dwindled to a handful who are keeping pace with us for the long haul. How grateful we are for these angels who regularly help with chores, bring meals and lift us up in prayer.

It is a reminder for me that so many of life's critical journeys are marathons, and the important thing is to stay the course and complete the race. What an assurance it is to know that God, who is our most faithful Friend, will see us through to the finish.

Ewe Jin's thoughts

I should make a note of what happened on the first day of Chinese New Year which fell on Feb 18. I went to return the food containers to our friends who had cooked us many meals.

As I approached the gate, their dog, which we had known for years, lunged at me and took a bite right at the tummy.

Maybe it could not recognise me because I was bald, or perhaps I smelt different because of the chemo. It took a while to find a doctor who could give me an anti-rabies jab.

I told anyone who bothered to listen that the dog must have been upset that the Year of the Dog was giving way to the Year of the Boar. And I am born in the Year of the Boar.

Angeline's thoughts

▶▶ Feb 23 – March 15 / Thoughts in the

Fourth Cycle: Someone noted that from my journal entries, it's unclear sometimes whether Ewe Jin is the one who is going through the chemo, or I am. I have taken too many liberties in my writing. Indeed, Ewe Jin is the one strapped into the roller coaster. It is not my ride... yet I can feel some of the terror of it. The caregiver is often caught in a No Man's Land, neither here nor there. I hope Ewe Jin will soon be able to tell you about his experience himself so we can get the 'inside story'. Meanwhile, these writings are my therapy.

The chemotherapy room is a window to a whole new world. Whatever anguish I feel as I watch from the sidelines, I will never fully know the emotions of the patient who waits five hours for a half-litre of poison to drain into his bloodstream, knowing the havoc it will wreak on his body. These brave ones who face the treatment with such fortitude deserve Purple Hearts.

I am so thankful that Ewe Jin is taking the treatment in stride. Physically, he has put on a further 1.4kg and has a growing girth to show for it. Above all, on most days he is his buoyant self emotionally. Despite the attendant fatigue this cycle, he made a determined effort to live life as usual.

On Day 4 he went marketing and cooked lunch. He bounced back fully on Day 7 (as in the previous cycle) and off he went, visiting other cancer patients and catching up with friends. As the song goes, you can't "catch a cloud and pin it



down”. Still, as the date of the next treatment draws near, he is noticeably subdued – and I get a glimpse of the potency of the therapy, the terror of the ride.

We take comfort that this next round on March 16 will be the penultimate one. After that, only one to go! I am aware that as one chapter closes, another will begin. There will have to be a reassessment of our schedules, roles, diets; our focus in life. But we will take it one step at a time.

A friend noted that Ewe Jin and I must have much faith because she saw “so much peace and calm” in us. The fact is that our faith is very small, but we have a very big God indeed. The journey is challenging, sometimes even gruelling, but one thing that I have gained through it all is an enduring peace. It is a peace that defies logic – incongruous in such turbulent times, and so sturdy that it withstands the fury of the storm. It is a peace that assures me that my God is beside me every step of the way.

►► **March 16 – April 6 / Thoughts in the Fifth Cycle:** When patient and caregiver are both indisposed, who cares for whom? We had a chance to find out this cycle. Two days before chemo day, I was knocked out by vertigo. Thankfully, we have strong family support and my sister Adeline stood in for me on March 16, Ewe Jin’s fifth dose. She was outside our house by 6.45am, ready to chauffeur him to the hospital. She saw

to his lunch, and brought him back home by 3pm. Thank God for cheerful helpers!

It appears the impact of the drugs goes up a notch every two rounds or so, not because the dose is any stronger but probably due to the cumulative effect on a battered body. The force this cycle certainly seemed much greater than before, even if it lasted only one week. I could see an immense weariness in Ewe Jin – not just in body but also in spirit. “Nothing is right,” he said to me in a subdued tone. I was reminded afresh of how potent the drugs are, and wondered about the long-term effects on the body, particularly the liver.

But time does heal and in a week he “sprang back to life”. As we visited and helped other cancer patients, Ewe Jin noted that he has been spared so much suffering compared to others. He is sure that God had a purpose for leading him on a journey that is “just so” – giving him the cancer experience and yet shielding him from intense pain.

The final dose will be on Good Friday, an appropriate day to end the journey. For Ewe Jin, it symbolises the “death of cancer cells” and new life beyond that. We approach the last chemo with mixed feelings. We plan to celebrate, of course, but will also need to buckle down to planning realistically for “life after chemo”.

Transitions are always a challenge, and we hope to navigate this part of the journey smoothly



too. Sometime in this cycle, we attended a memorial service for a man who had devoted his life to God. The victorious note of the hymns and eulogies reaffirmed for us that this journey on earth is but a preparation for life in heaven, and we resolved to take steps now to make that final transition well. As we rejoice in suffering, we are so thankful that the source of our joy and strength comes from an unchanging, ever-loving God.

► **April 6 / My Thoughts as the Journey Ends:** It was a modest affair – muffins, nuts and raisins all round at the clinic, and souvenir shots with a home-made “Last Chemo” mini banner. April 6 was not quite the end of the journey, but it was the last time Ewe Jin would have to go on the Taxol drip, and we celebrated the occasion with the other patients and the wonderfully cheerful oncology nurses.

The very next day, I was floored. The vertigo that hit me in Cycle 5, unappeased by insufficient rest, returned with a vengeance. This time I had no choice but to sleep it off for five days. Poor Ewe Jin had to turn caregiver in that period, despite feeling the full force of the chemo himself. It was an opportunity to fulfil our vows to be helpmates “in sickness and in health”.

At this time, we were also deeply saddened by the death of my sister-in-law Magdalene, who had been through a cancer journey herself. Despite

our sorrow, there was such a triumphant tone at her wake and funeral services. The glowing eulogies made it plain that she had touched many lives in serving God faithfully.

Once more, we were reminded that it is the final transition in life that matters. What an assurance to know with absolute certainty that through faith in Jesus, I will be in God's presence once I go past death's doorway.

There are still loose ends to tie up and crucial post-chemo decisions to be made – on our lifestyle, diet, careers. Ewe Jin will return to work next month, and go for more scans in three months. So while our chemo journey winds down to a close, the journey of life continues. As I take stock of the past six months, here are some thoughts that have crystallised.

Unfounded fears. At the start of this journey, two things brought me to tears. One, I dreaded a rerun of the emotional roller-coaster that we had been on during Ewe Jin's radiotherapy years ago. And two, I was daunted by the thought of feeding Ewe Jin through months of nausea. As it turned out, both these fears were totally unfounded. Ewe Jin was the most cheerful of patients. The mood swings did not materialise. Neither did the nausea – he had such a hearty appetite that he put on more than 10 pounds in six cycles. For the record, there were also no other side effects (numbness, mouth ulcers, etc) besides fatigue and baldness.



A faithful God. Throughout this journey, we have received blessing upon blessing. God's faithfulness simply overwhelmed us. Every financial need was taken care of. Right through to the end of the journey, we received occasional gifts, often at just the times payments had to be made. We were also blessed with strong support from family and friends. There were always hands to help with chores, prepare meals and run errands. Right up to the finish, Ewe Jin continued to receive freshly boiled chicken essence at least twice a week. And the 'meals on wheels' that were delivered regularly to our doorstep are, to me, the greatest idea ever.

Lessons learnt. As I look back, I realise that the journeys through the storms were the times that I truly learnt and grew. Seven years back during Ewe Jin's radiotherapy treatment, I discovered hidden strength I could not have possessed apart from God. God's strength was made perfect in my weakness. This time round, it was God's peace – so inexplicable and unshakable – that kept me steady and secure. As I clung on to God through turbulent times, He has drawn me closer to Him.

So as this 'marathon' ends, I believe that all things have worked for good, just as God has promised. It is my prayer that Ewe Jin and I will continue to wait upon the Lord as He reveals His purposes in our lives after this journey.

Ewe Jin's testimony

And the two shall be one – in sickness and in health; in good times and bad. If you have read up to this point, you will realise how blessed I am to be married to Angeline. I could not have chronicled the journey better.

On June 7, our 20th wedding anniversary, we took a short trip to Port Dickson with our boys before I started work again. I am thankful that *The Star* had kindly granted me medical leave and also taken care of the medical expenses.

When I went back to work, I was still bald but the hair eventually grew back. I was no longer *Sunday Star* editor but was redesignated as Special Projects editor. I took on the new position with an eagerness to face new challenges. Soon my life drifted back to normal and I was reaching out to other cancer patients again, this time with more “credentials”.

In April 2008, one year after my treatment ended, I asked my pastor for permission to thank the church from the pulpit for being so supportive during my journey. Pastor Ting went one step further and asked me to share it as a sermon. I would like to share some portions of it here.

Sharing with my church

My first journey, which most of you are familiar with, only involved radiotherapy, but now I have gone through an operation and chemotherapy. In



the world of cancer, we refer to these three forms of treatment as the Slash, Burn and Poison regimen. When you operate, you slash; when you do radiotherapy, you burn; when you do chemo, you poison. Now I can counsel anyone on all three.

I try to be positive. Yes, God, use me. But God, I am tired. I still have to ask you, “Why? Why Me?” God’s response is that He understands, and that His grace is sufficient for me. The operation and the chemotherapy took six months and I thank God that my company took care of all the hospital bills. In those months, God gave me the peace that passes all understanding and sent so many angels to take care of me.

As a cancer survivor, and as an encourager to many who are going through similar journeys, I can say that only God can make the difference. It is so clear how the peace that passes all understanding prevails in the lives of those who surrender their circumstances to Him. Even at death’s door, the serenity on their faces says it all.

I would also like to share about our human response to situations where a dear family member or friend has to go on a difficult journey of ill health. Is it all right to be angry? Is it all right to cry? Is it all right to think that the God who loves me so much, is nowhere near? Is it all right to shout, “Why me?”

I have always advocated the right of a patient (and loved ones) to be angry, anguished and un-

happy. Our God is a big God and He is patient with our rantings.

In my own journey, nothing hurts more than when I am reprimanded for having so “little faith” in God. Why are we expected to have super-faith at times when we are struggling physically, emotionally and spiritually? I remember when I had been hushed up by people who feared that if I were to question God, it meant my faith was too small.

James Dobson, in his best-selling book *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, said, “Doubting one’s faith and one’s self is a natural part of the Christian life.”

He related how Christians often fail in this respect because they are too eager to remind the patient of what God can do. So there is a lot of “God conversations” during visitations which can make the patient even more miserable.

During my treatment, my wife had to stop visits from people who took a toll on my physical well-being. Think for a moment – are you one of those who insist on hurrying to see a cancer patient, not to offer practical help or a silent prayer, but to convince yourself that God is in control?

I would like to suggest some practical steps that hopefully can benefit us when someone close to us has to go through a cancer journey.

▶▶ If you are not a doctor, and especially if you do not know anything about cancer, please do not give medical advice. Not only do I not



give medical advice, but I also take care not to overly share my own experiences because we know every patient is different, not only by way of temperament but also in the way he or she reacts to the treatment.

▶▶ We should be happy to share our faith with non-believers but I personally do not believe that aggressive evangelism at such a time is useful or appropriate. I have personally experienced cases where some church members were banned from visiting certain people because the patient and the caregivers could not handle the situation. Go as a friend and let God do His work in His own way, and in His own time.

▶▶ I find that I often have to help people debunk the myths. I tell them not to listen to the horror stories of people who were there years ago. A problem that all cancer patients face is that the moment the Big C is mentioned, everyone will have a horror story to share, a supplement to recommend, an alternative cure to promote, and a doctor to criticise. Such unsolicited advice can confuse, depress and disturb. Let us be careful how we give advice.

▶▶ I have learnt, through many trials and errors, that at a time when someone is facing a problem, the last thing he wants to hear is another person's problem. Do take note that when you visit, make the person you visit the most important person for the moment. No need to tell him about this person or that person. I remember how

someone told this patient about me and that person's immediate retort was: "You see, God is so unfair. He heals Ewe Jin but He makes me suffer!"

▶▶ Rather than dispense advice, the best thing you could do for a cancer patient is to simply be there. If we are the person with whom someone wants to share his burden, let's learn to keep our mouth shut and our ears open. Let's just be there to hold their hands.

▶▶ Practical help, often behind the scenes, is the most useful. Help with transport, help with the cooking, take the patient's children out. Share your books, CDs and DVD collections with patients.

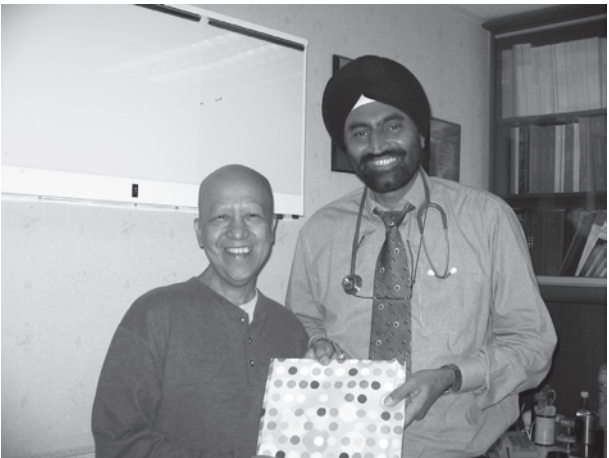
▶▶ Finally, remember the caregiver. My wife, the woman from Proverbs 31, is worth far more than rubies. How glad I am when a friend comes by not only to give me fruits but to give her essence of chicken or a bouquet of flowers. Take the caregiver out to a meal or to a movie, or a walk in the park. Remember the caregiver, my friends, not just the patient.



A photo diary



A succesful operation on the neck: My dear friend and ENT doctor, Dr Awal Hassan, who did the operation on Nov 15 2006 allowed me to go home on Nov 18.



After I finished my last chemo session on April 6, which was Good Friday, I had to record the moment with my dear friend and oncologist Dr Gurcharan Singh.



Some special visitors include our dear friends and spiritual mentors Rev Peter Young and Betty; and Pastor Micky and Kun Han



The chemotherapy journey was made so much more bearable with the ever cheerful nurses at the Damansara Specialist Centre oncology ward, Aminah (left), Azura (right) and Anita (behind).



A memorable family holiday in Port Dickson before Ewe Jin went back to work



Of course I got my hair back eventually, as can be seen in this traditional family picture taken each Christmas. This one is for Christmas 2008.

*From our
journals:
The first battle*

It began in April 1999...

A diary of the journey

I remember April 19, 1999 like it was yesterday. That was the day I was “zapped” in radiotherapy or RT, the first of 35 sessions spread over seven weeks, daily except for weekends. It has been five years since.

Today, the NPC or nasopharyngeal carcinoma – nose cancer in common terms – is in complete remission.

During my treatment, my weight plunged dramatically. Now my old pants fit snugly around my waist once more. During RT, my taste sensations all but disappeared. Today I can taste everything I eat and even my salivary glands seem to be cooperating.

The past five years have seen me go from highs to lows as my health hung in the balance. Most of all, it has strengthened my faith in God, who healed me. Here is a brief record of my weeks of treatment written during the journey itself. The thoughts of my wife, Angeline, are interspersed between my recollections.

►► **Discovery and pre-treatment stage:** In the middle of November 1998, I experienced nose-bleed and a blocked ear. Ordinarily, I would never have consulted the doctor for such seemingly small problems. But for some reason, I went to see my GP friend, Dr Chang Chee Wah. He referred me to the ENT specialist at Universiti Hospital (now known as the Universiti Malaya

Medical Centre) to have the symptoms checked out, “just to be on the safe side”. A biopsy turned out negative, and gave my family and me a chance to celebrate the “good news” with a Thanksgiving Christmas Party. In March 1999, when the ear pressure problem returned, a second biopsy was recommended together with a CAT scan and I was told to collect the results on April 15.

▶▶ **April 15:** The doctors at UH told me that I had cancer. It came as a shock to me that the cells had evolved from benign to malignant in a matter of four months. The good news was that my cancer was in Stage One and was 100 per cent curable. The people at UH knew what they were talking about. After all, the resident expert on nose cancer is Professor Umapati Prasad, whose lifetime of research into this particular cancer has won him accolades in Malaysia and globally. I thanked God for a GP who doesn’t take chances. Because it would have taken a few weeks for me to get my turn at UH’s radiotherapy clinic, I asked for options and was referred to the Damansara Specialist Hospital under the care of Dr Gurcharan Singh Khera.

▶▶ **April 16:** I went to DSH to prepare for radiotherapy, 35 sessions over a seven-week period. I was fitted with a white plastic mask that looks like a fencing mask, which is screwed on to keep my head in position each time the machine zaps me. My boys remarked that I looked like Darth Vader!



► **April 19:** RT began. The first session was like a carnival. I was accompanied by my wife Angeline, my fifth sister and her husband who happened to be visiting from Penang at the time. The staff were courteous and encouraging and I thanked God for leading us to this place.

I got to know the other patients and their caregivers. One patient travelled each morning from Nilai; another came from Klang. Compared with them, I am practically within walking distance of the hospital. But our sojourn into the radiotherapy chamber is more or less the same: three minutes each at the most.

The first two weeks were a breeze. Staff at the clinic dubbed me the “most cheerful patient”. That was before bacteria and fungi began to party in my throat.

(Angeline’s thoughts at the end of Week Two)

We were generally upbeat because Ewe Jin’s cancer was in Stage One and had an excellent chance of being cured. He was undergoing radiotherapy, and we were grateful to be spared the ravages of chemotherapy.

While we counted these blessings, our hearts went out to other patients whom we had befriended in the oncology clinic – those in Stage Two or Three who had tougher battles and, worst of all, those who were alone in their suffering. We didn’t know what the purpose was for this twist of events in our lives. What we did know was that we had developed an empathy with other cancer patients which one can’t possibly acquire looking in from the outside.

▶▶ **May 1:** The toughest part of the RT was Weeks Three to Five. My throat was attacked by bacteria and fungi that caused a serious infection. I was only able to take Enercal (a high-energy food drink) and juices, and my weight dipped steeply. My entire throat area hurt so much that even taking fluids was torturous. I felt nauseous most of the time.

In the first two weeks, I was guzzling down so much water that they could not refill enough bottles for me. In Week Three, I struggled to finish even one.

▶▶ **May 7:** I coughed up blood and vomitted in the bathroom. I lay on the floor, drained of energy. At the time, my fifth and seventh sisters were in town as well, and I felt really bad that they had to see me in this state. Finally, I decided to get myself admitted to the hospital for a one-night stay, to go on the drip.

Well, just another day in the life of a cancer patient undergoing radiotherapy. The drip did its job and after that my throat improved gradually. But skin on my cheeks and neck began to look like a really bad case of sunburn. People would stare at the angry burn marks.

(Angeline's thoughts at the end of Week Three)

Nausea. A throatful of ulcers. Excruciating pain. It is beginning to be obvious to me that we were in this for the long haul. Ewe Jin was admitted into hospital last Friday to go on the drip. The doctor gave us the option and Ewe Jin decided to go for it. It was simply too painful for



him to even drink. We had a host of questions, all of them bewildering to us, but oh-so-routine to the doctor. Yes, just one day on the drip would be enough to get Ewe Jin back on liquids. No, the sore throat won't go away, until the therapy is all finished. Yes, he should regain his confidence to eat again, and bear with the rest of the treatment.

Any other questions? No, it doesn't really make a difference how the food is taken - an all-liquid diet is okay, as long as it's high calorie, high protein. Any other questions?

Treatment at the hospital was five-star. The nurses were incredibly cheerful and the medicines worked like a charm. I stayed one night with Ewe Jin and helped untether him from the tubes when he needed to go to the toilet.

Saturday he was discharged and Sunday morning he was bright and perky. Then in the evening the pain came back. Ewe Jin's brow furrowed into a frown. And I snapped. Don't swing up and down like a yo-yo, and don't take me along with you, I said unreasonably.

► **May 9:** Today is Mother's Day. I woke up feeling great, went to church and met with many concerned church members who had been praying for me. I could drink my whole bottle of water. When I came back, I even managed to consume some porridge. The ulcers will not disappear overnight but I think it is now under control. The doctor has given me all sorts of medicine to minimise the discomfort, including local anesthetic administered in jelly form. Through it all, I was sustained by the love and concern of family members and mentally wished all mothers in the family a Happy Mother's Day.

(Angeline's thoughts at the end of Week Four)

We were now in the middle of the therapy. Stage One completed, said the radiologist with a smile. Well, the middle seemed to be fraught with mood swings, like a rollercoaster ride. There were so many ups and downs in a day, I was feeling exhausted from the ride.

Usually mornings held lots of promise. Ewe Jin would feel like he could lick this thing. He'd go about the house doing his usual chores. Come noon, he'd slow down. By afternoon he would retch. And my heart would sink again.

It was a period of contradictions. I was too distracted with Ewe Jin's medication to bother with small things - housework, personal grooming. Yet at the same time, small things became so very important.

Mother's Day was yesterday. Ewe Jin was too tired to "orchestrate" gifts from the boys. A friend's daughter gave me a rose, another friend's child gave me a bag of potpourri. Somehow, it meant a lot that these friends shared their Mother's Day gifts with me.

Unexpected gifts of cash and kind from friends brought a lump to my throat. I'd get teary-eyed when family members came to help out - fetch the kids, mop the floor, be around. When Ewe Jin smiled or cracked a joke, it was enough to make me cry. I guess emotions are heightened by tiredness and insufficient sleep. When it's all over and I look back on that period, I'd probably feel silly about being so emotional. At that point, all I knew was I had to work extra hard just to stay on an even keel. Maybe Stage Two would have fewer crests and troughs. I sure hoped so.

▶▶ **May 19:** Today, I completed Dose No 23,



with 12 more to go. I can confidently say that I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I talked to a fellow patient, a very nice 50-something Datuk, who told me that “radiotherapy is a breeze compared to chemotherapy” which he had to endure after they removed one of his lungs because of his lung cancer. This man is not even a smoker. Another young chap I spoke to had the same ailment as me, but his was at Stage Two when they found out. I did my best to encourage everyone I met at the clinic. I was indeed blessed to always have a “mini-entourage” with me when I went for treatment. Financially, we had enough to meet whatever expenses so far. Jesus is my Anchor in every Storm. A car passed by me with this sticker on the windscreen. How true indeed!

(Angeline’s thoughts at the end of Week Five)

The countdown had begun. Just 10 more therapy sessions to go! We saw the light at the end of the tunnel and suddenly even bad days were bearable. But it was also at this time that my body decided it had taken enough punishment and gave in to a full-blown bout of flu. Spiritual strength is more important than physical strength, but it would help to have both!

These days, Jin smiled a lot more, and the boys were glad to “have their Pap back”, even if he was “thin like a prairie dog”, as Tim observed. We’ve had to entertain visitors by the dozens. I guess I was glad Jin had that many concerned friends. Still, it was exhausting. People have tried to be helpful, and some have actually been. In

retrospect, what would have helped the most would have been a listening ear, no advice; and yeoman's services – cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, fetching the kids, pairs of hands and feet when I needed them! I thank God there were people around who were sensitive to my needs.

This week, I also received a card addressed to me. Not Jin and me. Such a little gesture, but it meant a lot. Here's to all caregivers to the sick around the world. I think they all deserve medals.

▶▶ **June 4:** Hurray, last day of RT! I celebrate by giving out little teddy bears to the doctor and staff of the Oncology Clinic. The next checkup is in a month's time but it will be at least a year before the all-clear can be given. I have lost 10kg from Week One. Seems like a good slimming programme, radiotherapy!

▶▶ **June 7:** It's our 13th wedding anniversary and also the day when we go to UH to take the results of my liver and bone scans. Everything is clear – the cancer has not spread! I will still have to go for check-ups every six months, and record five years of remission before I am officially pronounced “cured”.



The rainbow

The day before therapy began, we decided to treat ourselves to a seafood dinner before I had to observe dietary restrictions. As we sat rather gloomily in the restaurant that early evening, I looked out and was surprised by the sight of a rainbow, clear and bright, even though there was not a drop of rain. To me, that was a sign of God's promise that He would see me through this journey. I wrote this poem soon after.

A heart so burdened
Unanswered "whys"
Turmoil within
Despair and sighs

Spirits battered
Thoughts running wild
Then a voice beckoned:
Look up, my child

There was my rainbow
Lighting up my way
God's sign to me
On a clear, dry day

Be at peace, my child
Have no fear
You think me distant
But I am ever near

I will send my angels
To soothe your tired soul
Rest in me, my child
You won't walk alone

A promise made
A promise claimed
Thus began my journey
To my rainbow's end

Ahead there was
Both sunshine and rain
Yet, joy released
Despite the pain

There was no pot of gold
At my rainbow's end
But God's promise of life
Round every bend



*This poem was put to music and the song was
sung for the first time when I gave my testimony
in church. It brought tears to my eyes.*

Never alone

Throughout my seven weeks of treatment, I never went to radiotherapy alone. My wife Angeline was my constant companion. Besides her, Woo, a school friend, met us there most mornings, quietly encouraging me, giving me lifts back and running errands for me.

Other friends also rallied around me. It was such a joy to have family members from Penang (sisters, in-laws, nieces and nephews) who travelled all the way for the privilege of accompanying me to the room where I was zapped by the linear accelerator.

Kevin and Timothy came along once during the school holidays and were given a tour of the room. Tim asked the radiotherapist, “What if you make a mistake and hit my father in the wrong place?” Well, we trust that God saw to it that it didn’t happen!

I made many friends in the clinic. Most were in worse shape than I was. We encouraged and prayed for each other. There was no class distinction, no racial divide, no religious barrier among the patients; all of us were comrades-in-arms.

The radiotherapy sessions last only a few minutes or so. But there were always extra minutes in the waiting room for all of us to fellowship with one another. But after treatment, the rest of the day, I had to be taken care of “like a baby”. Thank God, I was never left alone during this period. Apart from

sisters who came down from Penang to “mother” me, here in KL, Angeline’s sisters took turns to take leave from work to “babysit” me and the boys whenever my wife was at work.

Encouragement from all over

I rejoice at all the cards, letters, faxes, e-mail and flowers I received... so many that I have lost count. And the visitors! As hard as we tried to keep the news from non-family members, eventually word did get out. We had a constant stream of visitors, from the headmistress and teachers of SK Sri Kelana (the boys’ school) to neighbours, former colleagues and old school friends.

Friends with whom we shared a common faith also came to pray for me to be healed. A very dear friend who himself was going through a journey far worse than mine, insisted on visiting to give me support and some money that had been raised for him through a public appeal. I cried when he left my home after his visit.

At last count, we received love gifts amounting to RM12,000. Our medical bills totalled RM7,000. We joked that we had “made a profit”, but in fact we had spent it all on incidentals like supplements and special foods. The financial support that poured in from family and friends ensured that we were never in need and we were spared an extra worry. It must be noted that throughout this period, I was a full-time househusband, without any company medical benefits to tide me through.



Help also came in kind. When my computer went on the blink, a friend immediately called up the computer shop and asked the man to fix it and put it on his bill.

This same friend brought me 10 CDs to listen to. As for the PC, in the end, the man from the computer shop replaced parts for free and even brought grapes for me.

I was given more fruits than I could possibly eat. I really appreciated the regular supplies of green apples and carrots that my niece Audrey, who was staying with us at the time, juiced for me daily. Friends took the boys off our hands regularly and ensured that they had some activities for the school holidays. A couple tracked down hard-to-get prescribed medication for my throat infection.

Others came by with home-cooked meals, chicken soup and flowers. Thank you, all, for being sensitive to our needs without even being asked!

Need for support

After we finish treatment, what happens? There is a sense of release, yet restraint in our joy because with cancer, there are no guarantees.

I felt led to lend my support to fellow cancer patients and visited the hospital often even after I had completed my treatment.

Once, I went along with a friend of mine who had just started his radiotherapy. It was nice to meet up with familiar faces among those who are

still undergoing treatment.

I think it would be great to have a support group that meets up occasionally to help each other along. It is an encouragement just to know someone has been through the same ordeal and survived it.

One fellow NPC patient whom I met on the street lamented, “What’s the point of living? I can’t taste anything!” I told him that when I finished my RT, I had expected to be able to enjoy my food again. Of course, this did not happen immediately and I was very disappointed. The problem was that I had expected my taste buds to be back at 100 per cent, but this is not possible. When I realised that and scaled down my expectations to say 70 per cent, eating was no longer a problem.

Gradually, God gave me back me my sense of taste and I am now able to enjoy my food as much as before. I hope to be able to share experiences like this with fellow patients so they will be encouraged to push on.

I would also like to point out that looking beyond ourselves is good therapy. As a patient, I did my best to express appreciation for everything that was done for me. After my discharge from hospital, I wrote a letter to commend the staff on their cheerfulness and efficiency. The hospital director, in turn, wrote to thank me for the note – apparently, it is not common for patients to say “thank you”!



Take time to laugh

About a year before I was diagnosed with cancer, in a rare moment of greed, I fell prey to a door-to-door salesman who convinced me that I was the luckiest person in the neighbourhood. For a mere RM80, I could participate in a draw that might just win me a 29-inch TV set. Now, who could let an opportunity like this pass by? (My better half would have, but that's a different story.)

Anyway, in the incident that brought out the best in him and the worst in me, I picked an envelope. Unfortunately, there was no TV set for me.

Instead, I had “won” the opportunity to buy a juicer for RM300, supposedly 50 per cent off the usual price. I paid him and took my “prize”. Boy, did I get a shelling from my better half that day.

Then as I underwent my radiotherapy sessions, this juicer that entered my household through such an interesting episode was my lifesaver.

With the opportunistic fungi still causing havoc in my throat, it was practically impossible to take anything solid in. Since I started treatment, I have had juiced carrots, green apples, celery, spinach, pears, bananas – you name it. The juicer has been useful when I needed to blend all sorts of stuff into a yucky mess that babies love to throw onto the floor.

So, to the salesman who ripped me off that day, thank you!

A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. – Proverbs 17:22

LETTERS TO LOVED ONES: Breaking news of this nature to loved ones is always difficult, especially if they are far away. We hope these letters can be good examples at times like this.

Sisters are extra special to me because I am their only brother. I am the only thorn among the eight roses. My fourth sister passed away of cancer in 1983 at the age of 34.

Dearest Sisters,

I hope you all don't mind this common letter for today. I shall write and call each of you individually later on. I know that all of you are very concerned about me. I thank you for that.

When I got the test results yesterday, I was shattered! Thank God Angie was there. She is indeed a tower of strength for me. We of course had to put on a brave front when we got back. I am sure you all understand why. I told the boys about it and they took the news quite calmly although Kevin looked a bit teary-eyed.

As my doctor and very good friend told me: "I'll be honest with you - there's no way anyone can feel great about news like this. So I'm not going to patronise and tell you to look at things on the bright side etc etc. Right now things seem so unfair, I mean, why a nice guy like you? Why not some other slime ball of the day?"

Psychologists have broken down the human grief reaction into nice neat little portions. Upon hearing bad news like this there are five stages; 1) Denial – "naaah, this can't be happening..just a bad dream.."



- 2) Anger – “why me? Why not ..(favourite villain)”
- 3) Bargaining – “must be some mistake here...must be some way out of this..”
- 4) Depression – “omigosh! I’m a goner...”
- 5) Acceptance – “well, what to do... got to take it... not so bad after all..”

I think it helps to know what’s at the end of the tunnel the moment we go into it. There’s no way out but through it. There’s seldom a soul who can skip stages 1-4 and arrive at stage 5 just like that. Well meaning friends and relatives sometimes try to deny us the experience of the early stages and hurry us along to stage 5 which they think is best for us.

I think all stages are necessary for any person to come to terms with this kind of misfortune, and I should take my time to get through this. And the same for you people too.

So I won’t tell you not to feel lousy about it. Go ahead and feel lousy about why it is happening to a “nice brother” like me (Ahem!)

BUT and here is the big BUT, I will win this fight. The following are the facts:

1. Not all cancers are the same. Cancer sounds like a dangerous word but there is a world of difference between a slow-growing cancer like NPC (which I have) and some other types of cancer. To put it in perspective, this is the “best” type of cancer I can possibly have.
2. The UH doctors say in the past 15 years, all those patients who were diagnosed with this

NPC at Stage One were completely cured. Not a single case of relapse in the past 15 years. So I am facing excellent odds. The cancer specialist at Damansara Specialist Hospital where I will be doing my therapy confirmed that my scan showed an excellent situation.

3. UH is actually a world-renowned centre for treatment of NPC and treatment guidelines worldwide are derived from experience from this hospital. Prof Umapati Prasad is the world authority on this form of cancer.
4. I am getting very good advice and I know that over the next few weeks, many well-meaning friends and relatives who know about it will be recommending me all sorts of alternative treatments. The doctor tells me to resist the temptation to try alternative therapies like Chinese medicine.
5. What are the side-effects? Not as bad as chemo of course so you won't have a bald brother or one without a nose! But a lot of my taste sensations will disappear and of course my diet will have to change a bit. But not to the extent that I will look like a sick person in the house. I can cook the food I need and make it fun. I do not want to be treated like a patient at home so Angie and I will need some time to adjust the eating patterns which hopefully Mama will be able to fit into.
6. I have not spent that much money so far. Up to this point, I have spent under RM1,000 at UH.



At Damansara, the treatment itself will come up to around RM4,000. So it's not going to be terribly much. We have the funds right now. Over the long term, when I run out of Enercal or Vit B or whatever, I will let you know.

7. All of you are aware of my policy to give and to receive always with an open and grateful heart. So I will not even try and stop you all from doing what you want to do. But for the moment, please do not overwhelm me with your generosity. Sometimes, I think having a chat with you all may be all I need. So please call, write, e-mail often!

With much love
Brother Jin



The thorn among the roses: I am much loved by all my sisters who made special trips from Penang to see me through both journeys.

A letter to my mother who returned to our family home in Penang for the duration of my treatment as we felt she should be spared the agony of watching the process. My father passed away of cancer in 1987.

Dearest Mama,

I know that you are very concerned about me. As you always say, “Not concerned, how can?” I thank you for that. I write this letter to reassure you that all is well. Maybe not 100 per cent yet, but I am certainly getting better by the day.

The treatment is going fine. By the end of this week, I would have completed 25 doses, with only 10 left to go. The doctor checks me every week and he is very happy with the progress I am making. I am really in good condition although I am a bit tired sometimes. This is a normal reaction to the treatment.

I want you to also understand that I am not fighting this battle alone. God is with me all the time. This is the God I believe in and He is such a wonderful Friend. When I am weak, He is strong. I know that you have seen with your own eyes, as you lived with us, how much we trust in this God who is our Provider. We never worry about tomorrow because we know He will be there for us.

Sometimes we cannot understand life because strange things happen. But how wonderful it is that whether in good times or in bad times, we have someone we can rely on. Each night I pray that God will see me through this and that my family will emerge stronger. I also pray that God



takes care of you and everyone else in the family.

I know sometimes we argue. But I want you to know that our quarrels never change the fact that I think you are the most wonderful mother I can possibly have. Take care of yourself at all times. I know you are in good hands in Penang. I am in good hands in KL, so don't worry.

With much love,
Your son, Jin



This picture was taken in Penang in February 2009. For both my radiotherapy in 1999 and my chemotherapy in 2006/7, I asked Mama, who has been staying with us for the past 20 years, to go back to Penang as I did not want her to see me go through such tough times.

A mother's love will always be special and I am so happy that when she turned 80, which was just after my five-year remission period, she gave thanks to God for my healing and got baptised.

*Lessons from a
caregiver*

Strength to climb mountains

By Angeline

It was a whole new world, surreal and cold. Sometime in April 1999, Ewe Jin and I stumbled unceremoniously into this new dimension called oncology.

There is no party-pooper like cancer. There seemed to be only losers; it's just a matter of how much you lose. It may be taste buds, hair, organs or loved ones.

Through this storm of physical trauma and emotional upheaval, we were fortunate to have a supportive network of family members and friends and, above all, an unwavering faith in God.

Ewe Jin was diagnosed with NPC or nasopharyngeal carcinoma by doctors at the Universiti Hospital in Petaling Jaya. The cancer, fortunately, was in Stage 1.

The prognosis was good. "Mr Soo, you have a higher chance of being knocked down by a car than dying of this," one doctor cheerfully put it to us. "Anyway, in the past 12 years, we have had a 100 per cent recovery record."

Ewe Jin was put on a 35-course radiotherapy treatment. We opted to do his therapy at the Damansara Specialist Hospital because there was a long waiting list at UH.

When we first walked into the Oncology Clinic at Damansara, we saw for the first time the reality behind the cancer statistics. The patients

ranged from young to old, Muslim to Christian, Datuks to plain Pakciks.

We got to know many of them. Some were in Stage Two or Three, battling a more tenacious brand of malignant cells. Our hearts cried out especially for those who seemed to be all alone in their suffering.

I wondered, was there any purpose for this twist of events in our lives? No doubt we will discover in due time. For now, we are just thankful that God remained faithful to us and saw Ewe Jin and me through this journey.

In the past months, we also gained some insights into how to respond to crises in ways that will help rather than hinder.

Prayer

As soon as we “raised the alarm”, family and friends prayed with us and for us. It is an immense source of comfort to know that this huge cloud of supplication for Ewe Jin was and is still going up daily to our Heavenly Father!

I must say, though, that Ewe Jin and I have our own convictions about physical healing. We have prayed for sick friends, too, and we know from experience that for every person who is healed through prayer, at least one other is not.

(I would like to differentiate physical healing from a healing of the spirit, which we believe comes to all who seek it.)

So where does it put God when physical heal-



ing does not come? Do we blame the person's faithlessness? Is God so petty that He will not heal if there are doubts playing in our minds? Is God so powerless that little obstacles can get in the way of His healing?

In Ewe Jin's case specifically, Ewe Jin and I have full confidence that he will be totally healed. But this is based on the doctors' prognosis as much as it is on faith in God. If it were a case of Stage Three cancer, say, would we be so quick to say it is God's will that he is healed?

Ultimately, Ewe Jin and I believe that "God is in His heaven and all is right with the world". For us, come healing or disease, God is still in charge. We will trust Him fully to unfold our lives for us according to His plan.

Prescriptions

In the short span of two weeks, we were overloaded with advice on diet, medication and cures.

We accepted them in the spirit they were given, with love. However, the point is that we had been told in no uncertain terms by the doctor that we should stay clear of alternative cures for the duration of radiotherapy.

Therapy is tiring and trying for both patient and caregiver. And having to listen to endless stories about how a neighbour or colleague was cured by wheatgrass juice or some other herb can wear us out. We don't really want to know the details of someone else's cancer at that point. This is

truly a lesson for me. Previously, I proffered such advice whenever someone confided in me that a loved one had cancer. Now I know I should just listen, for that is what helps more.

Presents

Although Ewe Jin did not hold a permanent job then, we told everyone we could manage financially. Still, when cash was quietly slipped into our hands or banked into our account, we were grateful.

We appreciated a half crate of green apples given to us for juicing. And a regular supply of home-cooked dhal curry. And vitamins to keep our resistance up. Cards and letters also gave much comfort.

In short, thoughtful presents given from the heart are always a balm to tired spirits.

I must also share the instance when Ewe Jin's throat took such a battering from the X-rays he was unable to swallow even liquids. He was admitted into hospital to go on the drip.

The one-night stay in hospital set us back by RM1,200. We deliberated over whether we should ask family and friends for help. After all, the Bible says ask and you will be given. Then we remembered, it says to ask God, so we simply brought our needs to God.

Within three days, the cash came in three parts – RM500, RM500 and then RM200. What perfect arithmetic! What a wonderful God!



We learnt to depend only on Him to provide, and are still learning this daily.

Presence

Unlike presents, your presence is less straight-forward. To be frank, Ewe Jin and I found some people's presence uplifting, others' strength-sapping.

Before you visit someone with cancer, ask yourself the purpose of your visit. Don't go if it is just to reassure yourself that your loved one is all right.

In all likelihood, the person may be fighting the disease well but side-effects of therapy are beginning to show – perhaps mouth blisters, scorched skin, a sore throat and so on. In such a condition, having to reassure visitors is no easy task and really unfair on the patient!

On the other hand, Ewe Jin has a friend who showed up each day at the oncology clinic where his radiotherapy was administered. This friend simply waited with Ewe Jin, read his newspaper, then went off when the session was over. These visits became a part of his schedule.

He didn't fuss over Ewe Jin's progressively obvious side effects. He simply offered support by being there.

This experience has taught me that when visiting a patient, your presence must give support and comfort, or else it defeats the purpose. When in doubt, ask first. If your presence will not help, the caregiver will tell you. Postpone the visit; you can do your part in other ways.

Learning is a life-long process. It was certainly a steep learning curve for us. Despite the discomfort and inconveniences, I believe we have come out the richer for it.

On July 4, Ewe Jin was scheduled to read scripture in the KL Wesley Methodist Church, where we worship. He thanked the church for its prayers and support.

He had come a long way. So have I. And we both know that we would never have made it without the enduring goodness of God.

A word from the patient

On the Sunday just before I found out about my cancer, the sermon was about how God never gives us strength in advance. When we need to climb a hill, the pastor said, God will give us the strength to climb a hill. And when we need to climb a mountain, God will give us the strength to climb a mountain.

As I went through this tumultuous journey, it was truly the Lord who sustained me at each turn. God not only sustained and strengthened me but He ensured that Angeline was my pillar, my fortress and the tree planted by the water that refuses to be moved.

She surprised all of us with her efficient running of the household and making sure that this interference caused the minimum amount of disturbance to our family. Angeline climbed hills and mountains. She forded raging rivers. With her by



my side, I was able to concentrate on my treatment and recovery. Thank you Lord for such a wonderful wife!

“Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.” – Jeremiah 17:14

“I am the Lord who heals you.” – Exodus 15:26

This article was published in Wesley Tidings, the church newsletter, in 1999

Of happy endings

Ewe Jin's thoughts

When we first thought of putting this booklet together, I wondered if my story was worth the telling. What's so special about my journey? Many have travelled this road before. Many have written more inspiring books.

But I am convinced that my story is unique in its own way. I lost my fourth sister and my father to cancer. I had travelled alongside them on both their journeys and each time it was different.

When my sister was diagnosed with cancer, all of us in the family were shocked and we were left groping very much in the dark. When I look back on her final months, I realise that she was seeking answers that none of us could provide then. As the faraway brother, I could do little more than send back money and make the occasional trip to see her. I was there when she breathed her last but felt helpless that I couldn't do more.

When my father was diagnosed with cancer, I was able to offer some comfort. I had found God by then and just knowing that He cared and would take care of my father made the journey a bit more bearable. I spoke to my father of my faith and was there when he, too, breathed his last.

Having watched two loved ones go this way, it was a wonder that when it came to my turn, I did not feel that death had come a-knocking at my door. Rather, with the promise of eternal life assured, I faced my journey with a confidence that only faith could provide.

I remember how so many times, I looked at the worried faces of my visitors and I would tease them, “Why look at me as though I am going to die?” They asked me for the secret to my peace and I would reply, “Trust the doctors, and have complete faith in God.”

When cancer struck in 1999, I was on the brink of getting back into the workforce. But the job that was supposedly guaranteed to me did not come. Although I was disappointed at first, I realised later that my return to work had been temporarily suspended by a Greater Power because I had to go through this trial first.

Did I pass the test? I cannot give an answer but I do know that I would have failed miserably if I did not have a Personal Saviour for comfort and for guidance. I clung to the belief that “we are never given more than we can bear”.

Exactly one year later, when the effects of my radiotherapy were long gone, I was able to get a job at *The Star*, where I am currently employed.

Wonders never cease. This booklet had to be condensed so that you can get a quick tour of what I went through and I had to leave many stories untold. What made the difference and why was this journey so special? The answer is: God made the difference.

Angeline's thoughts

We licked it. We *all* did: Ewe Jin, I, our boys Kevin and Tim, our huge extended families, many faith-



ful friends – and, most of all, a loving God who is the source of our strength and hope. Now, three years after Ewe Jin was diagnosed with cancer, he is in complete remission.

As the main caregiver to Ewe Jin during his illness, I often found myself on a roller coaster, emotionally. It was an uncomfortable ride, as I am basically a matter-of-fact kind of person and not given to great shows of emotion.

A major personal battle was learning to “walk the talk”, so to speak, and put my trust wholly in God. This was not easy even after many years as a Christian. Ewe Jin had been my pillar of strength in everything, from career decisions to paying the bills. It was a frightening experience to suddenly discover there may be cracks in the pillar.

I also worried about being left to bring up the children alone. This was a dreadful thought, not least because Ewe Jin has always been a participative parent and does more than his share with the boys.

I felt as if I was walking a tightrope with no safety net below. More than once, I collapsed in tears of despair when I had time to be by myself. The going seemed too hard to bear.

Only when I was totally drained and could no longer carry my burden in my own strength, did I surrender and let God take over. And when I did, how sweet was the relief that came! I no longer worried about the “hows” and “what ifs”.

“But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” – 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Yes, the journey was rough. But through it all, God proved ever faithful. With Him by my side, I can face anything – even death.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.” – Psalm 23:4



I wrote this the week after my doctors gave me the five-year all-clear report on April 7 2004. It was indeed an emotional day for me even as I was prepared for the good news. I brought my camera along to take pictures of myself with Dr Gurcharan Singh and Dr Awal Hassan.

The God that healeth me

On June 7, 1999, I wrote in my journal: It's our 13th wedding anniversary and also the day when we go to UH to take the results of my liver and bone scans. Everything is clear. The cancer in my nose has not spread! I will still have to go for check-ups every six months, and record five years of remission before I am officially pronounced "cured".

On April 7, 2004, my doctors at Damansara Specialist Hospital declared me cancer-free, exactly five years after it was discovered and treated. I had been in remission all this time but the five-year mark is considered crucial from the doctors' point of view. God the Healer, of course, works on a different timetable and His assurance of my healing came very much earlier. But I am glad that the doctors can medically prove what He has promised. Although the news was expected, the day still proved to be quite emotional for me.

I sent out the SMS while still in the hospital and the replies came back fast and furious. I was very touched that friends really shouted with joy upon hearing the good news. Some of you may have already heard my testimony, and some of

you might have already read the book written by my wife and me entitled *Face to Face with Cancer*.

Five years ago, I was full of questions as to why I had to battle the Big C. Today, I believe I have no reason to doubt that the trial I had to go through has strengthened me tremendously. I thank God for it. This is my testimony.

The Journey: *I Am The God That Healeth Thee*. How many times I had listened to Don Moen sing this song. God Heals. We all know that. But healing must not be limited to just physically healing. I am fortunate in that respect but I must also say that in this five-year period, I have also lost friends to cancer. My wife and I have our own convictions about physical healing.

We have prayed for sick friends, too, and we know from experience that for every person who is healed through prayer, at least one other is not. (I would like to differentiate physical healing from a healing of the spirit, which we believe comes to all who seek it.) So where does it put God when physical healing does not come? Do we blame the person's faithlessness? Is God so petty that He will not heal if there are doubts playing in our minds? Is God so powerless that little obstacles can get in the way of His healing?

In my case specifically, our confidence is based on the doctors' prognosis as much as it is on faith in God. At all times, we believed "God is in His heaven and all is right with the world". For us, come healing or disease, God is still in charge. I



have learnt to trust Him fully to unfold my life for me according to His plan. Though I went through suffering in the early days, I also know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

God The Provider: At the time when I was undergoing the journey, I was enjoying one of my stints as full-time father. This meant that I was not covered by any company scheme and everything that we had to spend on had to come from somewhere else. God's providence shone tremendously during this time. All bills were taken care of with the generous donations from family and friends.

Perhaps this was best exemplified when I had to be warded one day and the bill came up to RM1,200. Where was the money going to come from, we asked. Already we had been given so much for the anticipated bills but this was unexpected. We knew if we called up people, they would respond but we decided to get down on our knees to pray instead. Over the next three days, three cheques came in, two RM500 cheques and one RM200 cheque. Talk about God the perfect mathematician.

The Purpose becomes clearer with the benefit of hindsight. My experience has certainly made me a better counsellor to those who are

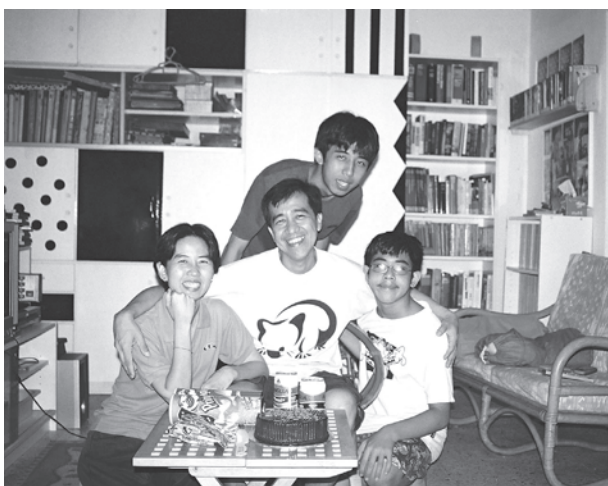
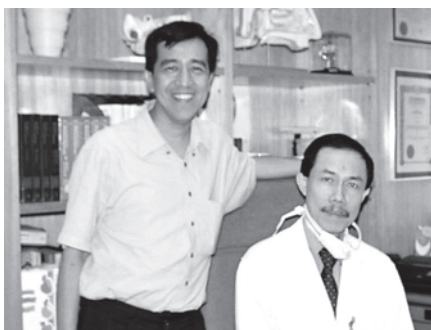
beginning the same journey. I am able to offer advice that is practical and useful, and speak words of comfort that don't sound hollow. I guess it's a bit like being swimming a coach who gets into the water with his students, rather than just shouting instructions from the poolside. In fact, the nurses at my onco's clinic have my phone number handy, and they give it out to new patients who are distraught and need someone to talk to. I count that as a privilege, for in helping others in this way, I myself have been truly blessed.

And finally, **the Perspective** I have gained is one of Thankfulness. There are a million things we should thank God for the moment we wake up each morning, but too often we take them all for granted. I try to impart this attitude of thankfulness to people whose paths cross mine. I have given my *Cancer* booklet to colleagues who are burdened by job problems, or friends going through a rough patch, and each time they call back to say that my story has helped them to take a step back from their problems and to realise that they are really very fortunate indeed.

Yes, cancer does have a way of making other problems seem small!

A day of celebration

(April 7 2004)





Dr Gurcharan and Dr Anil were equally thrilled about my visit on April 7, which roughly marked the five-year period of total remission when the doctors could say with confidence that the cancer had been kept fully at bay. They even waived their professional fees that day.

Back home, I was pleasantly surprised that my family had prepared a cake with the words “No more cancer, Praise God!” to celebrate the day.



To Encourage

The Ten Commandments for cancer survival

1. Thou shalt regard the word “cancer,” as exactly that: a word. Nothing more, nothing less. For its original meaning has changed mightily over the years, as have such words as smallpox and polio, all once dreaded ailments, now non-existent as maladies. And thus shalt go thy cancer. The answer shall come to those who shall be present to hear it. Be present when it comes.
2. Thou shalt love thy chemotherapy, thy radiation, and thy other treatments even as thyself, for they are thy friends and champions. Although they exact a toll for their endeavours, they are oft most generous in the favours they bestow.
3. Thou shalt participate fully in thy recovery. Thou shalt learn all the details of thy ailment, its diagnosis, its prognosis, its treatments, conventional and alternative. Thou shalt discuss them openly and candidly with thy oncologist and shalt question all thou do not comprehend. Then, thou shalt cooperate intelligently and knowledgeably with thy doctor.
4. Thou shalt regard thy ailment as a temporary detour in thy life and shalt plan thy future as though this detour had not occurred. Thou shalt never, at no time, no how, regard



thy temporary ailment as permanent. Thou shalt set long-term goals for thyself for thou WILL verily recover and thy believing so will contribute mightily to thy recovery.

5. Thou shalt express thy feelings candidly and openly to thy loved ones for they, too, are stricken. Thou shalt comfort and reassure them for they, too, needest comforting and reassurance, even as thou doest.
6. Thou shalt be a comfort to thy fellow-cancerites, providing knowledge, encouragement, understanding and love. Thou shalt give them hope where there may be none, for only in hope lies their salvation. And by doing so, thou providest comfort for thyself, as well.
7. Thou shalt never relinquish hope, no matter how thou may feelest at that moment, for thou knowest, in the deep recesses of thy heart, that thy discouragement is but fleeting and that a better day awaits thee.
8. Thou shalt not regard thy ailment as the sum total of thy life but as merely a part of it. Fill your life with other diversions, be they mundane, daring, altruistic, or merely amusing. To fill your life with thy ailment is to surrender to it.
9. Thou shalt maintain, at all times and in all circumstances, thy sense of humour, for laughter lightens thy heart and hastens thy

recovery. This is not an easy task, sometimes seemingly impossible, but it is a goal well worth the endeavour.

10. Thou shalt have enduring and unassailable faith, whether thy faith be in a Supreme Being, in Medical Science, in Thy Future, in Thyself, or in Whatever. Steadfastly sustain thy faith for it shall sustain thee.

By Paul H Klein

Source: www.lymphomation.org





Don't quit

Don't quit when the tide is lowest
For it's just about to turn
Don't quit over doubts and questions
For there is something you may learn
Don't quit when the night is darkest
For it's just a while till dawn
Don't quit when you've run the farthest
For the race is almost won
Don't quit when the hill is steepest
For your goal is almost nigh
Don't quit for you're not a failure
Until you fail to try.

What cancer can't do

It cannot cripple love
It cannot shatter hope
It cannot corrode faith
It cannot eat away peace
It cannot destroy confidence
It cannot kill friendship
It cannot shut out memories
It cannot silence courage
It cannot invade the soul
It cannot reduce eternal life
It cannot quench the spirit
It cannot lessen the power of the
resurrection.

*Why must I bear this pain? I cannot tell
I only know my Lord does all things well
And so trust in God, my all in all
For he will bring me through, what e'er befall*



Words of comfort

“The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in Him my heart trusts; so I am helped.”

– *Psalm 28:7*

“For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from Him comes my salvation. He only
is my rock and my salvation, my for-
tress; I shall not be greatly moved.”

– *Psalm 62:1-2*

“Fear not, for I am with you, be not
dismayed, for I am your God; I will
strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my
victorious right hand.”

– *Isaiah 41:10*

“I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though
they die will live, and everyone who lives
and believes in me will never die.”

– *John 11:25-26*

“For God so loved the world that he
gave His only Son, that whoever believes
in him should not perish but have
eternal life.”

– *John 3:16*

God's Promises

God didn't promise
days without pain,
laughter without sorrow
or sun without rain.

But God did promise
strength for the day,
comfort for the tears
and a light for the way.

And for all who believe
in His kingdom above,
He answers their faith
with everlasting love

*(This is a famous poem but the author is unknown. I
have a plaque with this poem sitting on my desk in the
office to remind me to remain faithful with God
through good or bad times)*



Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green
pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of
the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy
staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the
presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my
cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow
me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the
LORD for ever.

King James Version

*(This psalm has special significance to Ewe Jin who
would recite it silently while undergoing radiotherapy.
He went through his six sessions of chemotherapy
wearing a yellow Psalm 23 t-shirt)*

