



Sharing the Load

'This is not where I expected to be,' she said. 'I'm fit, healthy, active and engaged and now this?'

Cancer does that, hitting us without warning when life is going along just fine. Taking the wind out of our sails, when we thought we were in the clear. In this case surgery is, we hope, the cure, but it's radical and life won't be the same.

I know there are dark moments of fear and the wotifs are worst in the wee small hours. Those times when we most need someone or something to hold on to, until the shaking stops. Those are also the times when it's easiest to retreat and hide away from the world, shunning assistance as though we have to travel this alone.

She has been a sister to me for the best part of five decades. Always there no matter what, with calm practical support, big hugs and unconditional love. Our long walks and deep conversations are on hold for now, as we find new ways to connect and communicate about what matters to us both.

Just as she has stood with, and for, us in the past, now it's our turn to stand with her. This community of family and friends who will do whatever it takes to support her through this. It's the only possible response to such a devastating diagnosis.

When the wheels fall off, or get a bit wobbly, it's easy to take the road that focuses on self. After all, it's you that is unwell, it's you that has the tough path to navigate. I've watched as some back right away from the world, closing off to travel alone and refusing support. It's as though they have to prove they can carry the burden themselves. Others are demanding, full of expectations and comparisons that inevitably lead to disappointment when the support falls away.

This time though, I'm witnessing a different way. An inclusive focus in which her choice to love and support us, is enabling us to love and support her. It's all about her and all about us at the same time. That sense of community strengthens us all and, I've no doubt, will speed her healing.

She's helping us to help her, by inviting us to be part of her crew and offering us parts to play. One to keep everyone up to date with regular progress emails. One to look after her vegetable garden, watering and harvesting, while she's in hospital.

My part is twofold. First to find books to inspire – the first I'm sending is *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, by Rachel Naomi Remen M.D. The stories recount the kind of courage that I think she will recognize. The second was an invitation to spend a day in the kitchen with her, making batches of the family favourite, Betty's Best Bengal Chutney. With love and laughter, we remembered stories over steaming, fragrant pots of apples, tomatoes, dates, vinegar and spices. The old handwritten recipe card is faded and stained with years of repeated use. How much cayenne? Just add a tablespoon and see what happens! Two batches of jars filled, relationships sealed, gifts made and more memories embedded in the fabric of family.

It seems to me that there's plenty of talk about inclusion these days. Plenty of earnest discussion about the need to leave no-one out. Yet when it comes to the most personal of situations, a life-threatening illness, the default can be to stand back from those who care most for us. Perhaps it's a protective reaction, thinking that we withhold the pain and the burden that often comes with illness. But to paraphrase the saying that it takes a village to raise a child, so too it can take that same village to heal us when we are unwell. The odds of surviving and thriving are far greater when we have the loving support of others. That sustenance is not a given, rather an offering on the back of decades of strong relationships. How that offering is translated into the greatest value is a matter for negotiation.

She is helping us to help her, by making space for us to be on her team. Not just in platitudes and cups of tea, but in ways that use our strengths, enrich the relationship and enhance us both. Beyond turning lemons into lemonade, we're willing her to wellness in the ways we know best. And in the process we are all becoming better together.

Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life – How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from www.jennymagee.com If you are looking to make significant changes, contact **Jenny** via email to jenny@jennymagee.com

