

**Singing my way through
the cancer,
the darkness, the fear**

Maria Logis

When I was diagnosed with non Hodgkin's lymphoma I felt nothing; silence and paralysis took over. I became a machine, making appointments and phone calls, consulting with doctors, taking tests and researching treatments. Friends swamped me with articles and suggestions about cancer cures. I was grateful for their concern, but they could not help me. I sank, crushed into silence. I cried out to God for help, and the help that came was not at all what I would have imagined. I found music and in it a balm that made it possible for me to sing my way through my anguish.

It was the fall of 1994, and my job at Con Edison was going well; I was the General Manager of the company's state of the art learning Center. I had been a key player in the design and construction of this 168,000 sq. ft. facility only two years earlier. I was single, lived in a lovely Manhattan apartment, and had lots of friends; all the outward signs were good. I noticed a lump in my neck and several weeks later when it didn't go away I went to the dermatologist to have it removed. She thought it might be an infection in the lymph nodes and suggested I see an internist. On September 29, at 5:30 PM, the oncologist called me at my office and gave me the results of the biopsy; it was non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

I called my sister Niki and asked her if it would be okay if I came over.

"I'll be waiting for you," she said. She didn't ask me any questions even though I had the feeling that she sensed the bad news, and I didn't volunteer any information because I wanted to tell her in person.

When I got home I changed clothes and picked up the comforter that I had bought for Niki. Two months earlier, I had decided that her tattered and shedding comforter had to be replaced. My sister is a disciplined artist; she stays focused on her sculpture. Shopping doesn't make her list of priorities. She never wanted me to shop for her, so it was with some trepidation that I bought the comforter. I stopped to pick up some apple juice at the Korean deli across the street from Niki's loft; the woman running the store wanted to buy the comforter from me. Well, somebody likes it, I thought.

Niki hugged me when I walked in her door. She looked at me intently when we sat down and waited for me to speak.

"It's cancer," I sighed deeply.

"Why should you get cancer? I'm the one who smokes, it should be me." She leaned forward, a cigarette in her right hand.

Our talk that night was so tender, our voices hushed; we barely wept as we spoke. Niki held my hand and called the diagnosis the beginning of a journey that we would take together. I squeezed her hand. My eyes were full of tears, but no words came.

I remembered the only other time when I was seriously sick in my life. I was seven and had rheumatic fever; I just cried and cried. The doctor used a big needle; it was bigger than my arm. Niki, aged four, yelled and hit the doctor.

"Go away, leave my sister alone."

I can't remember what my mother or father did or said.

I was sick for many months. Niki played with me and kept me company. She peeled tangerines separating the pieces and lining them up. We played war with the little orange soldiers, and as they got banged up we popped them into our mouths.

I looked at Niki. She was deep in thought, staring at the floor. A few minutes later, I remembered the comforter and took it out of the bag, Niki loved the dark red color and the Chinese pattern when she saw it spread out on her bed. We threw away the raggedy old one with a laugh and decided to walk to Chinatown for dinner. Linking my arm in hers, I felt the power of knowing I wouldn't have to face this illness alone.

I began to research doctors. I feared them almost as much as treatment having watched my father, my dear friend Koula, and two other friends go through the horrors of chemotherapy and radiation only to deteriorate and in the end face miserable and agonizing deaths.

I went to six oncologists hoping to find one who would tell me it wasn't cancer, but the fact was that I had a stage four lymphoma. The diagnosis shook me deeply, and somehow made it possible to break out of my habitual thinking patterns. I prayed. I prayed, and what came to me was that I should sing.

What a ridiculous idea, I thought.

I talked to Niki.

"That's a great idea!" she exclaimed.

Boy, I thought, this cancer is not only making me nutty but my tough-minded sister isn't making sense either.

Still, I asked around for the names of singing teachers. I had no idea what I was doing, just put one foot in front of the other and moved. I went to see several teachers. At the time I was seeing a new dentist on a regular basis to get an infection in my mouth under control in anticipation of the chemo treatments. One day, I mentioned that I was thinking about taking singing lessons.

"That's a great idea, I'll get you the name of someone good. Lot's of my patients are musicians."

I wound up with an appointment to see Alan Turry, a music therapist. I didn't know what that was, but, since he was in walking distance from my house, I decided to check it out.

Alan greeted me at the door. He has a beard, sparkling brown eyes and an inviting presence, however; I did not notice him. I was too preoccupied with myself. The large number of instruments in the middle of the room did catch my attention: an upright piano, hand drums, bongos, maracas, bells, metalaphone, shakers, guiro, tambourine, and a large gong.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"Go ahead and pick any instrument you like and feel free to make any sounds you want."

"Any sounds at all?" I wondered.

"Yes, any sounds at all," he repeated.

I picked up a drum and then some bells and started to fool around. He played the piano. In a few minutes the room was full of sound. I was laughing and giggling. I hadn't laughed once in the two and a half months since the diagnosis. David Darling's improvisation workshop flashed through my mind, as did some articles I'd read about people who'd recovered from cancer by laughing. I felt comfortable with Alan; he was sensitive and attentive as I told him my story. I decided to come back for more.

"Bring a tape the next time," said Alan.

When we met the following week he told me to feel free to make any sounds I wanted. This time I didn't laugh, I made retching and spitting sounds, I groaned. Alan kept playing the piano no matter what sounds came out of me. These were the words I sang.

*She didn't want to go ahead with the treatment
She told herself it wasn't what she wanted to do
She didn't trust the doctors
She didn't want to get sick
She didn't want to follow their advice
She said...NO; I'd rather not do it!!!
But all the logic said
You have to go for this treatment
Oh...NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!
Oh yeah, you've got to go for this treatment*

I sang about myself in the third person, to get some distance from my situation. It was deeply satisfying to sing NO; I didn't dare say those words to the doctors. The words just kept coming, intense feelings about the doctors and chemotherapy.

*I go round in circles
Trying to come up with an answer
What will I do?
How will I resolve it?
They tell me I'm sick
And if I go ahead and do as they tell me
Soon I will be sick*

*I'm scared of the treatment
I'm scared of the treatment
I blame it on them
I blame it on them
I know it's not fair but I blame it on them
**I tell myself, you'll be sick when
They get through with you
You'll be sick when they get through with you***

You're fine now
They tell me I'm sick

Then came another voice, the one that told me that I must go for treatment. It was the voice of all the doctors and of my own logical/thinking side. The logical me started to yell at the frightened me. Later when I listened to the tape I heard the attack on myself, intense, ugly, scary sounds. I felt threatened.

Tell the truth
What is it?
Stop this stuff
Tell the truth tell the truth
Ugg.....ugh.....ugg

When I would speak to my friends about my illness and concerns, I was logical and organized. Even if upset, I had a plan. But when I sang, I felt my fear and anguish. The words in my mouth surprised me. I had not expressed this level of feeling to anyone.

Despite my desperate attempt to find an opinion to the contrary, all the doctors agreed I had to start chemotherapy. I had, however, used up so much time going for additional opinions that the initial C/T scan was no longer valid and needed to be repeated. I bowed my head in defeat and went for a second C/T scan on January 10th, 1995.

The next day was raw, cold, and rainy; I left work around 6:30 PM for an appointment with Alan. I was tired, beaten and scared. I walked into a deli and bought three milk chocolate Hershey bars with almonds. I started eating one while I was on line to pay for them. By the time I crossed the street I needed more; I hit the drug store, got three more and walked the half block down 19th Street to Alan's place. These are the first words that I sang that night.

Chocolate was the anesthetic of choice

It's all about a cover up chocolate
Do I really want to be alive?
Maybe that's the important question
Do I really want to get through this or not?
Maybe I'd rather not make it
Maybe I would rather not make it
Every now and then I think I'd like to make it

It's been this way all my life
Chocolate food eating comfort
Not caring not caring

Wanting to give up not caring about myself
Struggle, struggle, struggle
Ugh.....ugh....agggh
Criticisms, criticisms, criticisms criticisms

You're no good
Lazy slovenly slovenly
Self-indulgent selfish self-indulgent

Crushing labels... crushing...crushing labels.....oh crushing
They crush the life right out of you

Alan played loud jagged chords in response to my moaning and yelling. Slowly, my turmoil subsided and we stopped making music. When I started again I sang a quiet da...ta...da..da.... Alan sang with me but did not play the piano. The music was lyrical and began to soar. As we sang I was moved to pray in the words from Luke's gospel.

My soul magnifies, my soul magnifies the Lord, my God
My spirit rejoices in God my Savior
My soul magnifies
My soul magnifies the Lord my God
And my spirit and my spirit rejoices in God
In God my Savior

I trust you my God see me through this darkness
I trust you my Lord walk me through this poison

The "poison" had a double meaning for me that night, the chocolate that was coursing through my body and the chemo that frightened me. A week later, Niki went with me to Sloan Kettering Medical Center to get the results of the Jan 10th C/T scan. The lymph nodes had shrunk somewhat, Dr. P noted. "The fact that the lymph nodes may wax and wane and, in your case, are now smaller, is insignificant. You have a stage 4 mantle cell lymphoma with bone marrow involvement; it's dangerous. You should have started treatment already. Don't you understand?" "I'm worried about what the chemo will do to my immune system," I said. "What do you think the cancer is doing to your immune system? There is no free lunch. You've already compromised your immune system by waiting so long." By now she was quite irritated. Niki and I walked out to the street and stared at each other. "I don't want to cry. I have to go to work." "Call me when you get home. We'll figure out something," she said.

We talked and talked and finally decided that I should go for another opinion. We both liked Dr. A. at NYU Medical Center from the first round of consultations, so I made an appointment to see him. Dr. A. studied the results of the second C/T scan and told me that Dr. P's opinion was valid, i.e., I could start treatment right away. However, since the lymph nodes had shrunk spontaneously, he felt we could wait a month. He emphasized that lymphoma is not curable; and predicted that we'd most likely start treatment after my visit the following month. It felt like a stay of execution.

Each day was a gift, I told myself again and again. I noticed that when I met with Alan, I barely sang about being grateful and joyous. Why? The anguish of my life surfaced in song. The critic inside me let loose.

You're not good enough.....you're not good enough

You eat too much

You don't pray enough

Your mind is scattered

You don't concentrate

You're not organized enough

You don't write in your journal enough

You eat too much

You always eat too much

You don't manage your time properly

You don't do any service

You're not good enough

Oh God, you love me as I am

How can I let that in?

I prayed to God everyday. I did not ask to be healed but rather to know his will for my life and to have the strength to follow it. I did ask for one thing however. "Lord, I don't mind dying, if this my time, help me to be ready. But, if possible, please keep me out of the hands of the doctors."

Looking back now I see that God put Alan in my path for a reason. Alan could hear my deep cry of sadness. He played music that didn't just respond to my words but pushed my emotional awareness and recognition into unexplored areas. Feelings of despair, silliness, fun, and fear spewed out of me. Sometimes he answered me with big dissonant clusters, and at others he tuned in to my tears and sighing with lilting melodies. He played fabulous jazzy blues as I belted out words, and there were times when we entered into an eerie world with whole tone or atonal music. When I tried to describe what Alan and I were doing, words failed me. One evening, my friend Helen listened to a tape from the session with the Magnificat. "That's beautiful! Does he write the music first?" she asked. "No, everything you hear is created on the spot." I said.

“There is so much richness and subtlety in his playing, I’ve never heard improvisations like these. And you - I didn’t know you were musical.” she said. “I didn’t either, but working with Alan has opened doors to touch a part of myself I didn’t know existed. Sometimes I get scared that it’s a fluke.” I said.

“Where do your melodies come from?” she asked.

“It’s like this,” I said. “Alan creates a field of green grass and crocuses when he plays the piano, and I get to run around in the field without shoes and socks. I wind up jumping, flying, walking, running and rolling on the grass, lyrics and melodies pouring out of me. I feel free and wild. I’ve come to see that I can’t make a mistake.”

When I went back a month later to see Dr. A, the lymph nodes had not grown. My blood work showed some anemia but nothing too serious.

“We can hold off on chemotherapy at this time,” said Dr. A., “Come back in two months and we’ll see what the lymph nodes are doing.”

I headed straight for the deli when I left his office, ate nine chocolate bars, and went home stuffed and sick.

I was supposed to be happy. I told my friends I was happy, but when I sang, despair and sadness flooded the improvisations.

*Woman why are you weeping?
Woman why are you weeping?
They’ve taken away my voice
They’ve taken away my song
They’ve taken away my voice and my song*

A month or so after I started working with Alan, I met Janet Savage, a soulful and passionate woman and singer. She was an experienced teacher and vocal coach. Over time I learned of her great gifts as a music director. She and I worked on my voice. Sometimes we improvised, and sometimes we did singing exercises.

We were working in my living room one Saturday afternoon. I played tapes from some of the sessions with Alan for her. I had played portions of these tapes for my friends who were often moved to tears, so I was not surprised when tears came to Janet’s eyes. However, her comment, unlike anyone else’s, changed my life.

“These are songs,” she said.

“What do you mean songs?” I let out a little yelp. “All that crying and shouting?”

She played back the portion of the tape after I scream, “Tell the truth” and I sing a plaintive melody.

*They tell me I’m sick
They tell me I’m sick
They tell me I’m sick*

“There are songs here,” Janet said taking my hand.

I didn't get it.

"And I think we should go through the tapes," she said smiling at me, "and pick out the songs. You and Alan should have a recital. You can do it right here in your house and invite your friends."

"What are you talking about, me sing for people? Impossible. My plate is full. I'm really busy at work; I'm heading up the new Learning Center for Con Edison. You can't be serious." I spoke rapidly, then stopped and stared at her.

Her voice softened. "You told me that people were really touched when they listened to your tapes and that you too are moved by this music."

"Well, yes, that's right." I stammered.

"So what I'm saying is, this music needs to be set down and heard, and you and Alan are the right people to do it."

My stomach churned.

"But Janet, what you're saying is very scary, it's not me. I'm not a singer. I'm a corporate type, a General Manager in human resources, and I'm good at it."

She saw that I was bewildered, even though she was clear in her mind about the importance of sharing this music. She encouraged me to sit with the idea awhile before deciding anything.

In the weeks before I saw her again, I prayed a lot. Maybe I should give this a shot. After all, I reminded myself, if the doctor is right, I could be pretty sick in a few months and who knows what comes after that. Niki thinks that I should go for it. I struggled trying to decide what to do.

I asked Alan what he thought about us performing the music for my friends. He was taken aback; it was a highly unusual idea. He needed time to think about it. Good, I thought. He'll say no and that will be that.

A week later Alan said, "Yes."

"Wow! Really?" I clapped my hands in surprise and delight.

By the time I got home I was frightened. What was I thinking, how did I get myself into such a mess? God, you got me into this situation, you better get me out of it, I prayed, trusting that somehow this would work out.

Janet worked systematically with a strong musical sense. We played the tapes and she pointed to and put together ballads, blues and jazzy tunes. They were on the tape but usually not in one place; she listened carefully to find the connections. The editing process was arduous yet it was deeply healing to me. She communicated that this work was important, not something to be filed away. I felt more and more alive because she listened so intently. She made something beautiful out of the tapes. I would have let them sit on a shelf.

In a matter of weeks she had selected ten songs from our tapes. Once we started rehearsing she coached us so we could perform the improvisations as songs.

"That's great. Now Maria when you sing the A flat don't slide into it from below, get into a parachute and land on it from above."

She's talking to me like she would talk to a singer. She thinks I get it, that I can do this. She's crazy! We'd try it again. I was astonished time and again when I was able to do what she suggested.

I started to plan the party. My friend Katina made a buffet of home cooked Greek food, light and fluffy filo dough on the tyropita (cheese pie,) and spanokopita (spinach pie,) rich mousaka, keftedakia (tiny meatballs) to melt in your mouth, feta, olives, the works. My friend Michael, a computer whiz, designed a festive program with confetti on the cover. We called the concert, Celebrating One Year: A Year Without Chemotherapy.

When I called to invite my friends, they were flabbergasted. Here I was a corporate manager dealing with a life-threatening illness, and I was inviting them to hear me sing. It didn't make sense to them, and it didn't make sense to me either, but that's what I was doing. Some had heard excerpts from the tapes, but no one thought this was going anywhere. If someone had told me when I was diagnosed that I would be singing I'd have said 'if pigs had wings they would fly.'

I became engrossed by the details of the party and wondered what I should wear. Niki and Janet and I discussed it, and we finally decided on a black velour jumpsuit with a fire red satin sash that tied around the waist and draped down the front of the jumpsuit.

I thought about wearing a gardenia in my hair, but wondered what my friends would think. I started to imagine Billie Holiday and her fragrant white flower. Would it be okay with her if I wore one? Yes. I called the florist and ordered a gardenia. The concert took place in my living room. I moved all the furniture to make more of a performance space. I rented a piano, had it placed in front of the 12-foot windows. When you entered the living room, the piano was the first thing you saw. The couch and chairs were moved to face the piano. The room was a little theater. I decided not to be at home as the guests arrived; instead I asked Niki to greet them. Alan, Janet and I met at my friend's apartment around the corner. Janet gave us warm up exercises, but I was so nervous, I kept excusing myself and running to the bathroom. We laughed as we walked over, Janet and Alan on either side of me. When we arrived at my apartment, I stepped into the bathroom, checked my makeup, and made my entrance on the stage of my living room.

I began by reading a piece from my journal describing the night I told Niki about the diagnosis. My voice cracked several times as I sang my first song "They Tell Me I'm Sick." The dead silence after the song intimidated me. I looked for my water, drank and continued, describing the murderous chocolate attack that led to the creation of the second song the "Magnificat." I breathed deeply and sang to God. At the end of this song, they clapped. The more I sang, the more relaxed I felt.

Singing the songs for my friends was one of the happiest days of my life. It was a shimmering, glistening hot pink day in the middle of November. I was flying. When I look at the photographs, I see myself smiling in joyous exuberance. I felt so alive singing my way through the anguish of my illness.

Janet and I debriefed the concert a week later. She urged me to schedule another concert as soon as possible. I was in disbelief, but I followed through with the ideas we had brainstormed and asked Fr. Christopher, my parish priest, if I might do a concert for our church community. He was enthusiastic about the idea. Sixty people came to hear me sing and cheer me on.

"That was great," Janet said, when we met at my house a few weeks after the concert at my church. "You need to keep singing but the next audience should not be exclusively your friends."

"I'm afraid, Janet."

"I'm sure you are, but keep going."

I discussed Janet's suggestion with Alan. Sharing these songs was changing me. I felt strong when I sang. I was standing up for myself and defeating the oppression that had squashed me all my life. Alan agreed and arranged for us to make a presentation in May 1996 at the Nordoff Robbins Center for Music Therapy at NYU. I spent a lot of time thinking about and creating the program. This time I decided to play portions of the tapes from the sessions with Alan, as well as to sing some of the songs.

Two days before the presentation, I went to a new hairdresser for a haircut. I wound up telling her the story about my cancer and my singing.

"May I come? My dear aunt has cancer; maybe this will help me," she asked.

"Please do," I said, and gave her the address, even though this was a presentation for music therapy professionals.

I was nervous the day of the concert but kept telling myself this was not entertainment. I didn't have to sound good. Would they think I had a lot of nerve standing up and singing when I couldn't really sing? Too bad, I was going ahead anyway. I walked into the room with the grand piano and sat with Alan as people arrived. I was touched when I saw my hairdresser take a seat.

Alan made some flattering statements about me in his introduction. I stared at the program, unwilling to take in what he had just said. At my turn to speak, I gave a brief overview of my illness and then sang. I took questions and comments from the audience as we went along. People gave me feedback on the spot.

A woman wearing a flowing dress in bright greens and blues raised her hand.

"Your Magnificat is lyrical and quite beautiful. I was moved," she said.

"Thank you. It could never have been created without Alan," I replied.

A man with a cane, who was legally blind, had taken a seat in the first row, "I noticed that you used the words 'Woman why are you weeping,' and I thought of the scene in the garden from John's gospel," he said.

I almost jumped for joy.

"Yes, that's exactly where it came from," I bubbled. As I talked about that gospel reading, and how it comforted me, I began to relax.

"Did the relationship to God start after you became ill?" asked a man with a beard sitting in the back of the room.

“No, he was very much in my life, but my relationship with God deepened significantly after I was diagnosed. I know I’m in God’s hands and not in the hands of the doctors. That gives me a lot of strength.”

“Do you write the lyrics first? Where do the melodies come from? How has the cancer changed your life? Do you study singing?” It was easier for me when audience members asked me questions than when they complemented me. A woman who was taking notes asked, “How do you feel singing for an audience?” I struggled with the answer. “I’m not sure how to describe it, but I feel free and whole. I’m amazed and deeply touched that people are not only willing to listen but want to talk to me about my experience. I like being noticed even while it makes me cringe.” That was as close to my experience as I could get.

“You seem quite outgoing and in charge. Being noticed can’t be unusual for you,” said a man wearing a black turtleneck.

“You’re right. At work, I’m in charge and comfortable in a leadership role, but in social and personal situations I’m always silent. I never know what to say, and I can’t imagine that anyone would be interested in me. I revert back to silence, the role I took growing up with a charming, outgoing, gorgeous mother and an artistic, brilliant, witty sister.”

I was flying high from the feedback that day. They were moved; I was surprised. By the next morning, a storm of self-criticism hit. The critic inside me was relentless. I simply could not take in so much positive attention, even though I was starved for it. Each time we were invited to present at a conference, I had to battle my critic. By sharing my struggle, I was standing up for myself and facing the judgment that had crushed me all my life.

Since then we’ve presented at many conferences including Beth Israel Hospital, the New School, the Training Institute for Mental Health, and the World Congress for Music Therapy. Each presentation has been different since Alan and I always have new music to share.

Janet encouraged me to have the music transcribed and to start singing lessons. She focused her attention on listening to tapes and helping me to identify songs as well as coaching us when we were preparing for a concert. She connected me to some fantastic jazz pianists, who help me to learn the songs once they have transcribed them. It’s interesting that improvisations we created effortlessly require many rehearsals before I can perform them. My voice has changed dramatically thanks to Deborah Carmichael, a remarkable singing teacher. Her approach makes it possible for me to bypass the scathing attacks of my internal critic. Alan and I have a copyright on dozens and dozens of songs with more to come.

By the spring of 2000 and I was just getting used to the fact that my cancer was in a “partial spontaneous remission” Yes, I knew that the oncologist believed it would become active at some point but he could not predict when. I was trying to live my life. I made a deal with my boss and changed from a full time job to part time employment. That was a tough agreement for him to come to but that’s another

story. I wanted to try writing and joined a workshop at the Creative Center: Arts for People with Cancer. Writing always frightened me but lately I came to see that maybe I could do it.

I attended the weekly writing workshops and struggled to start writing. One day the facilitator gave us a flyer announcing a new project at the Creative Center, we were invited to join a 4 month long effort to create a “performance installation.” The invitation specified a meeting the following Saturday to discuss details. I went because I liked the people I had met so far. That Saturday, Molly Sturges and three collaborating artists explained that we’d be meeting every Saturday for several months, with the goal of creating a “performance installation.” I did not understand what she was describing, her language, “story board” “blocking” “movement exploration”, “objects creating pieces” went right over my head but I was drawn to her and the other artists plus I really liked the other participants, several of whom came from the writing class.

This was the beginning of a fascinating process that eventually led to the creation of my performance piece. I was amazed as we went through the process because it didn’t have a logical outline. Somewhere in the middle, I still did not know what the performance would look like. We were continually improvising and creating, movements, sounds, video.

On July 26th 2000, an ensemble of 14 women from the Creative Center performed “Crossings” at Judson Memorial Church, and I was the lead off performer. Don’t ask me how that happened, I really don’t know. But there I was wearing white pants and top and a cherry red shawl over my shoulders. I stood in the middle of the stage and began an improvised vocal using small arm movements, calling the other performers into the space. I had a simple structure, start slow and stay there, then when the feeling was set, change to a quick jazzy tempo. I made it up on the spot and as in my work with Alan, improvising allowed me to feel comfortable; there was no way to make a mistake. The audience was thrilled and impressed with our creation and so were we, especially after the long months of work and uncertainty.

It was the “Crossings” experience that led me to ask Molly if the story of my cancer and singing could be made into a performance piece. She seemed deeply moved when she heard my story and songs and became enthusiastic about working with me to create a piece.

I was stepping out into unknown territory but felt so comfortable with Molly that I didn’t really focus on my fear too much. We worked together for several months writing a script for the performance. When we were almost finished Molly announced a life changing decision, she and her family were moving to Santa Fe and she would not be able to help me finish the piece.

Well, that’s the end of the performance piece I thought.

“You’ve accomplished so much, don’t drop this now, I’ll see which Director’s might be available” said Molly.

But I was disappointed and discouraged and thought of shelving the project. One day I was describing my dilemma to my friend Cinzia, an architect and a burgeoning video artist.

“This woman Molly who I’ve been working with for three months is leaving and I don’t know how to continue with the piece.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I’d like to finish it and perform it, of course.”

“Where would you perform it?”

“Well, Gerry the Director of the Creative Center has invited me to perform it there. She’s excited that something is coming from the work on “Crossings.”

Cinzia looked at me, smiled and responded with a self assured look.

“So don’t stop now, go ahead”

“I can’t, I don’t know what to do.”

“What does Molly say?”

“She thinks I should continue”

“I do too, it sounds so exciting, I’ve always loved theater and I’ve dreamed of directing a theater piece. When I was a kid I used to direct plays with my friends. It was a bright spot in my difficult childhood.”

“Really. I never heard you speak about that.”

“I rarely do.”

“Well why don’t you take over for Molly?” I said, without thinking but delighted with the idea.

“Oh Maria, that doesn’t make sense, I don’t have any experience.”

“Ha! that’s great, it makes two of us; listen, please come and meet Molly and let’s talk about the possibility of us making this thing happen---two neophytes-why not?”

Cinzia was intrigued, I could see that and I felt safe with her and trusted her. Molly had put the word out to other directors but she came up empty handed. When she met Cinzia they clicked. Molly worked hard to make us self sufficient, meeting with us twice a week for the five weeks prior to her departure. Cinzia began creating ideas for a video that would fill out the piece. Video never occurred to Molly but when she heard Cinzia’s ideas she embraced them enthusiastically. By the time Molly left, the script was almost finished.

Cinzia and I were on our own; she went through my photographs, scanned them and continued to create video footage. She chose a photo of me as a three year old child with a pensive almost sad look---no smile. I remember that I was always told to smile but I didn’t do it easily. She planned to use this photo with my song “Woman why are you weeping” where I cry out

I have no voice, they’ve taken away my voice.

Cinzia created a gorgeous set that fit well in the setting of the Creative Center, covering the back of the stage with an off white opaque fabric hanging a sheer pale sand colored panel at approximately center stage. To the left and close to the front she hung a narrow black sheer curtain. The video was projected onto these fabrics. I sang about the “Rats in cellar” while I stood behind the black fabric, shining a flashlight into the dark. Then I slowly pulled the curtain down beginning the defeat of the darkness.

On November 9, 2001, with four musicians (Helen Yee, violin, Todd Isler, percussion, Justin Flynn, sax/clarinet/flute/bass clarinet, Jon Cowherd and Matthew Fries, piano/music director) and Cinzia Sarto’s shimmering video projections I performed the theater piece to an enthusiastic house at the Creative Center.

Many people felt that one performance was not enough and encouraged me to perform it again. Six months later, in April 2002 the theater piece had a four performance run at the Blue Heron Arts Center on East 24th St in Manhattan. We used many of the same elements as at the Creative Center but made several changes, adding songs and using thick ropes instead of sheer fabrics. The same marvelous musicians played.

In March 2002 our first CD “Do I Dare Imagine.” came out. It features Alan Turry on piano and vocals, Helen Yee on violin and Andy Salcius on cello.

I kept working on the theater piece and added a Greek Chorus to make the story richer and more complete. “And You Gave Me Music,” the new theater piece was presented in August 2003 at The New York International Fringe Festival.

A new development presented itself in 2004 when several organizations invited me to facilitate workshops about music and it’s power to heal. The focus was on using music to help others find deeper expression and authenticity.

Janet’s family responsibilities gradually made her less available and I turned to Jon Cowherd who had transcribed so many songs. He began to help me select the portion of an improvisation that could become a song. He transcribed and arranged more than a dozen songs many of which we presented at a concert in 2006 celebrating my more than 10 years of remission.

I continue to seek opportunities to present my story and music, performing is a healing experience for me.

I see the oncologist regularly, he evaluates the lymph nodes and my blood work; the lymphoma continues in a “partial remission.” This is called a “watch and wait”

period. Statistics show that lymphomas can go into an “indolent” phase, as mine has, but in most cases they eventually become active and require treatment. The oncologist can’t predict when that might be in my case.

As I look back now, I know that the experience forced me to decide whether or not I was going to fight for my life. I was going beyond my cancer to my lifelong depression and my own oppression. I discovered as I improvised with Alan that

I have no voice

I would not have used that expression before, but it came out of the music. Somehow, I was able to give it sound, and to express my feelings in a way that I had never done in my life. Images of silence, oppression and darkness abound in the improvisations. I have often been overwhelmed and full of tears.

I know now what I could never have seen initially: how perfect this solution is for me. I asked God for help. He knew that my lifelong anguish was about silence and oppression. What could make me feel better in the face of crushing pain and silence? UTTERANCE.

So he led me to music. Why music? Because music reaches me so deeply. The music made it possible for me to go into my hunger, my fear, and my anguish. I have taken a journey deep into my underworld and I have come back changed.

I am a Gardenia