

IN EVERY ISSUE

Surfer Wisdom

BY MARK LAWLESS

A random yet profound connection in the waiting room provides much needed inspiration.

Hospital waiting areas are basically the same. A television is on. For some, it's a convenient distraction. For others, their preoccupation with why they're in the waiting area in the first place leaves them disoriented. A receptionist checks in patients—their palpable energy charged by anticipation, trepidation and fear. It was in the waiting area of the cancer center where I work that I rediscovered

My role as a clinical social worker in a Northeastern cancer center brings me to the waiting area every day to listen and assess the climate. Like surfing, my professional training has taught me to be respectful of what lies beneath the surface. It often takes a lot of time and tact to assess the waters or to engage someone meaningfully. One Friday morning in early fall my personal experience gave me a short cut.

I overheard a man talking about having recently returned from the West Coast, where he had an opportunity to surf with his son. “Man, it is hard to believe that just two weeks ago I was surfing with my son. Now I'm getting radiation,” he said. This was his first day of radiation therapy for brain cancer.

Taking the risk of sounding unprofessional, I said, “It's not every day here that I can welcome a brother surfer.” His response amazed me. After a few exchanges about familiar and coveted breaks in an otherwise disregarded New England state, he said, “Oh, this is great. I was really scared to be here today. Just talking about surfing has put my mind at ease.” The sincerity on his face gave depth to his sentiment.

He was free to express with enthusiasm an aspect of his life that only a privileged few share with him. “Just being in the water puts life in perspective. I need to get out more frequently,” he said.

To hear this from him was one of those wake-up calls you get when you aren't expecting it. At 58, he was facing the fight of his life against an opponent only seen with advanced imaging technology. His prescribed treatments would

inevitably take their toll on him—spiritually, mentally and physically. But his passion for the ocean brought him the greatest ease and solace. He emanated a soulful connection with the vast greatness of the ocean. For him, being a surfer was not an image, but rather a fundamental component of life. He was generous to share his time, experience and wisdom with me, reminding me of what I had lost perspective on.

Soon after, on one Saturday afternoon I sat in my old blue Volvo, radio on but not really listened to, preoccupied by the sea before me. I watched the gulls, some gliding gracefully while others skirmished for their next meal. Unable to see the break from the parking lot, I ran the 50 yards from the lot to the shore. Yes! There was a wave and not a soul in the water.

I raced back to my car and like a contortionist squeezing into a small box, I donned the four mils of neoprene necessary to protect me from the elements. (That's a wetsuit for the non-surfers out there.) I carefully removed my 10-foot nose rider from the racks atop my car, pausing momentarily to assess its wear. Each yellowed ding is a memory etched in my mind of a trip, a friend or a perfect day.

With my board under my arm I ran back to the beach. On my knees, I offered a quick prayer before becoming immersed in the 50-degree humbling baptismal.

Needless to say I surfed into the night on that Saturday. Alone but for the schools of striped bass throughout the session, I was one with the universe. I returned to work on Monday, back to the waiting room, grounded and in tune. "Thanks for the inspiration," I said to my fellow surfer as he approached me from the treatment area.