

# Insight

By Kurt Smidt-Jernstrom, MDiv, MA

"I asked to see you over an hour ago!" she complained as I entered her room and introduced myself. Judy looked slightly older than her 44 years with thick gray hair that had been styled short in preparation for the surgery. A volatility that had plagued her most of her life, manifested itself in the furrows on her brow. Annoyed that she was missing work because of her surgery—to remove a tumor that had engulfed an ovary—and aggravated by the pain she was experiencing, she tyrannized the nursing staff activating the call light continuously as if the mere act of pushing on the device would palliate her impatience.

"I came as soon as I could," I replied, trying not to become defensive. "Anyway, I'm here now."

"I can't reach anyone on this phone! What's more, the doctor says I'm ready to leave the hospital tomorrow. I am not ready to leave yet." The tone of her voice betrayed a hint of something besides frustration ... anxiety, perhaps. I pulled up a chair next to her bedside table and sat down.

She recited a litany of unmet expectations: family and coworkers not visiting more often, hospital staff seemingly unable to figure out what she needed, even God had let her down. "What kind of God allows a person to get cancer?" she demanded to know. Judy was angry with the hospital staff; angry at her illness and the limitations it had imposed on her, angry with her family and coworkers, and angry with herself. She had always been able to wield her anger effectively; and it bothered her that lately her anger had seemed to be losing its power. She had used it to break through institutional as well as relational barriers—"getting things done," "get-

ting people to move," and this in turn, enabled her to foster the semblance of control in her life. Judy abhorred uncertainty and tentativeness, and resented having to wait for anything or anyone.

A recent divorce had left her feeling embittered. Furious about the settlement, she blamed the judge for being biased and not understanding the rationale of her side of the suit. One of Judy's colleagues argued the case and was quite persuasive Judy thought. The whole contentious process created a deep resentment in her that grew as time passed, as if it were something alive inside of her.

After the divorce was finalized, Judy became sullen and irascible. At work, the least frustration provoked her and she lashed out at whomever was closest, which created resentment and anxiety among her colleagues. At some point, she began to have a sense that something was amiss, something was happening with or to her, but it was all so vague. She had been feeling under the weather: a cold, a fever, a slight discomfort—or rather a sense of fullness in her abdomen—none of which were going away. She was finding it difficult to concentrate on her work so she decided to get to the bottom of it all and see the doctor. The appointment was inconclusive; the doctor wanted her to return for a test. She became suspicious. *Why not just prescribe some medication and be done with all of this? Why was it taking so long to figure out what's wrong?*

At a follow-up appointment she was told the diagnosis: a tumor was growing on one of her ovaries, and it was uncertain if, or how far it had spread. "Tumor? You mean cancer?" She was not aware of raising her voice.

Rattled, she left quickly without making any decisions about the next step.

A few days afterward, Judy vaguely recalled the doctor having mentioned SURGERY saying that the need was URGENT. She was unsuccessful in attempting to compartmentalize these troublesome words. They would not remain in her mental file cabinet that she could open and close at will. Finally, in order to settle the matter, she decided to call the doctor. Presenting the evidence, the doctor convinced Judy of the need for surgery, and she reluctantly scheduled time off from work. She thought: *Why does it feel as if I'm admitting that I'm wrong?*

As I sat beside her, listening to her recollections, I noticed that the tone in her voice was changing. I sensed in it something like regret. When I asked her how the surgery went, she replied thoughtfully, "Fine, I guess, but it seems the cancer has spread. She looked down and then looked directly at me. "I have a question for you. Do you think ..." she began, "... that anger can cause cancer?"

Momentarily taken aback by her question, I wondered: *Is she really seeking a medical answer to this question, or is there something on a deep level that is working its way into her consciousness?*

"Are you wondering if perhaps *your* anger might have caused *your* cancer?" I asked.

She fought back tears as she began recounting instances in her life when her angry outbursts had alienated others—family, coworkers, friends. Her illness was forcing her to confront the limits of her control, and when she allowed herself to think about it all, she could begin to see the destructiveness of her anger. ♦

**Kurt Smidt-Jernstrom, MDiv, MA**, is currently a chaplain at Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center in Clackamas, Oregon. He has previously worked as a pastoral counselor with KP Northwest Hospice.

