

# Whispers on the Web

A Monthly Online Newsletter for WebWhispers

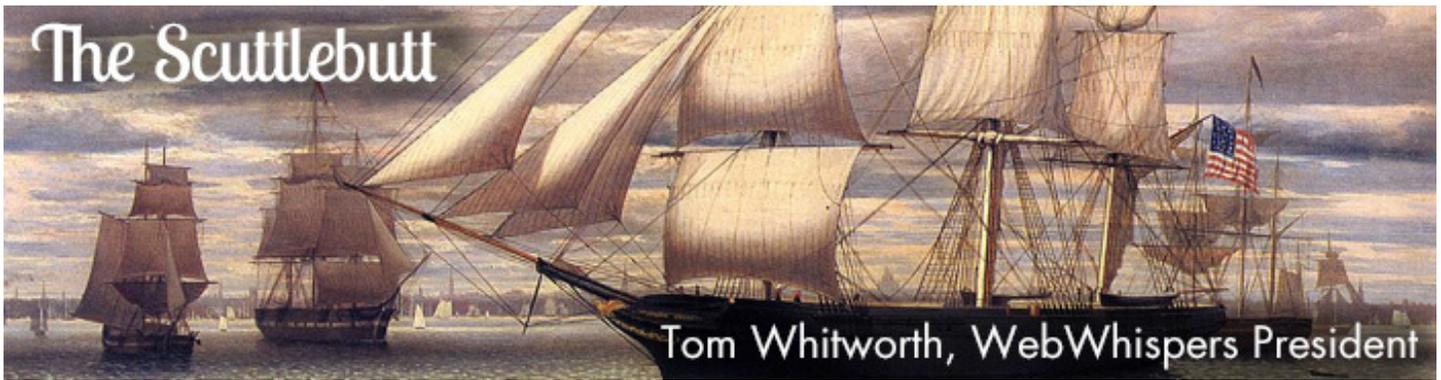
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*December 2018*



## Table of Contents

Name Of Column	Author	Title	Article Type
The Scuttlebutt	Tom Whitworth	Damaged Goods?	Commentary
VoicePoints	Linda Stachowiak MS/CCC-SLP BCS-S	Travel Tips For Larys	Education-Med
Between Friends	Donna McGary	Paying It Forward	Commentary
Stand By Me	Ron Mattoon	Taking Care Of My Caregiver	Caregiver Experiences
Dear Lary	Noirin Sheahan	Thoughts and Feelings	Commentary
My Neck of the Woods	Pradip Kumar Lakiri	New Voices In India	Member Experiences
Speaking Out	Members	What Are You Most Thankful For	Commentary
From The Archives	Len A. Hynds	A Christmas Story	



## Damaged Goods?

In this new world of ours, I have so often come across people who are beating themselves up over head & neck cancer, especially we laryngectomees and others whose natural voice was taken by it. Not everything we deal with has to do with voice and communicating. Frustration with changes in physical appearance are pretty much universal in Laryland. Online and elsewhere we encounter those focused on such things, who feel they are damaged goods, will never be like they were, feel minimized, useless, and even ugly. I suspect each of us has felt that way at some point. Piggybacking on their choice of words, I often respond privately with something like “if you are damaged goods, so am I. I assure you neither of us is!”. Though we may struggle with finding it, I truly believe we are spared for a purpose. The story below says it better than me.

### The Broken Pot ~ Unknown

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on an end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master’s house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master’s house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream.

“I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you.”

“Why?” asked the bearer. “What are you ashamed of?”

“I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master’s house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don’t get full value from your efforts.” the pot said.

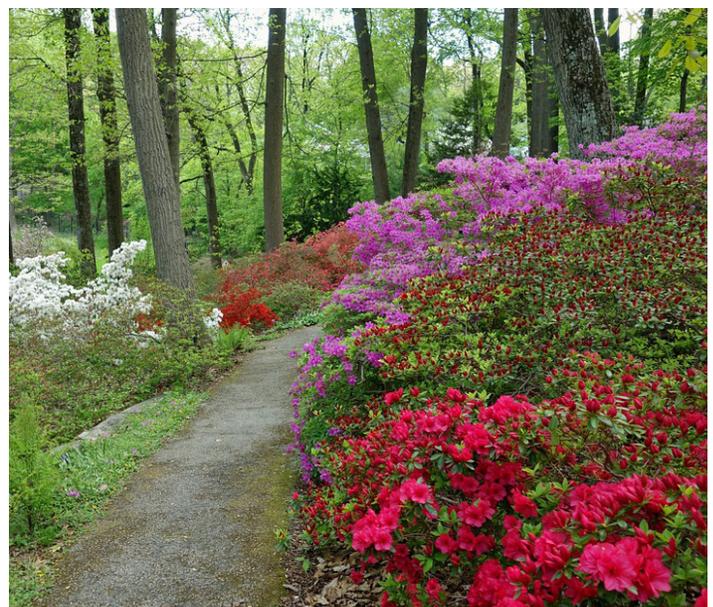
The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he said, “As we return to the master’s house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.”

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again the Pot apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you’ve watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my masters table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house.”

Now, go water some flowers.

**Enjoy, laugh, and learn,  
Tom Whitworth  
WebWhispers President**





# Voice Points

Written by Professionals

Coordinated by Kim Almand M.S., CCC-SLP

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## Laryngectomy Traveling Tips By Linda Stachowiak MS/CCC-SLP BCS-S

Most laryngectomees over the years have told me that traveling as a laryngectomee is not much different than before they had their surgery! The first tip sheet I developed for laryngectomees who travel entitled “Laryngectomees on the Road” focused on the traveling laryngectomee that encountered problems with their TEP (tracheo-esophageal voice prosthesis) when away from home. This brief article is going to focus on all laryngectomees, regardless of the means of alaryngeal speech used to communicate.

The question I would ask myself as a laryngectomee prior to departing on a trip is “What is different with me now than when I had my voice box (larynx)?” I think the answer to this question will assist in any “pre-planning” that you may require. For example, if since your surgery you need to be fed through a tube in your stomach or you need to be on oxygen, you will need to be sure that any special equipment or supplies can travel with you or be available at your destination. For example if traveling by air, check with your carrier to learn their specific rules and regulations for carrying special medical supplies (like oxygen). For most laryngectomees without “special needs” the main changes that have occurred since surgery are the way they communicate (electrolarynx, esophageal voice, TEP (tracheo-esophageal voice prosthesis) or paper/pencil) and how they breathe (stoma/hole in neck). Some methods of communication require special accessories or supplies and others don’t.

Be sure that additional supplies will be available so that you won’t have any interruption in your ability to communicate and get your needs met!

### Stoma Care – Basic Supply Check List

- Small portable mirror
- Small portable light
- Tissues/gauze
- Saline bullets (to lavage and mobilize secretions)
- Tweezers (long-handles are best)
- Stoma covers
- Stoma filters (HME’s – Heat Moisture Exchangers)
- Stoma buttons/tubes (if worn regularly)

Weather conditions can often affect the amount/type of secretions that a laryngectomee may encounter. Most laryngectomees encounter these changes even when they don’t travel, just by experiencing different weather conditions in their hometowns. Even climates that don’t have a significant change in seasons experience some changes in weather conditions. We often see a change in Florida when our hot/humid weather becomes colder and drier and we are in need of turning our heat on in our houses. When we travel, the means by which we get to our destination (plane, train, bicycle, car, boat, camel etc..) as well as the weather conditions at our final destination can contribute to these alterations.

Most larynegctomees at some point have experienced their stomal secretions becoming drier and crustier because of a lack of humidification. The key to reversing these symptoms is to add moisture to the air breathed through the stoma or to the stoma

### Communication Options

Means of alaryngeal communication	Accessories/supplies
Electrolarynx	Batteries specific for your device Charger if rechargeable batteries are used
TEP (tracheo-esophageal voice prosthesis)	See Traveling Hints for TEP users: “Laryngectomees on the Road” article
Esophageal Speech	None
Paper/Pencil	Paper/Pencil

itself. Using an HME (Heat Moisture Exchanger) like those available from InHealth Technologies and Atos Medical can filter and warm the air keeping secretions thinned and reduced in volume. Lavaging the stoma is another way of adding moisture and expectorating secretions.

#### Heat Moisture Exchanger

Lavaging the stoma (pronounced la vaj ing) is a French word which means “to cleanse”. Laryngectomees are encouraged to squirt 5-10



cc of saline solution into their stoma to stimulate a cough and bring up secretions/mucous from their lungs. We encourage patients to do this 3-5 times daily. Homemade saline solution can be made with the above noted recipe or pink saline “bullets” can be purchased at your pharmacy or through InHealth Technologies or Atos Medical.



Former patients have also shared some of their “tricks of the trade” on keeping stoma secretions moist. This includes “misting” a stoma cover with water prior to wearing it to moisten the air breathed through the stoma; running the shower on hot with the door closed, giving you the “steam room effect”; drinking more water or filling the bathtub up with steaming water, letting it sit in the tub adding humidity to the air while attending to other bathroom needs!

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## Laryngectomees On The Road

Educating patients on the nature of their surgery, plan for rehabilitation and long-term outcomes is often a routine component of most speech pathologist’s plan of care for the total laryngectomy patient. For those laryngectomees that have a tracheoesophageal voice prosthesis, the education is often more complex because of the ongoing attention that a voice prosthesis requires. As a clinician who works in Florida, I am often contacted by a “snowbird” (ie part-time Florida resident) who has run into problems with their prosthesis while temporarily residing in the sunshine state. Assistance to a laryngectomy who is unfamiliar to you as a clinician, can present it’s fair share of challenges! A patient who is well-versed on their care and prepared for the “unexpected”

visit to an unfamiliar clinician in an unfamiliar facility can be made easy with some advanced preparation/planning. I’d like to take this opportunity to share this “checklist” of thoughts with you that you in turn can share with your laryngectomee patients who are lucky enough to travel and spend time away from their primary residences for periods of time. Hopefully it will put their minds to ease knowing they are prepared to travel outside of their comfort zone when encountering TEP problems while traveling.

#### Procedural Variability:

There is much variation from facility to facility on procedure(s) for stocking and carrying voice prosthesis. Some facilities have all brands in stock, other’s only carry very specific manufacturers or types. Some facilities will bill your insurance for you and yet other facilities require you to bring a prosthesis with you. Please be aware that facilities do differ and you may be required to do something different than you have been expected to do in the past (example: order and pay for a prosthesis on your own knowing that there is a possibility that you may not be reimbursed by your insurance when independently purchasing the device)

#### Size/Type:

Knowing the size and the type of prosthesis you wear is critical. If the clinician carries prosthesis at his/her facility they can check ahead of time and be sure they have your size. If you carry a “spare” with you, that is even better.

#### Insurance specifics:

Does your insurance require prior authorization? If so, have the number you need to call for that authorization available to you when traveling.

#### Prescriptions:

In order for a clinician to see you and bill your insurance, they need a prescription from your MD. Most physicians are more than willing to give a patient a prescription prior to traveling that states “TEP replacement/troubleshooting” for emergency cases. At the very least, have your MD’s contact information available so that they may be contacted for a prescription if need be.

#### Speech Pathologist:

Most Speech Pathologists who work with the laryngectomy population are familiar with other clinicians who do the same in various parts of the country. They may have an emergency contact available for you before you begin your travel or may be able to search out a clinician with a little advance notice through professional networking sites.

#### Patient specific “issues”:

Some patients have “special needs or unique anatomy” that may require some special care or attention. This may be that their TEP tract closes down easily and needs to be over-dilated prior to insertion of a new prosthesis....OR maybe there prosthesis looks a bit long but shorter prosthesis in the past have caused problems so they stay with a slightly longer one that isn’t the “perfect” fit....always share these special circumstances with the Speech Pathologist that is seeing you for the first time. Making the visit a pleasant and successful one is the ultimate goal!

# Between Friends

Donna McGary

"That which does not kill us makes us strong."

Photo CC by Corack5239

## Paying It Forward

Being Grateful is a common theme this time of year and, frankly, one we can and should embrace all year round. I am a grateful recipient of many of the services provided by WebWhispers. In particular the Loan Closet came to my rescue the Christmas my Dad was in home-based hospice care and I dropped my only working Servox on the floor. I was devastated and already feeling overwhelmed. Pat Sanders put in a special call to Roger Johnson, the LC manager at the time, and a Servox was on its way overnight to me. It made all the difference to me and my family at that difficult time in our lives.

Four years later and now the Loan Closet is under my custodial care and I am profoundly aware of the difference an EL voice can make in someone's life. As I wrote earlier this year WW had been blessed with an abundant of riches when it came to ELs and related equipment from donations over the years. We were able to re-distribute a number of these "voices" to folks across the globe and still maintain a nice selection for our own WW Loan Closet.

All this would not be possible without the ongoing support of all our members, larys, caregivers and vendors. For the folks we serve I am their WW contact so I get the thank-you but their heart-felt appreciation should really go out to all of you. Your generosity in donating equipment and money as well as moral support help keep the loan closet and our other services thriving.

Most of the Loan Closet requests are fairly routine; someone needs a back-up while theirs is in for repairs, an SLP needs a loaner for a patient who can't afford one or just wants to see if it will work for them. We try to accommodate any request just asking that they or their

SLP or caregiver join WebWhispers (Free and Easy). To be honest we do have some folks who have taken advantage of us...but not enough to make us stop our mission to give folks a voice.

I would like to share a story that is a perfect example of how WebWhispers makes a difference. Earlier this year I received an email from a social worker at a shelter for abused women. She was trying to find out information about a voicing device (which she knew nothing about) for a client. The woman had recently escaped a long-time abusive relationship and when she tried to leave her husband had stolen her EL (she was a laryngectomee) and all her credit cards and identification so she had no resources to access insurance etc. The social worker had no knowledge of ELs and had a hard time understanding what the woman needed using just pen and paper. How the social worker found us is beyond me but she must have been diligent. We were able to send her (maintaining her client's confidentiality) a complete Servox kit w/ batteries, chargers everything. This hit all of us hard... the cruelty was unfathomable. BUT...a month or so later I received something in the mail ...no return address but it was a handwritten card from LOTS of folks from the shelter all saying THANK YOU!!

YOU all own that...for supporting the WW organization however you can...you make that possible.

Celebrate Life....

Donna

PS And for those who remember... "Merry Cheezits"

# Stand By Me

## The Caregivers Journey



### Taking Care Of My Caregiver

When I had my throat cancer 4 times and many other surgeries to follow my wife was always there for me. She was a nurse for over 43 years so it was in her nature but also out of love. I was very lucky as she knew what to do although the laryngectomy was new to her, so we learned together. I used to think that I wanted to pass on before my wife, however I learned a new view when she was diagnosed with a very rare lung cancer. She put up a great fight and was on chemo for 2 years. They tried 7 different chemo drugs and Immunotherapy. We reached a time when the chemo was causing more harm than it helped so it had to be stopped. We knew then that it was only a matter of time. We cherished every moment we had together and celebrated our over 45 years of marriage. She was awarded the WebWhispers Caregiver award for her help with me and others in the local area as well as through WebWhispers.

I now had become the caregiver but was honored to be there for her. I realized that I was so glad that I was there for her when she needed me. I could not even imagine her being going through this without help. Her last weeks were very hard as she could only sleep about an hour before she would be gasping for air. I would sleep with my hand on her so I would know when she needed me. The last days in intensive care were just before Christmas. I would not leave her side. My son realized that I needed some rest so he sent me home and stayed with her for a few hours. My son and my granddaughter brought in some Christmas decoration to decorate her room when they came in.

Christmas was her favorite time of the year and time she would always find someone to help. My son went down to get some coffee while she slept and when he came back the nurses she worked with, had papered her room with paper snowflakes and paper Christmas trees, they had made for her. She awoke the next morning to see it all. She was on a breathing machine to help her and that morning she told us it was time to remove it. Later that day she passed in my arms, peacefully asleep.

She was also honored by a plaque put in the healing garden at the hospital where she worked to dedicate her service to the hospital and to nursing.

My life will never be the same but it is all worth everything so I could be there for her.

Ron Mattoon  
2010 Seattle

*This is the plaque that the hospital put in their healing garden.  
It was Janine's poem and I designed the plaque*



### I WANT TO BE A NURSE

From the time I was little, a Nurse I wanted to be.  
This was my heart's desire probably before I was three.

Finally came the day... to college I would go  
To become a Nurse... was the only dream that I know.  
Nursing School was not easy, but I made it through...

For my love of Nursing really is true.

Thirty-seven years later at Highline

I still love what I do.

If you want to become a nurse, come and join us too.

By: Janine Mattoon

Not all angels have wings, some wear scrubs!

1951 – 2017

In Loving Memory

# Dear Lary

Noirin Sheahan

## Thoughts and Feelings

So much of our behaviour is based on feelings rather than rational thought. After laryngectomy I was feeling almost continuous anxiety for several months. I had to steel myself before visiting hour, dreading the communication gap. But afterwards I almost invariably felt happier. Each meeting gave me a much-needed confidence boost.

It was a long time before I began to be able to put words on my feelings. It happened while I was staying with friends Pat and Margaret. Some other friends had arranged to call, to take me out for a walk. I got cold feet just before the event and told Pat I didn't feel up to it. "Why not?" he asked. "Not being able to talk" I scrawled on my whiteboard. "I'd only spoil the fun." "That's not true" he said, "OK you can't talk, but you're still Noirin. People still want to be with you. They still see you as the same person." My heart leaped. Suddenly I felt on top of the world, and greeted my friends enthusiastically when they arrived. We walked along the seaside. We had a couple of dogs with us and I laughed heartily (if silently) as they chased after stones and carried them back so proudly in their mouths as if they were precious jewels. I felt genuinely happy and had a lovely afternoon and evening.

I had really needed to hear Pat's words. It's not that I had ever really said to myself "No one wants me around, now that I can't speak". It was more that I "felt" the thought, rather than thought it 'out loud' so to speak.

Feelings aren't rational. They are so often based on underlying fears and attachments. I'd built up an attachment to my persona as someone who could speak fluently. So much good feeling had always followed from fluent conversation. Might simply be an 'Ah...' or "I know what you mean", "Oh I see", "Really?", "Mmmm ...", "OK" or even just a goggle. These are called 'conversation fillers'. They keep a conversation going, encourage whoever is speaking, and indicate interest even if we can't make a more meaningful response. They're ways of communicating a friendly connection without having to think out something original to say in response.

I couldn't scribble conversation fillers on a whiteboard – they just looked foolish. I'd be nodding and smiling like crazy in an effort to compensate, but it never pressed those magic 'feel-good' buttons for me. Where I used to get little jots of happy feeling as I played my part in a conversation, I'd now get little

jots of anxiety as I missed each chance to contribute. The social confidence that had been based on happy feelings turned to self-doubt based on anxious feelings.

Thank goodness for family and friends who stuck by me, helped me not to believe my self-doubt. Nowadays I'm more able to feel the anxiety without letting it influence my behaviour or self-belief.

I can't pretend it's over. I still get pangs of grief at times as I think back to the joy of easy conversation and reflect that this is over for me now. Joan Didion's book "The Year of Magical Thinking" recounts the first year of mourning for her husband's death when she often denied his death with magical thinking e.g. refusing to give away his shoes because she knows he will need them when he returns. I have to admit to occasions of magical thinking about my voice – and this is five years later. My magic is some sort of a healing miracle – bound to come my way one of these days! I don't really take these thoughts seriously, but they give me that happy feeling for a few seconds. Happy feelings are hard to resist!

Addicted to happy feelings as I am, what helps me through is to focus on experience mindfully. Then I see the edge of anxiety that surrounds my happy feeling. When we're clinging to happiness with magical thinking, we're not really relaxed. Not really happy deep down. It's an effort to generate magical thoughts. Within the honest gaze of mindfulness, the thoughts stop, and with this, the happy feeling fades too. Where to go from here? I cast around for something to hold on to. What I find more easily nowadays is comfort in the simple sense of presence. Thoughts and feelings come and go, but the sense of presence remains. So does the willingness to be present, to keep looking for whatever might be reliable within the shifting world of thoughts and feelings.

Though my year of magical thinking has stretched to five and beyond, I have confidence that I'm gradually growing into my new role in life. Letting go of confidence that was based on feeling good. Learning that feeling bad isn't the end of the world. The sense of presence continues there too. And sooner or later the feeling changes.

Feelings change. Thoughts based on feeling change too. Presence is ever-present. Worth getting to know.



## New Voices In India

Pradip Kumar Lakiri

**Voice is the media of sharing ideas  
in between two human beings.**

**SELF INTRODUCTION:** Twenty-five years back I lost my voice due to cancer. I lost all interest in life, but Life did not stop here. By using food pipe (oesophagus) as my vocal media I started practicing sound day and night at my own effort. One day I heard myself. This was the stepping stone of voice restoration and eventually by articulation via the tongue, throat, nose, jaw, etc. I started speaking normally in a harsh voice. Unfortunately, in our country speech therapy in natural way was not available. Even now it is rarely available in India.

**ENHANCEMENT OF SPEECH:** Luckily Japan International Corporate Association (JICA) used to provide an advance training for the Laryngectomee survivors in Tokyo for those who could at least start talking.

**MISSION:** This training was specifically for development of speech with an idea that this training could be shared with many cancer survivors. With the help of three months advance training my voice was not only reached near to normal, but also it was the foundation for assisting many unfortunate mute persons so they could get their voice back. Coming from Japan I thought of sharing my experience with the laryngectomee patients who were leading a mute and traumatic life. I was waiting for the suitable opportunity;

**JOINING CRC:** One day I got the opportunity to fulfil my mission. Doctor Sultan Pradhan, and eminent cancer surgeon, God Father of Prince Aly Khan Hospital, who desired to start service for the laryngectomee patients, was searching for a person like me who could give them a voice back by providing necessary training In his Cancer Rehabilitation Clinic (CRC) where cancer survivors were already used to provide counselling mastectomy cancer patients with the help of a mastectomy survivor Mrs. Anita Vesuvala. As desired by Dr. Pradhan, Mrs. Anita met me in a conference and requested me to join with them. I took the opportunity and started my journey. We formed a dedicated group of survivors and volunteers to provide speech therapy to the laryngectomee patients

### OUR TRAINING PROCESS:

- To convince and motivate patients and their relatives for taking speech training.



- Assisting them to provide necessary prosthesis like stoma cover, bath apron, electronic machine, etc, which are required in their daily life.
- Conduct necessary exercises which is absolutely necessary for the Laryngectomee patient.
- Guiding them to take proper dieting which is also absolutely necessary for a newly recovered patient.
- Assisting to find out cheap accommodation in Mumbai.
- Distributing free ration to the needy patients through our donors.
- Finally conducting speech therapy training twice a week.

This training is continuous from six weeks to sixteen weeks to get their voice back. However, those who are not able to pick up voice training due to age, health problems, and those who come from a long distance of other provinces or outside of our country, we provide them an Electro Larynx. By limited training they quickly achieve their sound. We believe in group training which is consisting of patient, volunteers and close relatives of the patient. This system is totally followed in the line of Japanese training which we obtained by undergoing their system

**RESULT:** We are proud that we have already rendered our services for more than a few thousand patients since two decades who are enjoying normal life by coming out of trauma. We are able to give all this services with full support of the Hospital Authority. Without their sincere cooperation it would not be possible us to get our mission successful.

**CONCLUSION:** It is to be noted that Oesophageal speech therapy is rarely available in and around Mumbai and even in India also. We started with the patient of Prince Aly Khan Hospital. Now a days we provide this facility to the patient from other hospitals like Tata, Nair, Saifee, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Hospital, BARC Hospital and others. We are proud that Nair Hospital is regularly sending internee speech therapists to get the training of our method. Our success rate is 95 to 100 percent. Our resolution is Cancer is not the cancellation of life.

I am also proud that I had cancer.



## **As a Survivor, What Are You Most Thankful For?**

My family is the most important thing in my life; speaking of life, I thank God every day for another day.

Thankful, grateful, blessed I am!!!!

**Linda Kromm - Shannon, IL**  
**My surgery was 10-19-17**

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I am so thankful, I have survived. You realize value of life even more as a survivor.

Every day I hear someone or the other, passing away due to some cancer. There is a lot to be thankful for, for not being part of that statistics.

I do not miss, not being able to talk. I would have missed not being able to live. Gift of life deserves, endless thankfulness.

**Mohan Raj - Bangalore India**  
**Mar 2010**

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Thankful that I have the best wife in the world. My surgery was May 14th. 2018 and then July 5 I was back in the Hospital for a fistula repair surgery and then I had to wait until the end of August for the swallow.

**Mike Barndt – Lancaster, PA**

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What am I Most Thankful For - A few things. First, a competent doctor who knew what he was doing that guided me through the process, and who I am still seeing 10 years later. Second, WebWhispers. As everyone knows, information remains limited concerning laryngectomy related issues. WebWhispers has remained at the forefront in providing patients and family members and/or loved ones with relevant information. Last and most important...I am thankful for my wife who has stood beside me along the way to ensure the best decisions are being made and just standing beside me.

**Mike Smith – North Augusta, SC**  
**9-11-2008**

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The past thirty years.

**Carolyn Anderson - Whiting, NJ**  
**May, 1988**

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I am thankful for the 30+years of life after my surgery. I have met so many wonderful people, Traveled the world on 18 cruises, got to meet my grandchildren, and have had a great personal relationship with a neat lady friend. I am a lucky fellow.

**Richard Crum - Jeffersonville IN**  
**July 7, 1988**

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I'm thankful for the medical profession that can do difficult and intricate surgeries to give me back a life that is cancer free.

I'm thankful for Dr. Eric Blom, who with Dr. Mark Singer developed the Blom-Singer Voice Prosthesis and who has been an inveterate tinkerer ever since, developing new devices, improvements and what have you.

I'm thankful for an employer and co-workers that accepted me back as a Senior Mechanical Engineer with a strange new voice and the quirks of laryngectomees six weeks after surgery.

I'm thankful that even though 1993 was the year of laryngectomy and my wife's second round with breast cancer, we were able to enjoy twelve reasonably good years until her death.

I'm thankful for a church community that supported me through my journey, often coming up to me saying "you look like you need a hug".

I'm thankful for a loving, supportive family all around me.

I'm thankful for community groups that refused to let me resign and sink into the shadows.

Finally, at age 81, with all the medical issues that age brings and with all the medications it brings as well, I'm cancer free, with stable medical conditions and...on my most recent follow-up visit to my primary doctor was told "just keep doing what you're doing".

**Carl Strand, - Mystic - CT**  
**Laryngectomy February 10, 1993**

Of course we all are grateful that we are still on this side of the grass. Beyond that I'm grateful I have very few problems or situations with being a Lary and I credit that to my medical team that did my surgery.

**Bob Bauer - Hayward, CA**  
**Class '08**

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Hands down....my family and friends have given me the most to be grateful. Without support from loved ones, this journey would have been devastating. I also think my SLP, Janis Deane at UTSW, has been not only supportive but has calmed me more times than I can say.

**Marian Cure Plano, TX**  
**2009**

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There are four men I am most thankful for and to: 1) Dr. Frank Toub who performed my lung lobectomy surgery in 1997, 2) Dr. John Werning, who performed my total laryngectomy in 2005, 3) a total stranger, a Laryngectomee, I met at an RV resort that connected me with WebWhispers about 1-1/2 years prior to my laryngectomy surgery and lastly 4) Lt. Col. David L. Helms, USAF, (Ret.), aka "Dutch" the founder of Web Whispers, the world's greatest medical support site.

Amen!

**David Ross - San Antonio, TX**  
**2005**

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I am most thankful for my new outlook on life. I am much more mindful of the "precious present". Each day is a gift and I am grateful for it. I count my blessing every day. I tell those who I love that I do. Since speaking is more difficult than before my laryngectomy, I am more careful with my choice of words. I look for opportunities to "pay it forward". My tolerance, acceptance and patience have increased. I don't waste time on negativity. Life is a celebration!

Thank you and Happy Holiday!

**Pam Lodal - Boise, Idaho**  
**Feb 14, 2017**

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**Next Month's Question:**

**As a Survivor, What Are  
You Most Thankful For?**





*This column first appeared here in 2010. We've re-printed it in previous years and a number of you wrote in saying how much you enjoyed Len's holiday story, so it is now a tradition- maybe our own "It's A Wonderful Life". ~ Donna*

## A Christmas Story

The onset of these darker evenings, and the thoughts of Christmas which is now only a few weeks away, remind me of those halcyon days of childhood which are so strong in my memory. I was seven and could only dream of wonderful presents. I knew that mum and dad could not afford what I so dearly wanted, that wooden fort in the toyshop window. For two years I had stood outside, just gazing at it, and those marvellous Scots soldiers in their kilts, red coats and white helmets lining the ramparts. The youngest of seven children, with very little money coming into the household, you soon realise that your own personal wants are not even mentioned, so I never told anyone of my heart's desire.

Let me convey you to our darkened bedroom on the evening of that Christmas Day. My two brothers were asleep. I lay between them in our large bed, and being the youngest, I had to sleep at the opposite end between

their feet. Charlie was always on my left, and with him being shorter than Alf, I could get a clear vision over the top of his covered feet, so I always slept on my left side. What a day it had been. I loved Christmas; it was always so exciting. And this had been one of the most thrilling days of my life, and as it was drawing to a close, we had been sent to bed.

I lay there, looking over Charlie's covered feet, at the faint glow at the window which was coming from the gas lamp outside. Even Jack Frost knew it was Christmas. He had made his own decorations on the inside of the glass window panes, as our breath froze into the most wonderful shapes. They were like sparkling diamonds, and I wondered what part of that pattern was my own frozen breath, and if it was forming those intricate close knit patterns because we were brothers.

Before falling asleep, Charlie had blown out our candle, but I could still see my present in the faint glow from the window. It was the wooden fort, with its ramparts lined with those Scottish soldiers. I could not believe it when I had been given it earlier that day. I used to stand outside that toyshop for such long periods just gazing in, that nearby stall holders, wearing mistletoe in their woollen hats, and faces glowing from their acetylene lamps, would

nudge each other, and say to me, “ You’ll get it if you’re a good boy”.

Well I was good, or so I thought, but would miserably say to myself, ‘ I can’t even tell them what I want.’ The man from the toy shop came out and spoke to me on a few occasions, and I asked him what regiment it was, and after peering in, he said, “ Why, they’re the Camerons, a Scottish Regiment and they’re fighting in a country called Afghanistan right now.”

My sister Kit had read us several stories written by a man called Kipling, and one story was about those Afghans sweeping down the Khyber Pass to ravage and ransack India, and they had been doing this for hundreds of years. As he spoke, I was with that regiment marching up the pass, kilts swirling, bagpipes playing, returning the fire from the mountainsides.

When Dad had carried that fort into the parlour with the soldiers lining the walls, I could not believe my eyes. They were the Camerons. I was so filled with emotion that I felt tears coming into my eyes, but brushed them away, knowing that boys don’t cry like girls, but wondered how on earth did they know what I had wanted. Mum said, “ The shopkeeper told us what you wanted, and how you had been so good for business just gazing in. He sent you these as a present.” She produced another box with a further 12 Camerons inside.

Dad said, “ There was this one who had a leg broken in the shop, and was going to be thrown away. I told the shopkeeper that you might like him.” As I took this one, the one with the leg missing, I realised that here was a hero. He had lost his leg fighting those Afghans. I looked at my fort in the faint light and there he was, in a position of honour standing to attention in the uppermost tower.

British troops are still fighting those Afghans all these years later, and now they have their American colleagues with greater fire power to stand beside them.

It was the following summer, the exact circumstances elude me, but during a visit to our home by some relation, I was given a whole sixpence to spend, and I went to the market to buy something I had long coveted. As I crossed the road to enter the market, I saw a man sitting on the pavement with his back

resting against the wall. A crutch leant against the wall beside him.

The poor man only had one leg, which was stretched out in front of him, and beside it a soldier’s Glengarry cap which had a few coins in it. The poor man was begging.

As I was passing, he picked up the cap to take out the few coins, and I saw the most beautiful silver badge on it. I read the word Camerons. I put my sixpence in his cap.



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