

WebWhispers

Sharing Support Worldwide

Throat Cancer and Laryngectomy Rehabilitation

Whispers on the Web

A Monthly Online Newsletter for WebWhispers

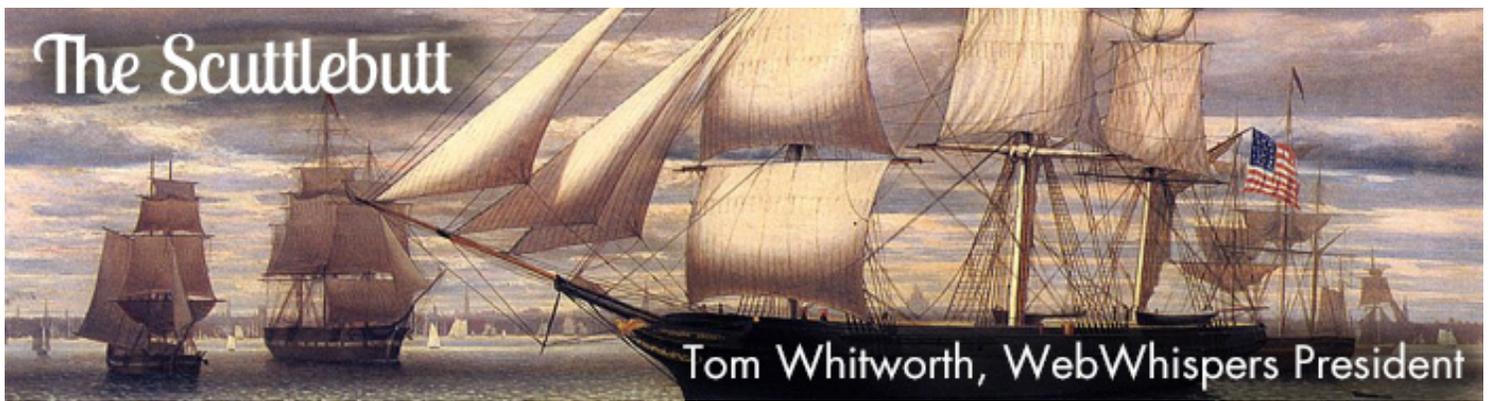
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FEEDBACK



Laying Down Bridges

That is what we do. The bridges are of different forms and serve many purposes. When I was a kid, our family loved our Florida vacations. I know I did as I loved being near the water and still do. Yes, that was one of the reasons I chose the Navy; most of the time I would be near a body of water. Personally, I am a huge fan of the Atlantic coast. I remember our family drives through coastal areas and how much fun it was to watch a draw bridge being lifted as we approached. When the bridge opened up, there would often be a number of watercraft waiting in line to pass through, so many that the regatta would take a while. No one enjoyed the scene more than me. I would stand on the back seat if necessary to get a good view as each vessel passed by. We were usually on our way to a vacation spot or a special restaurant my parents wanted to try and now we were delayed. The bridges never seemed to bother Mama and Daddy; of course not, it was free entertainment for the kids. Eventually, the last boat would pass through and we would get just as excited to watch the bridge being lowered, maybe more so than we did watching it open up. Now we could move on from where we were to the place we wanted to be; so could everyone else on the bridge. We could all get on with our lives.

That's how things are for those of us in the laryngectomy community. I remember the day the doctor told me I had cancer, as surely all do who have heard those words. I wasn't particularly frightened simply because I didn't really know what I was in for. I did feel as though there was a gap between where I was and my destination, a gap I surely did not know how to bridge. Chemotherapy and radiation were troublesome, aside from the fact they did not work so well. During that phase I relied on my faith, and I am told, an astoundingly positive attitude. Where that was not enough to get me through the day, there were bridges laid before me. My medical team was reassuring and a wonderful group of Speech-Language Pathologists helped me with communication and swallowing and also provided me with indescribable encouragement.

Laryngectomy came later, anyway. There was so little time to inform me of much as we were in a hurry to remove cancer from me as soon as possible. I had no idea my incision would run from exactly below one ear to a point actually behind the other. I had pictured an incision that would look like a plus sign, under two inches in each direction. It can be said that the first time I saw myself in a mirror, there in front of me was a bridge between naivety and reality. Ultimately, those are good for us. Once home from the hospital, I kept telling myself I was okay. I had lived to that point and was as grateful as a human being can be for anything. Even so, there were times I seemed to be facing a drawbridge in the open position. It towered as far into the sky as I could see or even imagine. I often wondered how I would cross the water to the other side, the place where I wanted to be. I soon found WebWhispers. Where I lacked knowledge or a sense of direction, I received information, understanding, compassion, and encouragement. Members laid down bridges before me and that has made all the difference in my recovery and rehabilitation.

New members and others come to us in much the same way, looking across seemingly treacherous waters, not seeing a way to cross over. They bring us not only questions but their fears, confusion, and emotional

struggle, needing a way to cross those waters, and move on with life. Here at WebWhispers, bridges are laid before them just as they were for me and for you. This is what we do.

This lyrics to this song say it well:

<https://binged.it/2J1Dd6k>

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



“How is your health insurance when it comes to lary supplies?”

I'm fortunate that after surgery, Jan. 2016, Shreveport, LA, I had Home Health so all my supplies were taken care of. I did have to buy a suction machine as University Health hospital policy insisted I have one before going home. Getting a partial refund from my insurer, Aetna Mail Handlers, was difficult and involved way too much paperwork. Home health did not cover the high cost of having an automatic feeding device; I had used one in the hospital; but getting a nebulizer was covered.

When I finally had to fend for myself re lary supplies, the home health office did provide the name and phone # of the supplier they'd used who had my insurance info. The SLPs at Feist Weiler/University Health are efficient re phoning in needed prescriptions. I've been pleased with the HMEs I've gotten at Medline, though often phoning in an order seems to take forever. However these past few months I've gotten a phone reminder and just press a button to renew my order...much better.

Medline seems to work well with Aetna & I find the costs reasonable. Though they carry lary clips in their online catalogue, it seems their catalogue is only for home health, hospitals, etc., so I order other lary supplies directly from Atos. Though at first there were problems, this past year, Atos has gotten the kind of contract with my insurer where I pay 20% rather than full payment up front and then getting \$ back.

Web Whispers is great...thank you.

**Ira C. Nathan - Shreveport, LA
Jan, 2016**

So far our supplement Manhattan plan F and Medicare has covered all of supplies. Around \$1200 every 3

months

Cheryl Weinhold – Springfield, OR

My surgery was Sept 14 2017 and Medicare, Medigap and The V.A. covered all if submitted properly. As far as I know, there is about \$500,000 not been paid. 7-hour flap operation. Supplies, such as EI (most expensive), suction machine etc. were all covered.

**Ed Weiner Boynton Beach, Fla
Sept 2017**

It's a shame the way the medical field treats the lary and his/her costs. Lary since Sept.9 2011. I have medical care backed up by BCBS. Last order from Atos was for \$697.97 all for supplies for my stoma care. Medical care approved \$197.49 and out of that amount I received a check for \$92.18. A loss of \$605,79! I'm waiting for a small check from BCBS, 20% of \$92.18 somebody is making a lot of money off us.

**Lee Peterson – Batavia, IL
Sept.9 2011**

I buy from InHealth and Medicare, and my supplant BC/BS pays everything except that percent that is held out for Obama Care.

Robert Hurd – Alamo, TX

I live in Massachusetts and on Medicare. Purchase my supplies from Atos. Had total laryngectomy 8/2015. Medicare covers full cost of HMEs. For all other supplies Atos bills my credit card and sends a claim for reimbursement to Medicare. Some weeks later I receive a Medicare check for about 1/3 of what I paid Atos.

**Richard Spiers – Mashpee, MA
Aug 2015**

I voice with TEP. All of my lary supplies and equipment are 100% covered, no co-pay. Prior to Atos recently becoming an approved in network vendor for Humana I did have continuous battles with Edgepark acquiring my prosthesis and HMEs but Humana was very good at forcing them to do their duty. Thank you Atos!!!

My policy is a Medicare health plan, Humana Gold Plus HMO, no monthly premiums and very nominal co-pays for doctors and hospital costs. The 7 prescriptions that I am on are all tier One with no co-pay.

Dave Ross - Florida, A Happy Camper.

I have Medicare as primary and Medi-Cal as a secondary insurance. My lary supplies consist mostly of foam

filters and saline. Saline is not covered at all by either, foam filters are reimbursed less and less with each passing year. It is now down to less than 30% of my out of pocket expenses reimbursed for foam filters. :(

Another five years to go and it may be possible that I will be paying the insurance every time I order supplies which I completely pay for! :-)

Michael Csapo - Twentynine Palms, CA
Class of 2000

We are on Medicare and selected a supplement with Manhattan, Plan F. It is rather costly at \$127 a month but between Medicare and Manhattan we pay nothing for supplies through Atos Medical which sometimes run \$1200 every 3 months.

David Weinhold - Portland, OR
Oct 2014

Here's what I like and dislike about my health insurance as related to laryngectomee supplies. I am covered by Kaiser Senior Advantage; a Kaiser plan in conjunction with Medicare.

I like that they cover 100% of the cost of my speech prosthesis and the cost of insertion, less co-pay. What I dislike is Kaisers use of Apria Healthcare for all of the other laryngectomee supplies (HMEs, base plates, free hands valves, etc.) Apria jacks up the price so much that my co-pay was almost as much as the price I'd pay buying directly from the manufacturer. Apria would also deliver my orders piecemeal, charge for items I never received, deliver opened packs of HME's. Drove me nuts!

Luckily, a couple of years ago, I spoke to a wonderful SLP from the San Francisco VA. She told me that as a vet I would qualify for free laryngectomee supplies through the VA. I visit the S.F. VA once a year for a checkup (\$50 fee), then receive all my supplies at zero cost. Glad I don't have to deal with Apria Healthcare anymore.

Greg Smith - Windsor, CA
Class of 2004

I have no costs to bicker over with insurance companies because the only lary supplies I use are foam stoma covers. Get them by the package which contain 90 foam covers. Cost me about 60 bucks, but being as I use them repeatedly (after sterilizing them again and again) I have to absorb this cost every couple of years or so. Of course I must also supply my own tape after their first sterilizing and that cost me roughly 5 bucks every few months. Just not worth having to dicker with companies that don't want to pay in the first place. I do have Humana (and Medicare as well as Medicaid), but I confess I know not how hard or easy getting reimbursement would be because I am not encumbered by the need of numerous supplies for our kind of folk.

As I've said so many times before . . . God treats me far better than I deserve.

Troll - Jax FL
Class of 2006

My surgery was Feb 14, 2018. I have adequate health insurance here in Canada between our government plan(OHIP) and my personal major medical plan. So far no complaints related to laryngectomee supplies.

Dennis Lamontagne – Ottawa, ON

My name is Frank Presch and I had a total laryngectomy on 4/26/2018. All seems to have went well until I got home to find that my insurance company, Cigna HealthSpring, does not have Atos on contract. My RXs were called in on 5/19/2018 and still to this day, is not any good. It appears that these two billion dollar companies are using me for a pawn in their negotiations for a single patient (me).

Cigna has a policy of responding to all requests within 14 days, never had a problem before. Now we are on a month and when they are called they say that they are waiting on more clinical information, this is a line of bull. This past Friday I spent hours sitting in my surgeon's office while they tried to sort this out. The outcome, after hours of phone calls and waiting is the truth, Cigna and Atos are at a negotiating war with me as the bait. While these giant insurance companies and virtual monopoly holders are arguing over a few measly dollars (because Atos has a list of Medicare prices that they honor for insurance comp. that they are in network with) I am going without my supplies.

Can anyone help, does anyone have any suggestions. I have already contacted the local media with my story and am in the process of writing President Trump himself and forwarding the story to the national media, David Muir of ABC for one. I want to test and see how well these titans of money can hold up to some bad publicity. Any and all help and suggestions will be greatly appreciated.

Frank Presch – York, SC

April 2018

preschf@gmail.com

**Next Month's Question:
Have you ever considered or tried esophageal speech?**

Thank you for your submissions. Edits are used for length, clarity and to keep comments on subject of the month.

Staff of Speaking Out

How to Start a Support Group

German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche once said, “He who has a why can endure any how.” Starting a support group is easy once you know why you want to start it. As a speech-language pathologist, I was seeing my head and neck cancer patients suffer. I felt like just another medical professional bossing them around. I desperately wanted to help my patients, so I started attending a NuVoice laryngectomy support group in the next town over. I could see how much the group enjoyed sharing and relating to one another. So, finding my “why” for starting a head and neck cancer resource support group was easy! There was a need for further support outside of the clinic.

I had no clue what to do, but I was determined to help. So, I reserved a room at my facility and called all the head and neck cancer survivors I knew in hopes that someone would show up.

That was the first big step and believe it or not, people showed up! From there, everything else fell into place. I used the first support group to determine how often my attendees wanted to meet, had them vote on times, topics of interest, preferred format of the group, etc. I learned early on that the males of the group did not like that I was calling the group meetings “Support Group.” They suggested we call it a “Head & Neck Cancer Resource Group.” We started off with very structured, educational group meetings with informative Powerpoint presentations and guest speakers. But, I quickly noticed folks nodding off—this format was for me and this group was for THEM! People came to life when they were sharing their stories and listening to the stories and advice from others.

We have a very unstructured meeting format. I bring educational materials and various activities in case the group is quiet or has low attendance. The group decided to meet monthly and we have been meeting for three years. I have seen the group shrink, grow, and change. The group is constantly evolving, so I periodically reassess what the group wants.

So, that’s it! If you have any desire to help head & neck cancer survivors (which you probably do if you are reading this)—start taking the steps to start your own resource support group today. Don’t let the fear of failure hold you back from doing something great. If you can help one person, you have succeeded immensely. There is such a need for support.

Here are some of the basic steps to start a support group:

1. Determine your “why.”

2. Find & reserve a room.

All you need is space and attendees. Because some of our attendees are unable to swallow safely, I did not start with refreshments. Now, I bring some bottled waters and thickener for folks who need it. I work at a facility where I can reserve rooms. Local hospitals would probably be glad to host a support group free of charge. Free meeting places could also include some restaurants, some public libraries, parks, etc.

3. Plan your group.

When will you meet? What time, what day, and how often? What rules will you have? I read a confidentiality notice and rules for taking turns speaking at the beginning of most meetings (sometimes an occasional survivor tends to dominate the conversation). Our speaking limit is five minutes, and no interruptions are permitted while another person is speaking. It is sometimes uncomfortable to enforce this, but it is important to be consistent from the beginning so everyone can be heard and have a turn. Our group meets the first Thursday of every month. I think an easily repeatable time is best (more folks remember).

What format will work best for your group? Open forum, topic-based, scheduled speakers? Our group enjoys the open forum the most. We begin the group by folks introducing themselves & briefly sharing their stories from diagnosis to current. Remember, these decisions are really something your group should decide on, and this will change depending on who is attending.

Attendance can be irregular with as few as one or two and as many as 11 or 12, so I bring extra materials or activities—that way even if there is one attendee, he or she can leave with something useful.

4. Invite head and neck cancer survivors.

Call, email, or text survivors you know. Then, you can make flyers and send them to local medical and radiation oncologists, ENT groups, cancer centers, etc. Have new attendees write down their preferred method of contact so you can send reminders (if they want). I send monthly reminder letters by mail to group attendees.

Heather Ford, M.S., CCC-SLP

Heather currently works for Blount Memorial Hospital in the acute care setting and in two outpatient clinics including the MEND Clinic which specializes in post cancer rehabilitation, lymphedema, and wound care. She specializes in head and neck cancer and chemobrain. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Audiology and Speech Pathology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) and a Master of Science degree in Speech Language Pathology through the University of Tennessee Health Science Center at UTK. Heather can be reached at hford@bmnet.com.



Dear Lary

Noirin Sheahan

Telling our Story

Myself and Ellie (my electrolarynx) recently joined the University of the Third Age (U3A). It's a university without a college building, fees, lecturers or exams, relying on members to share their knowledge and experience. It originated in France in 1974 and now has branches across Ireland and many other countries. The 'Third Age' means people who have finished full-time employment or parenting and have more leisure time to pursue their interests. Members talk on a huge range of topics including local history and wildlife, tai chi, creative writing, stress management, gardening, computers, poetry appreciation and other topics.

On their application form they asked whether there any topic on which I would be willing to speak to group. "Yes" I thought "Laryngectomy. But how do I talk about it?" Ellie's speech is good enough for basic communication but to give a lecture would challenge both me and the listeners – Ellie not having the sweetest voice on the planet!

But what I could do (if they take me up on this) is make slides and prepare short notes for each slide, printing each set of notes on a separate page. As people came in to the meeting, I'd ask if they would be willing to read out one page for me, because of my speech problem. So different people would be reading out the notes for each slide. In many ways this could be a richer experience than a conventional talk because so many people would be participating. And it would certainly make it easier for me – even with my old voice I would have been a bag of nerves before speaking in public. This way, all I'd have to do is give a brief introduction and then just sit back and enjoy!

To start with I could introduce them to Ellie and demonstrate how she works and then sit back as someone else explained what laryngectomy means using a slide showing our changed anatomy. That could lead on to some statistics that I recently prized out of Dr. Google: There are roughly 600,000 larys in the world, making us a rare breed – only one out of every 12,500 people are a laryngectomee. Which explains why we meet so few other larys outside of our ENT clinics or support groups, and why, so far at least, we don't have any well-known public figures with our condition. Though we do have Homer's aunt in the Simpsons! She's not a great role model – with her cigarette permanently stuck in her stoma! But that would be a light-hearted way to make the link with laryngectomy and smoking or other risk factors.

By the way do let me know if I've got any of this wrong. Email: editor@webwhispers.org with corrections or anything that might help with this talk.

I might then mention other diseases of the 'Third Age' which can lead to speech problems e.g. stroke. A survey in Ireland in 2011 estimated that 1 in 400 adults have acquired speech impairment – the vast majority have other disabilities such as mobility or cognitive issues as well and usually consider these other issues as more debilitating than their speech problems. We larys are lucky by comparison to most people with speech impairment.

From here on I would talk about my own experience. The inner journey could be illustrated using a time-line for self-confidence – how that was falling for the months leading up to the diagnosis, as pain, speech and swallowing problems escalated. The graph would then go crazily up and down in the couple of weeks between diagnosis and surgery as my mood oscillated from hope to despair. Then there would be a sudden steep drop on waking from the anaesthetic and, via many spikes and dips, a gradual recovery over the following years. In fact I would show confidence as eventually higher than pre-laryngectomy and still climbing. As the title of Donna's column says "That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

The next part of the talk would be the hardest – describing the challenge of the first few days of lary life. But that would lead on to examples of how mindfulness, friends, family and WebWhispers all helped my

confidence grow over the weeks and months afterwards.

I could finish off by stressing the role everyone can play in helping a person with speech impairment regain their confidence. Communication is a two-way process, so the problem isn't confined to the speech-impaired person – whoever we are talking to shares the burden for a few minutes. A shared burden is easier to carry – in fact it can become a bond rather than a burden.

I think it would be a good idea to make out a slide detailing what people might find burdensome about lary speech. Maybe frame it as a letter to Ellie, telling her a few home truths! First off are the acoustics like the robotic sound, the slow pace, the unfeminine tone, absence of emotional information, the background buzz, the lack of clarity. The difficulty will be accentuated if there is background noise or if the listener doesn't have good hearing. Then there are the possible psychological knock-on effects which could include anxiety, irritation, fear, confusion or a host of other possibilities. We all have our emotional baggage. But we also have strengths and the interaction might stir traits like interest, wonder, respect or compassion. If the listener can keep the burdensome aspect of their reaction under wraps and work on any positive responses then the interaction will notch up another step in the self-confidence curve.

That could lead to a final slide outlining what is required of the listener if they wish to share the burden of speech impairment. I would list these as patience, concentration and friendliness. Patience is needed because of the slow pace and because your brain needs a bit of time to process the unusual sounds. Concentration lets you keep focusing on the vague voice sounds and not getting distracted by the background buzz or the multitude of thoughts that might be crashing through your head. A cousin who teaches music described the electro larynx in terms of a didgeridoo – you need to search out the overlay of music from the underlying monotone – it takes a bit of concentration!

Most important of all is to maintain a friendly attitude. Keep remembering there's a human being behind the robotic voice. It can help to think of them as someone on a very bad telephone line. Most people with speech impairment are quite used to not being understood perfectly. The fact that you are making an effort to engage is the main thing. The worst outcome is when the other person turns away. They probably don't mean any harm, perhaps they are just confused. But the effect is to isolate the impaired person, which confirms the worst fears of anyone with a disability. On the other hand, every friendly encounter nudges the confidence curve in the right direction.

It might be a good idea to ask Ellie to give the final word, as I thank them for helping me to speak about laryngectomy and hope it has been somehow useful and interesting for them. I would also add that one of the advantages of laryngectomy is that you don't have to dread public speaking anymore! You get everyone else to do the hard work for you!

Between Friends

Donna McGary

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

Going to Church

I am not a religious person and while I try to be thoughtful, mindful, even, I do not think of myself as spiritual. Even though I don't believe in God or the Devil, I certainly believe in the power of love and hate and am in awe of the beauty and force of Mother Nature. When I am at water's edge, I am both humbled and inspired; rejuvenated and relaxed by my proximity to the mysterious power of water, I feel at peace. I suppose you could say I go to church.

As I write this I am in Cabo San Lucas (see related story in the Archives column this month) and am reminded that the Pacific Ocean here at the tip of the Baja where it meets the Sea of Cortez is rather like a glorious Southern Italianate cathedral. My old familiar Atlantic Ocean of New England more resembles an old Gothic Norman Abbey from the north of England. The lakes and ponds of Maine I am so familiar with are like the humble chapels built throughout small communities everywhere, testament to their member's faith and need for fellowship. I suppose to carry this even analogy even further, rivers represent that all-inclusive ecumenical desire for our faith to unite rather than divide.

That's definitely a stretch ☺ but I know I am not alone in finding my god in nature. And while the water is what speaks to me the most, I was moved to tears by my first face to face encounter with the Colorado Rockies. Countless images in movies and National Geo specials seen in HD did not do them justice. I was totally unprepared for their impact. Somehow, they seemed bigger than the ocean or closer anyway. I understand that folks who have never seen the ocean have a similar experience. Some folks feel this way about the woods and judging by what I'm learning from a new book I'm reading, "The Hidden Life of Trees" by Peter Wohlleben, they could be on to something.

After doing a little research (and taking one of those silly on-line tests) I am apparently a "Scientific Pantheist", which actually sounds about right, if I needed a label, which I don't! But I do find I need to go to church on a regular basis and for the same reasons that traditionally religious folk want and need to go to their personal houses of worship.

It is a reset button for our spirit, something we all need periodically. A reminder that we are only a small part of something much greater and that living in harmony with our surroundings requires patience, kindness, compassion and empathy. Greed and hubris, anger and fear all have terrible consequences for us and our world. Either listening to a well-delivered sermon on "the wages of sin" or a few moments witnessing the fury of a hurricane is a humbling experience and an opportunity for reflection.

If the power of the oceans or the majesty of the mountains don't do it for you, consider this. According to Wohlleben recent research has discovered that trees actually communicate using electrical impulses, have a sense of taste and smell and take care of each other. There is a network of soil fungi linking trees called the "wood wide web" and scientists are only beginning to unravel its mysteries. Next time I feel the need to go

church, I may have to head for the forest and see what I can learn from the trees.

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*
- Hamlet (1.5.167-8), Hamlet to Horatio



A Taste Of Cabo

It is one of those rare friendships that blossomed beautifully right from the very beginning. They were late to our table that first night on the 2004 WebWhispers Panama cruise; he was handsome and debonair in his white hat, she was stylish in flowing scarves. But what got to me were his elegant chivalry and her smart and naughty sense of humor. It is difficult to make witty asides with a TEP and a Servox, but considering our dinner companions, we managed very well. I was traveling with my mother and by the end of that trip, Linda, Miguel, Mom and I were fast friends.

This past February I finally made it to Cabo San Lucas, at the tip of the Baja Peninsula in Mexico to visit them. They are one of the great love stories. Linda is from Vancouver, Canada (more on that later- I was in Cabo during the recent Olympics). Miguel is Mexican, originally from Mexico City. He is a multi-talented and accomplished musician. She was an English teacher on vacation visiting her surfer dude son in Cabo. They went to a bar where this great band was playing... he could sing, she could dance...they have been making beautiful music together for over 20 years. He stood by her through surgery and treatments, traveling back and forth from Mexico and Vancouver to be at her side, and their devotion to each other is the real thing.

Eventually, the band broke up and Miguel is now property manager for Plaza Calafia, one of the first condominium complexes in Cabo - built back in the days when it was just a sleepy fishing village except for when the big sport fisherman showed up for the world-class tournaments. The growth over the last two decades has been exponential and shows no sign of abating. Calafia now seems quaint and a throwback - with its traditional architecture and narrow stone stairways. The resorts and luxury condominium complexes are literally being piled up one on top of another in a jumble that defiles the landscape and defies what passes for zoning ordinances. My second day there, Linda took me down to their lovely little private beach on the Sea of Cortez and along with the fabulous houses circling it, was an unfinished behemoth that jutted out onto the beach...not 50 feet from the water. It had been abandoned by the owner when the authorities finally shut him down for building too close to the water. The owner walked away from a multi-million dollar investment and probably found another seaside community in which to build, without interference. Bureaucratic corruption is a way of life and a source of frustration and sadness for people like Miguel, who loves his country and is very proud of his heritage but fears for its social and economic future.

Mexico is a complicated country. It is filled with contrasts which can make it difficult for a gringo/outsider to appreciate the richness of the culture, especially considering the proliferation of WalMarts , Costcos and all-inclusive resorts catering to the non-Mexicans. There are so many ex-pat Canadians and Californians that in some condo/communities the only natives are the groundskeepers and housekeepers. Mexico is a poor country; North Americans bring in much needed revenue and the tourist trade shapes our perceptions. I found some great deals on fun mementos at Artisanos, a three story warehouse of native arts and crafts. I love my hand-painted plates and the colorful little geckos are just too cute, but it is obviously a factory/outlet tailored to tourist people like me. Regardless, I could have spent many more pesos there and made my friends and family very happy with their presents!

The Farmer's Market was even better. It was like a Country Fair here in Maine, complete with music, tasty food, gorgeous local organic produce and beautiful handiwork. I found the perfect "souvenirs"- a traditional hand-woven wool rug from Oaxaca and a darling little embroidered sun dress for my grand-daughter. I got a bit too much sun but it was all worth it, munching on a fresh spinach and cheese empanada , watching a toddler dance to some terrific jazz and learning how to bargain in Spanish for my rug...it was a great day.

If you are fortunate enough to have friends like Linda and Miguel, you will be able to learn a bit more about the real Mexico. Starting with the food...what most of us know as Mexican is from a fast food chain. The real stuff is amazing. I am trying to learn the right Spanish words for certain foods, but as a Maine Yankee, I am pretty lame. The taco de nopales were muy rico. We are talking about cactus tacos and they are WAY better than it sounds! "Nopales" are a kind of cactus that tastes like a cross between green peppers and asparagus. Muy Rico is what you say when something is delicious. Add some of the local hot sauce, and some pico de gallo, roll it up in a fresh warm tortilla and pop it in your mouth at the local taco stand less than an hour after you land in Mexico - that is what I am talking about, amigos. Plus they make this lemon/lime fizzy drink thing that is perfect. And then there were the shrimp and fish tacos but they were closing the gates on us...Siesta Time.

Back to the condo and the next morning I had a pedicure on the deck overlooking the water. Maria comes to the house and for less than what I pay in the States, I got an amazing spa pedicure. There is a bit of an awkward moment as I try to figure out pesos and I get confused and end up squabbling over 350 peso. I am thinking it is about 30 American dollars. In reality it is less than \$3.50 - I am so embarrassed after she leaves and I realize my mistake. I feel like the quintessential Ugly American.

This visit was during the Winter Olympics in Vancouver. We had to plan our evening entertainment around the events. It doesn't make much sense; the view from their deck is magnificent and I was glued to the TV along with Linda and Miguel. I become an honorary Canadian during the ladies ice-skating, but it was the bobsledding that had me wondering...here I was in Cabo watching fuzzy Mexican coverage of the Olympics from Vancouver via Atlanta and I was on the edge of my seat. I stood up and saluted that night when they played "O' Canada". Even the night we did go out to hear their friends, an Australian bar band doing covers from the 70s and 80s, we had to bribe the bartender to find a station carrying the Olympics. That was followed by karaoke night at the after-hours jazz club and maybe it is the end of the land/ocean/sea convergence but Cabo has the same outlaw feel of Key West, Florida. The next Sunday afternoon, as we walked on the beach at Las Cerritos and a huge roar came up from the bar crowd, we knew it - Canada had won the Gold Medal in hockey. There are some things that just seem right and somehow that was a perfect cultural convergence.

Earlier that day we headed out to the desert. It is hard to describe - this juxtaposition of sea and mountains and desert. Truthfully, the desert is not all that beautiful, but it is raw and real and somehow, strangely compelling. It is a landscape from which you expect Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef to emerge on horseback...without any sense of irony. Away from the cities and border towns, which pose their own dangers, Mexico seems wild, untamed. You can drive for miles along winding two lane highways, dotted with memorials

for fatal crashes, with the Pacific on one side and the Sierras deceptively close on the other side of desert scrub land. You do not want to wander off the road. You drive a reliable vehicle with good clearance and pack a lot of water, no matter where you plan to go.... just on general principle.

This desert is not what I expected. It is actually quite fertile, fed by deep underground aquifers, but top side it is rough and scruffy. The cactus can sneak up on you. I forget what they call it, but I call it sneaky when a thorn just shows up in your foot. When safely in your vehicle you can drive past acres of basil fields, the aroma alone enough to make a foodie swoon. I have no idea why there are burros and ostriches guarding these fields, but there are. I also had no idea why Linda and Miguel want to build their dream house here in the wild until Linda hauls me up through that sneaky cactus to a small ridge and points out the view to the ocean and I get it. Raw and real and elemental. Mexico.

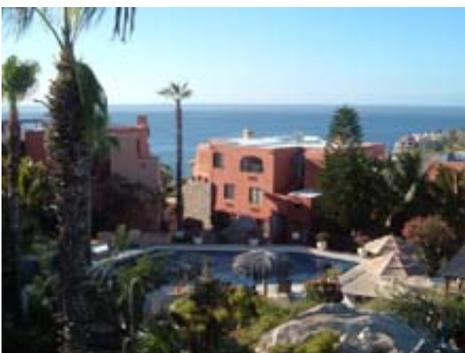
Just before I left Miguel taught me how to make tortilla soup. It is basically Mexican chicken soup, but it is my new favorite recipe. I will send you the recipe if you want, but I think it is best enjoyed overlooking the Cabo arches and maybe sipping some Damiana after, while you trade stories.

The same day we went to the Farmer's Market we also had dinner with June and Murray Allen (he is a former WW president). They are also Canadian and have a condo in San Jose; they were Linda's first contact with the lary WW world. June cooked fabulous Chinese food that night and it was a lovely visit. There is something to be said for being with friends who understand our situation. I especially enjoy cooking and/or eating with folks who know that I can't talk and eat at the same time!

Here in Maine a lot of folks get tired of the cold and decide that Florida is the place to spend the winters. I have friends and family there and it is a lovely treat to visit them in February. For about \$200 more in airfare, I can go to Cabo...no contest. I am saving my pesos. I still am fuzzy on the math, but the exchange rate is favorable.

It is beautiful, weird and wild. I saw whales from our balcony and watched sunsets through the arches. I ate noplales and learned the difference between cardon and pitaya cactus in Las Congrejos. I watched the sunset in Elias Calles and even learned something new along the way. It was magical.

I will be back.



The view from their deck my first morning out to the Sea of Cortez



The view from the deck that afternoon out to the west and the Cabo arches



Quintessential Cabo



The Three Amigos – Murray, Linda and Donna



Burros on the road to Las Congrejos



Cardon cactus



The Desert Pioneers, Linda and Miguel



The view to the Pacific from Las Congrejos



Linda and Donna celebrating the Canadian hockey win at Las Cerritos



One last look at the water before flying out of San Jose and back home



Linda and Miguel

For newsletter questions, comments or contributions, please write to editor@webwhispers.org

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