

Beacon of Hope

In Honor of Donna Cloonan

"Hope is snowmobiling," my mother responded, without a pause, when I asked her what hope means. My mother is being treated for breast cancer for the third time in her life. It didn't surprise me that she said snowmobiling, it has been her favorite activity for at least the past decade. Why snowmobiling? What does snowmobiling exemplify? A liberal arts graduate, I had to ponder. What I came up with – snowmobiling is living life. Living life is what my mother has always done and what she will always do.

You may be confined physically, suited up from head to toe with a five pound helmet enclosed over your head and boots tied up to your knees when snowmobiling, but mentally you must be present. You have to be "on" the ride. All of your senses need to be keenly focused on your surroundings because there's little room for error, especially when on an unfamiliar narrow wooded path. You can't get



lost in thoughts about the errands you need to run next week or about what you wish you had done five years ago. You have to be attentive to the terrain, then and there, to know when to accelerate, when to turn and when to put on the brakes. You have to be fully present in that

instant – your survival on the trail – yours and your cohort – depends on it. Snowmobilers go out in packs and you have to stay accountable for your team. Snowmobiling has perils – icy lakes, downed bridges and other snowmobilers. The other snowmobilers are most



dangerous when you are on a sharp turn deep in the woods. There are few multi-lane roads on these intercontinental highways (I joke not, there are published snowmobile highway maps from Maine thru Canada), so when you come across another group, you must signal, with your thickly gloved hand, how many "sleds" are behind you so that one crew waits for the other to pass and avoids a crash. Then, after going slow and steady to avoid a lot of pitfalls, you are able to celebrate your success. You can squeeze the accelerator and, if you are lucky, hit 80 mph to feel a freedom like no other.

Snowmobiling in turn is like having cancer. Your body may be physically restricted – due to the fatigue and the pain associated with the disease itself and with treatment – but mentally you must be present. You can't, as my mother says, "live in cancer," you have to live. You need to be "on" the ride and focused on your surroundings – whether it be home, school or office. You can't get lost in thoughts about the future or the past, you have to be here in this precise moment. When having cancer, you need to be fully aware of your environment to know how and when to give what energy you have. Just like on the trail, you have to be fully present on your cancer path because both your survival and that of your community (friends, family, co-workers) depend on it. And as with any journey, there will be twists and turns. You may have to go slower than you wish, but a glorious moment will appear when you can just hit the gas and propel yourself into a lightness of being. Hope is living life like Donna Cloonan lives hers.