

Janet's story of rediscovery.

Milestone birthdays can be difficult. They often force us to review how quickly time marches on, and that perhaps our best years may be behind us.

Janet Cohen's 60th birthday in 2013 came soon after a very unexpected twist in her life story – a lung cancer diagnosis.

As she began to come to terms with this, she penned a poignant, though-provoking piece that examines who she is and who she has become.

Janet chose to share her story via the Our Stories Project as a means of sharing and connecting with other travelers on the cancer journey.

This is her story.

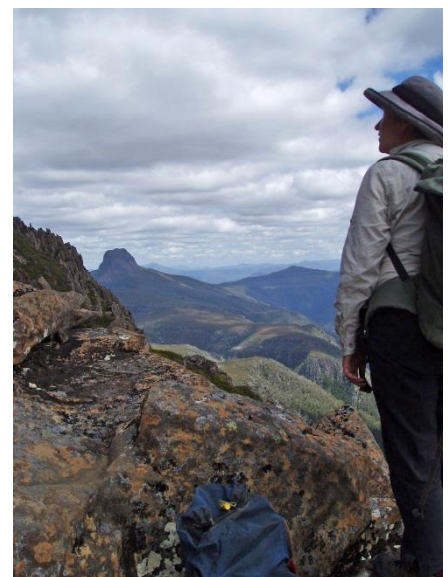
Rediscovering myself

by Janet Cohen

Oh my God, I've just turned 60 and almost overnight I find myself saying all the things other people have said about getting older that I previously discounted as not applying to me.

"How did this happen ... where did the last 20 years go ... why are there less years ahead and more behind ... and, the most important of philosophical questions - why is the garage still a mess"?

I'm eligible for a Seniors Card, so it seems that now I'm officially old.



Unlike other birthdays, 60 burst into my life like a gale force storm with the chance discovery of an early stage form of lung cancer. My 60th birthday present was being alive and, I thought, on the road to healing.

So looking back, who am I now?

“I am the person who received the diagnosis with a large amount of panic, a smidgen of acceptance and a pinch of equanimity and grace.”

I am the person who received the diagnosis with a large amount of panic, a smidgen of acceptance and a pinch of hard won equanimity and grace. Could this disaster be viewed as an unwanted gift, a first class ticket to spiritual development?

I’m the woman who worked hard to have as much choice as possible about my treatment.

I am the patient doing a ridiculous warrior yoga pose in my pyjamas just before the operation, the one who sat casually cross-legged on the bed the day after.

I’m also the character who re-organised the furniture in the hospital room and ‘borrowed’ real tea-cups from the nurses’ tea room so my friends could have afternoon tea. We’re the ones laughing uproariously amidst the medical apparatus and offering the nurses a piece of the delicious ‘menopause’ slice, home-made in the Blue Mountains. When the surgeon pops in on his rounds, I’m the one disguised in my civvies who remains silent when he asks: “Who’s the patient?”

I’m the woman who is consumed by fear one long lonely night, despite all her mantras and meditations.

I am she who constantly presses the buzzer to summon the already overworked nursing staff, in growing distress and frustration.

I’m ‘that patient’ who complained to management in the morning about the impact of staffing levels on staff and patient well-being. And in recovery, I’m a sailor who has had some of the wind taken from her sails and now finds herself becalmed.

... I’m a sailor who has had some of the wind taken from her sails and now finds herself becalmed.

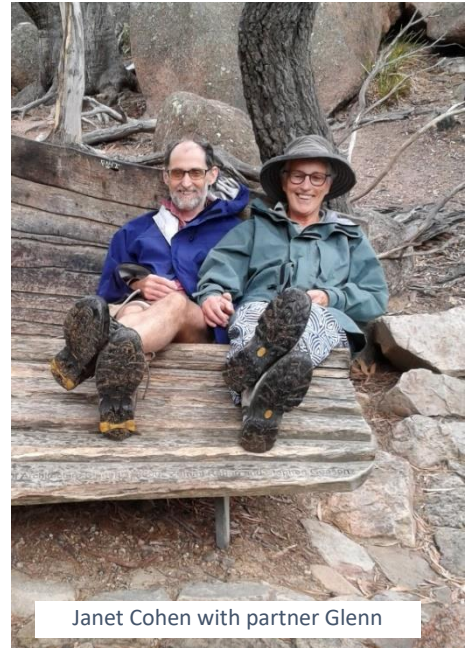
After more than 30 years as a social, environmental and cultural worker I have at last ‘run out of puff’. Now there is nowhere to go, nothing to do but everything to be, becalmed on an ocean of time and possibility.

I'm a resident of a remarkable place, a bushy headland that juts into the Pacific Ocean, surrounded by lake, river and sea, alive with the calls of birds.

With my partner Glenn and others I've been one of the carers of this environment which we've protected for over 15 years.

Dramatically severed from my former worker-self with its demands, deadlines and delights, I immerse myself in the peace of this place, becoming friends with stillness, supporting my body's will towards life, joy, love and peace as I try to embrace the biology of healing, the captain of my own ship.

Thank you for sharing Janet.



1 Other stories written by Janet Cohen and included in the "Our Stores" Project include "A Matter of time" and "Advice from a wise friend".

More about Janet

Janet Cohen is a passionate advocate for protecting the natural environment and for community the arts and culture. She is perhaps best known for her work with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, redeveloping and managing Sea Acres Rainforest Centre in Port Macquarie NSW, a unique visitor centre featuring rare coastal subtropical and littoral rainforest and Aboriginal cultural programs.

Not one to shy away from a challenge, Janet and her partner Glenn spent three months as volunteer caretakers on remote Deal Island, in Bass Strait, where they grew veggies in howling gales, survived the wild Bass Strait weather and worked to conserve the island's natural and cultural heritage. Janet and Glenn love the bush and have spent time backpacking in remote areas.

Janet has also been active with local community projects including Friends of Kattang Nature Reserve, Camden Haven Protection Society and Camden Head Pilot Station.

Janet has been vocal in her support of the introduction of Voluntary Assisted Dying in NSW and will continue to share her story about living with a terminal illness to add to the call for legislative change on this issue.

Janet says the "Our Stories" project has given her the opportunity to reflect on and validate her experience of cancer and to connect with fellow travellers who are on or have gone through the cancer "journey".

"Our Stories" Project – empowering people to share their stories.

To see read more stories, go to www.hastingscancertrust.org.au/our-stories

Contact: OurStoriesProject1@gmail.com



This story was written by Janet Cohen and forms part of the "Our Stories" Project, which was funded by a grant from The Hastings Cancer Trust.

The Hastings Cancer Trust is a local, not-for-profit organisation that supports local cancer services via their annual grants program. For more information go to www.hastingscancertrust.org.au.