



STEERING THROUGH IT

Navigating Life-Threatening Illness
Acceptance, Survival and Healing

Lynn McLaughlin

"Lynn McLaughlin writes from the heart. Her story will touch and amaze you. She is an inspiration to brain injury patients and to anyone who reads her book. You feel her honesty, pain and encouragement page by page."

~ **Marlene Markham,**
Journalist, BizX Magazine

"*Steering Through It* by Lynn McLaughlin is a remarkable piece of literature I am genuinely grateful for having read. A memoir like this doesn't happen often; it's truly rare to come across a piece of writing that touches us in such a profound way that stays with us, holding a place in our hearts eternally. Lynn McLaughlin beautifully shares her tale of comfort and hope, fears, and her survival. *Steering Through It* will captivate the heart and attention of any reader!"

~ **Aimee Ann**

"Lynn McLaughlin's memoir, *Steering Through It* is a must-read for all new and seasoned healthcare practitioners. Lynn and her family's reflections on her life-threatening diagnosis and journey within the healthcare system provides clinicians with insight into the difficulties patients face in navigating the course of their disease and how impactful our interactions with them are during those difficult times. Lynn's narrative will inspire doctors, nurses and all healthcare practitioners to see their patients in a different light suggesting that we listen closer to them, we take the time to learn about their story and to understand that they are not only a patient but a beloved mother, a sister, daughter and friend. It's then, when we understand this, that we can provide the holistic care that every person deserves during their most difficult times in life."

~ **Shelley Corp**
MA, BSN, RN
(Registered Nurse for 30 years)

"The book is relatable on every level if you've ever faced a life-threatening diagnosis. It offers an insightful glimpse into the life of a survivor facing the daily struggles in dealing with their new normal — while providing inspiration and hope for others fighting similar battles. When it comes to life, the author learned that "steering through it" takes on a whole new meaning."

~ **Pat Bailey,**
Journalist, *Southpoint Sun*

"For anyone who's suffered a traumatic brain injury or knows someone who has, I encourage you to read this book. I could completely relate to Lynn and her family's anxiety about surgery and what her life after surgery might be like, how it would be forever changed. A must-read for anyone whose life has come to a screeching halt. Remember, you are not alone."

~ **Melanie Goyeau,**
Brain Surgery Survivor

"I really found this book to be uplifting and inspiring. The author's words, observations, insight, analysis and reflections are truly powerful, positive, extremely helpful and inspirational. I admire her ability to share so many useful strategies in facing such an incredible challenge. I truly agree staying positive, laughter, music, one day at a time, the support of family and friends that's the key. Thanks for sharing your incredible experience!!!"

~ **H. Bailey**

"*Steering Through It*, written by Lynn McLaughlin, is a poignant reflection of a woman faced with a life-changing health event. She takes you through it on a very personal level as a patient, mom, wife, sister, friend and daughter. Working in healthcare, I find it compelling to be brought into all the emotion and uncertainty that our patients face every day. An excellent storyteller. Looking forward to her next one!"

~ **Renee Sperduti**

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Navigating Life-Threatening Illness...
Acceptance, Survival And Healing

Complimentary
Chapter 1

Lynn McLaughlin

ISBN 978-1-7750017-2-0 (print)
ISBN 978-1-7750017-3-7 (electronic)

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Front Cover Artwork: Sari Richter
Photo – About the Author Page: Carl Chevalier, courtesy of GECDsB

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For information: www.steeringthroughit.com

Second edition
Published and printed in Canada
First Edition published 2017
ISBN 978-1-7750017-0-6 (print)
ISBN 978-1-7750017-1-3 (electronic)

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*Steering
Through It*

*This book is dedicated to Ken, Shayne,
Marina and Mitch, without whom I could
not have stemmed the tide.*

There is never one side to a story, even a personal one such as mine. I am deeply grateful to the following individuals who provided their personal perspective. This memoir is truly enriched by their contributions.

Marina McLaughlin
Peter Prior
Heather Raymond
Colleen Gascoigne
Michael Prior

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Introduction

I had no idea what the future held — whether I would be alive for one more day, or for even another hour. At that moment, the clock stopped. It was Saturday, July 13th, 2013. That was the day I began journaling. My boat had started to rock, and I could not see a clear course forward through the oncoming storm.

A life-threatening illness crushes the world around you, and around those you love. How do we all cope with the diagnosis physically, emotionally, and spiritually? How do we move on? What are the most helpful ways to support others in crisis? In the end, what does it all mean?

I have written this memoir with the hope that my story will help to minimize the impact of “surprises” that might be thrown at you and your family — surprises that the professionals cannot prepare you for. Whether you are experiencing a life-changing event, or you are a spouse, friend, partner, or any relative of someone who is struggling, it is my hope that this book will move you to believe that your actions and positive mindset have the power to drive acceptance, survival, and healing.

Many members of my family have written about specific experiences or reflections during this year of our lives. Others have chosen not to share, each for their own personal reasons. There are no words to express how honoured and privileged I am to have each of them in my life.

Chapter One
The Detour

Saturday, 13 July

The incessant noise in this cramped space is nauseating... a repetitive shrill followed by the roar of a motorcycle revving its engine. The pounding of a sledgehammer, a screeching emergency siren, a dull hum. Silence. I lie here clutching the panic button.

Immediately following the MRI at Windsor Regional Hospital, I was directed to the emergency department. My headaches had been getting worse and I had tinnitus in my left ear, but I had shrugged it off. I attributed the symptoms to turning 50, and the increased responsibility of being promoted to a supervisory role at work. I'd already seen an ear, nose, and throat specialist (ENT) and an optometrist, but those consultations had yielded no clues as to the cause of my headaches.

Now, alone and waiting to be called into the emergency department, my mind whirled with the possibilities. The reception area held approximately 20 chairs arranged in rows. The gentleman sitting beside me was reading the local newspaper. After a 10-minute wait that felt like an eternity, a nurse led me into a curtained cubicle. On either side, I could hear medical practitioners gathering personal health information from other patients and explaining their diagnoses. Clearly, whatever I was about to be advised would not be said in privacy. The apprehension intensified.

A woman whom I guessed to be about my age stood outside of my cubicle. She was dressed in a medical gown and wore her dark hair pulled back. She was reading a chart. Was it mine? Her face was blank. She pushed the curtain aside as she entered the cubicle. I sat on the hospital bed, facing her. She flipped through several pages and then introduced herself. Without hesitation, she rattled off my diagnosis. Her words fell like fragments.

“I’m sorry to inform you ... an abnormal lesion ... aggressive ...”

A brain tumour. A brain tumour the size of a golf ball, growing in my left temporal lobe.

I stopped breathing. I stared in disbelief at the physician as she spoke. I felt my heart palpitating and I began to perspire, but part of me remained detached from everything. Smiling automatically, I repeated her words. I was at risk of a stroke, seizure, or coma. It was a ticking time bomb. My frozen expression masked emotions that I could not name.

The edema — that is, the swelling — was so extensive that it had caused my brain to shift more than a centimetre to the right. Within minutes, I was prescribed steroids and anti-seizure medications. Blood work was done, and my temperature and blood pressure were taken. I was given an urgent referral to a neurosurgery clinic for a full consultation. My appointment was in five days.

Everything in my life had changed forever. I had no idea what the future held, or even if I would survive the next week. How would I cope emotionally, spiritually, and physically? How could I tell my family the news? How does a mother inform three teenaged children that she has a life-threatening diagnosis? How could my aging father support his daughter through such a thing?

I left the emergency department and bolted to my car. Before going to the hospital, I had dropped off my daughter and her friend at the shopping mall. I could not pick them up. I could not face anyone. Fumbling with my cell phone, I called my husband. He is a police officer, and he had worked the night shift. It was now mid-afternoon, and he would be just waking up.

“Hi, Ken. Are the boys around?” I asked. “I need to speak with you privately.”

He asked what was wrong. I blurted it out. There was dead silence on the other end of the line. I hastily told him the rest. “They don’t know if it’s cancer, but I need surgery. We’ll get through this.” He asked if I was alright to drive. “Yes,” I said. He arranged for the girls to get a ride home from the mall. I still have no idea how I got home, given my state of mind, and I regret operating a vehicle that day.

Ken was caring, calm, and reassuring as he hugged me in the garage. After much discussion, we decided to wait until we had all the details before telling anyone, even our children. We had far too many questions ourselves. What was a craniotomy? Was the tumour cancerous? Would I need radiation or chemotherapy?

Ken had been my best friend since our first date almost 30 years prior, on my twenty-first birthday. Back then, we were both training as officer candidates in Esquimalt, British Columbia, and we have been together since. His strength kept us both going as we laboured through the next few days. I started taking Prednisone to shrink the edema around the tumour, and the medication played havoc with my body and mind. Sleep came haphazardly for no more than four hours per night. While my family slept, I researched and documented my condition. I was determined to acquire more information than the doctor had provided. I was consumed by the need to know. The more we understood, the better prepared we would be.

This was my life, my very essence. “Could it be ending?” I wondered. “Will my kids lose their mother? If I survive, will I be capable of caring for my family, or even enjoying life

in any capacity?" I was determined not to allow myself to become a burden to them.

Monday, 15 July

Why has this road block been thrown up before me? I have always believed that events in our lives occur for a reason. Is this a divine punishment because of the choices I have made in my life? Have I been too self-absorbed? Have I confused my priorities and taken a path not meant for me? Have I not been there for my family and others, as I have always vowed to be? What is there to learn? One thing is for certain: without warning, my life is taking an unexpected and extreme detour. I pray I have not reached a dead end.

I felt an urgency to figure out what I believed — what guided me and held me true to myself. I had been raised Catholic, but had stopped going to church five years before. Although I still believed in most of the church's teachings, I felt strongly that any individual, including a woman, should have the right to serve as a priest. Although we had baptized all three of our children, it wasn't because we believed they needed forgiveness for sins they had committed prior to the time they reached three months of age. Baptism was a family tradition that we had decided to honour. For these reasons, I felt a sense of hypocrisy when attending mass, especially when reciting Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Catholic Church ... and life everlasting." I persevered with church for my children's sake. I wanted them to have a strong foundation that would guide them in finding their own faith. I had no regrets when I stepped away, and I have none to this day.

In contrast to my traditional Catholic upbringing, my mother-in-law welcomed any religious or spiritual experience without judgement. She believed in the healing touch and in the psychic connection. "Each of us has a

purpose in this life," she would say. Faced with death, I considered my own spirituality. I pondered whether I had been truly living, or simply existing in this physical realm. What was my purpose? Could I express my deepest values, including the immortality of my soul? What was my inner voice telling me? I would continue to ask myself these questions, and many more, in my quest to understand what was happening to me.

Wednesday, 17 July

How do I protect the people I love from worry? I pledge to remain positive and believe that I will prevail. I will do my best to remember that my mindset has a direct influence on my body. I must shield myself and my family from negativity and fear.

On Thursday, we met with Dr. Morassutti, the neurosurgeon at Windsor Regional Hospital who would be trusted with my life. He had a confident and calm manner, and I trusted him immediately after he introduced himself. He walked us through everything we needed to know, as hard as it was to hear. As we viewed the distressing MRI images, I grew nauseated. They seemed to magnify themselves and jump off the screen.

"It may very well be a meningioma," he said, "and if so, there's a greater than 95 percent chance that it's not cancerous." He looked me right in the eyes. "If we had discovered this sooner, you may have had other options. It is too large now. You have no option but to have an urgent craniotomy."

My mind raced as he listed the risks. My personality, cognition, and motor skills were in jeopardy, and there was a chance that I would regain consciousness without speech. I could die of excessive blood loss. My surgery would be in less than three weeks, which would give the

steroids time to shrink the swelling. It all made horrible sense. The fatigue, tinnitus, and short-term memory issues — it had been a brain tumour all along.

I needed a moment alone.

There are no words to articulate how heart-breaking it was to tell our children. Shayne (19), our eldest son, with a scientific and mathematical mind, would want facts. We expected Marina (15), who was very active in both school and community sports, to have more of an emotional response. Mitchell (14), always calm and easy-going, was most difficult to predict, as he was the youngest.

We asked them to join us in our main living room. “The Green Room,” as we so fondly called it, was where we had family meetings. We also met here when Ken or I needed to mediate between siblings.

Each of our children entered and sat on one of two couches, oddly quiet. I suppose they already knew that being invited into the Green Room meant something serious was happening. It felt as though the living room was closing in on us as we spoke to them. They were focussed on us, expressionless. They simply asked a few questions.

Shayne later told me that he thought they were going to be told that someone close to us had passed away. He and Mitchell did not seem to have sensed that I was ill, but their sister did, when she realized I had not been going to work.

One by one, they left the room to what would become their new reality. In that moment, I was more worried for them than I was for myself.

We contemplated a delay in telling our McLaughlin and Prior families, but knew that we could not put it off for long. There were too many signs that things were not normal. I dreaded the conversations with my father and my two sisters, but especially with my brother, who had suffered the tragic loss of his first fiancé in a car accident nineteen years earlier.

I began by making phone calls to my two younger sisters, Heather and Colleen. We spoke often, so I hoped that asking to drop by for a visit would be welcomed as perfectly normal. Heather, who is a nurse practitioner, heard something in my voice — but I wanted her to be my sister, not a medical consultant.

As Heather later recalled about our conversation that day:

There are just certain times in your life you can never forget! It was a Monday. I was at my hairdresser's, with colour in my hair, when my phone rang. "Hi, Heather," Lynn said. "What are you up to today? Are you working?" I told her I was at the hairdresser's and asked her what was up. She replied, "Just thought I would drop by to talk to you about something. Will you be home this afternoon?" I told her I'd be home around 5 p.m.

After we spoke, I felt a sudden ache, a fear. Call it a sister's instinct, but I knew something was wrong. I just knew it. But what was it? I felt the anxiety building as I considered all the possibilities. By 1 p.m., I knew I had to call her back. I felt sick. I sensed something was dreadfully wrong.

"We can talk when I get there," she said.

"No, I have to know," I insisted. I remember begging for some little hint of what it could be. "Well," Lynn said, "I... I have a brain tumour."

Silence, pain, fear, hands trembling, everything closing in. What was I hearing? Was this really happening? 5 p.m. was an eternity away. Having the medical knowledge I do only added to my fear. "Be rational," I thought. "I have to be positive. Statistically, a large percentage of brain tumours are non-malignant. Oh my God! Please don't let this be happening." I felt weak with fear, and I was nauseated. She was alone in the ER when she got the news! How can that happen? Why wasn't I there? Why did she not call? How can she be so strong in the face of everything?

As I was looking at the MRI report after Lynn and Ken arrived, I remember thinking, "Oh my God, could she be in that 10 percent? Less than 10 percent of meningiomas are cancerous. But the tumour is big. How is my sister sitting there so calm? Sipping on a glass of wine, describing only subtle symptoms. She is my strength. Strength is running off her." I knew one thing for sure: in God's faith we would find the strength to support her and get through this.

My timing was very poor when I called my sister Colleen. She was at work and didn't answer the phone at first, but within seconds she called me back, asking what was wrong, clearly suspecting something. Her voice became increasingly shaky on the phone. She was persistent. Putting off the news would have only caused her to wonder. I tried to speak as calmly as I could, while listening for her response. Waiting to call or drop by at the end of the work day would have been a better choice.

Ken and I went to see my father together. Dad, now 73 years old, and my stepmother Carol are Florida residents but they spend the summer months in Ontario. Dad sat on the couch with Carol beside him. She offered us a drink, as she did on every visit. I declined. I'm sure my anxiety was apparent. I clutched my hands in front of me and shared the news.

Dad was very good at masking his concern, but I noticed that he was chewing the fingernails on his left hand. I could feel the tension in his shoulders as he hugged me. They asked a few questions and we answered honestly, playing a supportive role. I can imagine the conversation between them as they followed us to my brother's home.

Mike and my sister-in-law responded in the same way, assuring us that they would do anything we needed over the coming weeks. Dad offered to call my two half-brothers, Sean and Colin, our family in Michigan.

I would love to have been a fly on the wall after we left each family member's home. I'm sure that's when true emotions and feelings were revealed. I knew that I would never be privy to them. I wondered how I could lessen their worry as the days and nights passed.

My family has always been my rock, and each of them played a role in keeping me on an even keel. If you're on your own journey towards recovery, don't be afraid to lean on your family and friends. Even during times of uncertainty along the way, it is important to remember that you can depend on the love and support of your crew!

My boss needed to be told in person. I felt a very real sense of guilt about the situation, since he and two other members of the senior team were about to retire. This would put additional pressure on him and his exit plan.

Warren was always in the office long before anyone else arrived. I knocked on the open door and asked to speak with him privately. “Do you have any plans for the summer?” he asked as he closed the door behind me.

“My plans have changed,” I blurted out.

He was taken aback, but he was very considerate. He understood that my leave of absence had to begin immediately, and agreed to keep the news confidential until I contacted him again later in the week. Afterwards, back in my office, I began to prepare for a turnover — but when and to whom, I had no idea.

Thursday, 18 July

This is exhausting and I just can't find any more words. I will need to find a way to tell my closest friends, but I just can't do it today. My energy now needs to focus on what is before me.



Lynn McLaughlin is a Canadian educator who has spent her life devoted to ensuring each of us meets our full potential. Mother of three wonderful children, she currently lives with her husband in southern Ontario.

Lynn began journaling the day she received a life-threatening diagnosis. Grateful for an amazing support network, she is now passionate about sharing her journey of fear and survival. It is Lynn's hope that by travelling with her through experiences and reflections, you will be empowered to advocate for yourself and others regardless of the challenges.

Lynn is working on the completion of her next book, while actively volunteering for the Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada.

As a consultant, public speaker and advocate, she also enjoys leading book talks, both virtually and in person.

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