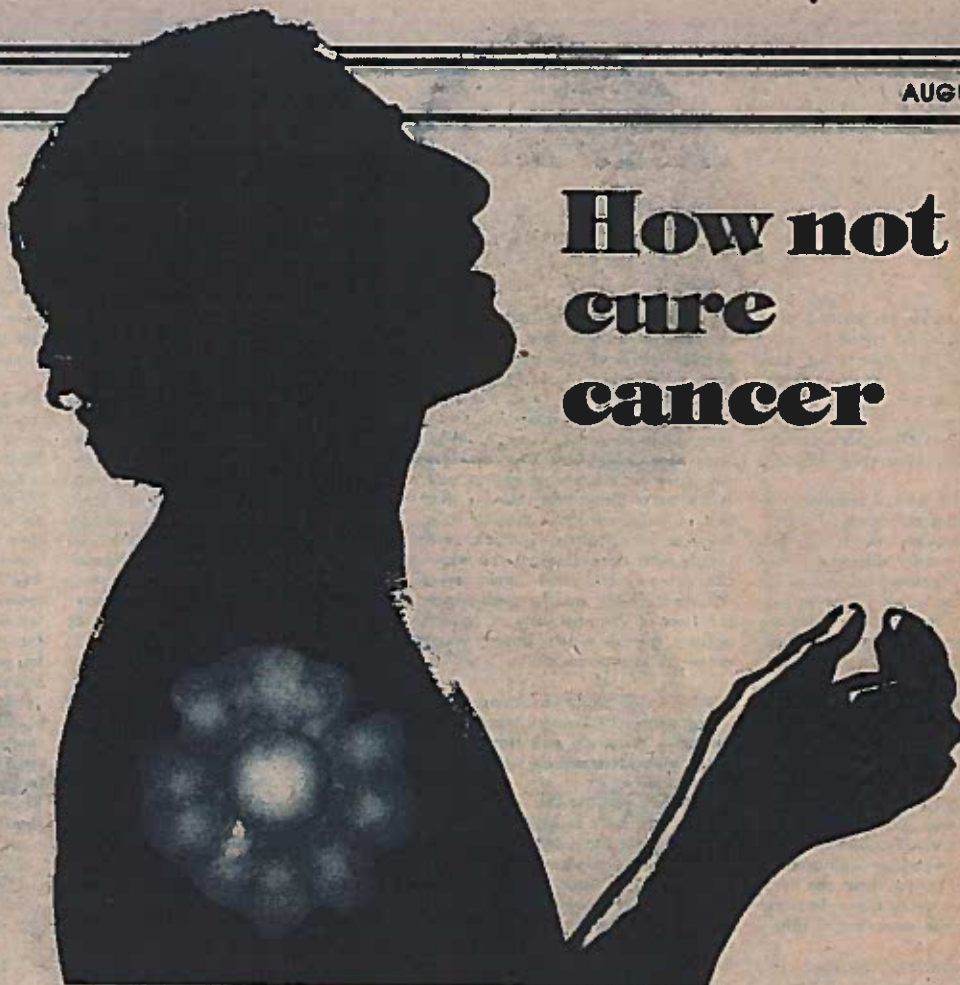


How not to cure cancer



by Joanna Rotte

Two actors: one a star—a comier, a mover, an up-front man; the other his support. Two friends: one alive on this planet: the other now gone. Both memorialized on film: both representative products of the modern age. This is the story of their appointment with death. As in the deferential manner of Jack Webb, the names have been changed or ignored.

My first meeting with Peter, the movie star, took place in one of those fast, loud, and flashy disco-clubs in New York's East Side. His energy stunned me. Although it was a cool, early April, the scene was hot and Peter was getting warm under layers of shirts, a sweater, and a sports-jacket; he quaffed down bottled beer with bourbon chasers. Two striking women: one a gaga California model, the other an Israeli doctor, were delivered to our table, consisting of myself and four men (two actors and two show-bit businessmen), which accelerated the mood from shop talk to boy-girl jesting to dancing. Without the loosening aid of liquor, I felt shy, chained the cigarettes, and drank up Peter as he stomped the dance floor. Back to the table came the face as sensitive as on film, riding a solidly square, compactly charged body: the shoulders jumped, the head was dropped then flung back as fingers raced up the forehead and streamed through rivulets of silky hair. He was an electric sculpture of self-massage—a wired bundle, alternately restricting and releasing, aligning and adjusting so as not to short-circuit his own exuberance; he was yangness itself, American style, with yin blasting the extremities. I could

not speak to him; nor could I deny him. After closing hours, the party levitated to the home of the two ladies, where the smoke got blown, the bottles drained, and the young silly stopped. When the pretty model fell to the floor, somersaulted head over pantyhose and came up halfway, giggling, Peter lowered gears, perhaps sobered by the gymnastics, perhaps by the yang of approaching dawn. He sat beside me on the sofa and somehow, parting the vapors of weed and wine, we merged in a conversation on Oriental medicine. To demonstrate, I gave him some Shiatsu massage around the neck, head, and shoulders, absorbing the heat, feeling the tightness release under pressure points. His intensity relaxed as heaven and earth stabilized, and, through the power of divine will, this actor, a Taurus, shared with me, an actress, a Taurus, the story of Roman, his best friend, an actor, a Taurus, then dying of cancer in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, the futility of it splitting Peter's heart a little more each day. Having at one point saved my own soul through macrobiotics, I offered to help.

Roman had appeared on film with Peter: he was a real heavy on the screen, one of the bad guys, his demeanor and temperament different from the way I found him in life. The two had known each other since acting school and, if not lifelong friends, were fast and deep ones. Raised in Hawaii, Roman had left a middle-class, Navy home for a Notre Dame education, married, divorced, and elected to pursue the adventures of the New York City acting struggle.

At thirty-four years, he shared the flamboyant, shocking pink and gilded gold apartment of a painfully distracted lady singer and was, just before his illness, on the periphery of commercial success. Originally his condition had been noted as some trouble in the lungs, possibly tuberculosis, but soon it was known to be cancer. Peter secured for him the best New York City doctor that opinion could muster; the tumor in the left lung, near the heart, was diagnosed as inoperable, and radiation treatment ensued. As is characteristic of such unwieldy measures, nerve tissue was destroyed, resulting in paralysis of the left vocal cord, a side effect of mechanically arrested growth. Consequently, when I first spoke with Roman by telephone, the gruffness, harshness, stridency of his voice frightened me. After learning the cause of those grating tones, the hideous bequest of a mammoth x-ray machine, I wondered at Roman's ability to look forward—to what? Being an actor without a voice, like a musician without an instrument? The authorities, of course, had assured him that "in time" the right cord would accommodate, moving west to vibrate against the dead sick, but nobody was predicting the tenor or facility of that future voice. Armed with William Dufty's *You Are All Sarpaku* (usually attractive to performing artists because of its theatrical nature), George Ohsawa's *Cancer and the Philosophy of the Far East*, and *The Teachings of Michio Kushi* for some yin/yang fundamental background, I subways uptown to meet the man who was to teach me

much about the nature of life before death. He was black-haired, large-eyed, flame-lipped, and pale, very pale, with tinges of yellow; his hands were powerful, masculine, colored bright red along the lung meridians; his native constitution was strong, yang; his present condition was sick, extremely yin. I was nervous: cancer is voracious, omnipresent, enveloping. Beyond the lung, it had foraged into his right leg, rendering him immobile without crutches, eliciting pain generally quelled only by morphine. We talked. Roman was responsive, willing yet neither desperate nor recklessly eager. His smile was warm, gentle; he seemed very spiritual. A few days earlier I had sent ahead Jean Kobler's account of his own macrobiotic cure of pancreatic cancer, which Peter had read aloud, "the best first reading he had given in his life." He also delivered some Ohsawa material, which struck Roman as the only writing on disease he had ever found that made sense to him, that felt true deep inside. The doctors, the medical studies had characterized cancer either as a virus, some alien intruder that attacked from outside, or as a weird, symbiotic resident that suddenly began dividing and reproducing within; whichever, it was an enemy and needed to be eliminated by the weapons of machinery and/or chemicals. Conversely, Ohsawa wrote of cancer as a creation by the self, manifesting that one has violated the Order of the Universe by nourishing oneself without regard for natural balance, usually on a diet weighted with animal products. In Roman's case, his food history since leaving



home had been: meat two or three times a day; little cereal and no whole grains; refined white flour products; vegetables, if any, canned or frozen; considerable liquid (though little alcohol); and desserts—all with the standard supply of additives and preservatives. His was a typical American diet: he ate without consideration for season, environment, manner of cultivation, or method of preparation. He was not an ignoble person; on the contrary, he was kind, had a charming, almost implicit humor, but was, as have all we moderns been, ignorant of balance within the Order of the Universe, having blocked himself to the intuitive laws of nature. In short, within the modern age, he was a regular guy. What he found enlightening in Ohsawa was the knowledge that he alone was responsible for this cancer; that he, by virtue of his lifestyle, had created it—which, if he so elected, allowed him the dignity of controlled participation in his own destiny.

As we talked, lunch was served. When Roman lifted the tin lid off the antiseptic plate, I laughed, going pale. The midday fare of this man dying from processed and animal food was two cups of bleeding roast beef atop a machine-sliced slab of Wonder-style white bread, canned, obviously dyed, succotash; some bits of innocuous salad; a refined white-flour roll dressed with a paper-cased pat of butter; a waxed carton of "vitamin D" enriched cow's milk to be drunk through a paper straw; a

plastic cup of pudding, probably made from unfertilized eggs, powdered milk, and refined sugar; a metal pot of coffee to be laced with packaged half 'n half and the choice of white sugar or saccharine, depending, I suppose, on the patient's predilection for gaining or losing weight in time for his funeral. Fortunately, Roman was not hungry; his bodily intuition had apparently already set into motion its survival mechanism of dispelling the appetite so as to yangize through fasting—a common occurrence among cancer patients. I suggested, if he did feel hunger, to take only the vegetables, to avoid whatever chemicalized, processed, or animal foods they might serve, and I urged him to request a special diet centered on whole cereals with vegetable side dishes. He thought he might do that, acknowledged he could get oatmeal in the morning, and wondered how to satiate his rabid thirst—the legacy of medication—other than with the quarts of metal-pitcher ice-water and tall glasses of frozen-concentrate orange juice that were his ever-constant bedside demons. I offered to bring him herbal teas and set up a mini-kitchen in the bathroom, then left him to consider, as he was wheeled off to the x-ray monster, whether he wanted to take the path of macrobiotics.

I had worked with food as medicine for self-healing for over two years and had dabbled with it for mostly minor complaints of family and friends, so I knew its power both

to heal and to harm. Still, cancer, which I understood as an extremely yin (expanded) stage of profligate cellular disease, takes a long time to materialize and so needs some time to dematerialize. In other words, the chaos could not be rearranged overnight with an uneboshi plum but would entail a program, discipline, dedication, and ultimately faith. Bolstered by my understanding of the yin and yang of diet and disease, I was not afraid of the cancer per se; but, in terms of Western medicine, wherein folks revere the Surgeon General, whoever he may be, this was the big time. Not knowing how to penetrate institutionalized medicine, I felt insecure, naive, a fledgling in the midst of that huge hospital with all its sterility. I telephoned a friend, Sylvia, a woman more competent in the Oriental art of visual diagnosis, experienced in Shiatsu massage, and knowledgeable in external remedies than I. She was willing to help. I arranged a meeting with Roman and together we went to face our potential patient, his mother and father, who had flown in from Hawaii at the onset, and his girlfriend, Hazel. For three hours we spoke with two utterly devoted, intelligent, gracious, frightened parents, a strained, bewildered girlfriend, and Roman, who mostly looked on, smoking micronite filter cigarettes and occasionally interjecting decisive questions. The most difficult procedure was finding a channel of communication, a meeting place for understanding. We tried nutritional areas

such as proteins, vitamins, and minerals; physiological areas such as the debilitating effects of x-ray and drugs; psychological areas such as "mind over matter"; we tried ideology, philosophy, emotion and sentiment. Finally, when Sylvia introduced God into the conversation, we were accepted—to the Universal, all could relate. But we needed to convince them to intervene themselves, to participate responsibly rather than submit to the fearful hand of God. As George Ohsawa wrote,

"In order to cure a cancer patient who has already surrendered it is first necessary to change his attitude. This must be accomplished at any cost. Otherwise everything is useless and the patient might just as well be dead."

To that I would add it is also vital to affect the attitude of those surrounding the patient. It was paramount that we gain their support, dispel their fear; we never did. From that first meeting it was indicated that Hazel had already bowed before the awesomeness of cancer; as her lips just barely brushed his cheek in little kisses, hers appeared a romance with Death, and we were intruders. His mother was docile, conciliatory toward her son, this little boy with a fever who had eaten "bad things"; though she seemed resigned to the will of God, she wanted us there. His father, the military gentleman, was suffering behind a staunchness worthy of Caesar; although his whole hope lay in technology, his medieval faith in the modern medicine men, he



welcomed us. It was Peter, the Taurus, the bull, the stubborn ally, who was waging a battle through Roman, he said. "Cancer is bullshit; I don't believe in cancer." Pronouncing Roman "an extraordinary human being," Peter was sure Roman would live, and he wanted Roman to be sure. But what Roman felt from the inside none of us could know. It was his decision, and despite the optimism he had recently drawn from Ohsawa, Peter's support, his family's love, and his lady's attention, Roman was tired.

He allowed us to care for him. But at the same time he allowed anybody, in any way, to care for him. At one point, Peter brought in a faith healer. Hazel presented Kentucky-fried chicken, chocolate cake, and ice cream for his birthday because he liked it. Parental sentiment abounded, the doctor propagandized, and honey ran unshod. Despite our protestations, Roman remained in the hospital, which continued its redoubtable ministrations. Everything, every vibration in that cool, white edifice was antagonistic to a cure. It was a yin paradise: metal, plastic and electric; dacron-polyester; ice water and TV; fluorescent lighting, x-rays, and drugs—the only natural energy in the room was the fire from matches Roman used to light his cigarettes. Each day, into that flaccid haven came Sylvia or myself with high hopes and food intentions to yangtze. We asked Roman to wear cotton pajamas, to curtail the liquid or, at least, drink it at room temperature; I brought or

sent miso soup, brown rice, vegetables, and beans; Sylvia administered ginger compresses and taro plasters to his lungs and legs; she did massage and palm-healing; together we chanted, together we prayed, and Roman joined in. He grew stronger, less depressed as his lungs cleared. In three weeks he was out of the hospital, by his own volition, a better if not a well man.

It was then that our diagnosis and treatment were substantiated by Michio Kushi, while he was lecturing in New York City, we prevailed upon him to visit Roman at home. We were relieved by his prognosis: if Roman would adhere very strictly to an appropriate macrobiotic diet, have taro-plasters repeatedly applied to the cancerous areas, exercise, ease off the drugs, and not take hot baths, then in six weeks he would be scotching about, able to cook his own rice and vegetables. By facial diagnosis, iridology, and taking the six pulses used in Oriental medicine, Michio concluded that Roman's cancer was serious but certainly not incurable; it was "medium level." Still, he impressed Roman with the necessity for precision and asked him if he would "be good." Roman smiled. Somewhat consoled, Sylvia and I decided to take a break. After stocking the shelves with food and giving a cooking class to Roman's mother, leaving a supply of ginger, taro, flour and cotton and teaching his father how to apply them, we vacated. After a weekend absence, Sylvia telephoned, asking to see

Roman; each day of that week she was offered some reason why a visit would be inconvenient. Finally, during the next week; when I was allowed to return, everything was out of order; the sickness was again in charge. Roman had become contentious, his mother intimidated, his father removed, avoiding conflict, and Hazel solicitous. Scant rice was being eaten, no plasters made; Roman slept less, watched TV more, and barely moved; no air circulated in his room, yet the window remained fastened; pills were on the increase and morphine had become a ritual. I despaired; I gave a lecture; I left. I did not question why Roman's family did not force him to heal himself; I believe they respected Roman's free will—and that they were right to do so. I also did not question why they did not assist us more actively—prepare the food, apply the plasters, open the window. I respected their free will—I believe I was right to do so. Still, I know, beyond human deferences, in the end and always, balance is the only right, because balance is justice is love is God. And in Roman, balance meant either yangization through food or yangization through death. Since neither Sylvia nor I had been able to be there with him all the time, every day, perhaps because we were not 100 percent committed, we could not order the balance through food. And since Roman was also not 100 percent committed, he could not order the balance either. Somebody had to.

A week later Roman returned to

the hospital. There were more powwows, more smoky innuendoes, and the signal went out to commence chemotherapy. The findings revealed cancer in the left leg; the findings revealed defeat. Roman was left to lie there; Roman was left to die. His parents moved into the hospital lobby, setting up a twenty-four hour vigil. Anger kept me from visiting; I telephoned. Sylvia was more gracious; she went, but there was nothing more to be done. It was their time to draw together Roman with his mother and father, and they used it well. In five days, he entered into a coma. Collecting our remorse, Sylvia and I went to see the family and the man who in eight weeks had become an integral part of both our sub- and surface consciousness.

It was a Friday evening, raining, quiet for New York City. We found his parents in a sitting room at the end of the corridor that bordered the closed door to Roman's room. His mother embraced us, kissed us; we three held each other and passed around photos of Roman as a little boy, as a teenager, and pictures of his sisters, now waiting at home in Hawaii. She reminisced about his childhood, his marriage, his goodness, many things up until the time he had become an actor, up until the time he had "gotten sick." His father sat off in a corner. Finally, stiff and unprepared, Sylvia and I made the long walk to Roman's room. Our reactions were very different: she was calm, acquiescent, prayerful; I was horri-



fled. His stomach was distended; there were tubes in his arms, arms now thinner than the malnourished children exposed in *National Geographic*; a handkerchief-sized towel amply draped what had been a strong and full chest; as oxygen was pumped into his mouth, his whole torso heaved up from the bed, struggling with each inhalation; his hair, once thick and shiny, was nearly gone—patches of scalp showed through moist streaks of black; his eyes were closed. Judging from his emaciated limbs and swollen belly it was clear that the chemicals had destroyed the intestinal flora and thus his ability to absorb food. His *Aura*—his vital center, his life—was blown out. I knew that death by starvation had enlisted this body hours before and only the mechanisms of electricity and biochemistry were inhibiting the flight of its spirit. Yet withal, some relentless faith or foolishness inside me wanted to get him out of there, wake him from his transition to another sphere, make him remove those tubes and heal himself. Sylvia touched him; I could not. We left, not looking back, bid good night to his parents, and had nothing to say to each other all the way home.

The church services followed quickly upon his death twenty-four hours after we last saw him, arranged by Peter so that Roman's colleagues could pay tribute to their friend and his parents. I did not cry until his mother and I clasped hands in the receiving line following the ceremony.

One last time, before they flew his body home to Hawaii, I spoke with Roman's parents. His father asked for names of families, centers for macrobiotic studies, natural food stores in Hawaii that he could contact; he expressed a conviction in what we had been trying to do, a disillusionment with Western medicine. I was glad for his interest, and equally glad he did not convey regret—no sense of "if only . . ." We had all done all we could.

Sylvia has since written me, "When I look back to April and May I feel stupid. I was very emotional and had little real faith. I was playing at faith." But I do not credit that—it is only the obscurity of objectivity. We had faith in the universe and it was real. But our faith was insignificant without Roman's, and his was in a different place. Perhaps bound to our common heritage, the morality of crime and punishment, he seemed never to transcend viewing the cancer as due retributive, and so he surrendered, benevolently. It is true that having made the cancer, he deserved it; but behind that, it is likewise true that having made it, he deserved the chance to unmake it. Had he been able to embrace the cancer as an admonition, even love it as a blood brother, he might have seeded his faith in the universe within and thus remade himself. But he chose not to—at least not here, not now. What his parents feel today I do not know; nor do I know what Hazel or Peter is feeling. What I do know, having

traversed the path leading from an East Side bar via an uptown hospital to a West Side church, is that there is little difference among the conventional "healers" of today—the discotheque with its liquor, the doctor with drugs, the priest with forgiveness. Each offers a placebo, treating our symptoms; each tries to relieve by addition, adding yin to yin, whereas true healing is subtraction—removal of the cause. But modern medicine is simply part and parcel of the modern age, the age of excess. Nowadays we like to make our blood from animals, which get stuck inside us; we like to plant our feet in concrete and cover our heads with smoke, which we get stuck in; we like to work a little, move less, and sit a lot. We are dying of what we like. We are a people of conveniences, of things, of material comforts; we have much of everything, especially stagnation, both inside and out. Given the modern lifestyle, cancer is a remedy from nature—the balance, the mirror image, a lever to unstick the stuck lifestyle of modern mankind; it is the internal complement to external technology—excess food, excess protein, excess material, excess growth. Its appetite is as voracious as our own; it is, in fact, ourselves consuming what we have overconsumed. Cancer is as extreme, greedy, and disorderly as the eating that creates it.

Once one has become a slave to the modern-age lifestyle, there are two choices: move or be moved by cancer. Roman, as judged by his

accommodating nature, was a less assertive type: the apartment in which he lived, for example, revealed little trace of himself; a receptive, gentle man, he was a supporting actor. Peter, his counterpart, is a man of dominant tastes, a leading actor. Given Peter's pace and ego it is doubtful that he would ever develop, ever accommodate the competition of cancer; his nature destined him for a more sudden death. If one must eat and live in the modern manner (that is, immoderately), then it is better to avoid the choice that Roman made and move as Peter moves—immoderately, even flagrantly, so as to discharge excess constantly. The risk he runs, of course, is heart attack. Is it not a grim choice? There is an alternative, however: change of lifestyle entailing subtraction and substitution—quality for quantity. That is my prayer, because I do not want to watch any other young person of the twentieth century yield to damage by radiation and destruction by drugs on the orders of unhealthy medics who, in their narrow-visioned ignorance, violate the natural Order of the Universe by attacking excess with excess. Nor do I want to read about heart attacks suffered at age forty. What I do want is for Peter to live long and happily on this planet, and for Roman, when he chooses to return to it, to find a sane civilization of moderate balance, wherein excess is a memory, hearts are untroubled, and cancer prehistoric. Let us prepare the earth for the coming of angels. ☐