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# I SIGNED AS THE DOCTOR

**Memoir of a Cancer Doctor Surviving Cancer**



**Healing through humor, hats, and hope**

*Laura Liberman, M.D.*

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## **Praise for Dr. Laura Liberman's *I Signed as the Doctor***

“A lucid look at cancer when an eminent doctor becomes a patient. Laura Liberman's touching personal and expert professional insights, humanity and down-right helpful advice should be read by those who have cancer and those who treat this disease. Actually, it's a great read for everyone.”

-Barbara Goldsmith, bestselling author and historian,  
Winner of 2007 American Institute of Physics Best Book  
for *Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie*

“When a reader laughs and cries at the same time, that's a sign of a great book. Laura Liberman's true story does it. I love *I Signed as the Doctor*! It made my heart sing.”

-Ellen Daniell, author, *Every Other Thursday: Stories and Strategies from Successful Women Scientists*

“Music and medicine are healing arts. This memoir of a doctor facing her cancer with resilience persuasively describes music's potential for spiritual uplift and for synergy with medicine to heal the body and mind.”

-Richard Kogan, M.D., psychiatrist and concert pianist;  
creator of DVD series, *Music & The Mind*

“Laura Liberman makes the extraordinary possible. The author inspires by her openness and sharing of perspectives. Particularly compelling are her images of family life, reordering priorities, calmness during treatment, and insights into pain control. *I Signed as the Doctor* will help patients cope with illness and will help physicians be better doctors.”

-Kathleen Foley, M.D., neurologist, Pain & Palliative Care  
Service, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center



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This book does not provide medical advice such as that obtained in a direct consultation, and does not replace it. No recommendations regarding diagnosis or therapy are being made in this book by the author or by Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Medical issues that concern readers should be addressed directly with their health care practitioners.

About the cover:

The cover photos were taken by master photographer Richard I. DeWitt with permission of milliner extraordinaire Christine A. Moore (<http://www.camhats.com/about/html>). The front cover photo depicts Laura in Christine's New York studio, trying on hats as she did before beginning chemotherapy.

[www.LauraLiberman.com](http://www.LauraLiberman.com)

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Laura Liberman, M.D.



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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to my husband and the love of my life, David, and to our amazing two children, who make every day joyous. I thank the incredible Jennifer Menell, my “gentle reader,” and Cynthia Thornton, my guardian angel. I offer my work to all people living with cancer or other illness (either personally or in a loved one), whether recently diagnosed, in treatment, or survivors. This book is for us.



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## FOREWORD

After I had been a radiologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York for 17 years, I developed left arm numbness, heaviness, and loss of dexterity. I consulted a neurologist and had three months of tests that resulted in the diagnosis of widely disseminated lymphoma, a malignancy of the lymphocytes, which are a group of white blood cells in the body that normally fight infection. I knew from the beginning that I would be treated at Memorial. I worked at the best cancer hospital in the world—where else would I go?

This book is organized primarily as a collection of emails that I wrote immediately before, during, and after treatment. Most of the emails are to my dear friend Jen, although a few are to other people. Occasionally I include an email sent to me by someone else. In writing this book, I aim to tell a survival story accessible to all readers, to help people living with cancer or other serious illness (either personally or in a loved one), and to help doctors take better care of their patients, from my unique perspective as both a cancer doctor and a cancer survivor.

My friends who were kind enough to read and comment on the manuscript have asked me if it is memoir or fiction. The book is memoir. As President Barack Obama writes in the introduction to *Dreams from My Father*, the book is almost entirely true as written, but I have taken liberties, such as altering the order, time frame, or dates of events, compressing two characters into one, and changing some of the characters' names or backgrounds, primarily to protect the privacy of others.

I gratefully acknowledge the help of my friends, including Ellen, who suggested that I write about my cancer

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experience; Maureen, who used her cancer battle to guide me through mine; my sister-in-law, Laura, whose resilience and humor gave me hope; Monique (“Q”), who helped me believe that I would survive; and Christine, who makes the world’s most fabulous hats. I’m indebted to Richard I. Dewitt for magnificent photography, Todd Engel for beautiful cover design, Angela Hoy for shepherding me through the publication process, and Steve Bennett, Nancy MacDonald and colleagues at AuthorBytes for their spectacular work on the website, [www.LauraLieberman.com](http://www.LauraLieberman.com).

I thank my father for his love and inspiration; his spirit is always with me. I thank my mother for her caring, support, and priceless artistic advice. I gratefully acknowledge my brother for teaching me the alphabet when I was three and for always being able to make me laugh. Thanks to all who wrote to me and prayed for me during my treatment, and to the amazing doctors and nurses at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, who saved my life.

Laura Liberman, M.D.

## Chapter 1 Getting Ready

*Reach out to your friends. Write about it.*

**From:** Laura

**Sent:** Friday, March 2, 2007 10:55 PM

**To:** Jennifer

**Subject:** News

Hi Jen. I had hoped to talk to you on the phone today, but I'm in a whirlwind. I've just been diagnosed with an aggressive lymphoma, involving lymph nodes, bone marrow, spinal cord, and the fluid around my brain. I have to have a tube put into my chest on Monday, David and I tell the kids next weekend, I get another tube put in my brain the following Monday, and I start chemo on Thurs 3/15.

Apparently I've got a 50/50 shot of going into remission if I do this. I can make a 50/50 shot, don't you think?

I'll be playing stuff by ear—probably not taking care of patients for awhile, but will continue my research and administrative work.

I know that neither of us was religious when you lived in New York City, but we haven't talked about it for awhile. If you pray, please put in a word for me; if you don't, would you mind starting now?

Love

Laura

**From:** Laura

**Sent:** Monday, March 5, 2007 9:37 PM

**To:** Jennifer

**Subject:** Today

Hi Jen. Today I had a tube called a Mediport catheter put in my chest in Interventional Radiology. Phil, my oncologist, said it wasn't essential—that if I didn't want the catheter, they could just put in an intravenous (IV) every time I need to get IV chemo—but I've seen too many patients who get stuck for every chemo, and they dread it. Also, it sounds like I'll need six months of chemo, a lot of which will be intravenous. There's no way my veins would hold out through all that. I figured getting the catheter would spare my veins from repeated needle sticks. And they said they can take it out after I've finished all of the chemo treatments.

The Mediport was no big deal. They give you IV sedation and then do the procedure under local anesthesia, using fluoroscopy, which looks like a TV screen that shows you x-rays of what's going on in your body, so they can see what they're doing. After making a tiny incision, they insert this sterile plastic catheter into the superior vena cava, a big vein in the chest that leads directly to the heart, and then close the skin over it. They put some sticky stuff called Dermabond on the skin over where the incision was made to help it heal, and then place a bandage over that. Once you have the catheter, they can deliver all the IV chemo through that.

It feels so odd to be a patient at the cancer hospital where I've been a doctor for 17 years. I must have thought that being a doctor, wearing that white coat, confers immunity—like cancer is something that happens to other people, and couldn't

possibly happen to me—but apparently that’s not the case. When they brought me the consent form for the Mediport, I signed the wrong part—I signed as the doctor, because that’s where I always sign! They said no, you have to sign as the patient now. Sometimes I feel like I’m in a play where I know all the lines, but they have me reading the wrong part.

Write to me—little things about you, Sophie, Jim, music, work, life in Philadelphia, and how your pregnancy is going.

Love  
Laura

**From:** Laura  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 6, 2007 8:10 PM  
**To:** Jennifer  
**Subject:** Chemo

Hi Jen. It’s great that you’re still finding time to play the cello. I haven’t been playing the piano much these days, although I’m a dedicated listener. I miss playing music with you. For me, the best thing about taking that chamber music class at Mannes Conservatory ten years ago was that we got to meet! It was a real departure for me, because in all of my piano training as a kid, my teacher insisted that being a soloist was all that mattered; playing with another person was considered “accompanying” and a lesser art. I’m glad she was wrong.

When we met in that music class, I thought it was so cool that you played the cello, especially since traditionally the cello used to be considered “unladylike.” I thought, “Here’s a woman unabashed by gender stereotypes.” You go, girl.

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