

WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

A MEMOIR
OF MY TRIUMPH
OVER ILLNESS

MAX LERNER

ALSO BY MAX LERNER

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Wrestling WITH THE Angel

A Memoir of My Triumph over Illness

MAX LERNER

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For Jenny
—and for my children
Adam, Stephen, Michael, Joanna, Constance,
who are in the camp of life

And in memory of
my daughter Pamela Schofield
who died of cancer at 29

CONTENTS

Author's Note	11
1. Contingency Is King	19
2. The Locus of the Evil	27
3. The Torment of Choice	37
4. The Universe of the Ill	47
5. Don't Take My Night Away	59
6. "You Are Twice-Blessed: You Have Two Cancers"	77
7. "Don't Let Them Do an Abelard on You"	95
8. A Medical Miracle—and a Medical Museum	111
9. "Thank God, It's Only a Heart Attack!"	117
10. The Upward Spiral: The Doctor Within the Patient	137
11. Aging: The Last Voyage	145
12. Confronting Death, Asserting Life	167
Notes	196
Further Reading	205

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THESE PAGES are a narrative of a life-threatening illness. I have seen it through a patient's eye, not a doctor's, which is bound to make a difference. I shall be telling of two successive cancers, followed by a heart attack, all in the space of four or five years. For a time I felt like Job.

My first cancer came when I was seventy-eight, and after a year the prognosis was pretty dark. But I learned that command belongs to the patient, and made a fight of it, as I did of the two successor episodes. I was lucky in the doctors who worked with me, and in the cohesiveness of my large and supportive family.

Since I am by profession a writing man, not certain whether something has happened until I can put it into words, I kept a fitful account of my adventures in ailing and healing—and of my aging as well, although I tend to regard the ailing/aging complex as an unholy alliance.

Consequently I have ventured, at various points, to flesh out the bare bones of the narrative by inserting journal entries, some of them written in the full flood of feeling and of narcissism, with little concern for the niceties of language or the imperatives of modesty. Some others are more reflective, at times even meditative, as I try in my journals to give an account to myself of the complex role of the shaman in the doctor-patient relation, the intricacies and uncertainties of the mind-body

connection, the miseries and splendors of the aging experience, the dialectical dances of life and death, and even some explorations of the presence of God in the one-sided conversations I started with Him.

For the metaphor of wrestling that I have used in my title, I went to the story in Genesis about Jacob's emergence from his night of wrestling with the Angel of God, scathed but triumphant: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

As I wrote the book I came to see that it was a wrestling not with the disease alone, nor with the doctors and their medications and interventions, nor even with the "spite of Fortune." It was with the unfathomable mysteries, with Jacob's angel, with the dark man who came in the night and stayed and left—the angel at once of death and life—the Angel of God.

Since this is an intimate book, several persons close to me have been involved in its history. I am lucky to have three sons whose work has impinged closely upon its central theme. My doctor son is Adam Lerner, now an oncology fellow at Harvard's Dana Farber Cancer Institute. My ecologist and journalist son, Stephen Lerner, currently working out of Washington, has joined in watching over me at critical junctures, both personally and professionally. My son Michael Lerner, president of Commonweal, a health institute at Bolinas, California, has worked productively with an integral approach to cancer therapies, especially the "alternative" ones. I have profited from lively, sustained, and ongoing conversations with all three and from their contributions and criticisms.

My wife, Genevieve Edna Lerner, has shown courage and strength in coping with the course of my illness amidst her own crowded life. But for her the manuscripts would have come into

the world laden with more of my crotchety excesses than have survived her astringent editorial skills. I owe more than I dare acknowledge to Evelyn Irsay, who had the forethought to spend some years working with a medical group before she became my personal assistant. Her experience and empathy have counted for much. I also consider myself lucky to have had Carol Houck Smith contributing her sensitive insights as editor.

. . . And Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the bottom of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him. . . . And Jacob called . . . the place Peniel, "for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

— Gen. 32:24–30

I've made a long journey and been to a strange country, and I've seen the dark man very close.

— Thomas Wolfe, from the last letter he wrote

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