

My Journey Through and Beyond Breast Cancer

A Survivor's Story

By Robin S. Dudley

People who knew me in 1997 B.C. ("Before Cancer") probably can't tell the difference. Except for a shorter haircut, on the outside I may seem the same. But my journey through breast cancer changed me profoundly, altering the way I look at and live life.

One commonality I've found from talking to other cancer survivors is a dramatic shift in attitude and perspective on just about everything. Likewise, while I would never want to go through it again, I don't regret the experience. I gained so much more from my cancer than I lost. Today I know and revel in who I am, not in what I might become. I know that life is a precious gift to be cherished. Each new day that I wake up I feel like Alice in Wonderland, and life is so much better from this side of the "looking glass."

Prior to my diagnosis, I approached life as if looking through a telescope – always focused forward on tomorrow, or next week, or next year. "Today" was merely a slot of time to fill with activities that moved me toward an elusive "someday." At the age of 42 I felt invincible. I was sure there would always be time to "smell the flowers" – later.

Then everything changed. In the year following my diagnosis, there were certain memorable moments that are now woven into the fabric of my being forever. While very personal and hard to revisit – even on paper – I share them here so others who follow after me may see the pink ribbons of hope tied along the path, and realize they are not alone in their own journey.

"The Call" or "One is the Loneliest Number."

It was one of those awful moments when the whole world seemed to stop. Time, reality, and my heart froze for what felt like an eternity. Whatever came after my surgeon's first terrifying words was lost in the fog that seized my mind. "Robin, I got your biopsy results. I'm afraid you have breast cancer."

Nothing could have prepared me for those words, or the huge and varied wave of emotions that followed. Even though I knew millions of other women had gone through this, I felt completely and utterly alone. For the first time in my life, I stood face to face with my own mortality, and felt the paralyzing grip of pure fear.

"Doctor, Doctor...Give Me the News...!"

The next two weeks were a blur. Escorted by my husband Carl as driver, interpreter and scribe, I made the rounds to my surgeon and two types of Oncologists. I learned about "staging" and "estrogen receptors." I found out more surgery would be required, with a high probability of needing chemotherapy and radiation. I was completely numb, as if it was happening to someone else. I found I could talk about breast cancer in the "third person" and clinical terms, but I couldn't join the words "I have" with this terrifying disease. That would make it a fact, and reality was still too frightening.

Meanwhile, I began reading everything I could lay my hands on to educate myself and prepare for the fight of my life. Of particular help was "Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book," and several booklets I got from my local American Cancer Society. They both spelled things out in simple, non-medical terms I could easily comprehend. In hind-site, I probably retained very little of the volumes of information I visually consumed. But the process of taking positive action helped me regain a small sense of control over my situation, and reduced my resentment for the body that had seemingly betrayed me.

“A Date with Destiny.”

As I was wheeled into the Operating Room, I don't know which scared me more: the possibility of dying from breast cancer, or the unknown physical outcome of surgery. Depending on if, or how much, the cancer had spread, I knew I might only lose a portion of my breast, or I might wake up with no breast at all. But my priority was to stay alive, so – whatever it took – the diseased tissue had to go.

Fortunately, more conservative surgery was possible. Unfortunately, the cancer had spread to some of my lymph nodes. Chemotherapy would have to be my saving grace.

“Hey! Look Me Over...”

A few days after surgery I was back in my doctor's office for the moment of truth: removal of the bandages that had not only protected my surgery site, but my self-image as a woman. That's when it really hit home. No more denying it. Cancer had stolen a part of me. My chest and my dignity were bruised and scarred, and I felt a piece of my very soul had been carved away with my surgeon's knife. (In time I would grow to accept my scars, and see them as a “badge of honor” – a reminder of a battle fought and won.)

“One Chemo, Two Chemo, Three Chemo, Four...”

The day I started chemotherapy was the day I took back control from the breast cancer, and officially began my recovery. It wasn't easy. With treatments and weekly blood tests, I felt like a pin cushion. Words like “good day,” “bad day,” “chemo brain” and “white blood count” became part of my normal vocabulary, and I lived (literally) on “smoothies” — one of the few things that didn't taste metallic or make me feel nauseous.

After two months I got a “break” to have two months of radiation treatments directly on my cancer site, then resumed the more generalize chemo for four more months. To keep from feeling over-whelmed by this long process, I found it helpful to reduce my “dose” of this regimented new life to living one day at a time.

“Every Cloud has a Silver Lining...”

During this difficult time I began to learn some valuable lessons. Like when I lost my hair to chemo. Sure, it was traumatic while it was happening – and messy. (I have a new compassion for our two cats' unintentional shedding, and will never yell about hair on my clothes and furniture again.)

But once it was gone, I found not having hair to be unexpectedly freeing. Not only did daily bathing and grooming take less time, undergoing chemo was like being given a “free pass” to explore unlimited self-expression. It gave me “license” to be more creative in my style and dress. (“Fashion faux pas” standards don't apply to cancer patients.) I got a plethora of new, fun hats and colorful scarves to adorn my naked head. And when my hair finally grew back, I decided to keep it very short to fit the new “more fun” me. My experience also put perspective on relatively unimportant things I used to fret about, like “bad hair days” and “hat hair.”

Chemotherapy taught me to stop and pay more attention. I learned to just “be.” With little energy to spare in the days during treatments, I would often just sit quietly in our back yard watching the clouds drift slowly by, enjoying the flowers in my garden, and listening to the birds sing. It took cancer to teach me to live in the “here and now,” because having tomorrow was no longer a guarantee.

“That's What Friends Are For...”

Also incredibly important to my recovery was maintaining a positive attitude, and being blessed with a strong personal network. It was truly the love and uplifting support of our family, friends, church and the community that kept Carl and I going during those scary and trying months. Cards and flowers were like missiles of hope and light, the meals that just “arrived” on our doorstep nourished us, and “angels” disguised as caring friends often helped take me to chemo appointments so Carl could continue working. No words can explain how much those kindnesses helped.

“Is That All There Is?”

Then came the Big Day – “Graduation” from chemo. The many months of extensive treatments and monitoring had ended. I thought I’d be elated. However, leaving my Oncologist’s office that day was a little unnerving. Chemo had been my parachute, and frequent doctor visits my safety net. Suddenly I was “free-falling.” It was exhilarating – and terrifying.

“Through the Looking Glass...”

Life returned to normal. I threw myself back into work, and rejoined the normal ebb and flow of the life I had put aside. But somehow doing things the same old way felt wrong. I had changed. It was as if the brightness, intensity and hue on my world had been cranked up a full notch. Gone was my telescopic perspective. Colors seemed brighter, music was lovelier, situations seemed clearer, relationships became more important and fulfilling and the “small stuff” didn’t seem to matter as much.

The face I see in the mirror today is the same as before, but the person I used to be is gone forever. I am now a “new” woman, filled with purpose and passion, determined to make the most of whatever time I have on this Earth (which is hopefully a long, long time).

I have chosen to use that time to find a more satisfying balance between what I need to do, what I feel is important to do (for myself and others), and what I love to do. I am better about taking time for myself without feeling selfish or guilty. I have learned how you live is more important than who you are or what you do. And most important, I’m less afraid of dying, because I have learned how to live.

“Keep the Candle Burning”

I was one of the lucky ones. I was given a great gift – a second chance at life. We must keep the awareness “candle” burning bright in memory of those “sisters” who lost their battle, and the one in eight women who currently have or may someday face breast cancer. Please join in the fight until we find a cure.

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