

Reflections of a Breast Cancer Survivor



Connecting with others along the journey to heal

BY TERRI PEDACE, RN

One advantage, if you can call it that, of being the third family member with breast cancer, is that I had the opportunity to walk through the experience initially with my mother when she was diagnosed in 1988, and again with my sister when she was diagnosed in 1995. Although their treatment courses and responses to treatment were quite different, it prepared me for my own journey with cancer, which began in February of 1998. I accepted this legacy somewhat reluctantly, but adopted the attitude that although you don't choose some of the unfortunate things that happen to you in life, what you can choose is how you respond to the challenge and what you learn from the experience.

Many cancer survivors I've had the privilege of knowing in the past four years seem to share my observation that you aren't the same person coming out of the experience as you were going in. But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Cancer changes your life in many ways, not the least of which is how you relate to people, and how you feel about things that are important to you. Begin faced with your own mortality at a time when life is cruising along pretty well is, for most of us, not a welcome exercise in growing up.

Treatment and Decisions

A fairly rigorous treatment path was recommended to me because of my strong family history of cancer, as well as the aggressive stage of disease when I was

diagnosed. Initially, I had a bilateral mastectomy (removal of both breasts). A procedure that sounds devastating both physically and emotionally takes on a different meaning when you know it's part of the package that may save your life—not that it feels any easier, but I knew what I had to do. Three weeks after the surgery, I started a six-month course of chemotherapy, taking advantage of a clinical trial that was available. Losing my hair from the treatment, although expected, was a difficult milestone. Before that point, I didn't look like a cancer patient. But once you start to look sick, your identity as a cancer patient becomes more public.

Sadly, during the middle of my chemotherapy, my sister's cancer returned. Although she underwent

further radiation treatments to slow the spread of the cancer, she lost her battle on July 14th, the night before my seventh chemotherapy appointment. Her wake was on my 43rd birthday. The obvious psychological dilemma for me as I was grieving her loss was to try to remain optimistic about my treatment course, while acknowledging with a heavy heart that hers had failed. Ironically, my initial prognosis was worse than hers, but she died within three years of diagnosis, and here I am thriving at four years out. One of life's many mysteries.

Following the chemotherapy came six weeks of radiation therapy, which provided a bit of reprieve since there are relatively few side effects. It also adds to the feeling of confidence that



this combination of therapies is a bit of an insurance policy against having a recurrence of the cancer. Then, last but not least, reconstruction surgery was the final hurdle along the treatment path, approximately one year after my initial diagnosis. Oddly enough, the end of treatment is a bit unsettling for many cancer survivors. Enduring and coping with the rigors of aggressive treatment is strangely comforting, in that it makes you feel like you're doing what you can to fight the disease, armed with all the artillery medical science has to offer. Once that chapter comes to a close, it feels like there should be something more out there. For many women, the drug Tamoxifen satisfies that need. For some of us who can't take that drug, there is a period of adjustment to ending formal treatment.

A paradox of cancer is that the very disease that is so feared by all, can also be the "gift" that enriches your life, strengthening relationships and putting your life into perspective. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support I received from the point of diagnosis through the end of treatment, and beyond. It was truly humbling to be the recipient of so many gestures of love and compassion—from family, friends, coworkers, people from my church, and many more. My husband's work colleagues even organized a "Food Brigade," assuring a steady stream of home delivered meals which lasted for months. It's a wonder I remembered how to cook!

Infinite Boundaries

Another source of comfort for cancer survivors is sharing their experiences with each other. For some, joining a support group is a very therapeutic way of dealing with the struggles and fears of

living with a cancer diagnosis. For others, networking informally with other breast cancer survivors achieves the same purpose. There is a unique comfort in hearing other women's stories. Even though every person's cancer experience is different, finding out what we have in common, and what we can learn from each other creates strong bonds of friendship.

I was fortunate to be invited to attend a retreat for breast cancer survivors two years ago, and have encouraged several other Coulee Region women to attend since. The four day retreats, entitled "Infinite Boundaries," are sponsored by the Breast Cancer Recovery Foundation and are held in various locations around the state. The main focus of Infinite Boundaries is on mind-body healing, with an emphasis on emotional and spiritual healing. The structured program provided a mixture of physical activities, such as hiking and exercises, along with educational presentations, discussion groups, and art and music activities.

One example of a creative activity I found particularly helpful was the opportunity to make a "prayer flag." Although we were told we could take our flags home with us, most women left theirs with the facilitators, to add to the growing collection left by former retreat participants. Each retreat has a large "hospitality room," which is decorated with all these flags tied together, and stretched across the walls of the room for the entire weekend. This gave us the feeling of being a part of a larger community of women who have walked the same path, and also gave us a sense of hope.

There were 13 participants in my retreat group, and a retreat team of five

women, consisting of three volunteers and two facilitators. All 18 of us were breast cancer survivors. Most of the women had either completed their cancer treatment, or were nearing the end of either chemotherapy or radiation. There was a broad range of ages, including one young woman who was in her early thirties with two toddlers at home, to a woman in her seventies, with a husband, children, and grandchildren.

The various ages and life experiences that this diverse group represents all played a part in the effectiveness of group interactions. We all brought unique perspectives to share, and took away knowledge and support from others. In fact, some members of our group have continued to maintain ongoing contact. Ideally, every woman with breast cancer should have this opportunity—the retreat was very therapeutic for me personally, and for others who attended.

All in all, my journey with breast cancer has given me more than it has taken away. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't realize how lucky I am to be here, and how important it is to make the most of opportunities that come my way. It's been a privilege to have met and befriended so many wonderful women during this journey, whose courage and strength is a constant source of inspiration to me. I have more blessings than I can count! ❧

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