

Celebrated as a Survivor



Last week, my husband nonchalantly tossed my mail on the kitchen counter. Ripping into a small envelope on top, I found a pretty purple invitation. Immediately my gut clenched. Setting it down, I turned back to making dinner as my mind scrambled through the trauma I had experienced not long ago. I was just invited to a tea for breast cancer survivors.

So what's the big deal? You might be thinking, *Oh! Nice. That was sweet of them.* That would be the natural reaction to such consideration, but what you can't understand until you've lived it is the unpredictable power of trauma.

Puzzled in Pink

Six months after my breast cancer diagnosis, I received a similar invitation asking if I wanted to participate in a walk-a-thon fundraiser for breast cancer research. Invisibly glued to the counter, it remained there for several days as I wrestled the decision down in my head. I finally decided to go and see if I could make some connections with other survivors.

Unfamiliar with how it worked, I decided to go by myself. This is my usual way of scoping things out. It allows me the freedom to bail if I decide I don't want to stay. Such are the rationalizations of a strongly independent personality.



The best word I can pin down to express what I experienced is **puzzling**. I just found the whole thing odd, how people were celebrating by wearing bedazzled bras, pink feather boas and party hats. There were large groups of people, many with matching shirts, that stood together as if participating in the revelry of a national holiday.

At the Survivor's Table, I was checked in and given a T-shirt with several gifts. Then, they pointed me to a sprawling buffet table of brunch treats. I shuffled through the line in a foggy puzzlement and found my seat at a table nearby. Detached from the gala around me, I nibbled on pastry while watching some of the most crazily dressed people walk by.

It's possible that the strangeness I felt could have come from being so close to the trauma of cancer treatment. At the time, I was still wearing a support band over my hip-to-hip incision from the reconstruction. The people surrounding me had come to know breast cancer in their own way. I understood that they were raising money to support the research for a cure. But something deep inside of me silently cried out as I stood watching them, "How could I celebrate such an awful thing?"

They honored survivors in several ways that day, and I appreciated the kind treatment. The struggle my heart had was in reconciling what I observed with how I felt about my experience.

A Buffet Table of Seafood

As I'm writing this, one extremely poignant scene comes to mind from the movie *Castaway*. The main character (played by Tom Hanks) spent several years surviving on an island after his plane crashed in the ocean. Shortly after his rescue, friends organize a welcome reception. Disgust fills his face



when he finds the buffet table spread with various kinds of seafood. That night, he is unable to sleep in his own bed, having grown accustomed to sleeping on the ground.

This foreignness and irrevocable change is strangely similar to life after cancer treatment. You emerge from this other world where you have been isolated, lost, and continually wracked by the medical wounding of your body. Returning to your life, you are spoken of as a “survivor” and celebrated. Your world isn’t the same. Those around you have moved on in their careers and relationships. You don’t know what just happened, having navigated the whirlwind motions of treatment without realizing the physical and emotional effects of a threat to your life. Now you are standing in the middle of a crossroads, trying to figure out what is next.

“I was just trying to survive.”

There is importance in celebrating and commemorating those who have fought in military battles or overcome daunting setbacks to achieve victory over their struggle. I don’t see my battle with cancer that way. I was just trying to **survive**. My choices came from what I could do to keep living... to keep from getting cancer again.



But, as I think back to the celebration at the walk-a-thon, I wonder if my naivety misunderstood the motivation. People gathered together to acknowledge the struggle the survivors went through, remember loved ones who have been lost, and get to know others who suffered similar pain. They celebrate the

resilience of the human spirit and root on the ones who are still fighting.

So, I tacked the pretty purple invitation to my calendar. Then I dialed up my dearest friend to ask her to go with me. My perspective of the Survivors' Tea changed when I saw it as a chance to meet other women who may be new at this, like I was just two years ago. I think this is where some healing could be found.

If you'd like to read more about my journey through cancer treatment, click [here](#) or visit "[Posts from the Past](#)" at the bottom of the web page.