

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.

Acupuncture – (Maybe Not) When All Else Fails

Disappointment was written all over my face as I walked out of my oncologist's office. After a month of using a sleep medication to get more than 4 hours of sleep per night, we learned that it was causing my white blood cell count to fall. My doctor told me I had to stop taking it, and there wasn't anything else I could take. The last thing he said before releasing me was "Try Acupuncture".

Growing up in rural Montana, I did not have a lot of exposure to Eastern Medicine. In my ignorance, I wondered how being poked by tiny needles could have any significant impact on my health.



Boy was I wrong.

Today, I am happy to say that acupuncture has been the most effective treatment for me in dealing with the traumatizing effects of cancer therapy. Some studies suggest that more than 3 million Americans are finding help with this ancient approach to medicine

Why Acupuncture?

Typically in America, you make an appointment to see your primary physician when something is wrong with your health. When you go in to see your doctor, you tell them all about the problem. They pick the medicine or treatment that would best remedy the problem. Then they send you home, most often with a prescription.

My problem was the prescriptions. The medications I am taking to prevent the recurrence of cancer have developed severe side effects that drastically altered my way of life.

An acupuncturist handles their patients in a very different way. They do want to know what health issues are troubling you, but they also ask about your diet, your sleep, how often you eat, what you eat, when you exercise, how you exercise, etc. They are more sensitive to the state of your entire body.

They also look at the connections and rhythm of the different areas of the body to decide how to best treat their patients.



When I go in to see my acupuncturist, he will check the color of my tongue and different pulses in my wrist. He will use various methods to care for my present condition – essential oils, smaller needles that are

stickers, [moxibustion](#), Chinese herbs, and massage. He is very careful and great at listening to me. While I am being 'needled', we talk about food choices or the affect that the seasons have on my mood or sleep. He works to make me feel comfortable and follows up to see what is working and what needs to be adjusted.

Also, what some people don't realize is that acupuncture takes some adjustment. What may work well one week could produce milder results the next. It has a lot to do with where you are at when you come in (tired, stressed, anxious, exhausted) and how well you respond to the treatment.

What I like most about acupuncture is the time to escape into a relaxing and healing environment. The points where the needle are inserted cause a soothing ripple to flow through my body that lasts for days. The treatment never causes much pain, and I come out feeling more grounded and more whole.

What Can Acupuncture Treat?

Some of the most common treatments are for osteoarthritis, back pain, migraines, digestive issues, nausea, vomiting, heartburn, insomnia, dizziness, fatigue, depression, weakened immune system, bone loss, hormone fluctuation, hot flashes, stress, and anxiety.

Most major insurance carriers cover acupuncture. Also, many acupuncturists offer treatment at a discounted rate if you do

overlapping appointments.



If you'd like to learn more about the benefits of acupuncture or have any questions, check out the links below.

Feel free to share a comment of your experience or thoughts about the topic.

[UCSanDiego Article on Advantages of Acupuncture](#)

I recommend **Tim McGee** at Acacia Natural Health in Everett, WA.
www.acacianaturalhealth.com

How Do You Remember Such a Day?

What makes a day memorable?



The significance of a day often comes from celebration. We find someone's birthday a special event to be enjoyed every year with balloons, gifts and cake. A day may also be stamped into our memory when there is death. We will never forget when we lost someone dear to us.

Another reason we remember the significance of a day is because of accomplishment. High school graduation is a time of memory making (and money making, according to Jostens). It could also be a personal achievement, like the first (and last) time you ran a 5k race.

The most unpredictable moments can also make a day memorable. June 23rd and September 29th will always be special to me. I will never forget the two days when each of my sons was introduced to the world.

Many know unpredictable moments can be traumatic. A former coworker of mine will never forget the day his parents were killed in a home invasion while he hid under the bed.

Through all the ways a moment is etched in our minds we learn that a day is memorable because of the effect it has on our life. From that day on, you are no longer a child. . . no longer childless. . . no longer with the one you love. . . no

longer in college. . . no longer innocent.

Two years ago today, my world was permanently tumbled upside down when I was told I had breast cancer.

What to Do with Such a Day?

Each year since then, I see that day coming on the calendar. A sick feeling boils in my stomach as I consider, "What do you do with such a day?"

My initial reaction is to pretend that it never happened.



Sure... if only I could... Just like the saying "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me", everyone knows words hurt, and so does the memory of such a painful day. Something I could NEVER ignore.

As the time drew closer last year, I became more bothered about it. There was no way I was going to celebrate something so difficult. That moment of diagnosis was like stepping on a land mine. Everything was blown apart.

But, I felt I needed to acknowledge it, memorialize the battle I have been fighting ever since. Much like the loss of a loved one, I have had to grieve the loss of the life I knew as a fully capable, healthy mother, wife, full-time 4th grade

teacher, and try to make sense of the confusion and scars that I was left with.

What Have These Years Done?

I am celebrating today, maybe not with songs or parties, but I am rejoicing in the fact that I have come this far. It has been a hard road, these past two years; the hardest of my life. And as much as I wouldn't wish it upon my worst enemy, I know that I have learned a whole lot about myself.



Through it all, I have been forced out of a reliance on my self and my own strength.

I found a very inspirational book when I first started fighting. It is a free little .pdf online called [Don't Waste Your Cancer](#) by John Piper. What a crazy thought that having cancer is an opportunity. . . but that's what it was.

I took the opportunity to believe God was going to see me through and have found Him faithful, extremely loving and perfectly capable of managing everything that I could not control.

And that's what I found, too. I found myself face to face with all the ways I was not in control. We really don't realize how little control we have, and it's okay. We usually screw things up when we do have control anyway. ;)

What to Wish For?

On that day two years ago, I robotically got into my car and

drove out of the hospital parking lot with my head spinning. I made it about three-fourths of a mile before I realized I probably shouldn't be driving. I happened to pull into the parking lot of a sweet little florist shop I had visited before and told myself that after I had finished calling my parents and brothers to tell them the news, I was going to go in that shop and buy something beautiful. And that's just what I did.

As the calendar turned to April 9th last year and again today, I visited that shop and bought myself something beautiful. The flowers remind me that as short as life is, it can blaze into a beauty that remains long after it is gone. The sun rises and sets so rapidly each day. My hope is to become better at finding the beauty hidden within.

As I look into the future, not knowing what twists and turns await, I ache for a freedom from fear. I'm learning to trust in the One-Who-Holds-It-All, but I still flinch a bit as the earth spins around at a 1,000 mph pace.

Another wish I have for this coming year is for more contentment. I am learning to say that what I've done (or haven't even come close to doing) for today is good enough. The limited amount of energy I have shouldn't be wasted on fretting over what I was incapable of doing. If I did my best to care for my family as well as myself, then it has been a great day.

Now there's only 364 more to go. . .

How about you? What ways do you remember those days that are most challenging? What do you hope for as you remember them?

Please share with us by leaving a comment below.

Post from the Past: “It’s that bad... (Not the cancer)”

Read this and other posts at my CaringBridge.org site.

To begin, I must apologize for not sharing my results from last week’s biopsy. I have good reason as to why I haven’t written (of which you will learn later).

But first, let’s get to the good news...

The mass in my right breast is BENIGN! Basically just a fibrous mass of tissue that is NOT cancerous. Yay!

So, we are going to leave that side alone. (Phew!)

We sat down with the doctor on Monday morning and scheduled the surgery for May 26th. They will perform a mastectomy of the left breast. So far, we have seen no evidence of cancer in the lymph nodes. They will remove a few to check for sure, and if there’s no sign, I won’t need chemo or radiation. If they do find something, we will meet that road when it comes.

I’m so relieved to begin my treatment soon and also relieved that I was able to tell my class. My precious (adopted) kids really took it well, but it was still hard news. I was so amazed at how many of them could name someone they knew that had cancer. It is so prevalent! Another reminder that this is not our home, and someday God will make ALL things new.

So, you’re still wondering what took me so long to write, aren’t you? ☐

Well, if you can imagine, it was a **disaster**.

Twenty minutes before I was going to leave for my biopsy on

Friday, I was going to fill our water filter canister at the kitchen sink. I reached for the spray nozzle that comes out with a long hose. It caught on something, so I gave it a strong tug. Instantly, I heard a great wooshing sound come from below the sink. I looked under and only saw a small amount of water trickling down where the pipes come out. It sounded like it might have been coming from the outside of the house, which is on the opposite side of the wall. So I looked outside and water was rushing down the side of my house! Did I mention that our kitchen is on the 2nd floor? Oh, yes!

So I went back in and the water was now coming out from under the cabinets. I called my husband, but he didn't pick up. I texted him "Emergency!" He called me back and I told him what happened. He didn't believe me at first.

"Where is the shut off valve?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm coming home!"

As I paced and shouted after he hung up, I decided to try to call the PUD. The automated answering system picked up and when I heard "If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 9-1-1." I shouted, "This is an emergency!" and then I hung up and dialed 9-1-1.

Soon the Fire Department was on their way. I texted my husband, "The FD is coming." to which he replied "What?!" to which I typed, "**It's that bad.**"

They arrived at the same time as my husband to a distraught and sobbing woman on the porch. The firemen kept saying, "It's gonna be OK. It's not that bad." And I thought, "You have no idea!"

They were very kind, asked where the water heater was, reached up and "click!" flipped off the water supply.

*Ladies and Gentlemen... Please take a moment to find out how to shut off the water supply to your house. It's ok. I'll

wait... and you'll thank me later. ☐

Ok... now that you're saved from the trouble we had, let me share the aftermath. I had to leave for my biopsy, so my poor dear husband was left with the damage I had done. By the time I returned after lunch, Serv Pro was there tearing up all the carpet on the 1st floor. They had ripped up the carpet on the 2nd floor and pushed heated fans underneath. They filled the house with de-humidifiers and fans and for the past 4 days, have been "blow-drying" our house.

We had to move out, because our house is unlivable, at a cozy 95 degrees. When I pulled up to get something from the house yesterday, I opened the garage door to discover a stack of 10 or so boxes. I walked into the garage and noticed... there's our kitchen cabinets... and there's our bathroom sink...and would you believe it. They even threw in the kitchen sink. ☐

So, right now, our house is torn apart.

Rough estimates are that repair work will take 3 weeks. We have some very gracious and loving friends that own a quaint home with a "mother-in-law" apartment above it that they have shared with us to stay in for the mean time. We have found out that not only do we have abundant medical insurance coverage, but we also have a plentiful amount of home insurance coverage (a typical deductible notwithstanding). With my cancer recovery, I will also get new carpet and kitchen flooring. Not sure about the cabinets yet...

As wildly absurd as this all sounds, I can see God's fingerprints all over it. Every step of the way, he provided what we needed. I just dropped off our cat and dog at "Tails-a-Waggin" pet boarding that insurance will pay for so we don't have to worry about them at this time.

Through this, I have heard a new song played here and there that has really touched my heart. The lyrics are...

There's hope for the hopeless
And all those who've strayed
Come sit at the table
Come taste the grace
There's rest for the weary
Rest that endures
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't cure

So lay down your burdens
Lay down your shame
All who are broken
Lift up your face

I just play this song over and over again. Remembering that this isn't it. It's not over yet. There's so much more beyond the sorrows of today, though they may be **many**. God's going to be there to see us through, and the love and support that you've shown us has proved that. <3

Post from the Past: "Knowing the Unknown"

Read this and other posts at my CaringBridge.org site.

An experience like this comes with many decisions...**so...many...decisions**. How do I want to be treated? Who do I want as a surgeon? What kind of surgery? Do I want hormone treatment? When would you like to start? I've been learning a lot, because I want to understand as much as I can to make the best decisions and know most of what is going on. Basically, it's like I've just enrolled in the latest college class: Breast Cancer101. They gave me this great

handbook that's kind of like a "For Dummies" book. I've learned a lot about how lymph nodes work and the stages of cancer. The thing I don't like so much about learning is that it can open up the imagination to more "What Ifs" and "Maybes". The bad kind...

They recommended I do genetic testing, because of my age. They have identified 24 genetic markers that reveal higher risks for other recurring cancers (ovarian, uterine, colon, prostate, etc). I was asked to record some family history of who else has had cancer in my family and give blood to find out if I have any of these mutated genes. The technology really is amazing, but it leaves me to wonder... Do I really want to know? What will I do with my knowing?

I'll be afraid... afraid of getting cancer again. I'll be afraid of passing it on to my boys. Will that fear drive me to take drastic measures that I will regret?

But, I **want** to know. I want to be proactive in preventing any future recurrences. I want to give my boys a fighting chance and a future....

Tomorrow morning, I go in for an MRI of my chest to see if there's any more cancer that we haven't found yet. So far, I am Stage 1 because the nurse didn't see anything in the lymph nodes she ultrasounded under my arm 2 weeks ago. An MRI is much clearer and gives a 3D look of pretty much everything. If it has reached my lymph nodes, I will be bumped up to Stage 2 status. I want to know, for sure... but I have to say, knowing is pretty scary.

We will find out Friday the results of the MRI and the next steps in treatment. And go from there I guess...

Thank you ALL, for your love and support, prayers and verses, songs and hugs. We feel your embrace and presence around us in this difficult time. Sometimes, it's what carries me on when I don't want to move any further.

We love you, too.

Post from the Past: “I have breast cancer.”

Read this and other posts at my previous CaringBridge.org site.

The thought kept rolling over and over in my mind. “I have breast cancer.” I understood what it meant, but it just kept tumbling through my thoughts like laundry in the dryer. As John and I sat and listened to the nurse explain the situation, I felt as though I knew it was possible, from the stinging pain that remained two days after the rigorous biopsies... but how could I have cancer? I am 37. I’m in fairly good shape and love eating well and exercising...

The kind nurse thoroughly pushed us through as brief of an explanation as you can get on “invasive ductal carcinoma”. I have three that are 7mm, 7mm, and 13 mm. They are rapidly multiplying at a rate of 100 days. So in three months they will have doubled. They need to be surgically removed, and because they are about 4cm apart, I qualify for a lumpectomy. Before any more decisions about treatment are made, the doctors need to know if there is anything they missed. So, I am going in on Weds. morning for an MRI of both breasts. If they don’t find anything else, then we go ahead with the lumpectomy. If they do find more... well, the way the nurse put it, “this kind of thing evolves as you go along”. Well said.

Welcome to my newest adventure. Breast Cancer....