Published in *Tiny Buddha Magazine. 2024.*

Life After a Cancer Diagnosis

by

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When we face a serious health issue or life challenge, we can choose to navigate toward the light or bury ourselves in its darkness. While it's not always easy to find the light, it's a place that is much easier to survive in and, in the long run, is much healthier. This way of being has helped me on my recent health journeys.

Twice in the past 25 years, I have received the news of a breast cancer diagnosis. The two diagnoses were completely different and unrelated. This is my story, and ha reflection on why looking for the light is so important in the face of adversity.

My first cancer diagnosis at the age of 47, days before the horrific events of 9/11. DCIS, (ductal carcinoma in situ), an early form of breast cancer, was discovered through my annual mammogram. I was given the choice to have a lumpectomy and radiation, or a mastectomy and reconstruction. I opted for the latter because I didn't want to spend the following days, months, and years worrying about a possible recurrence. Plus, back then, radiation was riskier and not as refined and focused as it is today. At the time, I was living in a small town in Florida and decided to travel to California to see the best doctor for this type of cancer. It wasn't easy being separated from my three children, all under the age of 18. In the end, it was the right choice, and it eventually led to a move to California, the place of my dreams. Sometimes going through difficult challenges can

lead to better things.

After my surgery, my husband Simon and I stayed in California for two weeks before returning home to Florida. I slowly got used to my new body's landscape, and I diligently continued to go for my annual mammograms, watching my only breast being squished between those two sheets of glass. Tears would trickle down my face, triggered by the loss of the breast that had fed my three children. During my meditations, I expressed gratitude for my life and remaining breast. I tried to bring the light into my life whenever possible by engaging in self-care activities. I surrounded myself with loving, thoughtful people and tried to disconnect from those with less hopeful attitudes.

Five years later, during a routine blood test, I learned that I had multiple myeloma, a rare type of blood cancer affecting the plasma cells. In short, it turns healthy cells into unhealthy ones. I had no symptoms at the time but was told that I'd need bloodwork every three months to make sure the disease was not progressing, and that down the road there was a chance I would need to undergo treatment for this incurable cancer.

The fear of enduring another cancer overcame me, and I researched the best integrative physicians in Los Angeles to help me navigate this new terrain. For 18 years my myeloma was what is called "smoldering" because I had no symptoms, but my blood tests continued to show high protein levels—a sign that the disease was present. Each day I swallowed handfuls of vitamins to ward off any further disease progression. I consulted with leading doctors and researchers at the Mayo Clinic and at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. I was told that everybody's case was different, but at some point treatment would be unavoidable.

My second breast cancer diagnosis came in 2024, not long before my 70th birthday. I was feeling fine, and it was still a few months before my scheduled annual mammogram when I noticed that my right nipple had inverted. At first, I thought a tight bra might have caused this. After a few weeks of close observation, I saw that it was becoming more pronounced, so I asked for an earlier mammogram. I'm glad I did.

A mammogram, biopsy, and MRI revealed lobular breast cancer, which is more aggressive than DCIS. I ended up having another mastectomy and reconstruction. Much to my chagrin, I also needed radiation. Thankfully, because my Oncotype DX Score—a score from 0 to 100 indicating the likelihood of the breast cancer returning—was low, only 9, I did not need chemotherapy. I am not generally a fearful person, although I am prone to depression and to holding my feelings in. I continued to try to keep clear of those who were living more in the dark than in the light, because being around them triggered feelings of depression. The entire experience brought back memories of my first breast cancer diagnosis, coupled with increasing fear and sadness.

Once again, I had to get used to my new physical landscape, with implants taking the place of my real breasts. Much had evolved surgically in the 23 years since my previous surgery, and the recovery seemed easier. I was happy that my plastic surgeon revised my original breast reconstruction, so that both sides would be more or less even. The radiation, however, took a lot out of me. In addition to shrink-wrapping my newly constructed breast, the radiation left me utterly exhausted during the six weeks of treatment, five days a week.

Unfortunately, during my hospitalization for this second mastectomy and reconstruction, my hemoglobin dropped significantly. This signaled to my doctors that

my myeloma might be becoming active. They scheduled a bone marrow biopsy and found that 90% of my marrow contained cancer cells. This was shocking news. My oncologist had been suggesting treatment to ward off progression, but I declined and said that I would rather wait until I was symptomatic. He had been very patient with me wanting to do it my way, combining Eastern and Western medicine, mainly because he knew that each case was different and he honored my intuition about my body. However, he had told me that there would be a time when he would say that I had no choice but to begin treatment, and unfortunately it had arrived. He suggested I heal from my surgery before beginning.

The drop in my hemoglobin made me feel uncharacteristically tired. I had been active, hiking and working out with a trainer, so having no energy was very difficult for me. Plus, being active is also a way to fend off depression. I'd always been an advocate of listening to my body, and now I felt that my body was telling me that it was time for treatment, which involved weekly injections at the hospital and taking a handful of medications at home to fend off side effects.

I never really understood the concept of "chemo brain" until now, but now I truly feel that I cannot think clearly. It challenges my lifelong passion for writing and creating. I've decided to keep listening to my body—to rest when it asks to rest and move when it's time to move. Over the course of my three cancers, I went from being mad at my body for putting me through all of this, to respecting the temple that has kept me alive. I've accepted that I cannot be as productive, and that spending a day with one or all of my six grandchildren is more healing than writing any article or a book.

All in all, my healing had many layers—emotional, psychological, and physical.

Compounding this was the knowledge that I would be living with an incurable cancer that would probably need treatment for the rest of my life, and I was left feeling quite depressed. I decided I could not manage alone without the assistance of an antidepressant, which would just keep my head above water. I wanted to thrive and just needed that little bit of support. I maintained my sanity by turning to self-care practices, many of which I had used during other challenging times in my life, such as writing, meditation, listening to music, exercising, and connecting with friends.

Writing has always helped me navigate difficult times, and this time was no different. Listening to music has always helped me, and during really challenging times, spiritual music helped me the most. There's one song that inspired my way of being: Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive." For me, the lyrics became my mantra, even after I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma; self-care is critical after any challenging health diagnosis.

Cancer survivors can wear many faces. We might have a public face, and a private face. True healing and recovery depend on the support of loved ones and trusted medical professionals. My physicians were very caring and kind, and I'll never forget the words of my first oncologist when he gave me my diagnosis: "If this experience doesn't rivet you, nothing will. You'll never look at life in the same way." He was right.

My oncologist's words continue to echo in my mind. Physically, I can acknowledge and accept that my body will never look or feel the same. My daily glances in the mirror constantly remind me of my journey. Although I look a little better when I'm dressed, when I'm unclothed, there's no escaping the fact that I've had breast

cancer—I have the scars to prove it. I can hide under my clothing, my covers, or in my closet, but in the shower and during lovemaking, I cannot hide, so I've taught myself to accept my newly transformed body.

People say that scars give us character, and I've worked hard to convince myself of this supposed truth. I tell myself that the scars don't really matter because the important thing is that I've survived, even though the moment I heard my doctor's words, all I wanted to do was hide.

As survivors, we go through many mood changes, but in the end I believe in the old adage," from all bad comes good." I'm cognizant of the importance of being mindful of life's priorities. As mentioned earlier, I've come to realize that my writing grounds me, makes me happy, and helps me survive. I also know that I need to surround myself with people who make me feel good about myself and who provide healing energy.

I suppose this is what intuitively happens when you come face-to-face with your own mortality—you try not to allow people into your life who drain you of the vital life force that is essential for your own healing. For me, doing so made me feel that I was shoring up my spirit's natural defense mechanisms.

I'd always been a productive person, and my first cancer diagnosis brought with it a new sense of urgency to continue my writing practice and to share my words and passions with the universe. Immediately after my first diagnosis, and during my healing period, I went into overdrive, busying myself with more projects than I had ever imagined. My cancer journals evolved into my second memoir, *Healing with Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey*. Throughout the writing process, I made a point of relaxing and

reminding myself not to overdo it. I made sure to meditate and work out every day, and to get a massage and/or acupuncture when I could fit these forms of healing into my schedule.

I decided to express gratitude for my life and all the things I'd taken for granted, such as my family, friends, home, and the time I could spend in nature. Given my lifelong commitment to the care of others (I was trained as a registered nurse), I decided to turn that compassion inward and indulge in more self-care. For years I'd put everyone else's needs first, so it felt good to offer gratitude and kindness to myself.

Of course, when we're diagnosed with something like cancer, the possibility of a recurrence is always in the back of our minds—but we have no way to predict the future, so we can only do our best and be compassionate toward ourselves and others.

I have repeatedly told myself that cancer was no longer welcome in my life. I realized that I would thrive as long as I *continued to love,* as intuitive Sonia Choquette says, "When you name it, you claim it." And I am naming it: I will be in the light. That's my choice.