

## A New Woman: Life after Breast Cancer

Diana M. Raab

**I** REFUSE TO ALLOW my experience with breast cancer to dampen my drive to forge ahead with my life, so instead I have used it as a stepping stone to follow the path of my destiny and my dreams as a full-time writer.

There is no escaping the truth that after having a mastectomy and reconstruction, your body will never look the same. There is no escaping the truth. Daily glances in the mirror are a constant reminder of the saga. You can hide under your covers, in your closet or behind your partner's shadow, but in the end, you must accept your new landscape. Some say that scars give us character and I still try to convince myself of this.

One thing that's really difficult to get used to after losing a breast is the loss of sensation on the mastectomy side. You don't feel your husband's touch; you don't have sensations when holding books against your chest; and you don't feel your skin when washing in the shower. There's this indescribable numbness. Sometimes I may get phantom tingles that feel wonderful, but they don't come very often.

I've read that some women are so jarred by their physical changes after breast cancer that many consider having an affair to reconfirm their femininity. I can easily understand this urge. Since this wasn't an option for me, I had an affair with my journal which provides an enormous amount of solace. I have been writing in my journal since the age of 10, and, more often than not, I reach for the pages most during tumultuous times, like going through breast cancer. My journal is the perfect lover because it doesn't talk back, gives me pleasure and I can leave silently when I have had enough.

Writing has been a blessing for me. My father always taught me to turn a negative experience into something positive, so, soon after my diagnosis, I followed my dream to return to graduate school for my Master's in writing. Being in this milieu not only forced me to focus my attention on something else, it gave me an outlet to express my feelings. Among a multitude of rewards, the program culminated in my second memoir, *Healing with Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey*.

Those who have been exposed to scary events or life-threatening illnesses seem to be more aware of the importance of good health. Women, in particular, are more in touch with their bodies. Some who have endured cancer make radical alterations in eating and lifestyle habits. Others may choose to minimize the amount of fats and sugars in their diet or might decide to decrease their daily caloric intake. Having cancer inspired me to maintain a healthy body weight, not only because my oncologist told me that cancer cells have an

affinity for fat cells, but also because being at a lower weight simply allows me to feel better about myself.

On a spiritual level, women tend to be a little more fragile after having had breast cancer, and often they do not like it when people discuss breasts, artificial or otherwise. Also, the small things in life don't seem to matter much anymore. It's not that you don't get upset about an untidy house or keep the car seats free of dog prints, but you come to realize what is truly important in life. For me it is my family, friends and my writing. This is where I focus my energy.

I now surround myself with positive energy and people who make me feel good about myself. I suppose this is what intuitively happens when you come face to face with your own mortality. I try not to allow people into my life who may drain me of the vital energy that is best preserved for healing. It feels like my spirit's natural defense mechanism.

In terms of my writing productivity, I have always been very driven to get a lot done, but now there seems to be this added sense of urgency. My oncologist says that my prognosis is extremely good and that I will probably live to a ripe old age and die of something other than breast cancer. I'm glad to hear this because in this lifetime, there is so much I want to accomplish.

Since my diagnosis with cancer, there seems to be a hidden clock in my inner psyche. I've always juggled working on a few books or projects at one a time, but these days I want to do even more. When you are diagnosed with something like cancer, the possibility of reoccurrence is always in the back of your mind, as much as you try to convince yourself otherwise.

I'll never forget what my oncologist told me just after my diagnosis, "If this condition or experience does not rivet your focus on life, then you've missed the point." As time goes on I agree more and more with this sentiment. I really want to live life to its fullest and focus on everything that makes me happy, and his words have truly inspired me to do so.

"You will never look at life in the same way," a breast cancer survivor told me just days after my mastectomy and reconstruction. Now seven years later, her words still echo in my head. She is right on so many levels.

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