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Warrior Woman: From Survivor to Thriver

A survivor is someone who endures or survives a trauma or event where others may have not. Survival wears many faces. People survive wars, physical and emotional abuse, natural disasters, trauma, and health issues. Sometimes the art of survival has to do with luck, and other times can result from having a positive attitude and becoming involved in measures that facilitate survival. My passion for writing has helped me navigate successfully through life and has been instrumental in my own survival.

My life as a writer began at the age of ten when my mother gave me my first journal to help me cope with my grandmother's suicide. It was a Khalil Gibran journal with quotes at the top of each page. Since that day, I've used writing as a source of healing, transformation, and empowerment. It has inspired my life as a woman "warrior" and survivor. Writing brings with it a sense of self-awareness and renewal. By sharing my writing with others, I have helped to protect, heal, guard, and guide others through their own journeys.

In 2001 when I was diagnosed with ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), a form of breast cancer, everything was going well in my life. I was 47 years old and had three wonderful children, ages 12, 16, and 18.

Happily married, my husband and I had just celebrated our 24th wedding anniversary.

After being given my options and seeking numerous medical opinions, I chose to have a mastectomy and reconstruction. The surgery and immediate recovery were basically uneventful, except for the emotional upheaval and occasional panic attacks, but despite the wisdom shared by my loved ones, the trauma of losing a breast—a vital maternal/feminine marker—touched a deep part of my psyche. From diagnosis to post-op recovery, my journal became my best friend and confidant. Essentially, it helped me navigate my breast-cancer journey, as I was able to record my insights, fears, and dreams. Sometimes I would write poems such as this one:

Robbed Twice

The day after the doctor
cut off my breast
I got on the phone
to my therapist
who told me to give
myself some time
to figure out who I am
after being slashed
by the knife.

I was pleased that my surgeon had recommended reconstructive surgery at the time of my mastectomy so that I would, as he said, “wake up with a breast.” But, as a very sensual person, the nature of my surgery profoundly affected my view of myself as a woman. In addition to the loss of sensation on the mastectomy side, each morning and night when dressing and undressing I was reminded of my physical deformity. My surgeon assured me that most women are asymmetrical and that nobody would notice. It was also a blessing to have a supportive husband who helped me believe that I was still a beautiful person inside and out. During my healing, my surgeon also encouraged me to wear revealing and provocative clothing—first at home and then out in public. I journaled my feelings on the subject and, indeed, my entire breast-cancer experience.

My surgeon’s input was also instrumental in my healing. I’ll never forget how he suggested that I keep a journal during my post-op period. This greatly helped me deal with what was, for me both emotionally and physically. Knowing I was a writer, my doctor suspected that I’d take this assignment seriously. To inspire me even further, he asked me to mail him sections of the diary. His gesture illustrated a deep interest in both my physical and emotional well-being. I sent him a few segments, but then realized that while writing, I was also editing because I knew my musings would be read. This went completely against my philosophy about the purpose of journaling. Journal writing should be done in a stream-of-consciousness manner, or writing without lifting the pen off the page, crossing out, or erasing. Grammar and spelling errors are irrelevant, as worrying about them often dampens creativity as well as the ability to express honest sentiments.

I’m the type of person who prefers to move on from negative experiences, so when I was ready, I tucked those journals away in my office closet. Soon thereafter, friends, family members, and colleagues encouraged me to write a book to help other women with

their breast-cancer journeys. Given my nursing, psychology, and writing experience and my keen desire to help others, I was often referred to as a *woman warrior*.

So, about nine years after my diagnosis, I published a self-help memoir, *Healing with Words: A Writer’s Cancer Journey*, which incorporated my journals, poems, and personal story. At the end of each chapter, I offered writing prompts for my readers to share their own stories.

In addition to the healing I experienced through journaling, and subsequently, my published memoir, in the years after my diagnosis, in a password-protected section of my computer, I began to write sensual poems merging my sentiments about lust with my feelings about my new body. Last year, twelve years after my diagnosis, I felt brave enough to share these poems with the world, pulling them together in a poetry collection called *Lust*. I realized that once you’re a *survivor*, the next transition should be that of a *thrifer*. The idea is to never cease dreaming and bringing joy into your life. It’s about constantly reminding yourself to look for the light in the darkness.

I do believe that in order to see the light, we must first pass through the darkness, and while my scars have ruined my seemingly perfect facade, they’re a constant reminder of my survival. My poetry serves as a reminder that sensuality can continue even after a mastectomy and reconstruction, and it’s about looking for the beauty in any situation.

From a physical standpoint, I have acknowledged and accepted that my body will never look and feel the same. My daily glances in the mirror continue to be a consistent reminder of my loss—my right breast removed and replaced with a silicone pouch. There’s no escaping that truth. I can hide under my clothing, my covers, or in my closet, but underneath I must accept my new landscape. My dressing room has a full-length mirror, so unless I shut my eyes while getting dressed, I can’t escape the reality of my scarred body. People say that scars give us

character, and each day I work to convince myself of this. I tell myself that they don't really matter because the important thing is that I've survived, even though the moment I heard my doctor's words, I thought of my grandmother and how she committed suicide because of depression. I thought that death would be a better alternative than the mutilation of that part of me that had nursed and nurtured all three of my children—the part of a woman symbolizing femininity, the part men often glance at before looking into a woman's eyes. For the first time I had an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Although I had never considered taking my own life, I did get a glimpse of what it felt like to consider such a drastic measure.

To thrive also means surrounding yourself with positive individuals—those who offer healing energy and who make you feel good about yourself and your situation. 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 lives who drain you of the vital energy that is essential for your own healing. In a way, it felt like I was activating my spirit's natural defense mechanism.

Then, exactly seven years after my breast-cancer diagnosis, during a routine blood test, I was diagnosed with smoldering myeloma, a form of bone-marrow cancer. I was shocked once again and driven back to my journals to help me make sense of the news.

I had always been a productive person, but this new diagnosis brought with it an added sense of urgency to share my words and passion with the world. I'd never been afraid of dying, but immediately after this diagnosis, I went into overdrive, burning the candle at both ends and putting out book after book. I truly felt my impending mortality.

Then I turned 60 and came face-to-face with another transition. Perhaps it was getting senior discounts at the movie theater, or maybe it was the periodic arrival of the AARP magazine in my mailbox. Whatever

happened, a switch was flipped in me. I committed myself to slowing down and doing more than smell the roses. I decided to be grateful for my life, spend more time in nature, and *read* more rather than *produce* more. While I'd always offered compassion to others and tended to put others' needs and desires before my own, I began to offer more compassion and love to *myself*—something I'd never done before. It felt good.

I've always cherished my journaling time, and this was especially true during my cancer journey—from diagnosis to recovery. It was a time for deep reflection, and each morning I sat in my backyard overlooking the lake with my cup of coffee, and poured my sentiments onto the pages of my journal. As a journaling instructor, I understand the huge benefits of writing to heal.

Many women have used journals to record their breast-cancer experiences. Some of these journals or books have been published, such as those by Audre Lorde, May Sarton, Betty Rollin, Rose Kushner, Hilda Raz, and Elizabeth Berg, to name a few.

For me, journaling on a regular basis gave me the opportunity to get to know myself on a deeper level. A lot came forth during my journaling practice. I realized that I didn't want to be identified as a cancer victim. Rather, I wanted to be the person who *overcame* cancer. I didn't want empathy or sympathy; I just wanted to be respected. I had surmounted many obstacles in my life, and this was just another one to add to my list.

As I mentioned above, through journaling I realized that others' needs had always trumped mine, and that it was time for me to spend more time on myself. I learned that I took on too many responsibilities and that it was time to start saying no, and that when I did so, I could still be a role-model survivor even if I took time for myself. I came to understand that for years I'd suppressed my negative emotions—mainly grief—something that can increase cortisol levels and lower one's immunity. I started to put aside time on a daily basis for meditation and exercise. As

much as possible, I removed all toxic people from my life, and surrounded myself with positive individuals who made me feel good.

Even though my incisions have healed and I've returned to my daily routines, the emotional and physical scars of having had breast cancer and then multiple myeloma will always be present, although they've dulled somewhat over the years. I'm less sensitive; and more proud of my survival, revival, and ability to thrive.

Here is another poem I wrote in my journal, which was later published in *Healing with Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey*:

Bifurcation

Having a breast sliced off
leaves a woman with two lives—
the one before the loss
and the one after.

Journaling has taught me that emotional healing usually takes longer than physical healing. I'm thankful to be living in a time when medical advances have made it possible to have a cancer removed, which in my case led to my complete recovery. As cancer survivors and thrivers, we sometimes reflect upon our mortality and wonder what people will say about us after we're gone. I want to be remembered as a woman warrior who survived in spite of all odds, and also as a positive person who contributed to the happiness of others in whatever way possible—without jeopardizing my own health. I also want to be remembered as someone who celebrated life's high points and navigated quickly through turbulence.

My father was a Holocaust survivor, so I realize how much of my understanding has come from him. Even though he's been gone for more than 20 years, I want to say, "Thank you, Dad, for your views on life; and thank you, Mom, for buying me my first journal. You have both changed my life forever."