

From There To Here



a breast cancer journey

by Diane Davies

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Contents

Acknowledgments.....	6
Introduction.....	8
Part One: Diagnosis	11
Part Two: Surgeries and Healing	73
Part Three: Resources For More Help	155

Introduction

“The important things in life always happened by accident... You could worry yourself sick trying to be a better person, spend a thousand sleepless nights figuring out how to live clean and decent and honest, you could make a plan and bolt it in place, kneel by your bed every night and swear to God you’d stick to it, hell, you could go to church and promise properly. You could cross your heart seven times with your eyes tight shut, cut your thumb and squeeze it and pen solemn vows on a rock with your own blood then throw it in the river at the stroke of midnight. And then, out of the black beyond, like a hawk on a rat, some nameless catastrophe would swoop into your life and turn everything upside down and inside out forever” (*The Smoke Jumper* by Nicholas Evans, Delacorte Press).

My nameless catastrophe has a name—breast cancer. It too swooped into my life and turned everything upside down and inside out forever. You need to know from the beginning that my story, at this point in time, has a happy ending unlike many, many others that do not. My cancer is gone; no chemo or radiation was needed, just some radical surgery. I am very blessed and very grateful. It was not a walk in the park by any means. I know that my final chapter is not yet written. My hope is that the telling of my experiences may in some way help others along their journey through whatever nameless catastrophe they are called upon to face.

The pages that follow are my journal written in an effort to help me get my mind around the breast cancer journey that I was walking. I told family and friends many times that I knew where I was,

and I knew where I wanted to be, and the only way I could see to get there was straight through the middle. The daily writing helped me to do just that. It helped me to get from there, a diagnosis of breast cancer, to here, cancer eliminated and silicone implants as a part of my body. It helped me to describe what was happening and what I was experiencing, and at the same time give voice to my feelings about those very things. To help make the reading easier for you, the events and descriptions are printed in regular font and *my thoughts and feelings are printed in italics.*

Many valuable life lessons have been the result of my journey *From There to Here*. As you read my journal, these lessons will be made clearer:

1. It is God's timetable, not mine. I've prayed for patience throughout my life. I thought teaching first grade was my ultimate lesson in patience, but then along came my husband's stroke and later my breast cancer. I wonder what other lessons in patience await me in my lifetime. My anxiety and worry does not and cannot change the timetable. It all happens in due time—in God's time, not mine.

2. Prayer works. It does make a difference and it can be felt.

3. Love comes to you in many different ways and forms. You just need to be open to it.

4. Life is good. The trees are greener and the sky bluer on this side of cancer.

5. Life is precious. It is too precious to waste and too short to worry over the little things along the way.

6. An attitude of gratitude is most appropriate and healthy. A natural outcome of gratitude is a desire to be of help to others.

7. Being a gracious receiver is just as important as being a generous giver.

8. Sometimes I do have to listen to what other people tell me. I do not have all the answers even if I would like to think that I do. It is an issue of trust and dependence.

Part One



Diagnosis

I THOUGHT I KNEW LIFE

By Carolyn Salter

I thought I knew life
Touched all the facets
Shone in the sparkle
Plumbed the depths
Clambered back to sparkle
I have known life
Learnt from experience
So why now, this
This huge challenge
Life threatening?
Did I need to look again?
Perhaps
Could I make a difference?
Perhaps
I thought I knew life
But I am learning to know it
All over again.

April 19

DAY 1

I had my last mammogram in October of 2003. They called me back for a follow-up mammogram two days later, October 16. Some areas of calcification were seen on my right breast. They told me that they would like to do another mammogram in six months to reassess those two areas. I set up the appointment for April 19, 2004, and put it out of my mind. Here it is April 19. How time flies when you are trying to forget! I really hadn't given the whole thing a lot of thought until just a couple of weeks ago. I noticed in the mirror that my right nipple seemed to be about an inch lower than my left and that the right breast appeared somewhat larger. Then I remembered my mother telling me after her mastectomy in the early '70s, that she had watched her breast grow and change for over a year before she gave in and went to the doctor. I pretty much froze with the realization and terror of what I was now seeing on my own body.

Now my brain went into the "what if" mode. What if it was cancer? What if I needed to have a mastectomy? What if it was too late to do anything for me? What if I died? At least I hadn't waited and watched for a year. At least I was on my way to have the necessary tests. How will I ever be able to handle what lies ahead? How will my family get along without me? I don't want another woman to watch my grandchildren grow up and call her Grandma. I want to be around to see those grandchildren born, to see Krisi, my daughter, as a mother, to enjoy with Butch, my husband, our life well into old age. This is not fair. My dad died of cancer at age fifty. Well at least I'm fifty-six. I made it a few more years than he did! How do I learn to accept and live with this? Why me? Why now? I feel like the only person in the world with this challenge to face. Am I being selfish? I need to slow down and take this one step at a time. That is not easy for me.

This morning has found me strangely calm as if I already knew what was coming. I drove to Stillwater listening to my Rod Stewart CD. I found I was driving slower and slower as I neared the

hospital—afraid to go ahead and knowing it was too late not to. As it was, I arrived a few minutes before my scheduled appointment. The woman ahead of me was late. When she arrived, they took her first for a normal screening.

The machine needed to be changed somewhat for me as they needed to do a magnification type of screening. The technician, as I learned later, had not done the type of screening I needed before on their new equipment. She naturally wanted to get the other woman out of the way before she changed things for me. That was perfectly understandable, but it dragged out the agony. The pictures were taken and I was told to have a seat, the doctor would be in shortly.

It was probably ten minutes or so before he came in. I have no idea what his name was even though I'm sure he told me. He put the film on the viewer and pointed out the areas of concern. I guess I pretty much removed myself once I heard 20 percent chance of cancer. I heard myself say that my mother had breast cancer and that I didn't want to wait any longer. He explained a couple of options for a biopsy, but I had no idea what he was saying. I must have agreed to something, however, as he said, "That's fine. We'll get it set up." He then told me that on a scale of one to five, one being benign and five being malignant, that I was about a three. *I'm no math whiz but I think the odds just changed. It must have had something to do with my mother's cancer.* He told me to contact my doctor later in the day, as he would let her know within the hour what was happening.

He left and the technician asked me if I was okay. I have no idea how I replied. She said that I had been a real trooper and had cooperated with her so well that she was able to get the pictures needed on the first try. She assured me that things would all work out—could she help me in any way? I didn't even know what to ask at that point. I think I was in shock or something. My world was going out of control and I couldn't do anything but go with it.

I was a little upset with the technician for trying to assure me that everything would be okay. If everything was okay, why was I going for a biopsy? How could everything be okay if I have breast cancer? I know she was just trying to be helpful. I need to be alone to work

through things. I've always been that way. I think I need to be alone now for a while. Being angry at the technician wasn't going to help anything or change anything. So where do I put my anger? Who do I blame?

I got dressed and headed back into the real world. On my way home, I stopped at Target to pick up my Prempro. The clinic had already called but left no message. I, of course, called Butch immediately to give him the news. He was pretty silent. "I don't know what to say, Diane." He was not surprised either. I guess it had kind of been an unspoken thing that we both knew for a while but didn't want to give voice to. That makes it too real.

I called the clinic as instructed and left a message for my doctor. Her office returned my call shortly with the appointment for the biopsy set for April 22 at 10:30 A.M. I had a ton of questions between tears, none of which the nurse could answer. She told me that I had to call the hospital to preregister and that I should be sure and ask my questions at that time. Following directions like a robot, I called the hospital. I gave them the necessary information and did quite well, even if I do say so myself. I only had to look up my social security number, which I know like the back of my hand. Oh well. I began to ask my questions again and was told that she really didn't know the answers but would transfer me to the breast center where they could be of help. I declined as I was beginning to lose it emotionally. I told her that was fine—I'll just be surprised on Thursday.

I made a few tearful phone calls and then decided to get busy so as not to think. I used the power washer on the deck furniture and then turned it on the mold on the cement on the deck on top of the garage. Before I knew it, it was 4:00 P.M. and Butch came home. He let me cry for a bit. I can only imagine how hard it was for him. The big macho man with a heart made of marshmallow. We just sat for a while, together. I told him that I couldn't believe how poorly I was handling this. He reassured me that I had every right to be upset and scared—after all it was my body. *It feels so strange to be talking about it, the cancer I mean, in that way. That it's my body. It seems so unreal—like a bad dream but I don't wake up.*

Butch called Krisi for me and told her that I couldn't talk right then but would try and call later. The words were not coming, only the tears. Maybe later I'll be able to hold it together better and give her a call. Butch forgot to pick up his prescription so he ran into Hastings to do that and bring dinner home. I finished up the deck while he was gone. I did talk to Krisi a little later, through her tears and mine. We just spent a quiet evening watching TV and I crocheted. I was exhausted physically and emotionally.

My family knows about the upcoming biopsy. Wow! It's really happening and it's happening to me. I feel as if I'm in a nightmare and need to wake up and have it all go away. I don't think that's going to happen. I want my life back without the threat and fear of cancer.

April 20

DAY 2

I actually slept pretty well. I was exhausted. I woke up for the first time about 5:30 A.M. That's good for me even on a good day. I started the day with Butch's arms around me in bed and had a good cry. The rest of the day went by pretty well. I visited a student teacher. (I work part-time for the University of Wisconsin River Falls in their teacher education department where I supervise student teachers in their field experience placements.) I then came home and washed the big windows in the front of the house. Sunday we had had a lot of wind with a lot of dust, so outside furniture, end tables, and so on needed more than dusting. So I washed them all with soapy water and dried them with a soft towel. They actually look pretty good now. Butch came home early instead of going to the seaplane base for his night out with the guys, which is his usual routine. I made a quick supper then went to Bible Study. I came home feeling pretty good and went to bed. Waking up at 2:30 A.M., I couldn't get back to sleep and started thinking, which is not good. Butch woke up and held me for a while as I cried. He started to make love to me by caressing my breast, which only made me cry all the harder. I'm not sure if he was trying to comfort me, provide the healing touch, say good-bye to my breast, or help me say good-bye to my breast. The answer is probably all of the above. We finally both fell back to sleep.

I have cried so many tears that I cannot believe there is any more left in me. Butch is being here for me and I appreciate that so much. I don't even know what I want him to do or say. I'm just so glad that he is here.

April 21

DAY 3

I had an appointment with Nancy—my friend, neighbor and hairdresser—this morning at 6:45 A.M. for a perm, which I needed badly. I started this journal when I got home as a way to help me deal with whatever is ahead. I drove into Hastings for a few groceries and to get my watchband fixed. Working in the garden helped pass most of the afternoon. I moved hostas from down below to the bed on the west side of the garage. That was a real workout with the shovel and wheelbarrow. The harder I work, the more I'll be able to sleep—that's my plan. I talked to Faye, my friend as well as my brother's wife, for a while this afternoon on the telephone. I then went up to the farm and worked in my garden. Bob and Bub, friends of ours, along with Butch, cut some brush and had hotdogs at the shop over the bonfire they created. I talked to Krisi for a while and cried again.

This waiting is getting to be way too long. I wish tomorrow was over and I knew what I was facing. I think I'll take a Tylenol PM before I go to bed tonight. I already have a headache from crying. I know where I'm at and where I want to be and the only way to get there is straight through this thing, whatever it is. And that is the hard part—not knowing what I am facing. The biopsy tomorrow is the next step in this journey I'm taking. I wish now that I would have asked more questions. At the time, they didn't come. I couldn't get beyond the word CANCER. As my mind settles around this, the questions materialize. I have made a resolve not to hold anything back and to ask for what I need, both here at home and at the hospital. If I don't tell people what it is I need, I can't expect them to read my mind and respond to me. That will not be easy as that is not a part of who I am. I do need to practice that and I will. I keep looking at the clock and wishing it was twenty-four hours later.