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# Doing the Heart Work of Cancer

BY KATHY LATOUR

Three years after my breast cancer diagnosis, I hit a wall. My physical recovery had been easy. I resumed swimming six weeks after my mastectomy and soon had full range of motion. Chemotherapy was hard, particularly since there were no anti-nausea medications in 1986.

But I was motivated to get past cancer and get back to raising the baby I had struggled to conceive, who was only a year old when I found the lump in my right breast.

The problem with this plan? I had forgotten to do any of the emotional work, the “heart work,” around my cancer. I had made great medical decisions but no one had mentioned that I needed to “feel” what had happened to me. As a result, I just went on as if a rather nasty event was now behind me.

Three years later my body let me know that it’s impossible to ignore the emotional impact of cancer. I couldn’t sleep. I was consumed with fear of recurrence, and I cried at the smallest thing.

Then a visit to the surgeon for a checkup turned into a hysterical crying session, and she told me that she had found that many of her patients were having emotional issues even though they were doing well physically. She had hired a therapist to start a support group for her patients and asked if I wanted to join.

For the next three years I met with this amazing group of women twice a month. We laughed and cried and held each other when words didn’t work. We went through recurrence with two members and were there the day Judy finally decided to look at her pathology report. She knew it was bad; she just hadn’t been ready.

With these women I learned what it was to “feel” what cancer had done to my life. It was hard and it was painful at times, but it was also the place where I learned to face the possibility of my own death and, with that experience, be free to live the rest of it without fear.

The greatest gift came from Marilyn, who had already outlived her prognosis by years. We were talking one day about dying and she said, “Kathy, there are much worse things than dying.”

I was shocked. My fear of dying and leaving my child had driven my emotional life. I asked her to explain what she meant.

“Dying without having lived is worse,” she said. And with those words I received cancer’s greatest gift. Thanks, Marilyn.

