

IN EVERY ISSUE

A Life Well-Lived

BY DEBORAH LANG HAMPTON

Finding comfort in life's new territory

Breast cancer is a foreign country I've learned to live in. When I was first diagnosed, it was as though I had been parachuted into enemy territory, an unwilling draftee. I had to learn the language and customs of this new place quickly, as though my life depended upon it—and it did. I was engaged in a war that was going to change me forever. I had no idea how profound that change was going to be or where it would take me. As the years went by, this new country became my permanent assignment and then, truly, my home.

After nearly 12 years, I have spent one third of my adult life in this place. Each experience, each encounter has harrowed up the soil of my life, my heart, my soul. From this ground, I have learned my capacity for courage, acceptance, strength, humor, joy and persistence. I now know and trust myself. As hard as this has been, I wouldn't change my life. The common thread woven throughout has been living with breast cancer, not dying from it.

I thank my body, which has rallied and responded to treatment so many times, showing strength and endurance in the face of a persistent assailant. Yet I sometimes feel betrayed by it. Why does the cancer keep coming back? I see my many scars as evidence of a series of battles, sometimes as signs of having been violated by this disease, but more often as badges of effort and even courage. I'm not saintly at all about this. I have to pry my fingers from an attachment to how I wish I still looked and felt physically. But I remind myself of that profound truth that embedded itself years ago: It's how I live my life that matters.

I have spent these years with cancer looking for its higher purpose. I don't profess to have some cosmic understanding of that, but every day I see evidence of the opportunities it opens to me. I think that when we suffer, we have two choices: We can become bitter and blaming, or we can dredge out a deep channel for compassion and see ourselves linked to the suffering and struggle of other people.

Living with the uncertainty of my life is sometimes trying. The end-of-life work

that I've done this past year as my prognosis worsened has been necessary and meaningful. Now that I'm doing better, though, sometimes I feel like I'm all dressed up with no place to go. I walk the tightrope between maintaining hope that I could live to a ripe old age and living in the moment. My spiritual and emotional history, however, tell me that I have every reason to be filled with hope. My hope lies in my sureness that I will be able to face whatever comes and that I'll have within me and around me what I need for the journey, wherever it takes me.

Some people talk about cure, but I don't have that word in my vocabulary, at least not where it applies to my life. I've watched other women live meaningful lives, right up to their deaths. Were they cured? No, not if you mean having their illness taken from them. But by my witness of their lives, they were healed. Their lives were as authentic and full as any I've ever known, whether they lived to be 28 or 80.

That's the healing that I pray for. Make me a whole person, one who loves, accepts, serves, rejoices and opens up to others honestly and without hesitation. Then I might be someone worth remembering. Then I will have left a life well-lived.

Deborah Lang Hampton lives in Hixson, Tennessee, and is author of the upcoming book, Slapped Awake: Living with Breast Cancer. Contact her at deborahhampton@slappedawake.com.