

CONTENTS

Mothers & Mortality

BY LINDA BLACHMAN

When Lisa's 12-year-old daughter started having insomnia and anxiety attacks, the 40-year-old breast cancer survivor didn't know what to do.

Following her intuition, Lisa took her daughter into their home's so-called meditation room. "I tried to be with her as she was breathing and feeling scared. Then, all of a sudden, all this stuff started coming out." As the girl poured out her fears about getting cancer, Lisa felt limited relief. She better understood her daughter's anxieties, but still wasn't sure how to alleviate them while dealing with her own.

For a mother with cancer, the troubles and the tasks are doubled. She must first bring her own fear down to a manageable level, and then use her best parenting skills to help her children. During the past 10 years, I have recorded the life stories and legacies of mothers with cancer through a project I founded called the Mothers' Living Stories Project. I have heard every imaginable maternal fear: losing breasts that have not finished nursing, losing health insurance or a livelihood, being unable to function as a parent, disappointing children by not looking "normal," being a bad mother for getting cancer. But irrespective of prognosis, one primary terror underlies all other anxieties for every mother—leaving before her children are launched. The inability to protect children from suffering causes mothers their greatest pain.

Still, concern for children can be a powerful catalyst, translating into a determination to stay alive. "I've got to finish raising my son. And I'm going to finish raising him. That's what keeps me motivated and pushing on," says Janet Johnson, a 38-year-old living with metastatic breast cancer. Johnson copes with fear by talking with her 16-year-old son about cancer in age-appropriate ways, practicing gratitude and teaching other African-American women about the importance of breast self-exams and of recording their stories whether or not they have cancer.

For many mothers, writing in a journal helped diminish fear. The mothers who wrote or recorded their stories also found that responsibly preparing for death, while hoping to live, gave them a sense of peace and personal empowerment. Sara Markowitz, whose husband died three months before her cancer recurrence, plans to find relief for herself by meditating, preparing guardianship plans and recording her story for her two young sons.

For some mothers, fear for their children abates not by doing something, but by realizing something. As Leona Reardon, a 41-year-old mother with colon cancer, says: "You can't protect your children from life." Nor can they be protected from

suffering. Telling their stories helps mothers make sense of their experience and to harvest life lessons, which they can then pass on to their children as gifts.

Fear and trauma constrict and narrow perspective. Reviewing life before cancer and telling or writing your story opens up perspective. So does sitting quietly and remembering to breathe.

Linda Blachman is the author of Another Morning: Voices of Truth and Hope from Mothers with Cancer. For more, visit www.motherslivingstories.org.