

# AFTER THE FEAR COME THE GIFTS



Breast Cancer's Nine Surprising Blessings

KAY METRES

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Preface

LET'S RECOVER TOGETHER

IN EXTENSO SAMPLE



My sisters, this is what 14th-century mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich wrote in her book *Revelations of Divine Love*, after suffering from a life-threatening illness: “All will be well, all will be well, all manner of things will be well.” Julian’s sentiment may stand in direct contradiction to the way you remember feeling when first hearing the diagnosis: you have breast cancer. It was not at all how I felt either; it is not the usual response to the terrible news that you have a disease that may be life-threatening. This disease changes us in many ways large and small, but I came to learn that the changes in our lives are not all negative. There are moments for all of us that are terrifying and painful but, as surprising as it seems, I now see that the discoveries we make about ourselves in adversity, in confronting cancer, ought rightfully to be viewed as gifts. I have changed and grown through the struggle, not in spite of

it, but because of it. I suspect we all have. Sharing my experience is my gift to you, my sisters.

This book is a gift to you from a woman who, like you, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Who, like you, was frightened and unsure. The treatment process was long, bewildering, and difficult. There was more than a little pain and lots of anxiety to be endured. But now I see some very specific benefits that my body, mind, heart, and spirit received through my encounter with cancer: nine gifts—what else can we call them?—that have helped me heal and grow.

I will explain the medical specifics of my own illness so that you can compare them with your own unique experience. We suffer in a variety of ways. No two women's stories are exactly alike. Some of us have enjoyed the enduring support of friends and family; others have felt very much alone. I hope this book will be a source of comfort to all who have found themselves in common difficulty, and who I hope will come to share my understanding of the not-so-hidden blessings I have discovered.

Though your experience with cancer and mine may have been vastly different, we have

many things in common. We are all women. We all have grown to womanhood in a breast-worshiping culture. Whether we are in a romantic relationship or not, whether we have nursed children or not, whether we are young or old, our breasts are an important part of our identity. We all know we can live without our breasts, but none of us wants to lose them. And we are too keenly aware that breast cancer can turn out to be deadly.

A diagnosis of breast cancer represents a major upheaval in our lives—medically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually. It requires surrendering to a stripping process that brings us to our knees. We are stripped of certainty, predictability, privacy, and confidence in our good health. Often the unnerving news comes to us as a complete surprise. We may feel happy and healthy right up to the moment we get the news.

Just before I received my diagnosis in March, 2015, I felt terrific. I had recently closed my psychology practice and had lost twenty pounds. I was exercising regularly and feeling better than I had felt in decades. My primary health concern was neurodegenerative disease. My brother had

died just months earlier of Parkinson's and my father died of the effects of Alzheimer's disease years ago. With no family history of the disease, cancer was not even on my radar. Still, as any prudent woman my age would, I had yearly mammograms. In 2015, one of those mammograms revealed the stunning reality: a tumor, about an inch long, which would turn out to be malignant.

This scenario is not uncommon. Was it like this for you, too? Many of us feel fine and happy up until our diagnosis. Breast cancer is sneaky that way. In the early stages there are commonly no symptoms. Many of us feel upended by it. It seems unreal and is so unfair. "Why me?" we ask.

My goal in writing this book is not to dwell on the dark side of breast cancer; we all know that too well. Rather I want to share the many positive things that can come out of a negative, even terrifying, experience. I have been amazed at the emotional and psychological benefits that have come out of my year with cancer. Though your experience will be different from mine in many ways, I hope that the core truth of what I am going to share will resonate with you. I hope



it will increase your self-compassion, make you aware of strengths you may not have known you had, and enable you to see that, through difficulty, you can become an even better version of yourself.

I also hope that through reading this book, you will find empowerment and even joy, yes, joy, becoming more aware of your own strengths and the inestimable value you bring to the world. Most of all, I hope this book serves as your compass for moving forward with whatever the future may bring, and helps you deal with whatever comes your way confidently, with the hope and the courage our common disease can help us discover.

**Understand this if nothing else: You are stronger than you realize.**

We will grow through an increasing self-awareness and through examining our most important relationships with new eyes. We will find a deeper contentment when we see the real gifts hidden in our struggle. We will discover a resilience we may never have otherwise known was in us. There is truth behind the adage that you don't know what you have until it's gone.

AFTER THE FEAR COME THE GIFTS

Life-threatening illness can bring to us new wisdom about our lives—not just the big things, but even more, the oh-so-important small blessings. Mystery dwells here, too. I invite you to walk with me now through this valley, and discover things about yourself you might never have known. Welcome, my sisters, to our shared journey.



IN EXTENSO SAMPLE

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Was your breast cancer diagnosis a complete surprise, or was it expected in some way? Explain your answer.
2. How did you feel when you heard the news? What was your first reaction? How did your friends and loved ones react? How did you feel about their reactions?
3. Upon reflection, do you now see the positives of which I write in your own experience with breast cancer? If so, remember a story or two and share it if you are able.
4. Do you think that other positives may reveal themselves in the stories shared by other women? Why or why not?

Gift One

TRANSFORMATION

IN EXTENSO SAMPLE



My sisters, we all have stories to share and we all have changed as a result of our ordeal. Last winter some changes became clear to me when, on a frigid January morning, I pulled on my blue down coat and ventured up the street for a walk. Chemo had flattened me on the couch for three months the previous summer, but I was finally beginning to regain some energy and decided to channel it into a daily walk. Despite the blast of freezing air as I left the house, I was determined to go as far as I could in half an hour. Striding around the block, I spied a neighbor getting mail out of his box, head down, turning back into his driveway.

I called out, “Hi, John. Morning! Good to see you. How’s Linda?”

For the next twenty minutes, he poured out the painful details of his family situation. He talked about having to place his wife in a nursing

home and about his son who was dying of liver failure. I stood by the curb on that winter street listening to his words and feeling great compassion. Our talk helped him name feelings that he felt ashamed about. My nose was running from the cold, but still I listened. I forgot about the time and about the freezing air and about my own misfortunes. When he was done talking and ready to go inside, I hugged him and went on my way. I left feeling gratitude for this surprising encounter. I was thankful that he shared his story and that I was in the right place at the right time to hear the story he wanted so much to tell.

This encounter was completely out of character for me. I am an introvert. Normally I would wave and say, "Morning" and keep going. But that encounter made me suddenly aware that I had changed in a significant way. After that day, I began what I now call a walking ministry, asking sincerely about the welfare of the people in my neighborhood and truly listening to their responses. The stories I hear move and engage me in ways I could not have imagined before my illness: a woman with a house in foreclosure; a

young father who told me about his throat cancer; a woman whose husband had left her; and a guy up the street just diagnosed with kidney cancer. It seemed that everyone I met had a story of struggle to tell. My own story of breast cancer, also moving and engaging, has changed me forever in the many ways that I will detail in this book. I hope it inspires you to consider the positive ways your experience with cancer may have changed you.



I am a clinical psychologist and spiritual director, married, with three grown children and four grandchildren. I was looking forward to a well-earned retirement in March of 2015, when my doctor found a suspicious spot on my annual mammogram. Even though it was small, it needed evaluation. A shockingly difficult and painful biopsy was performed later that week and my primary care doctor called me three days later with the results: breast cancer.

I was numb when I heard this news. Can you relate to that? The numbness? I just thought

it was surprising, and in a strange way, even sort of exciting. I wondered what all this meant, what would happen to me. I found it interesting. Clearly, I was defending myself against anxiety and trying to absorb all the stats and the range of next steps my doctor threw at me. I never expected cancer to be a part of my life story.

I'm thinking about you here, my sisters, and wondering if your experience was anything like this. Every one of us has had a slightly different, yet all too similar, experience of receiving and processing the news of our cancer. Who will I tell? How will I tell them? What might they say?

A few days after talking to my internist, my husband and I met with a surgeon to discuss our options. I felt like we were talking about someone else. This couldn't possibly be about me, could it? The surgeon was a kindly man who had performed surgery on hundreds of women. He spoke softly, but what he said was far from gentle. Options he presented included lumpectomy, mastectomy, double mastectomy, and removal of my ovaries. I heard the term "triple negative" cancer for the first time, describing a cancer that is not driven by the hormones estrogen, pro-



gesterone, or Herceptin as most breast cancers are. I was to learn this would make my cancer uniquely difficult to treat.

We also were told about genetic testing, sentinel node biopsy, and worst of all, recurrence. My head was spinning. It was way too much.

I thought, "Wait a minute. It's just a tiny little thing. Why are we even talking about this? I feel fine." It all seemed so unreal.

Our surgeon spoke as if we understood what he was talking about. I still had no idea of the significance of triple negative pathology. I didn't realize at the time that I was diagnosed with a cancer more aggressive than hormone-driven cancers; that it usually occurs in younger women or African American women; and that there is no treatment, aside from chemo, to prevent recurrence. I didn't know that I wouldn't be able to depend on the common treatment of Tamoxifen to keep the cancer at bay. All of this was so completely new to us.

Don't we become students of our pathology? Cancer makes us walking, talking experts on the topic of our disease. We Google obscure medical phrases, puzzle over an alphabet soup

of medical acronyms, and struggle to understand what is happening to us, as if that might give us some dominion over it. In an odd way, it seems that it does.

We learned there are many different types of breast cancer, all treated differently. After the requisite MRI of both breasts, I had genetic testing done to see if the presence of a BRCA gene was going to further drive treatment options. I tested negative and was advised to undergo a lumpectomy with lymph node biopsy.

The lymph node biopsy revealed the bad news that the cancer had already weaseled its way into my lymphatic system. I would need both chemo and radiation.

I remember that I was in a grocery store the morning my surgeon called me on my cell phone to give me the results of the lymph node biopsy. We don't forget such moments, do we? I was holding a head of red cabbage when the phone rang. The cabbage was cold and still wet with spray. My doctor told me matter-of-factly that the cancer had already spread into my sentinel node. I would have to endure chemo. He told me that he was very surprised; he hadn't seen it

coming. So much of what happens to us comes out of the darkness like this, without warning.

I was stunned by the unexpected news. When does this thing stop getting worse? I thought. Was that your experience, too? Was the way you found out very much like this? Were you as overwhelmed and dismayed as I was? Did you feel the same sense of powerlessness?

Chemotherapy, as you undoubtedly remember, in all its hundreds of permutations, is invariably tough, and affects different people in different ways. How did it affect you? The long list of side effects we may endure includes: nausea and vomiting, hair loss, weakness, rash, mouth sores, loss of appetite, edema, or the anxiety and depression they often neglect to mention on medical web sites.

In my case, chemo aggravated a debilitating case of atrial fibrillation, a common cardiac arrhythmia. I'd had A-Fib occasionally for many years, but the chemo made it chronic and more severe. The mouth sores, skin eruptions, exhaustion, and "metal mouth" were minor inconveniences compared to my heart problems. My heart was out of rhythm for many months,

through four chemo cycles and thirty-three radiation treatments. At times, I feared that my heart would stop altogether. I was hospitalized twice and had to start visiting my cardiologist on a regular basis. I had to rely on others to drive me to doctors' appointments because I was too weak and too short of breath to drive myself.

When my chemo and radiation treatments ended, my doctor ordered a cardiac ablation, an invasive surgery that uses extreme heat or cold to create small scars in heart tissue to disrupt the transmission of abnormal electrical signals. (You see how we become medical experts regarding our pathologies.) But the surgeon I saw wisely recommended a three-month break to see if my heart could regain a normal rhythm on its own. During those three months, I regularly visited a practitioner of Chinese medicine who performed acupuncture and prescribed a number of herbs and curative teas. These helped my heart heal and made it possible for me to forgo the surgery.

Did some form of alternative medicine help you? Even massage therapy can help soothe our souls and calm our stressed nervous systems.

We need to explore every tool we can find to help us heal.

Sometimes all the CT scans, ultrasounds, and MRI's turn up other problems, usually surprising, often alarming problems. Did this happen to you?

One of my many tests revealed another node, this one on my lung. My oncologist feared lung cancer, which has a far higher mortality rate than my primary diagnosis. Before I could begin radiation treatments for breast cancer, doctors needed to discern whether I also had cancer in my lung. Two lung surgeries revealed that the node was benign, just a fungal infection that had grown because of my reduced ability to fight off infection. My immune system was so suppressed by chemo that by this time new growths were popping up everywhere. Seven pre-cancers also erupted on my arms.

Your experience may have been very different. You may have been nauseated. You may have had neuropathy or problems with diarrhea or constipation. You may have lost your fingernails or had any of a multitude of other problems. Cancer, and its treatment, are horribly tough on

our bodies, minds, and spirits.

My recovery took a long time. Maybe yours did, too. Our bodies need time to heal and our minds, emotions, and spirits need to process all we have been through. Complicating recovery for many of us is “chemo brain,” that foggy, hard-to-remember feeling that is a complication of chemo. It can last for a year or even longer, long after other side effects of treatment have passed, and plagues many of us even in recovery, as we try to piece our lives back together once again.

In spite of all these low moments, I am steadfast in my recognition of a significant upside to having breast cancer. My difficulties taught me new ways to live my life. They taught me to open myself more fully to the people around me, even the strangers living in my neighborhood. They made me more outgoing. I doubt that I would be the same woman I am today had I not endured the frightening experience of breast cancer. Anything, even any difficulty, that causes such personal growth must be viewed as a gift. You are a changed woman as well, probably more than you realize. Your suffering has made you wiser and

deeper. I hope you appreciate that about yourself. I hope you are able to see, and embrace, that gift.



IN EXTENSO SAMPLE

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was your emotional reaction to the news of your diagnosis?
2. Were you angry, sad, scared, or numb? Or something else? Have you told this story?
3. Did your feelings change as your diagnosis became more real to you?
4. Did you react in the same way you usually react to crises?
5. If you had chemo, how did it affect you? In what ways did your life change?
6. Is there anything that you would do differently? What are those things?
7. Is there anything you wish others had done differently?
8. Are you still suffering the effects of chemo? If so, in what ways?



## Advance Praise for *After the Fear*

As a cancer survivor, I found myself responding “yes” over and over again to Kay’s reflections on her own journey with this life-changing disease. How I wish I would have had the benefit of her wisdom as an anchor and a guide when I was in the midst of the storm.

— Chaplain Bob Backis, BCC



Kay’s journey eloquently summarizes what so many of my patients with serious illness struggle with. After reading *After the Fear Come the Gifts*, I have a better understanding of what my patients are going through. This has helped me approach patients differently. I have been able to focus more on their emotional and psychological needs, which often times get buried in the management of pressing medical needs.

— Dr. Janet Barczyk, MD

# BREAST CANCER'S NINE SURPRISING BLESSINGS

Clinical psychologist and spiritual director Kay Metres discovered during the course of her treatment for breast cancer what she came to think of as nine gifts, nine surprising discoveries about herself, about her family and friends, about the wide world around her, that now enrich her life in ways she could not have imagined, in ways she felt compelled to share with other women.

## THE NINE GIFTS

- Transformation: *Embracing change*
- Learning to Ask for Help: *On not being alone anymore*
- Interdependence: *Cooperating in your healing*
- Surrender: *The power of giving up*
- Sisterhood: *The wonderful women in your life*
- No Longer Needing to Be Right: *The delicious freedom of letting go*
- Savoring Each Day: *Mindfulness in every moment*
- Discovering Your Own Strength and Beauty: *Loving yourself again*
- Deeper Spirituality: *The unending pool of strength*

*"I hope that through reading this book, you will find empowerment and even joy, yes, joy, becoming more aware of your own strengths and the inestimable value you bring to the world."*



Kay Metres, Psy.D., is a clinical psychologist and spiritual director with a private practice in Deerfield, Illinois. Before becoming a therapist, Kay was a college English instructor, and later a hospital chaplain. She has three far-flung kids and four precious grandchildren whom she loves to visit. Raised in southern New England, she now lives with her husband Phil in suburban Chicago. Dr. Metres is available to speak to book clubs and organizations.

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