

Marie

Riding the Wind and Waves

Marie tossed in bed. Her mind was still churning over yesterday's medical appointment. Her oncologist had told her that her PET Scan showed activity in her sternum and he couldn't tell if her breast cancer had come back – only a year after her diagnosis. Marie then looked up to the two pictures on her bedside table which she had placed there to 'anchor' and guide her healing journey.

The first picture shows her standing on a beach in France. It was taken two years before her breast cancer diagnosis at age 38. As a single woman, Marie had joined a tour visiting the shores of Normandy. The brisk wind and sound of surf invigorated her as she quickly headed to the water's edge to begin a long walk, the waves breaking at her feet.

After some time, an old man who was on the tour offered to take her picture. Marie posed, facing up toward her new friend. Both were unaware that a huge wave was bearing down on her. When it hit, crashing around her body, the wave threw her to the sand, soaking her to the skin. The tour bus would not return until the end of the day and Marie lay wet, shivering, and out of breath.

Pledging to herself to make the most out of the day, she got up, brushed the dirt off her clothes, and began to walk around. Shivering at first, she accepted a jacket from a stranger and then joined her new friends who were climbing the rocks and cliffs, warming herself through the vigorous climb. Before long, she was laughing, enjoying the spectacular views, and by lunchtime was dry enough to sit with her friends and taste the French bread, cheese, and wine.

Marie understands the wave in this story to be her cancer diagnosis and looks to this picture as a reminder that she can choose how to respond to life's difficulties. Trained as a child psychologist, she took a positive and proactive approach to her diagnosis and the months of chemotherapy, mastectomy, radiation, and two reconstructive breast surgeries. She empowered herself with information, drawing on the expertise of the cancer

centre librarian, as she prepared for each of her medical visits. She would just smile at her plastic surgeon when he teased her about bringing in a pad of paper with questions.

Marie was also quick to integrate healthy habits into her life like exercise and a healthy diet which had recently been proven to improve breast cancer survival rates. She started taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or would park several blocks from the school where she worked which added a brisk walk to her day.

Her healing program also included mindfulness meditation that she learned from the cancer center's social worker. She learned a 'playful' healing visualization in which she imagined her white blood cells as white beluga whales going into the sand to remove cancer cells.

Although Marie felt empowered by the practical things she was doing to promote her healing, she had to work with the anxiety that she wasn't doing enough. At one point, she struggled with feelings of guilt for not exercising as much as she thought she should. But she learned to reframe these thoughts with a kind and rational response by telling herself she was doing the best she could, focussing on 'baby steps' instead of trying to be perfect.

As Marie cherished her alone time, the individual self-care activities came easily to her, but she worried about her support system. In the years leading up to her diagnosis, in which she had a busy clinical practice and was teaching at the university, her social circle was shrinking and she was feeling less connected to her family. When she found a cyst in her breast that didn't go away, her greatest fear was not of dying but of being alone – single and isolated during her cancer journey.

She remembered working with children with cancer during her training, and being awed by their courage and resilience. Drawing on their inspiration, she deliberately chose to break away from her tendency to withdraw and, instead, to share the news of her diagnosis with all of her friends and family, even reaching out to colleagues at work.

Marie was overwhelmed by the emails, phone calls, and gifts of support. Her mother, who lives in another city, came to live with her. Someone would come to each of her medical appointments to take notes for her.

It was initially intimidating for Marie to even think about joining a support group, but the experience was so positive that she invited these same women to meet in her apartment every month. They would share their lives with each other and laugh over silly things like the time when

Marie described getting a cold scalp when she stuck her bald head in the fridge.

Marie gave each woman a stone that had been smoothed by the waves from the beach near her cottage. The members of the ‘stepping stones’ group carried these solid reminders of their connection to each other in their purses. Just before Marie was to undergo her second breast surgery, the women gathered in Marie’s apartment where they signed her ‘stepping stone’. She carried it with her into the operating room and now brings her stone with her everywhere she goes, a reminder that she is connected to the invisible web of her healing community.

When one of the group members suffered a recurrence, Marie stuck with her friend every step of the way, providing rides or meals, or simply listening to her in the last days of her friend’s life. This experience was rewarding but also provoked Marie’s fears, especially when Marie’s PET scan raised the question whether her own cancer had come back. More than ever, she needed to draw on the inspiration from her second healing picture.

This second picture was taken shortly after her treatment finished, when her brother invited her to go sailing. The winds were very strong that day and the boat tilted at a precarious angle as it shot through the water at breakneck speed. Her brother asked her to take the steering wheel. Marie’s eyes opened wide as she recounted the scene. “He was yelling at me, ‘You can do it—Go! Go! Go!’ I was scared but laughed at the same time and stayed at the helm despite my fear. I was able to do it. So that’s the way I want my healing journey to be— I want to stay at the helm of my boat even if it’s frightening. And I will find some joy and meaning in it.”

Marie smiled to herself as she recalled seeing this picture posted on the fridge door of one of her ‘stepping stones’ friends. She had sent out invitations to forty close friends and family members to join her in an “End of Chemotherapy / Fortieth Birthday” Party. The idea for this party began during an art therapy exercise at our weekend retreat.

Marie had drawn pictures representing her life in the past, the present, and the future. The picture of her future was a montage of people joyfully gathering in a beautiful building, warmed by a golden sun in the background. Marie felt awkward about the idea of inviting others to such a celebration but a close friend finally persuaded her to send out the invitations.

Everyone showed up. People brought baked goods and told stories about Marie. She reflects “So that was a big event and people really enjoyed it. And at that celebration I gave a talk and showed the drawing I had done at the weekend retreat. I told people how, in a way, cancer had been a gift for me. It sounds strange to say that, but I discovered how strong I was, and how loved I was, and how much support I had in my life. Being alone was not an obstacle. I had so many people in my life.... And I’m trying to have this sense of celebration every day now.”



Five years after the questionable PET scan, Marie appears cancer-free and no longer needs to take hormone therapy.