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Why I Don't Miss My Breasts Anymore

Shortly after my double mastectomy 12 years ago, my oncologist asked me how I felt about losing my breasts. I told him I was sad, very sad, and like most big despairs, it seemed like it would last forever.

“How you feel will keep evolving,” he said.

It turns out that was one of the truest things anyone told me about losing body parts although, at the time, I could imagine shrugging and saying, “Whatever” to losing these body parts. I had just finished six months of very aggressive chemotherapy, and had a lumpectomy, hysterectomy and oophorectomy (removal of the ovaries). I also slogged through genetic testing, only to discover I was BRCA-positive (BRCA is the acronym for the breast cancer genetic marker). This meant I had an 87% chance of recurrent breast cancer, and a 44% chance of the far more sneaky (often undetectable until it's too late) ovarian cancer. I was past child-bearing age, married to someone who would rather have me and not my breasts around, and I had already given up various indoor and outdoor parts of myself, so what's one – or two – more?

In the weeks before the bilateral mastectomy, I dressed my grief in new names for this surgery, calling it, in my memoir *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*, a debooing or mammatus interruptus, and even what my then 13-year-old son came up with, a de-racking. I had grappled with whether to undergo breast reconstruction, something I fully and intimately understand that each of us in this situation need to decide for ourselves. My body clearly communicated to me that it had had enough, my husband asked me not to put myself through this for him, and it mattered little to me whether I wore silicon boobs on the inside or outside of my skin, so I decided to simply have the mastectomy and wear prostheses.

The night before the surgery, being a writer and a lover of ritual, I wrote a good-bye letter to my breasts, thanking them for successfully nursing three children and bringing me a good deal of

pleasure over the years. After all, if the body is an amusement park, the breasts (as opposed to the Tunnel of Love below) are the roller coaster, the ride with the longest line.

For some years, I missed the girls terribly. I didn't mind the fake boobs, and it was kind of fun to pull them out and toss them around as party tricks, but it took time to adapt to the flash of myself naked in the mirror. I valued my breasts in good part because they balanced out the fat I carried below the waist. Also, something no one told me about my post-surgery torso, is that whatever fat the breasts weighed down now bubbled up into love handles, only at chest level.

Twelve years later, not having breasts is no big deal. Part of feeling at home with this body comes from witnessing much harsher losses around me and in my own life. I've held friends in my arms as they wailed over the deaths of their children, spouses, or parents. My father, uncle, beloved father-in-law, two close friends, several other friends, and others died slowly or suddenly, changing my social and familial landscape. Breast are small potatoes (or large ones) compared to not being able to sit at Weedle's kitchen table anymore and watch her make a cherry pie from scratch in 7 minutes while we laugh our asses off. Breasts don't amount to a hill of beans when it comes to no longer hearing my father-in-law use one of his splendid made-up words, like regusting, to describe the state of the world.

I also have the advantage of being a Transformative Language Artist – someone who uses writing, storytelling, drama and other arts for health, growth, and community-building. Facilitating writing groups for people living with serious illness – metastatic cancer, Parkinson's progressive M.S. - widens my perspective as I watch people deal with constant pain or the knowledge that what's wrong is only going to get worse, and still manage to find humor, meaning, spirit. As someone who writes poetry, fiction, songs, and non-fiction, I've had many outlets along the way for putting my world into words. I've also had many good witnesses along the way, who could reflect back to me the turns and drops in my own story.

What's more, not having breasts doesn't exactly impair my ability to function in the world. As a writer and teacher, I suffer no occupational impact (obviously, things would be different if I were a

swimsuit model). Friends without colons need to put a lot of time and care into their daily routines.

People without limbs, such as so many veterans in the last decade, face real and long-term challenges to their work, mobility, family life, and simple ability to get up and wander where they want to go. My greatest challenge is transferring my silicon boobs between bras and swimsuit.

At the same time, my ease at being boobless comes from privilege, luck, and age. As a happily-married and middle-aged woman who didn't need a set of tatas to attract a mate, demonstrate my beauty through the hint of cleavage, or nurse a baby, not having breasts doesn't keep me from my life.

I've gotten used to my sleek chest in the mirror, and the bra that carries its own set of boobs. The chest love handles have, thanks to a lot of yoga and weight-lifting, largely vanished. We are obviously hard-wired to resist change but also to incorporate it. The new normal has become the old normal, and the old breasts are like an old friend I've lost touch with for so long that I can't remember our connection.

To those who are now facing breast cancer and BRCA results that make them wonder who they'll be and how they'll fare without breasts, I want to say that over time, you will find your own way. You might miss your breasts fiercely your whole life, you might mourn their absence quickly, you might be far more delighted with reconstructed breasts than you were with your originals, you might wonder what all the fuss was about or tunnel through intense bouts of anger, despair, loss and fear. I wish you complete trust in your own twisting, vanishing, and re-appearing path; lots of good friends who will listen to you without judgment and with deep love; opportunities to say what you need to say – through the arts or counseling or just talking to yourself as you walk down the street. May you find your own true north in your choices and adaptations, and such a long life beyond this moment that you get to experience the perspective of time, love, and vitality.