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“Another Way to Step Into the Air, To Land on the Ground”: Resiliency Through the Arts

Bridges

All that year of cancer and surgeries,
of my father’s cancer and death as I held
his knee, of his chemo and mine,
long waits for injections or test results,
I dreamt of bridges – large suspension bridges
I had to scale with my hands or climb over
gingerly with trembling legs.
Slim wooden slats stories above certain
rocks, and always a slat or two
missing in the high wind. Crossing
expansive spaces made of water
or shifting ground, junkyards or rivers,
untold distances to master.

Sometimes there were ways to stop climbing –
a phone call or a plane ticket, another needle
in my forearm, the gleaming ceiling of the
waiting room while the magazine spread itself
across my lap, telling me of other destinations.
Or there was the occasional fall as I sat on the bed,
the fear storming through me like shards
of nightmare, the reaching out for help
from that sensation of going under.

I do not have words big enough for how far I traveled.
I do not have language intimate enough
for how I arrived here, to the world more itself
than it ever was before, tender as the last breath
of my father, fierce as the woman
waking up again on the other side.

As far back as I remember, I turned to art for healing, first drawing, then piano, eventually writing. What hurts us -- body, heart and mind -- converted into art can unfurl into something of meaning, a talisman of our strength, a pattern I witness in the writing and art of my students and community workshop participants over the last 25 years. No wonder then that when I was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer and BRCA 1, my mother faced cancer three times, and both my father and stepfather died from pancreatic cancer, I turned to and facilitated others making things with images, music and especially words.

Over the last decade I've written *The Sky Begins At Your Feet: A Memoir on Cancer, Community & Coming Home to the Body*; *Reading the Body*, a collection of breast cancer poems, and edited *My Tree Called Life: Writing & Living Through Cancer*, an anthology from the writing workshops I've led for a decade with people living through serious injury or illness. I've also worked closely with students writing about serious illness at Goddard College, where I teach. Writing has allowed my community and me a flashlight to navigate the dark, tangled woods or vast empty parking lot where there's no clear path to survival, health and healing.

Like many of you, I've been learning about what resiliency means: how we can cultivate the courage, tenderness, strength and perspective to not just endure, but find sweetness, vibrancy, certainly humor and even joy. Simultaneously, there's the kind of loss of what or who can't be replaced, and for some of this, this shapes out inner landscape like a hole in the ground as big as the Grand Canyon.

Here are some moments along my own meanderings through this journey, which I offer with the caveat that we each, more than ever when facing what many of you survive and endure, must find our own truth.

Some things you can't see coming at you. Like most of us diagnosed with cancer or encompassed by a sudden life-changing injury, I tripped over the irony of feeling just fine along with being stunned at a relatively young age to have something in me that could end my life. I also found the necessity in my response and the responses of many I work with to allow time for numbness and disassociation, both which help to name the sudden hole in the ground. Here's a poem from *Reading the Body*:

Diagnosis

Not what you'd expect, not in this ordinary body:
the phone message on the machine that says,
"mammogram," "irregular," the technician's voice
later who tells you there's something
to look at, make sure, check.

Then it's that moment alone in the bedroom,

the chair so large and forgiving, the panic
that suddenly seems extraterrestrial, the incessant
questions while the wait stretches its beginning
to meet you.

Until the second x-ray hangs on the lit box
singing out its small constellation of calcium, until the
surgeon's receptionist touches your shoulder kindly
and nods, and you lie on a still table
while a nurse looks, shrugs just a little,

until that call, those words which come
by the time you already know them, you
already know the walls of your body falling away,
this dropping down to your seat, to your notebook
where you write it down because you're supposed to,
to your fingers looking so normal
as they hold the pen and paper, unfurling

this new script, this open page
of a body where, without moving an inch,
you've become a flesh-and-bones double
of who you always were – one who has cancer,
one who can't believe it, and both of you
standing up, shaking the hand of the doctor,
walking out into widest sky you've ever seen.

No matter who we are, and what happens to us, the widest sky is here, coming or coming again. As we age and change, the floor will give out beneath us. How do we learn to roll when we crash? I believe integral to this is feeling whatever we feel, also taking charge of our lives despite the sense of no longer being who we thought we were or even, at times, being able to drive the bus of our own lives. Even and especially when we're making the biggest decisions on short notice while engulfed by pain, fear, rage or confusion.

Your Life is Your Life

Know this when you must lie
completely still on the steel table
while the glass plate presses down
on your chest. Your life
obviously your life. Dream it back
into your memory for when
the kool-aid-colored chemo
is pumped into the plastic port
in your clavicle. Tell yourself

this when the doctor comes in
to talk with you, carrying
a small box of tissues. Don't
forget then how your life is
your life, not when the phone rings
at the wrong time, or the biopsy needle
inserted in your left breast shoots
its click near your heart. Your life beats
loud and often. Your life
surges against itself
in at least some cells so tell it
your life is your life
when you sit, naked from
the waist up on the examining table.
Your life there talking with
the pharmacist or here on the couch
is your life. ick it up
and hold it close
especially when the wait
is long and the news is bad.
Tell your life what it is.

At the same time, life goes on: kids needs to be picked up from school, the car engine light comes on, it rains on the one day we planned a long walk, and whatever treatment we're enduring rides side-saddle. Each of us has our own coping strategies. For me, humor, and surprisingly, temporary tattoos turned out to be key to getting through six months of chemo. Here is an excerpt from my memoir, *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*:

The Tattooed Lady

I didn't hate my hair. Most women I knew did, or at least fought with their hair occasionally when they weren't banishing it to pony tails or short cuts. For me, my hair had been one of the few things right about my otherwise flawed appearance.....

After my buzz cut, right after the second chemo treatment when my hair was supposed to fall out, it fell out in such slow motion that I started to look less like a Holocaust victim and more like a very confused duckling. That was when I called Courtney and Denise. Veterans of shaved heads, and lured also by the promise of spaghetti and meatballs, they came right over.

While the pasta boiled, Denise shaved a checkerboard on my head, telling me it looked

awesome. Courtney nodded, but Ken, walking in the door after a long day at work, told me I looked like a gang member. The kids trailing behind him just gaped at me.

I went to the mirror. White supremacist. Not really my look. So I asked Denise to shave it all off.

Back at the mirror, with Denise's giggles behind me telling me I looked beautiful bald, I found an image of someone hairless but friendly. I decided that it was also a good summer cut, so to speak.....

Bald. That's what I'll do, I thought at that moment looking in the mirror. At least, that was where I started out.

Sometime after spaghetti and meatballs, with Courtney and Denise joking about my cool new look, I found my hand reaching for a pack of fake tattoos. Birds. All different kinds – cardinals, blue jays, eagles, owls. Some of the birds had wings outstretched, mid-flight, and others were perched or nested. The tattoos were Natalie's, and neither she nor I could remember where she got them.

Tattoos. Bald head. A flash of electricity jumped between them. I knew what I had to do.

I put a cardinal right over my left eye, a goose over my right, and the others became part of the garland around my head.....They just seemed to belong there.

When I came back to the table, where Forest was passing out ice cream bars, he started giggling. "Are those permanent?" 11-year-old Daniel asked.

"Oh my god," said Natalie, but she was smiling. "Mom, you've got freaking birds on your head!"

Ken opened his mouth but didn't say anything. Denise applauded and rushed up to hug me. Courtney rolled her eyes.

The tattoos were indeed temporary, and within a week, my birds started to tatter, but I found a toy store that carried temporary tattoos.....and once I week, I would shave my head

smooth of the nubs that had started to erupt, and then carefully, with a wet washcloth, apply a circle of mammals, amphibians, butterflies, or flowers. The ring of flora or fauna lightened up the chemo for the kids and for me and took the bald edge off my life. Once, as I lifted a bag of groceries, a woman called out, “Hey, I like your fishies.”

I turned and looked at her, trying to smile as I said, “They’re whales.”

I walked into the hall of Forest’s elementary school where some kindergartens stared at my head, so I bent down.

“Wow! Dogs,” one said.

“That one looks like our puppy,” said another.

For a chemo appointment, I wore flowers, small delicate pansies, daisies, and roses. For a taco dinner at Ken’s parents’ house, I sported small woodland creatures. For getting the oil in the car changed, I wore wolves. I wore prairie dogs to a meeting, farm animals to a potluck.

One day, when a teacher saw my bald head as I picked Natalie up, he looked at my garland of galloping horses, and called out, “Hey, who did you lose a bet with?”

“God,” I answered.

But it turned out that at least God had a good sense of humor, and there was something about wearing a ringlet of kittens around my scalp that made chemo seem a lot less like a pact with the devil.

Tattoos of kittens helped enormously, but there was also the reality of loss. I needed language to funnel the deadness and energy, rage and exhilaration. This poem was written about the moment I returned home from my double mastectomy when I took off, seemingly angry that the house was a mess but actually needing to do something I couldn’t yet understand at the moment. At a moment when nothing made sense, I had to go outside and outside myself to gather beauty:

Lilac

The day after they cut my breasts off,
just home from the hospital, not even
napping or talking on the phone yet,
that day, I walked on my own two legs
down the dirt road over the slope
of loose rocks, cradling....
the broken body, the large orange handled
clippers, the big wind holding me....
that day beginning the healing
from all of it – unslashed
from the expectation of what knife or infusion
comes next

was the day I made my way to my mother-in-law's
old-fashioned dark purple lilac, and reached against
the tightness of gauze and paper tape....
the odd sensation of parts removed and scars
just making themselves, against my sore arms reaching
toward their old strength

to gather and hold,
to cut and cut and cut
all I could fill my arms with,
all the dark purple alive with death and
birth, loss and blossom, and the white ones too.

My arms filling with the explosion of lilac,
my life filling with wind and weight of branches,
all of it against, upon, my open chest,
....ready to be carried
into the next life
that starts right now.

What I realized and try to keep at the center of my awareness all the time is how much each moment begins the new life. This moment. Whatever you see, sense; however you feel is an archway you are breathing right right into the wobbly, surprising, painful, lovely and daring future. What we don't know, what we can't figure out, names the truth we face always. Resiliency means opening ourselves to the grappling and reckoning that comes, to feeling our way through the dark. But it also means acknowledging what's beyond making peace with or understanding. There some some losses that are inconsolable, or at least, seem that way. Here is one of my own honest grappling and reckoning moments from *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*:

Singing the Body Electric

I cannot figure out who I am as a body these days. I look in the mirror each morning, each night. I look right into the scars, trying to read them like the dreams I have at night of driving around lost for hours.....

Right before the sleep that might take me back to such dreams, I touch my chest – feel the lines and the numbness too, try to measure with my fingers where feeling begins and where the zone of only pressure. Sometimes I use my husband’s hand to show me where the nerve endings are and aren’t anymore.....

I get up in the morning and always put my glasses on first, then strap on my fake breasts, which have spent the night hanging out in the pockets of my special bra. There is little difference between the glasses and the boobs to me, just things I wear when I’m awake, each an item to bridge the world between dreams and waking time, between whoever I am and the rest of the living world, my prosthesis something between person and garment.

Each day I walk among the other bodies, remembering to remember that everyone has their own scars and numbness, most of these wounds not even physical. Yet at the same time, I find myself often confused about what it is to live in a woman’s body without breasts. Of course, I know that breasts are just a body part, not a gender identity, but there’s something about losing this part of me would hold gently on cold nights as I slept to keep them warm. This part round and lovely, traveling effortlessly, quiet mourning doves sleeping soundly on my chest. It’s inconceivable that such a part could be gone, that I would have chosen to give it up, that there’s so little evidence of its existence in my memory.

That’s part of the problem: in my memory, below the surface of words and rational understanding, breasts are part of being erotic, alive.....

So I am trying to love my body for what it is right now. Let the love I feel for it – the

tenderness for my moving fingers on the keyboard, the appreciation for the strength of my legs to carry me for miles on an early spring day, the wonder at the softness of my skin, the shapes I leave in the blankets. Let this love be enough.

Let me learn this way of loving what's imperfect from the land and sky around me, the best mirror to show us that what we do to our environment, we also do to ourselves. As well, the earth where I live is the best teacher when it comes to persevering through the seasons with the kind of grace that celebrates life, however it comes – in the icy wind mid-winter that makes the windows tremble, the explosion of lilac one particularly slow spring, the reddening grasses late fall, the black sheen of the crow mid-day. Life just wants to live, so the old saying goes, and this desire makes for tremendous innovation.

There is little script in this culture for such innovation when it comes to women's breasts. There is only the narrative everywhere I look of women made of curves and sleekness. Meanwhile, I feel like a 12-year-old with my bare chest cut so close to the bone. Meanwhile, the rest of my body blossoms so much older than the child I was. Meanwhile, the breasts in between past and present sleep on an invisible shelf.

I open the door to the back deck, and stand outside in the middle of the night, watching the clouds travel past the waning moon, collapsed on one side because of the sun's particular slant of light at this moment. I step outside again in the morning, the overgrown grass of early spring pouring over itself around the tilted cottonwood tree. The hills and wind around this home carrying their own losses and scars, and yet lit with a green both pale and fierce, quiet and shining, fully here at this moment and on the verge of changing completely.

In recent years, I've become very interested in Jubilee, which comes from the Hebrew tradition of letting the fields lie fallow every seven years, and when a person turns 49 -- 7 x 7 -- giving everything away and starting over. As I work with people who live with injuries and illness and work

through my own experience, I feel that compulsion to get rid of stuff, not just lid-less plastic containers and extra six pie pans. I'm shedding old ideas about who I thought I was, how I'm not really the kind of person who does this or that and how some of the myths I've spun about identity and the world turned out to be scaffolding that got me to the point where I no longer need them.

Jubilee

Are you ready to give it all up, the news
that isn't news, the sullen child calling the shots,
the scared grip of the fingers, the longing
of the spine? Are you ready to step out
into this new life, naked in the night rain?
Will you bring here the supposed treasures –
lost boys buried in cigar boxes, a glass bird
perched on the window sill, the earnest wish
for someone to change her mind about you?

Jubilee is not all dance and fall.
Get up from that curb where you wait
for the parade of acceptance or the
nightmares of fear. Your life is not
made of the nameable.

The party has already started,
only a small flame that catches it all:
paper, rages, old shoes....empty
medicine bottles and torn blankets.
The fire that, once invited, consumes itself
and makes warmth for you, sitting there
in your new skin.

Now find or make another house.
Whatever comes, give away.
Don't wait for answers from authority,
don't push choices before their time.
Stand on the threshold, looking out,
imagining how one small bulb,
the size of newborn rabbit,
once in the ground, can winter itself
into the power of hyacinth.
Don't settle for anything less.

Jubilee makes me think not just about what we let go of, but what we keep, and how we repair ourselves and our world. Tikkun Olam (which means repairing or perfecting the world) is a phrase that

sees divine light contained in special vessels -- or Kelim -- some of which shattered and scattered, attaching light to fragments of evil, which gave these fragments power. Our Tikkun Olam is freeing the light from the dark, gathering it into acts and art that help repair the world one word, one image, one note at a time, and in the process, give us back more of ourselves, despite and because of all that's lost. I cannot imagine a better story to show what resiliency can be, particularly after living through something that feels like a hole in the ground as large as the Grand Canyon. Speaking of which, I leave you with this from *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*:

Fifth Anniversary

The fifth anniversary is supposed to be the biggie, like the fiftieth anniversary of a marriage, something to celebrate with balloons and ballrooms, only for cancer, it's a quieter affair. We go to a place full of drama and herds of people from around the world: the Grand Canyon.

That afternoon, I walk down the path with Ken and Forest, the other kids back in the motel room fighting over the remote control. After colder temperatures than I expected for late March, the sun is back out, and it's nearing 50 degrees. Forest and I walk hand-in-hand around the path smoothed by millions of people over the years, encircling the interior of a large curve of rock.

We come to an arch of stone, and we take each other's picture there, standing in that protected place of dirt and depth. When I look down, even after walking for an hour, I still can't see the bottom, only clusters of green treetops, more slants and half-circles of reddening stone. I wonder what it's like down there, but for now, there's only the walk back up, and the need to lean against the canyon wall as the long line of tourist-laden donkeys passes by.

The next day, we leave early to visit friends in Santa Fe, encouraging the kids to wrap themselves up in fleece on the car seat and return to sleep. It's just barely light, and driving east from the canyon, we soon have to turn on our windshield wipers to clear the snow, falling

sparsely at first, and then fierce and full, the flakes large as quarters.

Over the next three hours, we drive through multiple nuances of winter and spring, the light hidden, the light returning. Crossing the Navajo reservation, which holds the Hopi reservation, which holds more of the Navajo reservation, we change time zones seven times.

Time and weather. Ken's hands steady on the wheel, his eyes take in the rises and falls of land, the way a small cottonwood on a hill leans north from the south wind, the details of a kind of sage he remembers from years before.

About a year after my treatment ended, I began co-writing songs with rhythm and blues singer Kelley Hunt. Our first song – which we were brought together to write for a breast cancer awareness show featuring her music, my poetry, and a dance troop – is one of my favorites, especially the bridge of the song: “I love this body that’s not the way I thought. I love these people who help me through the dark. I love this life that keeps me waking up.”

.....Our fiercest losses can bring us closer to each other and the earth. Every place we go just another way to step into the air, to land on the ground.