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March 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "The Earth We Are: Living With and Beyond Cancer" (2023). *Essays*. 23.
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The Earth We Are: Living With and Beyond Cancer

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

1,826 words

A steady question has circled me for years like a song I can't shake: "How to live?" When I was diagnosed with breast cancer six years ago, it was as if someone turned up the volume of this question not just from my slim creek of bodily danger but from an ocean of ecological devastation. Our bodies, part of nature, are the most local portion of the earth we inhabit; it's no wonder that what we do to the earth, we also do to ourselves.

The facts are daunting, the stories crushing: Cancer rates are up throughout industrialized countries at overwhelming, and if it's someone you know or are, heartbreaking rate. Previously rare cancers, such as pancreatic cancer (which is difficult to detect until final stages), have climbed dramatically in recent years. "And you know why that is. It's the environment," says my oncologist, who tells me that dealing with the causes of cancers in this country would take nothing less than a complete renovation of every aspect of our economy.

Yet there is little discussion of the solid, compelling and essential research already done and in process on environmental causes for various cancers. When I google "pancreatic cancer research," studies concerning people's diets pop up. Even with breast cancer, a disease so prevalent that one in eight women will be diagnosed during her life,

the lion's share of research concerns treatment. Meanwhile, the proliferation of farming pesticides and herbicides, industrial waste, estrogen-releasing soft plastics, and all manner of other cancer-inducing practices persist.

In my world, this environmental devastation we carry in our bodies is up close and personal. I'm a survivor among a family of the cancer-living and the cancer-dead. My mother and aunt have each been diagnosed with breast cancer twice, and my mother also had colon cancer. My father and his brother both died of pancreatic cancer. Two of my siblings and I tested positive for the breast cancer genetic mutation, meaning we had (before we elected to give up our breasts and ovaries) an 87% chance of breast cancer. My step-father currently is dying from pancreatic cancer. A close cousin struggles with late-stage lung cancer.

My experience with cancer, and my long-time practice as a writer has brought me into contact with a larger cancer community where I regularly facilitate writing workshops. Linda is still alive despite being diagnosed with late stage ovarian cancer six years ago, but the amount of chemo she's undergone has devastated her kidneys and liver. Louise and Heather, a couple of 25 years, face daily excursions to doctor's offices and medical procedures for Louise's liver cancer. Woody tries to ride his bike daily despite the tumors popping up in his brain from his rare form of lung cancer.

The people in my family, among my friends and in my workshops are in daily conversation with the question of how to live in the face of debilitating treatments, long tangles with insurance companies and impending painful deaths. It is *the* question for any of us who have heard the words, "You have cancer." Of course, it's also *the* question for anyone alive who can see through our culture's false responses to this question that

push buying things and numbing ourselves with various big- or small-screen distractions. Whether we've cozied up with our mortality or not, the latest statistics – that one out of three of us will have cancer in our life times – make it impossible to not consider how to live.

Those of us deemed survivors live in bodies eroded and altered, built up or taken down in the battlefields where the weapons are slash (surgery), burn (radiation) or poison (chemotherapy). We share the sad news of diminished sex drives, loss of the sense of taste, ongoing gastric problems, or floating depression that lands on us without apparent cause. We know what it means to surrender our breasts, uteruses, prostates, part of an intestine or other organs or body parts, not to mention sense of well-being, time and energy, all in the name of wanting to live.

How to live in general is easier to name than how to live in specific, and at the same time, the specifics are as personal as individual cancer profiles. Most people I know are intent on living a life of meaning, continually deepening and learning from their relationships with loved ones, and in many of our cases, our relationships with the places we live. Yet the broad sweep of these impulses doesn't translate into moment-by-moment clarity on what to do, in part, because facing mortality illuminates the precious luminosity of life in its specifics. Susan tells us in the writing workshop about feeling good enough to do something one day, but then being unable to decide whether to plant tomatoes, visit her sister, or write. Likewise, I often find myself in the middle of my living room, debating whether to read a book, practice the cello, weed the garden, take a walk, or clean out an obscure drawer.

The specifics of my own answer started to emerge after years of packing my time as tightly as I pack our van for any camping trip: With every nugget of space filled with something that might be needed. After over a year of multiple surgeries and intensive chemotherapy, right when my treatment was officially over, I developed a chronic, unidentifiable illness of low-grade flu-like symptoms. Regardless of the cause (which I believe is related to my treatment), I found myself caught in the conflicting impulses of wanting to do everything I had ever wanted to do right away, and wanting to dwell in the perfect world of delicate purple blossoms against the wet bark of the redbud tree. After years of doing, I needed to be.

I was a slow learner. Given an urgent task and high speed internet, I would easily gallop toward “too much” instead of “enough” despite my health going south easily and for prolonged periods if I didn’t listen to my body. In the middle of three years of my post-treatment illness, I found myself stuck on a high floor of a swanky hotel in Boston, where I was attending a conference. I wanted to be outside – it was just on the cusp of spring – walking among those blossoming trees, but I felt too broken and worn, too sick with something that never seemed to fade. In that moment, I heard one clear sentence: *If you want to heal your life, you need to change your life.*

Since that Boston epiphany, I started giving up some of what I do: some of my work, volunteer gigs and activities, and the more weedy thought-mazes and habits that took me away from being here, with myself as I am, in the present whatever the weather. As a long-time bioregionalist who has and probably will again start a campaign, begin fundraising for a cause, or do a bulk mailing at the drop of a hat as long it relates to improving how we live in balance and understanding with the earth, I’ve had to learn to

engage in a more balanced and understanding dialogue first with my own body. Listening to the earth, vibrant and also speaking in wind or bird call, seasonal shift or curve of a hill I'm climbing slowly.

Listening to my body, though, is also about listening to the earth. One particularly difficult day, on the heels of several insomnia-wracked nights, I felt so scared, exhausted, unable to relax, and like reality itself was some kind of construct easily misplaced. I didn't know what to do with myself so I turned myself over to my husband. "Please help me, I'm losing my mind," I told him.

Within a few minutes, he led me to the woods near our home, to a small clearing, where he had laid out a pad from a lounge chair and a blanket. He told me to lie there, and then he covered me with the blanket, and placed across my stomach a few branches of a blossoming redbud. "Just lie here, and let the wind through the trees heal you. You don't have to do anything."

It worked. I felt, with each breath and each breeze, more relaxed and less fragmented, and soon I even fell asleep. When I woke, I knew that I needed to come back, and so I have, often retreating to a hammock now in this place where I can lie still, staring up into the trees – winter-bare or ecstatic green – and just be a part of earth in aware relationship with the earth surrounding me.

The earth where I live has been changed, and not for the better, during my lifetime, and yet this earth around me, and this earth I am made of, hold the best answers I can find for how to live. My vision hasn't deepened so much from cancer within and around me, but it's widened, and in the periphery of every moment, I can see the land or sky, a single tree drooped with small pale green buds in April, a sudden crow zooming

past the billboard, the bat's squeaky call overhead, the beetle pouring down between the sidewalk and street.

If being alive is about anything, it's about communion with life, and life is everywhere, even in the hospital basement room, overly air-conditioned, where we write together. It's no wonder that people in the writing workshops often write about trees blossoming, thunder storms cleansing the air, the wide whiteness of snow making a whole new landscape, or the cool smoothness of the pond where they once swam.

There is such a profound joy in the simple and constant art of deepening and extending our reciprocal relationship with the earth. I know in my bones now when David Abram writes:

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with *other* eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn those other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.

Even now, as I look out a window and see, in the diagonal wind of an incoming spring storm, a flood of pear blossoms, the size of finger tips, lift and then shower across my view. How to live? I hear William Stafford's poem, "Ask Me," in which he says, "What the river says. That's what I say." What the earth most local to me says – the part I inhabit under my skin and around me – that's what I say.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D. is the author of seven books, including three collections of poetry (Reading the Body, Animals in the House and Lot's Wife), and over 50 poems and essays published in literary journals and magazines. She is a long-time bioregionalist and one of the founders of the Continental Bioregional Congress and the Kansas Area Watershed Council. Founder of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College where she teaches, Mirriam-Goldberg facilitates writing workshops for people living with serious illness as well as workshops on writing from the earth, and, with rhythm and blues singer Kelley Hunt, writing and singing workshops. She makes her home with various humans, and indoor and outdoor animals in the country just south of Lawrence, Kansas. www.writewhereyouare.org, www.bioregional-congress.org, www.kawcouncil.org, www.goddard.edu