

Writing Heals

BY DIANA M. RAAB, PH.D

My life as a writer began at the age of ten when my mother gave me my first journal to help me cope with my grandmother's suicide. The journal was a Kahlil Gibran journal with quotes on top of each page. Since that day I have used writing as a source of healing, transformation and empowerment — its role in my cancer journey has been invaluable.

When diagnosed with DCIS (ductal carcinoma in situ), an early breast cancer, in 2001, everything was going well in my life. I was 47 years old with three wonderful children, aged 12, 16 and 18. Happily married, my husband and I had just celebrated our 24th wedding anniversary.

After being given my options and seeking numerous medical opinions, I opted for a mastectomy and reconstruction. The surgery and immediate recovery were basically uneventful except for the emotional upheaval and occasional panic attacks. Despite the wisdom shared by my loved ones, the trauma of losing a breast, a vital maternal female marker, the experience touched a deep part of my psyche.

From diagnosis to post-op recovery, my journal became my best friend and confidant. Essentially, my journal helped me navigate through my breast cancer journey as I recorded my insights, fears and dreams. Sometimes I would write poems such as this one:

Robbed Twice

The day after the doctor
cut off my breast
I got on the phone
to my therapist
who told me to give
myself some time
to figure out who I am
after being slashed
by the knife.



with the world, pulling them together in a poetry collection called *Lust*. The idea is to never cease dreaming and bringing joy into your life. I do believe that in order to see the light, we must first pass through the darkness, and while my scars have changed my perfect landscape, they are a constant reminder of my survival. My poetry serves as a reminder that sensuality can continue even after a mastectomy and reconstruction, and it is about looking for the beauty in any situation.

I have always cherished my journaling time, and this was especially true during my cancer journey—from diagnosis to recovery. Journaling is a time for deep reflection. Every morning I sat in my backyard overlooking the lake with my cup of coffee and poured my sentiments onto the pages of my journal. As a journaling instructor, I understand the huge benefits of writing to heal.

Many women have used journals to record their breast cancer experiences. Some of these journals or books have been published, such as those of Audre Lorde, May Sarton, Betty Rollin, Rose Kushner, Hilda Raz, and Elizabeth Berg, to name a few.

For me, journaling on a regular basis gave me the opportunity to get to know myself on a deeper level. A lot came forth during my journaling practice. I realized that I did not want to be identified as a cancer victim. I wanted to be the person who overcame cancer. I did not want empathy or sympathy. I just wanted to be respected. I had surmounted many obstacles in my life and this was another one to add to my list.

Through journaling, I also realized that others' needs had always trumped mine, and that it was time for me to spend more time on myself. I learned that I took on too many responsibilities and that it was time to start saying "no." I learned that for years, I had suppressed my negative emotions, mainly grief, and this can increase cortisol levels and decrease immunity. I began to put aside time daily for meditation and exercise. As much as possible, I removed all toxic people from my life and surrounded myself with positive individuals who made me feel good.

Even though my incisions healed and I have returned to my routine, the emotional and physical scars of having had breast cancer will always be present, although they have dulled somewhat over the years. I am

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Use the creative process — singing, writing, art, dance, whatever — to get to know yourself better.”

— Catie Curtis



I was glad my surgeon recommended the reconstructive surgery at the time of the mastectomy so that I would, as he said, “wake up with a breast.” But, as a very sensual person, the nature of my surgery profoundly affected my view of myself as a woman. In addition to the loss of sensation on the mastectomy side, every morning and night when dressing and undressing, I was reminded of the deformity to my anatomy. My surgeon assured me that most women were asymmetrical and that nobody would notice. It was also a blessing to have a supportive husband who helped me believe that I was still a beautiful person. During my healing, my surgeon also encouraged me to wear revealing and provocative clothing—first at home and then out in public. I journaled my feelings on the subject and my entire breast cancer experience.

My surgeon’s input was also instrumental for my healing. I will never forget how he suggested for me to keep a diary of my post-operative period. Knowing I was a writer, he suspected that I would take the assignment seriously. To inspire me even further, he asked me to mail him sections of the diary. Journal writing should be done in a stream-of-consciousness manner, or writing without lifting the pen off the page, crossing out or erasing. Grammar and spelling errors are irrelevant, as they often dampen creativity and the ability to really express honest sentiments.

I am the type of person who prefers to move on from negative experiences and so, when I was ready, I tucked those journals away in my office closet. Friends and colleagues began to encourage me to write a book to help other women with their breast cancer experiences. About nine years after my diagnosis, I published a self-help memoir, *Healing With Words: A Writer’s Cancer Journey* which incorporates my journals, poems and story. At the end of each chapter, I offer writing prompts for my readers to share their own experiences.

In addition to the healing I experienced through journaling, shortly after my diagnosis, in a password-protected section of my computer, I began to write sensual poems merging my sentiments about lust with the landscape of my new body. Earlier this year, twelve years after my diagnosis, I felt brave enough to share these poems

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Kerry is a breast cancer survivor. She is wearing a SOFTEE® ROO with breast forms.



less sensitive and more proud of my survival, revival and thriving.

Here's another poem I wrote in my journal and which was later published in *Healing with Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey*:

Bifurcation

Having a breast sliced off
leaves a woman with two lives—
the one before the loss
and the one after.

Journaling has taught me that emotional healing usually takes longer than physical healing. I am thankful to be living in a time when medical advances made it possible for me to have my cancer removed which led to my complete recovery.

As cancer survivors and thrivers we sometimes reflect upon our mortality and wonder what people will say about us after we are gone. I want to be remembered as a positive person who contributed to the happiness of others in whatever way possible, without jeopardizing my own well-being. I want to be remembered as someone who celebrated and focused on life's high points and navigated quickly through its turbulence. When first diagnosed with breast cancer, my father-in-law who survived a world war and the loss of his parents, called me up and said, "Have no fear, Diana. Have no fear." His words meant a lot to me and I heard them echo over and over in my mind over the years. As my father was a Holocaust survivor, I realize how much of my learning came from him. Now that he is gone for more than twenty years, I can say thank you, Dad, for your view on life and thank you, Mom for buying me my first journal. You have both changed my life forever. ■

www.DianaRaab.com



Top to bottom: Son Josh, daughters Rachel and Regine, husband Simon