

The Phoenix Within

By Jamie Stout

This is dedicated to my mom and Iggy Bit. I love you both forever!

Nothing in my short 39 years of life, prepared me for the events that occurred on February 3, 2008. That was the day that I was diagnosed with Stage IIIA Invasive Ductal Carcinoma. At that moment, sitting in an examination room at my Doctor's office, I watched my world change as if it were a piece of glass that had just cracked. I stared in horror as the crack grew, splintering off into new web-like cracks until the view of my life was completely obstructed.

I was dumb-struck. I remember thinking that breast cancer was not a young women's disease. It was something that happened during the later stages of a women's life, once she had had the opportunity to accomplish her greatest works in life ... when her life was winding down. I could imagine my grandmother or my great grandmother getting breast cancer. But me getting cancer...it was unimaginable.

The next couple of weeks were hazy and a blur. I remember going home and calling my mom. I had no idea what words I was supposed to use to explain to her that I had cancer. When she answers the phone, do I ask about her day? Do I try to ease into the conversation? Do I say, "Hi mom, guess what I have cancer"? Really, this was never covered in any of the communication self-help books I have read. And the truth is, that today, I don't remember what I said. It was the beginning of the many instances throughout my walk with cancer that God did for me what I could not do for myself.

Regardless of how I broke the news to my mother, I realized I needed my mommy. She was so amazing. She was coming to protect me from this evil called cancer and she assured me that everything would be alright. I can't begin to imagine what that solitary 16 hour drive from Washington to California must have been like for her. Whatever her fears, she never shared them with me. Rather she summoned all her courage, strength, love and faith and believed for both of us that I would be alright. She believed that I was strong enough and tough enough to get through what lie ahead of me. It was the single best gift she has ever given me.

So many discussions had to be made within those first two weeks. A lumpectomy? A particle mastectomy? Or complete mastectomy? A port or a pic-line? I'd like to say that there was a choice about my chemotherapy treatment, but there wasn't. I was getting the biggest, baddest chemo for the longest possible period of time. Shave my head when I started chemo or wait until my newly grown-out long hair started to fall out on its own? Wig or no wig? Mounds or Almond Joy?

Some of these answers came easily, some did not and none of the answers would have been possible without my support network. I am very clear that I am alive today because of the God of my understanding and the people who love me. I opted for a complete mastectomy, a port and to shave my head prior to my hair falling out.

Out of necessity I went to the local barber to get my head shaved. I could not go into a salon and ask a hair dresser to shave my head. There would be questions that I did not want to face and answers I did not want to give. So a barber it would be. I chose a local barbershop that was run by a father and son. I walked in asked if the son would shave my head and sat down. He did indeed shave my head with a prayer but not a single question. I was to discover later, that he did not have to ask me any questions; he already knew "why". Because one of the women in his family was traveling the same road. After I departed without so much as a backward glance at him or at the pile of my hair on the floor he went in the back, closed the door and proceed to cry with his father. After the tears were shed they put my name on every prayer chain and prayer list they could find. They hold a very special place in my heart and they are proof that there are times when uttering words are not necessary to convey the trials of life. I go back regularly and visit the two of them, if for no other reason than to show them that all those prayers worked.

In short order the day came for my first chemotherapy treatment. As I settled ignorantly into my recliner in the infusion center, the nurse wheeled in an IV pole strung with bags of stuff that I could begin to not pronounce and that moment it hit me like a tons of bricks. This was serious, I had to do this and I was scared out of my mind. My best friend sat beside me, reflecting compassion back to me and she held my hand as the tears rolled down my cheeks. It is hard to put into words exactly what transpired between the two of us that day. She loved me unconditionally and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she could be strong for both of us at that moment and time.

The next 4 months that followed where some of the hardest months of my life. I remember lying in bed thinking to myself, "I absolutely cannot do another day of this". I was overwhelmed, exhausted and sick and tired of being sick and tired. It felt, at that time, that finishing this journey was straight out impossible. Then a soft, still voice said to me, "you don't have to do the rest of the journey today - just do the next 15 minutes". So I just focused on surviving the next 15 minutes. And with each 15 minute period I survived I gained strength for the next 15 minutes. To this day, I put that 15 minute practice into place whenever I am overwhelmed and by gosh it still works.

As my own life was being renewed, I realized that I needed a symbol of that renewal that I could touch and see and smell. My Mom, my best friend and I drove to Sacramento to meet my new little miniature Dachshund puppy. Her name is Noel because she born on Christmas Eve, a day of new life and beginnings. I would wake to find her curled up next to my side under the covers, so soft and warm and full of life. Watching her grow and thrive gave me something to focus on. It gave me courage to believe that I would be ok. She was my constant companion and still is to this day.

As my last chemo treatment neared, I wanted to do something to say thank you to all the wonderful ladies in the infusion center who had made my time there as pleasant as possible considering the circumstances. So I called up a friend and we made boob sugar cookies complete with pink frosting and red hot nipples. We had a blast and I had so much fun passing them out in the infusion center. I'm pretty sure that a cancer center is the only place where a breast cancer survivor can walk up to someone and ask "would you like a boob". We all had a good laugh that day and for a few moments each of us was free from cancer's grip.

After chemo the next leg of my journey was to include daily radiation for 6 weeks. No big deal, I thought...that's what I get for thinking. The closest radiation facility was an hour and a half away from the cancer center where I was receiving my treatment. The hospital made arrangements to transport a group of us to this facility daily. I showed up for day one and was met by a long black stretch limousine and 5 other cancer patients who would be my traveling partners for the next 6 weeks.

By this time in my treatment, my 5'11" frame was down to 120lbs, I was bald and in general a mess. As the limo pulled into the parking lot of the radiation facility I remember thinking as I extended my leg out the door that "I may look like and feel like shit from the knees up but from now on when I stick my foot out of this limo it will have a fabulous shoe on it."

I must admit that I am a shoe freak. My mother would surprise me during my months of chemo by bringing me wonderful new shoes that she had found while she was out running the errands I could not. She brought me a pair of bright peach silk wedges, luscious purple swede strappy heels with beautiful pictures on the bottoms and red patent leather sling backs. My feet where the only thing that had not changed over the course of my treatment.

Every day I would show up to meet my new friends wearing a different pair of high heel shoes. My traveling mates expressed that they looked forward to seeing what wonderful shoes would adorn my feet each morning. Even the hospital staff would greet us at the door to see what shoe would be announcing my arrival. This quest of my involving fancy shoes gave us all something else to focus on and for that I am grateful. In looking back at that experience it is clear to me that that act of wearing pretty shoes was my way of trying to exert some control over my very uncontrollable life.

While I was able to gain some apparent, small measures of control in life, the span of time between my last dose of radiation in late August and my final surgery to remove my other breast in December would prove to be the most uncontrollable part of my journey. Once treatment was over I had the mistaken idea that the very next day, I would be able to pick my life up where I had left off prior to cancer! However, I was still so sick and my body was still healing from all the prior months of trauma. I found myself deeply depressed and unclear how I was supposed to put my life back together after so many upheavals. Upheavals that had me questioning everything I believed and everything I thought I was. And again, God did for me what I could not do for myself. First He gave my mom a vision, which she relayed to me. While she was driving back to her home in Washington, she saw a shooting star directly in front of her, overhead. She asked God if that star was for me. God replied, "I have a joyous life in mind for her; but she must choose ... choose life or choose death."

It would take me several weeks to fully comprehend what she shared with me. In the meantime, I found myself reaching out to a pastor I barely knew desperately looking for guidance. That day that I walked into his office unannounced, he opened his door and welcomed me in. We talked and cried for the better part of 6 hours. He opened his heart and shared about a time of great depression in his life. I asked him what is Faith? If I could just figure that out, I might have something to hold to. What he said next had a profound impact on me then and continues to profoundly impact me today. He said, "Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see. Hebrews 11:1." At that point in my life I was very sure of what I hoped for – my life and I was very clear that the unseen miracles of God were going to bring my hopes into reality. And I chewed on that while waiting for my upcoming surgery. In fact I still to this day chew on Hebrews 11:1. It has become my invisible sidekick accompany me throughout my days.

After my final surgery in December, I began the long road to discovering my "new normal". My body was so beat-up that for most of 2009 I did little else than sleep and eat. I was not capable of doing anything more than that. As 2010 began, I realized that discovering my new normal was to begin by accepting what I could no longer do. My body now had physical limitation and my brain no longer functioned as I was accustomed to because of the all the chemo. I tried to be patient and non-judgmental with myself as I discovered daily more things that I was not able to do. I have always been fiercely independent and I was hard for me to have my life defined by what I could no longer do. But I kept at it, I was determined to work through all the psychological aftermath of surviving cancer. Part of this process involved realizing that I was grieving the loss of the old me. I was not the same woman I was before cancer. With this knowledge and my refusal to let cancer define me, I continued on. It was a very slow process. But I have been told that slow and steady wins the race.

By 2012 it had taken the better part of 3 years, post treatment, to gain the energy necessary to start the process of discovering and re-defining who I am, instead of what I am not. There are things that I will probably never do again, like ride my motorcycle, climb ladders, wear really sexy high heel shoes all day long, own sexy bras that have cute matching undies. And I grieve those losses. With time the grief has diminished but it resurfaces once in a while when I come across a new situation that exposes another lost part of the old me.

It was and still is important for me to remember that in the mist of loss I have been blessed with many new gifts. There is a kin of grace that has become part of who I am in response to these experiences that allows me to enjoy the journey of discovering the phoenix within myself. I cherish the things I can do so much more today. I can design a moment any way I choose and I can stay in that moment to enjoy my choice. I am not defined by what my body can and cannot do. But rather I am defined by the choices I make when interacting with life and the people surrounding me. This shift in perception has brought so much depth and richness to the moments in my life and believe it or not, I am grateful for this to be the silver lining from my cancer journey.

On February 3, 2012 I celebrated entering into my fifth year of remission. It was also the year that I finally walked my survivor lap in our local relay for life.

Prior to submitting my experience, strength and hope for publication, I asked my mom to look it over. She sent it back to me with the letter below, so I have included it.

Dear Jamie,

My pride in your courageous journey is as high as my sorrow was low when you told me of the cancer diagnosis. I wished we could have traded places. But such thinking didn't seem too helpful. So now what? I did the only thing I have ever known to do as a mother ... show up! My goodness, all the chicken broth and I rice I made in a desperate attempt to keep something in your tummy. I tried every trick I knew. We did the things we had to do, went to all the doctor appointments, went to Chemo, cold I remember, we walked in the sun and I held you when no light seemed to appear at all. I read books, I waited and watched, and when all else failed I tore up your kitchen and installed a new one. I think it was my attempt to make something better when there was so little I could do to make you better.

Today, you are not the same person and neither am I. I am deeply blessed by our time together on this journey. You are a strong, brave, loving, compassionate young woman. I am proud to call you daughter and friend.

Love you forever,

Mom