

My name is Paula Holland De Long and I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 37, twelve years ago this past January. One day I was living my life. Then, somehow, three weeks later I was sitting in a hospital minus my left breast, wondering what the hell had hit me, afraid I was going to die. The shock and disbelief of what was happening had barely sunk in before I was living it, afraid and not knowing what was next for my life. I remember the pain and fear of not knowing what was going to happen. The tedious numbness while putting one in front of the other during chemo, over and over again. Keeping my "I'm fine" face on and my wig straight in 90 degree heat and 90% humidity. Feeling guilty about not being superwoman during a time when I often could barely get out of bed. My focus was on reaching that magic time when somehow this cancer stuff would end and my life could go back to normal.

Two years later, with nine surgeries and 4 rounds of chemo behind me, my treatment did end. Everyone was so happy for me! So thrilled that I was "done" with "cancer." Well, guess what? I was bald, weighed 95 pounds, and half of my chest was missing. I had scars all over my body and facing the thought that I could die soon had changed me so much that I didn't know what normal was anymore.

My logic was fuzzy but my intuition was screaming at me. I knew in my heart that things that really mattered to me before, like a nice car, well paying job and prestigious title didn't matter anymore. The truth was, I wasn't thrilled to have my old life back. Something was wrong and I had no idea what to do about it.

I decided to take a low paying, mid-level job instead of going back to my executive position. I started gardening and walking the dog. Pretty soon my husband was looking at me and asking me "Who are you and what have you done with Paula?" And he didn't mean that in a necessarily positive way. I kept wondering "What's next for my life?" and feeling "There's got to be more."

After cancer, the stuff I had and the things I achieved didn't really make me feel like I mattered. It really hit home that bigger houses, impressive titles, or physical perfection — to name a few — don't take care of you when you're sick, love you when you're wrong, or provide inner peace or appreciation for what you do or who you are.

I have to tell you, the Paula who was diagnosed is not the same Paula who is writing this story. This Paula has been inspired by cancer to create a new life of passion and joy, of giving back, and helping others. This Paula isn't willing to wait for happiness. This Paula knows that she is meant to have it now. Since that day in 1997 I know that I don't know what the world has in store for me. I do know that I'm not going to wait to do the things that thrill me, bring me joy, and feed my heart and spirit. I'm not alone in this choice. Of the 11 million cancer survivors worldwide, and a large majority of them have made that same choice.

I realize that we have been taught from an early age to follow the thoughts in our heads rather than the desires in our heart. We have been relentlessly trained to operate inside the box of what we know we can achieve, rather than risking the uncharted territory of what we truly want. Intuition and resonance are ignored for the safety of conforming to society's definition of success and happiness.

Like millions of other survivors, cancer stripped me of my willingness to conform and replaced it with an unquenchable desire for aliveness, passion, and purpose in my life.

Now, I'm a professional life coach. I've been working with cancer patients and survivors for the last 10 years, either professionally as a volunteer. It took three years to get my life back after my cancer treatment ended. That's too long. This realization inspired me to use my experience and knowledge to help other survivors move beyond their experience to a meaningful life based on personal values and passion and found my company, What's Next For My Life, Inc. We're becoming known as an experts in the oncology community because our workshops transform the emotional challenges that come with cancer into hope and empowerment, in as little as one or two days. We hope to bring these workshops into cancer treatment centers around the country.

Before my diagnosis, I thought I was successful but I was dying inside. Cancer was a wake up call for me. Dealing with cancer and all of the changes it forced on me made me stronger and more courageous. It wasn't easy. It was worth it.