

CHALLENGING ILLNESS EXPERIENCE—KAY RYNERSON, SEATTLE SAVORING THE PRESENT MOMENT

Kay Rynerson challenges breast cancer with the awareness that ‘this moment is all we truly have.’

Early last year, I began taking hormones at the suggestion of my doctor to control perimenopausal symptoms. That summer, I noticed a lump in my breast that grew quickly. By the fall, my left breast was nearly twice the size of the other one. In late November, I found myself sitting in the surgeon’s sterile, windowless examination room as he shared the diagnosis: breast cancer. I felt exactly like a convicted criminal sentenced to death. What did I do to deserve this?

“This is not a death sentence,” the doctor said. “We have many ways to fight this disease.” But no matter what any medical professional said, I was convinced I was going to die a slow, agonizing death. I could see myself pale and bald, lying in a hospital bed hooked up to all kinds of machines, smiling tearfully as I bid my loved ones goodbye, just like in the movies. I felt my life begin to ebb away—my days dissolving into endless hospital visits and debilitating pain.

Testing revealed an aggressive form of breast cancer, and two weeks later the left breast was surgically removed, along with 27 lymph nodes. I had ignored the lump for months, knowing somewhere inside me that it was going to be trouble.

My family couldn’t believe the diagnosis— with my healthy, mostly vegetarian diet, my devotion to exercise and my low-stress career as a massage therapist, I was the last person anyone expected to become ill. I had no risk factors for cancer other than being a female—although after talking to many breast cancer survivors, I am convinced that a woman should do some hard thinking and extensive research before submitting to hormone replacement therapy.

At the incision site following the mastectomy, a small red rash appeared. The doctor said he thought it might be an allergic reaction to the surgical tape.

A month after the surgery, when the incision healed, I began chemotherapy using the most powerful and toxic drugs in use today. Chemotherapy targets the whole body, mopping up cancer cells that may linger anywhere. Any case in which 10 or more lymph nodes test positive for cancer calls for the heavy ammunition. I had 12 positive nodes.

The way chemotherapy works is by killing off the cancer cells while they are in the process of dividing and multiplying. The drugs incidentally kill off other dividing cells, such as those in the hair follicles, which is why I lost my hair. They also shut down the ovaries, sending the body into menopause, which has some very interesting side effects.

Six weeks into the chemo treatment, the red rash had grown larger and when biopsied was found to be cancerous. Leftover tumor cells had seeped through the skin and were spreading, despite the aggressive drugs. I then realized I really had to start fighting.

I thought back to the early days of my practice, when I was manic depressive with suicidal tendencies, exhibiting many disturbing tendencies, which led me to Buddhism. By the end of a six-year battle, the depression was gone and has not recurred—not even for a single day—in the last 24 years. Nevertheless, the day of the diagnosis, I began looking death in the face, and to tell the truth, it looked like a very comfortable alternative

to the medical interventions that lay ahead of me. It was a dark feeling from the depths of my consciousness that yearned toward a quick, painless death—perhaps an exhilarating jump off a bridge or a simple drug overdose.

I then had the opportunity to receive guidance from SGI North America Bureau Director Norimasa Saito. He told me that life as a Buddhist is a process of overcoming one hurdle after another after another, just like an athlete, becoming stronger and stronger with each one. He also said that we choose roles in life, like actors, to display the power of this great philosophy. So, why not choose to be a Katherine Hepburn, with truly challenging roles that allow me to reveal my true power?

The doctors decided the chemo wasn't working, since the tumor spread on the skin despite the drugs, so I then started radiation, which targeted the left chest directly in daily treatments for two months. "If the skin can't tolerate the maximum dose," said the oncologist, "the cancer cells can't either." The targeted area tanned, then burned, getting papery and hypersensitive to the touch, then peeled, then went through many other changes. The pain, oddly enough, was worse while I was chanting, as if the universe was saying: "Sit up straight and chant harder! Harder! You need a lot more life force to beat this one!" My friend Shigeko Groshell brought me soothing yam paste compresses, which helped the pain subside slowly.

I then began a different chemotherapy cocktail following radiation in hopes that the cancer would respond to this one.

Before the diagnosis, I had started a daily chanting session with another member who is facing some major challenges. Once I got the diagnosis, we invited any and all to come—so many members asked to chant with us that I finally began to put the weekly schedule on the outgoing announcement on my phone. Now two other members also sponsor chanting sessions once or twice a week.

Shortly after the word got out, I was sitting in front of my altar one morning reading *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and my body began to pulsate. It was the same rhythm as my arterial pulse, but my entire body was vibrating. I felt instinctively that all the prayers of my friends were rocking my body with positive energy. It was the first time I have ever felt keenly the prayers of others reaching the depths of my life.

Another time, surrounded by a room full of people chanting, I felt a great, warm light permeate me like a giant energy x-ray illuminating every single cell in my body. I felt at that moment that I was going to win.

As a result of the chanting, I actually have more energy than before I was diagnosed. I'm working more hours than ever and enjoying it more and more. Every day seems so precious now. I ride my bicycle to treatments—five miles—which includes a killer hill, so I'm getting stronger and stronger. I continue to use my bike for most of my transportation needs.

I've witnessed an overwhelming outpouring of care and concern from people around me, as if being surrounded by an incredible embrace. Friends of mine who have long since given up their Buddhist practice are showing up now and then for the chanting sessions. I have a partner, Dennis, who is right beside me to offer any kind of support, even bringing offerings of greens and fruit to set on the altar. He calls me Hippolyta, after the queen of the Amazons, a [mythological] tribe of women who cut off their left breasts in order to be better archers.

In my heart I am happy.

SGI President Ikeda said: "People who have not experienced painful struggles or

suffering cannot understand the hearts of others. Only if one has tasted life's bitterness can one lead people to happiness.

“To simply view your sufferings as ‘karma’ is backward-looking. We should have the attitude: ‘These are the sufferings I took on for the sake of my mission. I vowed to overcome these problems through faith.’

“When we understand this principle of ‘deliberately creating the appropriate karma,’ our frame of mind is transformed; what we had previously viewed as destiny, we come to see as mission. There is absolutely no way we cannot overcome sufferings that are the result of a vow that we ourselves made” (February 1997 *Living Buddhism*, pp. 36–37).

I have a cancer buddy who is six months ahead of me in her diagnosis, with the same type of tumor in the same location in the same breast. She is also a massage therapist. Her tumor has metastasized to her liver, but she is active and fighting hard. We both agreed recently that we have no regrets about going through this ordeal because it brings the important things in life into such clear focus. You shed negative influences, you prioritize time spent with loved ones (I have two self-motivated, well-adjusted teenagers of whom I am very proud) and you feel some days that you have such a clear view of eternity that your life expands into an awareness that we are all dying. You have to live each day with the understanding that yesterday is gone, tomorrow will never come, and the present moment is to be savored with a hearty appetite. That this moment is all we truly have.

I am determined to beat this illness and live a long life. I can't wait to meet my grandchildren, attend the opening of an SGI community center in my neighborhood, perfect the tango, publish a massage textbook and continue to help my SGI district grow and support this great Buddhist movement for peace.