

## Foreword

“Breast cancer,” the doctor said to my frightened mother as I looked on. She wasn’t surprised, really. She had felt the lump every day, again and again. Repeatedly, she had run her fingers over it. For many weeks she felt it, she saw it, but she tried to ignore the obvious. And she ignored the voice within too, the voice that said, “Call the doctor.” She had not wanted to face the possibility of cancer. She had not wanted her life to change, to know what was on the other side of the lump. Like most women, she simply wanted to wake up one morning and discover the lump gone.

My mother wasn’t the only one in the family with breast cancer. My maternal grandmother and three maternal aunts were also diagnosed; five women who faced breast cancer, each in her own way, making different choices, but all bravely meeting the challenges. Every year when I go for my mammogram, I wait, tentatively, for the letter I hope to receive, the one that says, “Your results are normal.” I have been lucky, so far. But while we know much more about the genetic links to breast cancer, we also know that the majority of women who get this disease have no family history. A staggering one in eight women will experience

breast cancer in her lifetime. And while the medical community has developed more targeted and effective therapies, there is still no cure.

Breast cancer is profoundly painful, most times physically, oftentimes emotionally, and sometimes spiritually. Women come face-to-face with their own mortality, knowing there are no certain outcomes. They turn to other women who are fighting this disease for the support, advice, and inspiration they need. And that is exactly what *The Language of Healing: Daily Comfort for Women Living with Breast Cancer* offers—comfort, guidance, and practical information, from women who have been there.

Pat Benson and Linda Dackman, the authors of this special book of tough and tender reflections, know firsthand the shock of a diagnosis, the grueling challenges of treatment, and the healing power of turning to other women with breast cancer for insight and inspiration. They wanted to offer “a support group in a book,” so that help could always be at hand, wherever you are on your journey. *The Language of Healing* includes their voices, as well as the voices of a diverse group of other women of all ages and attitudes. The book is divided into three parts—A Time to Cry, A Time to Heal, and A Time to Live—the portals every woman with breast cancer walks through as she comes to terms with her disease.

I deeply believe that peer support and books are vital tools for healing, so when I was asked to write the foreword to *The Language of Healing*, I was honored. I am the author

of a number of books for women who are struggling with a range of life issues. But all my work is grounded in the belief that the path of recovery begins with learning to take life one day at a time, even one moment at a time. This is how we give ourselves the opportunity to listen not only to the “experts,” but to consider what our inner voices have to say. This trusting in ourselves, coupled with the open and non-judgmental sharing with other companions on this journey, companions who promise steady, quiet strength, and who can reach us when another’s words may ring hollow, who can ease our ways and even change our lives.

*The Language of Healing* is a companion for you, too, as you walk your individual path on the common ground of breast cancer to arrive at peace. And isn’t that what we all want? Regardless of our circumstances, we want the peace to go on moment by moment, and despite whatever has derailed us, the ability to live life fully each day. That resilient spirit of moving through fear, loss, and grief to arrive at such a peace is present on every page of this lovely book.

Karen Casey, author of bestselling books  
*Each Day a New Beginning* and  
*Change Your Mind and Your Life Will Follow*



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Pat Benson

For this book, I wish to acknowledge Pat Benson . . . and Pat Benson only. Thank you, Pat.

Linda Dackman



# Introduction

Like so many other women, we, the authors, have lived through the shock of breast cancer diagnoses. One of us was thirty-four years old, a single woman living on the West Coast who had her whole life ahead of her; the other, a post-menopausal, married, fifty-six-year-old Midwesterner, eagerly anticipating the birth of a grandchild. We didn't know each other as we made our separate ways from diagnosis through treatment and recovery. We met when we were asked to explore the possibility of working on a book about confronting breast cancer. We agreed, and as we shared our individual stories, we discovered that while our lives are very different, our breast cancer stories have much in common.

We experienced the same sense of loss and disorientation. We shared similar questions as we wandered through the wilderness of medical opinions, options, choices, and terror. In recovery, we both struggled in the aftermath of the physical, emotional, and psychological effects to our lives. We had to redefine what "normal" meant to us. We began to live life with a renewed sense of the value of each and every day. Most importantly, we found immeasurable support and guidance in listening to the stories of other

women facing breast cancer and in sharing ours. By reflecting on the advice and insights offered, we responded to our individual challenges in confident, thoughtful, and healing ways. Acceptance overcame anger, understanding overtook confusion, and courage diminished fear. Moment by moment, breast cancer became an unexpected journey of self-discovery, new friends, and new beginnings.

As we talked more about a potential book, we knew it had to include a diversity of voices, our own as well as those of other women who have a point of view and a deeply felt commitment to helping you on your journey. The result is our personal experiences mingled with those of other women in a down-to-earth volume that is the sum total of many perspectives, interwoven and laid out one upon the other. The scope ranges from the first shock of diagnosis to the ultimately transformative powers of the breast cancer experience—and many of the fears, insights, and even joys in between. You might say that *The Language of Healing* is like a breast cancer support group between the covers of a book. It is exactly what a woman recuperating in her hospital bed or at any of the other milestones of treatment and recovery might need—the accumulated coping devices, insights, wisdom, and inspiration of other women who have preceded her in confronting breast cancer.

Gathered here are moving anecdotes and practical information of value to every woman concerned or diagnosed with this disease. It is built upon the experiences of women of all ages, from twenty-three to eighty-four; women

who have undergone all types of breast surgery and treatments, from lumpectomy and mastectomy to radiation and chemotherapy; women who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, and gay. The reflections correspond to the progress of varied experiences. Each one begins with a quotation to bring the topic into focus and ends with an affirmation that you may use as guided support in your recovery. You will touch on topics as universal as fear and grief, and as intimate as sexual relations. And you will find wisdom and healing strategies as varied as the individuals who offer them.

Approach this book as you like. Read through it in sequence, or read at random, based on your own shifting questions and needs. However you use it, our hope is that you find *The Language of Healing* to be encouraging and uplifting. It is a place to gain insights into your own experience and discover ways in which others have coped. It is a private place for you to feel supported and understood, a place to share your grief, anger, and sense of loss. Above all, it is a resource to strengthen you in *your* journey of self-discovery as you live moment to moment, with a newly deepened appreciation of life.

Pat Benson and Linda Dackman



Part I.

*After Diagnosis*  
*A Time to Cry*



# Finding Out

*Suffering . . . no matter how multiplied . . .  
is always individual.*

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

What follows a breast cancer diagnosis?

Shock. Disbelief. Fear. Numbness.

The question: “Cancer?”

The answer: “Yes. Cancer.”

And then what?

Then you cry.



*I let the tears come, the first thing I do for myself.*

# Shock

*Oh Lord! If you but knew  
what a brimstone of a creature  
I am behind all this beautiful amiability!*

Jane Welsh Carlyle

No matter how calm we may appear on the surface, we are standing on unstable ground. No one can absorb the news of breast cancer simply by hearing the diagnosis. The overwhelming reality of it becomes instantly buried under a protective shell of shock.

But reality cracks through our shock, our fear, our denial, little by little, until we are ready to face it. Remember, no matter how together and in control we appear, even to ourselves, we want to respect and acknowledge the chaos beneath.



*I acknowledge the chaos underneath the surface  
as I struggle to face my diagnosis.*

# Grief

*I tell you hopeless grief is passionless.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

*I have breast cancer, you say to yourself over and over again. Yet you do not fully grasp the meaning of these words. The impact approaches and then recedes, is painfully clear, then muffled. You are inside and outside yourself all at once, aware that something awful has happened, but at the same time you expect to wake up from this terrible dream. You are rocked by shock and fear and grief. Suddenly, you shift. You are above it all, floating calmly, looking down at the world. You see the shattered pieces of yourself on the floor.*



*I will feel the grief, then gather my energy for moving forward.*

# Disorientation

*Though the body moves, the soul may stay behind.*  
Murasaki Shikibu

The world moves, our body moves, and our mind rushes off without us, to visit some distant, narrow place at the end of a long, dark tunnel, although our thoughts cannot stay there long.

Our soul stands still, holding on to the world we once knew, the world before we took the word “cancer” inside us, the world we understood before everything changed.



*Despite my disorientation, I continue.*

# Denial

*Of course it will never be quite the same.  
But what ever is in this life?*

Alison Lurie

Cancer sneaks up sideways, quietly. It whispers, sends subtle signals, until it nudges past denial to get our attention. We see the doctors and have the tests. Whether the results are delivered gently or roughly, the diagnosis is clear—breast cancer.

The bad news settles on the surface. We can't fathom our death, and we can't fathom living with this disease. We sit quietly, unable to find the words to comfort ourselves, or the people we love. There are next steps to be taken. But we're not ready to be brave, or to let go of our old life, and accept this news.



*I give myself time to accept this diagnosis and  
the changes it will bring.*

# Anger

*I'm so angry that my body is  
all but bursting into flame.*

Alamanda

The anger we feel is terrifying, directed as it is against the very universe. The anger within is sudden, wrenching. We scream, “How dare this happen to me?”

We are raging against the implication that our lives as we have known them are about to be destroyed. We are burning with anger at the threat to our plans, our expectations, to our very future.

Think of this anger as an erupting volcano, because from the volcano—as from anger—also comes renewal and rebirth. As the earth gives birth to itself by erupting, we can channel our anger, fear, and pain about this diagnosis into creative action and the vital will to fight.



*My anger is a tool in the fight against this disease.*

# Shame

*I have been sick and I found out, only then,  
how lonely I am. Is it too late?*

Eudora Welty

The unwarranted and confusing shame that follows a diagnosis of cancer colors our perceptions of how others see us. Since we are feeling out of control, alienated from our bodies, and no longer sure of ourselves, we expect that others are seeing us as less valuable, too.

Why jump to imaginary conclusions? Does it make sense to withdraw on the basis of how we believe others will respond to us? Withdrawal assures us of only one thing: isolation. It takes time and practice to discover who we are and the process now, as in any other time of life, means risking vulnerability.



*I will not let my unexpected feelings of shame  
close me off from others.*

# Death Sentence

*The time on either side of now stands fast.*

Maxine Kumin

Despite our fears and suspicions, hearing the actual diagnosis of breast cancer from a doctor is always a shock. And in its wake, time stands still.

As Jory Graham pointed out in her book, *In the Company of Others*, what we hear in those first few stony seconds as time grinds to a halt is “less like a medical fact from a doctor and more like a verdict from a judge. What we hear is ‘I have been sentenced to death,’ and in your heart of hearts, you know that it is for a crime that you did not commit.”

All we have to remember is that there is no judge and that we are the prosecution, the defense, and the jury.



*A diagnosis alone does not condemn me.*

# Delayed Diagnosis

*It is by surmounting difficulties, not by sinking under them, that we discover our fortitude.*

Hannah Webster Foster

Who can know what might have been different if our physical problems had been dealt with sooner? Feel the anger. Grieve the delay. But, more importantly, this is the time to ask, what can we do about it *now*? Self-pity changes nothing. We take our anger and use it positively. It spurs us on to the next step, which is the fighting.



*Starting today, I fight.*

# Urgency

*Time . . . is so precious  
that it's only given to us moment by moment.*

Amelia Barr

As we grapple with this diagnosis, cancer is our new shadow, a shifting presence blurring our vision of the future. We are pulled into the present in a way we have likely never been before. A new sense of urgency takes over. But we do what we have to do, taking each moment as it comes, and that giant shadow slowly recedes.



*I stay in the moment and focus on what is in  
front of me.*

# Rage

*In some ways it's my rage that keeps me going.  
Without it, I would have been whipped long ago.*

Etta James

Cancer requires patience with the medical system and with the well-meaning people all around us. But the time comes when we're tired of waiting for the doctor, or for more test results. We're fed up with feeling dependent and acting brave. Out of nowhere comes an anger that fractures our self-pity. We rage against cancer and everything it has dumped in our lap. This is a bare-knuckles, "Get out of my way," "I've had enough" kind of rage.

Feel it. Express it. Sometimes it is only our anger that gets us through the day.



*I acknowledge my anger at having cancer, let it  
out, and move on.*

# Isolation

*To be alone is to be different;  
to be different is to be alone.*

Suzanne Gordon

Who around us can really understand? Do they have cancer? Are they suddenly facing death? What do they know? We ask ourselves these questions because we have the feeling of being cut off from people who haven't had to face this experience, even the people closest to us.

These feelings are natural. Breast cancer has a surreal, distancing effect. But while we are inside this shell of sorrow, we must try to avoid becoming isolated, stuck between our fate and bitterness over what has happened to us.



*I leave an opening through which I can reach out  
to others.*

# Alienation

*It is here that we feel . . .  
a strong force from the Self, saying,  
“Do not throw me away. Keep me. You’ll see.”*

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Does it seem easier to avoid mentioning breast cancer than to face the possible rejection inherent in letting people know? How painful a choice that is, given that our needs for communication and support are now at their greatest.

Reaching out to others is actually a way of working through feelings of alienation. It is an opportunity for those around us to demonstrate their appreciation of us, to show us that we have not changed in their eyes.



*By communicating what I need, I create the  
possibility of getting it.*

# Peer Support

*The burden is so heavy just now,  
the task is so great . . . reinforcement is needed.*

Mary McLeod Bethune

We're grateful for our family and friends, but it seems they have expectations of us, too. They want us to be strong, optimistic, to fight. The doctors ask us to make serious treatment choices on mastectomy, lumpectomy, reconstruction, radiation, and chemotherapy. We feel vulnerable, shifting between wanting to take charge and wanting to be told what to do. We vacillate between options and get frustrated with the uncertain outcomes.

This may be the time to reach out to other women with breast cancer who understand what it feels like when the ground under our feet disappears and we're in freefall. In a support group that's comfortable, where sharing feels safe and silence is embraced, strangers become staunch advocates and invaluable teachers. Confidence in our ability to do what we need to do grows.



*I must make some hard decisions now, but I  
don't have to do it alone.*

# Respect

*No one can make you feel inferior  
without your consent.*

Eleanor Roosevelt

It is important for our doctor-patient relationships to include respect and open communication. But how do we translate such ideal goals into the reality of a relationship that's under pressure and time constraints? How do we relate when the common perception is that we are at the mercy of the doctor (the expert) and that we must be the obedient patient, who waits in the waiting room for our turn?

Say, "It is my life at stake and I am responsible for it." When the time comes to ask questions about treatment options, perhaps even to question a point of authority or to express dissatisfaction with the level of attention we receive, do it. This is all part of the back-and-forth flow of respectful communication. This, too, is part of your healing.



*I express my opinions and doubts to my doctor,  
fostering respect.*