



# The Upside of Cancer—A personal account of embracing life with cancer

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If you took away man's capacity to fear, you also take away his capacity to grow...Joshua Liebman

## KEYWORDS

Cancer personal  
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**Summary** Carol Edmonston was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995. After a lumpectomy and 6 weeks of daily radiation therapy she continued living a full life. Exactly 2 years later she was diagnosed with an unrelated cancer in her other breast following a routine mammogram. She had a lumpectomy, along with lymph node dissection, followed by 6 weeks of daily radiation therapy. Upon completion, she took Tamoxifen for 5 years and is currently cancer free, enjoying a full and rich life. The following story offers a unique insight into one person's spiritual adventure through cancer and the personal transformation that followed using "Doodling" as a therapeutic tool.

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I woke up one morning expecting my day to unfold exactly as I had planned—a few meetings, lunch with a friend and dinner at home with my husband. I felt safe living in a world that had a sense of order and predictability. I loved being able to weave a connection between a beginning, middle and end, which is a lovely way of saying, "I felt comfortable and safe being in control." Isn't that what faith was all about? Trusting the journey as long as you know how everything is going to turn out. If I could orchestrate and stay focused in the perfect end result, then I would have faith in the journey itself, and all that transpired along the way.

However, on this particular morning I was rudely pulled from a place of predictability when the phone rang and my doctor's voice uttered words that left me speechless and which forever changed my life... "Carol, you have breast cancer."

Was he talking to me? Was I to believe that "I" had cancer... again? How could that be? I already had surgery and completed 6 weeks of daily radiation therapy on my other breast exactly 2 years earlier.

When I got off the phone my emotions ranged from disbelief, to anger and fear. With tears in my eyes, I remember taking my fist and hitting the kitchen wall as hard as I could, shouting at the top of my voice, "What have I done wrong?" "Why me?" "God, what are you thinking?" "Am I going to die and leave my family all alone?" I thought I had

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already explored and processed the endless array of emotions that surfaced with the initial diagnosis 2 years earlier. Once again, I felt overwhelmed wondering why this was happening.

I've been practicing and studying meditation since 1988 and thought I had learned my lessons so as not to have created this scenario from infiltrating my otherwise peaceful life. How naïve I was!

My mind was running rampant with more questions—"What did I really know about faith?" "How could I believe that challenges and adversity exist not to make our lives bitter, but to make our lives better?" In one brief moment my world, as I knew it melted and instead of feeling secure and safe, I felt alone and afraid.

One night I remember laughing to myself when I naively thought that being married to a doctor would be my protection from things like cancer ever coming into my life in the first place. How wrong I was! Yet, in retrospect, cancer actually became one of the great gifts that came into my life. It transformed my life as it offered me the opportunity to experience what faith was all about by my willingness to do the very thing I had always feared...step into "the middle" and trust the actual journey itself without having any sense of outcome.

After the initial anger I began to settle into a more contemplative space and seek the support of the teachings that have managed to burrow themselves within my heart. I was especially drawn to the teaching that *life gives us no more than we have the capacity to handle*.

I also needed to take care of the practical side of dealing with cancer, such as getting a second opinion, making sure that wherever I was treated the hospital staff were well trained, compassionate and understood the importance of integrating mind, body and spirit into the healing equation.

I ended up at the City of Hope National Cancer Center, just outside Los Angeles. I was very familiar with this facility, not just because of its national reputation, but because my parents had been philanthropically involved since I was a child. I remember thinking how amazing it was that four decades later their own child would walk through those doors and benefit from all their years of active service.

I remember the first day I arrived at the hospital with my husband. I was feeling a bit nervous, not knowing what to expect or how my life would inevitably change. I began to notice buildings and streets named after people my family knew. It was an odd, yet comforting experience—hard to describe. From "Ben Horowitz" Drive to the "Lee Graff" building, I was slowly beginning to feel more

peaceful even though, diagnostically, my comfort level had been stretched well beyond my delight.

The icing on the cake occurred as we entered the front lobby. My eyes were immediately drawn to a large painting that had the following words inscribed: *There is no profit in curing the physical body if in the process you destroy the soul*.

As I read those words I took a deep breath and felt a wave of relief wash through my body, as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Those words had touched my heart and spirit in such a profound way. If I had any doubts before, this melted them away and I knew everything would be all right. Even my husband, a western-trained surgeon was touched by those sentiments. What a welcoming presence that painting held for all.

Every one we encountered that day greeted us with such warmth. I felt acknowledged as a whole being, not just as a diagnosis. The nurses and doctors appeared as concerned about my emotional and spiritual state as my pathology report. They knew I was much more than my microscopic cancerous lesion.

On the recommendation of the doctor, it was decided that a lumpectomy would be the appropriate surgery followed by 6 weeks of daily radiation. Once the surgery was behind me, I began daily radiation therapy. I told my husband I didn't need him to accompany me to the hospital, as I felt well supported by staff and new friends I had been meeting in the radiation oncology waiting room.

Those of us who came for radiation treatments looked forward to seeing and supporting each other and friendships quickly developed. One woman, Rochelle, has since become a very close personal friend. We even discovered that we both grew up in the same neighborhood and attended the same junior high and high school.

My fears were slowly being replaced by a sense of trust and comfort. It was the beginning of what was to become my journey from fear to faith. I was continually reminded that all I needed to do was stay focused in the moment at hand, that precious "present moment". It was a powerful teaching to grasp that the "Now" moment truly contains the seeds for courage, strength and trust even in the midst of such adversity. Yet, I was beginning to see fear for what it was—a projection into the unknown future—the Land of "What If's—" What if the surgeon doesn't get all the cancerous cells? What if I lose my breast and become disfigured? When this would happen, I simply remembered to stay focused on the breath as it helped quiet the endless stream of mental chatter and bring me back to a more centered and still space within.

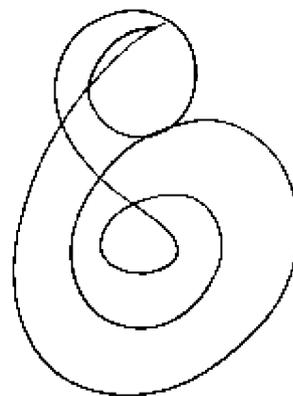
Throughout my medical adventure I was determined to search for the gifts—to find the pot of gold, and not allow myself to feel as though I had become victimized by this diagnosis. I truly believed cancer had come into my life to teach me something greater than I had the ability to otherwise grasp, and I was determined to discover what that might be.

Every morning I would get up and immerse myself in spiritual practices, which included meditation and journaling. I ended my day the same way. This helped create a strong foundation and nourished and nurtured my spirit along the way. My commitment to this discipline always left me feeling more peaceful and content with what is.

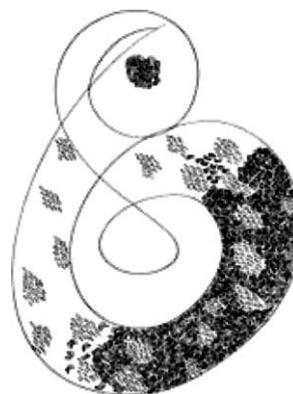
Another discipline that came into my life quite unexpectedly was “doodling.” This opened-eye meditation actually became a profound vehicle that helped show me how by learning to trust in a creative, artistic moment in time, I could also begin to learn how to trust in the creative process of life itself, even without having a sense of outcome. It amazed me how something as simple as “doodling” began to help transform my journey through breast cancer as it helped show me the healing power of trust and faith. I had thought “I” was designing these doodles, yet it became very apparent that the doodles were actually re-designing me.

It all started one day when one medical appointment was delayed and I noticed how anxious I was becoming the more I had to wait. As the minutes passed, my mind became more and more restless, wandering hither and yon, especially into the unknown future. As a way to reduce this nervousness, I asked the nurse for pen and paper and began to doodle. After awhile I noticed that this seemingly mindless and frivolous creative outlet had unknowingly brought a sense of calm and tranquility. When I returned home I knew I had stumbled into something very powerful, although I had yet to appreciate just how powerful this newfound outlet would become.

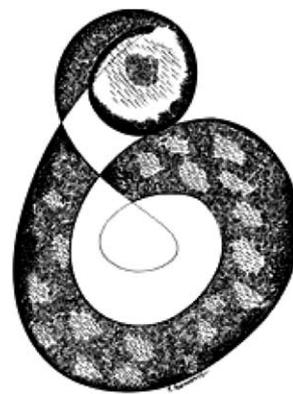
To have some extra fun I even created one guideline: to begin and end the doodle outline at the same point without lifting the pen off the paper and do so in 5s (the time for a breath in and breath out). Then, go back and fill it in with whatever sparks your fancy (adding hearts, lines, circles, stars, etc.). I was astonished, as a non artist, to see how seemingly simple doodle outlines became beautiful pieces of art. The bonus gift was watching how I began to let go of degrees of perfectionism that had unknowingly become part of my psyche.



*Step 1:* Begin and end the outline at the same point in one continuous motion, without lifting the pen off the paper.



*Step 2:* Complete the outline in 5–7s. Have fun and trust the creative “process” as you learn to let go of any attachment to “result.”



*Step 3:* Fill in the outline however you want—add hearts, lines, circles, stars, or anything else that comes to mind. There are no mistakes when it comes to doodling. Each one is perfect just as created.

Doodling allowed my spirit to rest, recover and regroup during an otherwise chaotic time. I have

learned to become one with *the middle* and see it as much more than a stepping stone to the future. It has become the anchor that keeps me steady and strong. I've truly come a long way—from fear to faith—from victim to victor...what more could I ask for?

As a great being once said

...Where ever you are, you are meant to be...whether at the beginning, middle or close to the destination—whether comfortable or uncomfortable—happy or sad. Don't let the rough spots hold you down. It takes courage—

just keep going and it will lead to deep tranquility.

Carol Edmonston is committed to impacting quality of life by weaving a creative connection between mind, body and spirit, integrating ancient wisdom and spontaneous creative expression. She has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Women's World*, *Elle*, *Girl*, *Women's Faith & Spirit magazines* and the *International Journal of Healing & Caring* and has authored two books—*Connections ...the Sacred Journey Between Two Points* and *Create While You Wait...a Doodle Book for All Ages*.

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