

Diamonds in the Snow
Rescuing the Senses in the Aftermath of Breast Cancer

By Maureen Hogan Lutz

Introduction

It sounded like gusts of a hurricane. I crossed to the window and looked out. An overnight snowstorm had blanketed the lawn and iced the trees. Branches, naked and rigid with winter, swayed and groaned as the sunrise brought warmth, and leftover storm winds buffeted the crystal coating. With each new gust, ice exploded off the branches and plunged downward with a mighty whoosh.

I rushed outside, squinting as my eyes adjusted to the sunlight splintering through the yellow pines that framed the hilltop. The morning air breathed fireplace smoke and pine sap. My hands flew up over my ears in defense of another thunderous burst of ice shards which covered the landscape and sparkled like diamonds in the snow. An exclamation escaped from the back of my throat and a trail of breath slid across my lips, vanishing into fathoms of air laden with the indescribable scent of a miracle. Later that day, I learned that I had breast cancer.

In the months that followed, there was no delight in sight, sound, taste, scent, and touch. My ears had to absorb what I did not want to hear. I lost my taste for morning coffee. Narcotics dulled the pain sensors of my skin. My eyes became accustomed to periods of dark shadows and distressing images in the mirror.

A breast cancer diagnosis marks the beginning of sensory cocooning. Our lives revolve around a calendar of doctor visits, surgical schedules, and for some women, weeks and months of radiation and chemotherapy. *Aftermath* begins when we hear the words “You’re done,” as if we are a cake in the oven springing back when pricked. Consciously resetting our sensory triggers is a simple strategy to help us hold it together when we have to come to terms with what has been called the “new normal.”

“It is like being on the other side of a fence,” one survivor explained. “At some point you have to accept that you will never get back to where you were.”

Unlike the treatment period, recovery roads have fewer signposts and no scale of distance. Yet loved ones want to be relieved of their worry and quickly pin on the “survivor” label, unaware that the internal struggle to understand, to come to terms, to find a new center of gravity, to look back over the fence and let go, has just begun. In all fairness, they have had a rough time of it too, offering a hand to hold and an arm to lean on, while fighting to keep fear and frustration from their expression and tone. Helplessness permeates the sidelines as time moves agonizingly slowly for loved ones during surgery. Afterward in the recovery room, they have to confront the sight of an ashen face shrouded in sheets.

Being thrust into premature survivorland has many issues, not the least of which is meeting expectations – our own as well as those of others. Let’s be honest. Popular culture focuses on amazing “survivor” stories. Breast cancer patients often get caught up in the notion to become new and improved. We have to stop denying ourselves, seek adventure, get out of a bad relationship and pretend we love our new short hair. We should write poetry, take up yoga, engage in rigorous exercise, go on a diet, become a

vegetarian, eat organic, run in a marathon, bike the French countryside — and write a book about all of the above. Breast cancer experiences are different and unique to each of us; so, too, is recovery.

Simultaneous to my mastectomy, I underwent reconstruction that used stomach tissue to rebuild my breast. When I was pronounced “done,” I signed up for yoga and found most of the postures difficult, if not impossible, because of stomach muscle disruption and overall body realignment. I left the class near tears. What I did not need at that point was an activity that made me feel like a failure. Recovery from major breast cancer surgery defies the “day by day” standard of healing. Time increments are stretched. Month-to-month worked for me, but in some cases, women use yearly anniversaries to mark progress. Filling those increments by reinvigorating the senses supports us in a way that may not be immediately evident, but eventually something will occur to make us recognize the value of this endeavor—which is exactly what happened to me.

The stress of multiple breast reconstruction surgeries caused havoc on every part of my body, changed my posture and altered the way I walked. I found myself stepping gingerly, moving tentatively, and stumbling often.

One day, I lost my balance in a supermarket parking lot. Down to the pavement I went; hand, arm, and hip absorbing the impact on the side of my body most affected by surgery. I lay there, curled up like an injured bird, head bent toward its wing and feathers pulled round. My mind raced. Had I done any damage to my breast? Was my arm broken? My range of motion was still not fully restored and a cast would be a major setback. Would a broken arm cause the onset of lymphedema? This could not be happening, I told myself, not after all I had been through.

A voice interrupted the *woe is me* moment. A young mother holding a toddler was offering to help me stand. Through a tearful outburst, the woman learned all about my breast cancer surgeries and fears of a broken arm. Her little boy gawked at the crazy lady before him.

As it turned out, my breast was fine, my arm was not broken, the scrapes healed, but humiliation prevented me from shopping at that store for a long time.

A few months into my “aftermath,” I planned a special day in Manhattan. I boarded a train in Connecticut for Grand Central Terminal. Along the way, accompanied by the sound of the rails and passenger chatter, I gazed out the window as the suburban landscape retreated and brick and stone took over, only to disappear when we were swallowed up in a tunnel and chugged underground for the last leg of the journey.

Sultry air engulfed me as I emerged from the train and stepped onto the platform. In the cathedral-like terminal, I crossed the marble floor beneath the vivid blue barrel-vaulted ceiling dotted with glittering lights.

I headed for a lunch date with a friend at Saks Fifth Avenue where gigantic floral arrangements arched over the aisles of polished wood and glass, sprinkled with exotic scents and filled with glittering jewels. I paused at a display of designer handbags to run my hand over the soft leather. In the mirrored panels of the crisscrossing escalators, I eyed myself all the way to the eighth floor café and a table next to a large window overlooking Rockefeller Center. After a delicious salad, a glass of chilled wine, and a length of great conversation, I said goodbye to my friend.

My step was light and joyful as if I had new batteries in my shoes. A block from Saks, I stumbled on a dip in the sidewalk. Down I went, sliding across the cement, scraping my right hand and sending a shock wave through my arm and hip. It was a replay of the supermarket fall, only this time there was no overwhelming sense of pain, stupidity, angst, or panic.

I got to my feet with the help of an outstretched hand offered by a man who barely broke his stride. This was New York after all and I, too, continued on, rejecting humiliation and mentally willing away the stinging sensation spreading across my palm, hip and knee.

On the way home, I contemplated my fall and realized that how I think I feel can actually affect me physically. In giving my senses attention, I believe that the pleasurable moments leading up to the second fall had somehow insulated me against pain and embarrassment. Filling my mind with new sensory experiences had pushed out some of the bad things that had the power to transform me into an injured bird.

There are many amazing stories about people using their senses to overcome handicaps. Helen Keller is the quintessential example. Blind and deaf from a childhood illness, her sense of touch was so keen that she merely had to put her fingers on someone's lips to understand what they were saying. Her remarkable life spanned nearly nine decades, during which she remapped the boundaries of the senses.

Author Sarah Ban Breathnach (*Romancing the Ordinary*) experienced sensory disorientation after suffering a head injury in a freak accident. Her vision was blurred and sensitive to light. She could not smell or taste. The slightest touch was painful and the senses that she had taken for granted became strangers. She calls it her "senseless period" and describes how it felt when her senses miraculously returned, "I was stunned and ashamed at my appalling lack of appreciation for what had been right under my nose. My new life as a passionate sensuist was about to begin."

A *sensuist* revels in sensory experiences and lives a life of intense engagement with the natural world. A physical or emotional trauma can weaken that connection. By concentrating on sense-impressions, we allow our mind to move in a natural sequence from one thing to another. Just like meditation, massage, or yoga, sensual rejuvenation is a way to enlist our own resources to relieve stress, move in a positive direction away from the cancer scenario, and give ourselves a break. This is within our comprehension and grasp. The resources are right at our fingertips, under our nose, on the tip of our tongue, within earshot, and in plain sight.

Rejuvenation starts with a closer look at the miracle that is our body. This in itself is a positive step in recovering from the trauma of breast cancer and perhaps for some, a deeply felt sense of body betrayal.

This book is a journey through the senses. I hope it will prompt you to take time to reconsider the senses and reflect upon how they so powerfully enrich your daily life.

The simple sensory exercises offered in this book will hopefully help you on your road *back*. Sensory metaphors are meant to tweak your poetic imagination about describing experiences for which there are no easy words.

Having some basic knowledge about our five senses is eye-opening and can only add to our appreciation of them. For me, the process of writing this book was the path to self-reconciliation. I hope reading it will point you in the same direction.