

CHAPTER ONE - BALANCE

Open up the windows and let the sunshine in. The less I keep hidden and secret, the more I lighten the burden. I am free to dance and sing, and whirl, and actually be there for myself and for others. I have energy and I can be responsive and real in this world.

Tonya Romano Schultz



Looking Through by Tonya Romano Schultz

There are some things that defy reason. Things like having someone to love you, someone for you to love, a wish coming true as soon as you say it, the discovery of a small lump at the elbow of my right arm. This is the story of a lump that developed into a thirteen-year odyssey of treatment, worry, and fear. And, ultimately, to this lovely place I am now, feeling loving and grateful for each day, bursting with energy and appreciation. Cancer taught me how to truly love, how to be a friend, and how to unleash all my creative energy. Cancer taught me not to be afraid to try to do what I wanted to do, and not to be afraid to look foolish. That's what this journey has done for me.

The story starts here. It is November 1996, I'm in the pool swimming and

exercising with my friend Kathy, a retired operating room nurse. I had noticed the lump on my right arm for some days, and had tried to imagine it was a natural bump that was duplicated on the other arm. That bright sunny day I asked Kathy if the lump on my arm was something I should see a doctor about. Her advice was to “check it out right away, it is probably nothing to worry about.”

The result was a biopsy, surgery to remove the malignant tissue, and radiation treatment for thirty-seven days to “finish the tumor.”

Six years passed, and a routine exam identified a second tumor in the same area. Treatment for this tumor required chemotherapy for a period of six months, with six day infusions in the hospital, followed by fifteen days to recover, then another round of chemotherapy. Surgery was completed in May of 2002, followed by more sessions of chemotherapy. I lost my hair, wore a surgically implanted device called a “pic” in my arm for infusion of chemicals over the six months of treatment, and I cut back significantly on my work with the public. Surgery was required one more time, in 2004 to remove a last piece of damaged tissue. Since that time, I have had regular MRI and X-Ray examinations, and the area is clear of any further malignant growth.

Let me tell you about the hair loss episode. When I started chemotherapy, I knew it meant I would lose my hair after a few days. My long hair was cut from mid-back to above the shoulders, a kind of transition for the ones I loved who had to look at me, and the haircut was a way to prepare **me** for major changes, too. Then one morning, I walked out in the kitchen to find a significant clump of hair on the kitchen floor. That’s the day I took shaving cream, a razor, and a bathroom mirror to shave my head. It was like putting whipped cream all over my head. Several strokes with the razor quickly removed all the hair that was left, and I was bald. In fact, after the first week of chemotherapy, all the hair on my body was gone. That is a very strange experience for an adult woman! No eyebrows, no eyelashes, no hair! I seemed like I had lost my face.

So began my ten months of no hair, wigs for work, and baldness at home. Wigs are terrific for others who see you out in the world—they prevent the startling appearance of a suddenly bald head. Wigs are also hot, itchy, and feel like a very tight hat on your head. I began to wear wigs only for short periods of time,

At the beginning of the chemotherapy treatments, the orthopedic oncologist at UCLA Cancer Center was very clear. “You have a lipo-sarcoma of the upper right arm, and you have already had surgery and radiation. We can try chemotherapy if you’re willing to undergo this treatment for the tumor. The preferred choice of the tumor board is to amputate the arm just below the shoulder, to ensure that the tumor does not continue to grow.”

Part of my understanding about this tumor was to learn that Lipo-Sarcomas, soft tissue sarcomas, are rare, occurring in approximately 9000 individuals worldwide per year. Treatment can include radiation, chemotherapy, surgery, and amputation of limbs. These tumors can recur in the same area or metastasize in other parts of the body.

My granddaughter heard that I might lose my arm, and there was a discussion about my possibly getting a prosthetic arm. Granddaughter Rachel reacted, “No she won’t, she’ll just make it seem like it’s unusual for people to have two arms.”

Based on my own inner wisdom and the consultation of other “cell challenged” individuals I have had the privilege of knowing, I chose not to have an amputation. As one friend said, “You have to look at quality of life issues.” My current doctor said, “We’ll treat whatever comes up.”

I chose chemotherapy. This was a sometimes tiring process, and there were bouts of tears, as I reacted emotionally to the medicine in my body, the fears about ever recovering and being normal, as I knew it, and the sense of loss about my family, myself, and the world I loved.

It is interesting to think about the things that worry you in an ordinary day, like “How’s my hair today?”, “What shall I wear?”, “Am I ready to face the world today?” Suddenly, none of that matters. What matters is this precious thing called “**life.**” Everything else is secondary.

I tolerated most of the treatments well, knitting a sweater (named the “miracle sweater”, a miracle I finished it) in the hospital during the treatment days, reading novels and writing some poetry. One day during the middle of treatment, I was home for a rest time, and I was taking a bath. A hot bath has always seemed like a wonderful luxury and a great way to relax. With no warning, I suddenly began to sob, great heaving sobs, tears that went on for some minutes. It was, I feel, a spontaneous “letting go” of the grief surrounding the huge task of healing from this shocking and unexpected invasion of my body by fast growing cells, and the discomfort of having to wear the necessary apparatus to deliver the chemicals. The sobs continued, and then quit, and I felt like I had defined a turning point in my healing. I let go of the sadness, and felt relieved that I was going to live.

The chemotherapy and the surgeries were finished in 2004. It is now spring of 2009. My arm shows no sign of malignancy, and the tumor board at City of Hope predicts there will be no further problem with the triceps on my right arm. I have a scar on the back of my arm, from the shoulder to the elbow, and I don’t think about it unless someone asks a question about my arm.

This begins the story of my odyssey toward wellness, and it includes the things I’ve learned along the way — wisdom I’ve gathered from the thousands of people who have been treated in my psychotherapy office over 35 years, from friends and loved ones, and wise persons who just seem to walk into all of our lives when we need a dose of understanding and clarity.

The issue with the tissue is just part of my life. I have felt that the chemotherapy was a cleansing of my body. I considered the chemical

treatment as a time of reflection and questioning and growth. I am a healthy body that has had an issue!

I realize I need to know how to find a sense of inner balance when it seems to have disappeared. Most everything in nature has a yin and yang, a stabilizing influence either by virtue of the seasons, the rhythm of night and day, the life cycles of the trees, the grass, the flowers. Nature knows how ...