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**THE HEALING POWER OF DOODLING:
 One woman's spiritual adventure
 through breast cancer**

Carol Edmonston

One day I found myself looking outside the kitchen window wondering if God truly existed. If so, why would He (or She) have me journey through breast cancer for a second time? I'm not even talking about a recurrence of the original

cancer two years prior, but a "new and unrelated" cancer in my other breast. At that time in my life, I had been deeply immersed in my own spiritual journey for nearly 10 years and naively thought that I would be immune to a repeat medical diagnosis. After all, I thought I had learned my lessons, created the necessary paradigm shifts in my personal philosophy as I learned how to better nourish and nurture myself, unearthed the gift and was moving forward to a new chapter in my life.

After my doctor called and told me of the news, I got into my car and set out in pursuit of God. I hadn't reached that space in my own personal journey to know for sure that He was only a whisper away, so I drove to a local church. I was feeling a mix of emotions – anger, confusion and fear, and felt that God owed me some answers.

As I walked up the front steps of the church I could feel my heart beating faster and faster. I was very nervous, not knowing what to expect, having been brought up in a non-religious home and not



having spent much time in church or temple. I took a deep breath, reminding myself that all I wanted to do was sit quietly have a dialogue with God. I placed my hand on the door trying to pull it open, and much to my surprise the door was locked. I tried another, and it was locked as well. I was very disappointed, wondering why the front doors of a church would be locked in the middle of the day.

I then went across the street to another church. Once again, as I walked up the steps I could feel the anxiety build up as my comfort zone was being stretched. Once again, I tried to open the doors and they were locked. By this time my feelings of disappointment were compounded with feelings of frustration.

I wondered what I was going to do next. After a few minutes

I remembered there was a Jewish temple about a mile away and I decided to go there – after all my family roots are in Judaism so maybe that’s where I was supposed to be in the first place. As I drove up the hill I kept reminding myself that the third try would be the magical one.



This time, with a sense of excitement added to the nervousness, I walked to the front door of the temple and gently put my hand on the door knob. As I tried to pull the door open, nothing happened. The door would just not open! I tried again and again, but to no avail. I couldn’t believe what was happening. All I wanted to do was find God and try to understand “Why me?” Surely God had some love for me and wouldn’t punish me like this with yet another diagnosis of breast cancer. After all, I had spent so many years sincerely probing my innermost core through scriptural study, meditation, contemplation and other spiritual practices.

With tears beginning to trickle down my face, I got back into my car and drove home, feeling so empty and angry. I came into the house and stood by the kitchen window, looking out at all the trees perched on the expansive slope below. I slowly opened the window and I momentarily listened to the sweet melody of the birds. Then, without losing a beat, I yelled out to God – “Where are you? Are you there? Do you really exist? I’ve been looking everywhere for you! I really need you NOW! How could you let this happen to me?”

By this time, tears were streaming down my face faster than I could wipe them away and I found myself pounding the kitchen walls as well, wondering if my son was going to lose his mother and my husband his wife. After the flood of emotions washed through me, I was then able to gain a sense of composure and decided to sit quietly and give myself an opportunity to journal what I was feeling. As I wrote, I began to sense that God truly wasn’t to be found somewhere “out there,” but had been within the cave of my heart all along. All I needed to do was sit quietly and go within, allowing my mind to become still so I could



allow my own intuitive voice to be heard.

I then asked God to reveal to me what the lesson amidst the chaos might be. This is what was shared: *transcending chaos is not an easy task, but within your heart resides all the strength*

and courage to help you move beyond this illusory state. Remember the two wings of the bird... self-effort and grace. You can soar in the skies with the best. Remember, the connection is within you. It is not outside. This time is filled with fire. This time is given to you as an opportunity to purify your thoughts, understandings and state of being. This time is being given to you as a gift, to rid yourself of that which you no longer need. Treat yourself gently as you walk this walk, and remember, the path is lined with the greatest love known... It is lined with God's love. (1)

That day was a turning point for me. It was a day when I truly began to appreciate that I wasn't alone, never had been and never will be! I was then able to focus my attention on the spiritual teachings that would guide me and become my greatest teachers during this time. The one teaching that beckoned my attention, appreciation and intrigue had to do with the healing power of the "Present

Moment." For me, it wasn't about just mastering the teaching intellectually. My intention was to actually "become" the teaching. I wanted every pore of my being to radiate from that space, for I began to recognize that the seeds for peace, joy, faith and courage dwell within that space. I began to understand what someone had once said to me: If you give everything to the moment, the moment will give you everything back."

In case I had any doubt about grasping this truth, a very interesting thing happened one day.

While nervously waiting for test results at my doctor's office, my mind began to race from one worrisome thought to another. All those what-if scenarios began to emerge: "What if this happens?" "What if that happens?" If the nurse had taken my vital signs in that moment, I'm sure they would have been elevated.

I knew I needed to do something, so I asked her for a piece of paper and pencil and began to *doodle*. While I had no idea what I was doing, I was beginning to feel more relaxed. I easily became lost in this creative activity. Fear and panic were being replaced by a sense of calm and peace. By the time I left the doctor's office I knew I had stumbled into something powerful, but had no idea of the depth and impact of this new experience. I continued to doodle after that day, whether at home, the hospital, hair salon, or anywhere I found myself waiting. Pen and paper became my constant companions. I'd even come early to my daily radiation therapy appointments just to have some extra doodle time. My fellow patients would admire my creativity and became interested in learning to how they could doodle. In fact, what started out as strangers coming together every morning and greeting one another just with a courtesy smile and cursory hello, quickly became something special. As strange as it might seem, we began to look forward to being with one another, sharing about our cancer experiences as we doodled. Hospital staff as well became curious about my doodling and wanted to learn more about it.



By that time I had begun to take doodling to another level. There was a consciousness that had woven its way into the process as I began to appreciate its healing potential. I had also created one guideline: to begin and end the doodle outline at the same point with one continuous motion of the pen, and do so in 5-7 seconds. I didn't think much about the "why"

ahead of time, I just remember wanting to experiment and have some fun. In hindsight, I can see that it helped circumvent that linear and logical scientific mind (that left brain) where I felt safer living most of my life. It helped open me up to the riches of the creative, intuitive right brain. I didn't have enough time to think about how I could create the "perfect" doodle outline. All I could do was begin to develop a sense of trust in a spontaneous moment in time.

When I had my outline complete I could fill it in with whatever came to mind – dots, circles, lines, hearts, etc. The choices were endless. I felt as though I had just been let out of prison. There was such a sense of freedom and joy knowing I couldn't make a mistake. No matter what I created it would be perfect! The more I doodled, the more beautiful the doodles became. This truly amazed me, for I was not an artist. I had been raised using the paint-by-the-number kits where no mistakes were possible. All you needed to do was match the number on the pencil to the number on the paper and you ended up with a perfect drawing. As a perfectionist (at the time), those kits allowed me to feel like an accomplished artist.

Doodling, which one usually thinks of as a mindless and frivolous activity, was fast becoming a powerful learning tool – a vehicle that was to transform my life forever. Doodling helped bring me back to a more centered and still space, like meditation. In fact, doodling became an opened-eye meditation leading me to tap into the richness of my inner being. From that space, breast cancer went from being merely a medical diagnosis, with resultant standardized surgery and follow-up radiation therapy, to a profound spiritual adventure where I could begin to gently let go of those limited beliefs and perspectives that no longer served me in my journey.

No matter where I turned, there were great teachings and words from great beings. Thich Naht Hanh once said, "The present moment is where life can be found, and if you don't arrive there, you miss your appointment with life. Breathe in and say, "I have arrived" ... Breathe out, "I am home."

Even Picasso became a powerful teacher. He truly knew the power in the NOW moment when he said, "there is no past or future in art. If a work of art can not live always in the present, it must not be considered at all." (2) I contemplated his words as I continued to create, wondering, "If that is true for art, why not for life?"

Over time, I began to see the correlation between doodling and my journey through breast cancer, and what the one was trying to teach me about the other. I began to clearly see that within each doodle there were many visible twists and turns that all came together to create a unique and beautiful design. If I were to just focus on only one part of the doodle I might miss out on appreciating the beauty of the bigger picture. Then I realized that life is very similar. Life has many twists and turns of its own, which in turn provide us with rich and colorful experiences. Some of those events seem to pop into our lives rather unexpectedly, yet they still have a magical way of adding richness to our world.

In my book, *Connections, the Sacred Journey between Two Points*, I was able to articulate this truth as it inched it's way from my heart to my hand, becoming my own resource:

*Between the two points in our lives,
the beginning and end, exists drama - that thing called life.
It is through all the twists and turns, ups and downs,
we can step into a still space and learn so much.
In that quiet, pure space we can begin to let go of our limited beliefs,*

*perspectives and fears that may bind us.
We are given many opportunities along the way
to create joy and happiness.*

*When walking from moment to moment with an open heart,
we can begin to learn to how trust in the creative process of life,
exactly as it unfolds -no matter what comes before us.*

*From breath to breath, moment to moment,
wisdom comes to us when we still our minds and allow
ourselves to discover our inner courage, strength and faith. (3)*

For me, it all came down to that magical space between the beginning and end - the middle, and the choices I made along the way. To thrive or merely to exist in survival mode was up to me. This was another “Ahha!” moment. That was when I began to see breast cancer in another light. I began to understand what the German philosopher Nietzsche meant when he said, “One must still have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star.” Breast cancer may have been the chaos, but I was the dancing star.

When I created the doodle outline quickly, I didn’t have time to think about the end result. I trusted and had faith in the process. When I filled in the doodle I just let myself play with whatever came to mind. There were no rights or wrongs. No one could tell me what I should or shouldn’t do. This was “my” doodle and I could create it however I wanted. The focus with this form of doodling is not about “what” you create, or having anyone interpret it, although I’m sure there are many who would be happy to share their insights into your state of being. The focus is all about learning how to “BE” in the moment, trusting the process – that journey between two points, with a heightened awareness of releasing all the unnecessary chatter ordinarily going on in your mind that might interfere with your ability to step into the “now” moment and connect with the essence of who you truly are... the spirit of your being. In that space of “now” – the middle – one can find peace, contentment, courage and inherent wisdom. The sweetness of life is found in the middle.

Helpful teachings and lessons along the way

There have been many teachings that have supported me through this medical adventure:

1. We receive no more than we have the capacity to handle.
2. If we approach the present with our heart’s consent, it can be a blessed event.
3. Nothing happens *to* us... It happens *for* us.

In addition to these and numerous other teachings, I have learned many lessons as I chose to let go of limited beliefs and perspectives that unknowingly held me captive:

- Life is an amazing adventure even in the midst of adversity
- Cancer is not necessarily a death sentence. Sometimes it’s an invitation for life.
- Faith is found in the middle by letting go of the need to know outcome in advance

- It's not the outer events that cause our pain and suffering. It's how we choose to respond.
- Cancer is not necessarily a death sentence. Sometimes it's an invitation for life.
- Faith is having the courage to show up in the "now," with a sense of trust that you do not need to know where you are going - just where you are.

Many gifts have come my way, yet the greatest single gift is in knowing that I'm not as afraid to welcome the unknown into my life. I'm more open to exploring the unknown, knowing that I'm in

partnership with the Divine, co-creating as I move moment to moment, breath by breath. No matter what challenge comes my way, from cancer to dealing with elderly parent issues, doodling continues to be a powerful teacher, reminding me that all I need to do is stay focused in "this" moment and everything I may need, I already have within the sacred space of my inner being.

My spiritual journey began with a desire to know God. My medical adventure through breast cancer began with fear and was transformed into faith through the power of sacred art of doodling. And in that space I found God. Breast cancer... an opportunity for growth, expansion and transformation. What more could I ask for?



About Carol Edmonston

When I sat waiting for my breast cancer treatments at the, I started doodling to pass the time. My cancer retreated and my doodles expanded into a powerful healing tool. Initially, I shared my doodle art with other cancer patients. Then, as I made room for a larger vision, my message expanded into inspirational talks and experiential workshops of value for everyone - including those with no artistic skills.

I developed a unique program called *Create While You Wait*[™] for the City of Hope National Cancer Center in Los Angeles. This program has baskets placed in clinic areas – each containing clipboards, paper & pen, and handouts. It is also available for inpatient use. This work is also being used in the UK, including the Christie Cancer Center. I have written two books: *Connections... the Sacred Journey Between Two Points* and *Create While You Wait...a Doodle Book for All Ages*. I shares my inspirational story and creative wisdom with children as well as adults – in schools, hospitals and corporate settings. I have been featured in a number of publications including *The New York Times*.

I received my B.S. in Physical Therapy from University of Southern California and am the former regional coordinator for the National "Just Say No" club program, a drug prevention program supported by Former First Lady, Nancy Reagan.

I am currently a member of the American Holistic Health Association and the Forte Speakers Bureau.

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IJHC Epilogue

The IJHC editor wrote to Carol Edmonston, and has her permission to share the following self-explanatory correspondence.

Hi Carol,

Doodles are invitations to the doodler to say what might be percolating inside that contributed to/ created that particular image at that specific time. (BTW – therapists use drawings in this way, to “draw people out” of their shells. Works wonders with children, surprisingly well with most adults.)

So I’d like to have anything like that about these specific doodles. If this is impossible, due to the time elapsed from the drawings, I’d really like to get some fresh ones and fresh words about them.

Thanks

Dan

Dan,

Sorry for the delay in getting back to you. I’m somewhat stumped with your request to add words reflecting my outer world/ inner state at the time of creating each doodle.

For me, doodling begins with letting go of all mind chatter, much like meditation. I was not using doodling as a way to process feelings or state of being. The purpose of doodling, for me, and those I teach, is not about its symbolic nature, but to show how easy it is for us to lose focus and live our lives in a state outside “Now” – in a state reflecting the fear of the unknown future or regrets from the past, neither allowing us to experience our own innate divinity.

I will say this. Many years ago I planned an event for David Viscott PhD (author, speaker and radio show host.). People would call in to his radio show and in 15 -30 seconds he’d be able to tell them exactly what their core issue was. One day I was in his office and thought if he’s so great with figuring out people, I was curious to know what he’d have to say about my art.

He looked through 40 doodles and, not knowing anything about me, looked at me and said “you really like your beginnings, middles and ends tied together.” I was astounded. There was such truth to that statement. I felt much safer in a world when I had a sense of knowing outcome. That, in part, was why breast cancer spiritually came into my life – to plop me into the middle, without having any sense of knowing the outcome. Faith is found in the middle, as is courage, strength and trust. In the middle, life happens and we can find God.

Sorry I couldn’t give you the explanations you were looking for. One day I might have had

issue with elderly parents swimming around in my mind, or thoughts of my son who has not quite found his niche, or my husband- who's wonderful state of beingness can drive me crazy on days when he's not on the golf course! Or maybe I'm just happy just being and welcoming whatever comes my way. One moment is so fleeting- one breath leads to another and in the blink of an eye, what is becomes what was.

Blessings,

Carol

References

- 1 Edmonston, Carol. *Connections...the Sacred Journey between Two Points*, Bindu 2000, 12
2. Picasso, Pablo and Clark, Hiro. *Picasso: In His Words*, San Francisco, CA: Collins 1993, 58
3. Edmonston, Carol. *Connections...the Sacred Journey between Two Points*, Bindu 2000 128

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