

Breast Cancer as a Spiritual Journey **by Sister Mary McGehee, OSB**

Whoever said, "The first thing you do is cry" was right. When I got the word that, "Yes, the lump in your breast is cancer. And, yes, it is recommended that you have a mastectomy!" all I could do was cry. Those days were difficult, gathering information, talking with friends and family, making decisions about surgery, possible reconstruction and chemotherapy. But I did survive. My life has gone on. In fact, it has blossomed in new and unexpected ways.

For women who have led productive, giving, meaningful lives, breast cancer is a shock, a jarring, a deeply emotional life event. While there is no doubt that breast cancer is a diminishment, it can be a turning point to open one to avenues not yet explored. It can lead us to see our lives from new angles. It can invite us to slow down and frame the giftedness of each moment and give thanks. It can literally turn us around to reevaluate and make some life choices. But this is the long journey of it all.

As one stands at the doorway of this event, she goes through all the emotions of death and dying. Not that this is her time to die. But, as with all major life changes, the "death and dying" emotions sweep through one. Sometimes they take on a life of their own, shooting out at anyone near her. So expect to find yourself in denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and hopefully acceptance.

You should be able to count on your friends and family to be able to handle your "moods," but not always. But for yourself, I encourage you to experience each emotion and name it. The naming helps tame the emotion, to keep it in perspective. I encourage you to feel each emotion, to know it well, to let it serve you. For each emotion will serve you.

Following I would like to share some scriptures that helped me through the acknowledging of and befriending each emotion. If a line or word deeply moves you, hold it in your heart and repeat it during your day. Walk in faith. Walk in the light of God's love.

1. **Denial** - a protection from initial shock. It lasts until I am ready to see my situation and deal with it.

Psalm 61:1-4

Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
From the end of the earth
I call to you,
when my heart is faint.

Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I;
for you are my refuge,
a strong tower against the
enemy.

Let me abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of
your wings.

Psalm 57:1-3

Be merciful to me, O God, be
merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I
will take refuge,
until the destroying storms pass
by.

I cry to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose
for me.

He will send from heaven and
save me,
he will put to shame those who
trample on me. (Selah)
God will send forth his steadfast
love and his faithfulness.

Isaiah 43: 1-3

But now thus says the
Lord, who created you,
O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed
you;

I have called you by name, you
are mine.

When you pass through the
waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they
shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through the fire you
shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume
you.

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your
Savior."

2. **Bargaining** - an initial response to try to protect myself from any diminishment.

Psalm 30:8-10

To you, O Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:

"What gain is there in my destruction,
in my going down into the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me;
O Lord, be my help."

Psalm 6:1-10

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.
Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint;

O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in
agony.
My soul is in anguish.
How long, O Lord, how long?

Turn, O Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
No one remembers you when he is dead.
Who praises you from the grave?

I am worn out from groaning;
all night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.

Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.
The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be ashamed and
dismayed;
they will turn back in sudden disgrace.

Luke 12: 22-32

He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.
"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

3. **Anger** - means I am alive and that I care. I care deeply and strongly. I care about my life, my loved ones, my goals, my body

Psalm 69:1-4

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my
neck:
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
looking for my God.
Those who hate me without reason
outnumber the hairs of my head;
many are my enemies without cause,
those who seek to destroy me.
I am forced to restore
what I did not steal.

Psalm 69:13-15

But I pray to you, O Lord,
in the time of your favor;
In your great love, O God,
answer me with your sure salvation.
Rescue me from the mire,
do not let me sink;
deliver me from those who hate me,
from the deep waters.
Do not let the floodwaters engulf me
or the depths swallow me up
or the pit close its mouth over me.

Psalm 13:1-6

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me
forever?
How long will you hide your face from
me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my
heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over
me?
Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in
death;
my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
for he has been good to me.

4. **Sadness or Depression** - allows me time to go within and ponder deeply, to see what is happening on all levels, to reevaluate and make choices

Psalm 22:1-11

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer;
by night, and am not silent.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
They cried to you, and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

But I am a worm, and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
"He trusts in the Lord;
let the Lord rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

5. **Acceptance** - the courageous "YES" to whatever may be.

Psalm 139:1-18

O Lord, you have searched me
and known me.
You know when I sit down and
when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from
far away.
You search out my path and my
lying down,
and are acquainted with all my
ways.
Even before a word is on my
tongue,
O Lord, you know it
completely.
You hem me in, behind and
before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful
for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee our
Presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are
there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you
are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits
of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead
me,
and your right hand shall hold
me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall
cover me,
and the light around me become
night,"
even the darkness is not dark to
you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my
inward parts;
you knit me together in my
mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from
you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths
of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed
substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed
for me,
when none of them as yet
existed.
How weighty to me are your
thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are
more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still
with you.

Isaiah 61:1-4

The spirit of the Lord God
is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed
me;
to bring good tidings to the af-
flicted,
he has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison
to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor,
and the day of vengeance of
our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in
Zion—
to give them a garland instead
of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of
mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of
a faint spirit.
That they may be called oaks of
righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that
he may be glorified.
They shall build up the ancient
ruins,
they shall raise up the former
devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many gen-
erations.

Isaiah 61:10-11

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my soul shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the
garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the
robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself
with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself
with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its
shoots,
and as a garden causes what is
sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause right-
eousness and praise
to spring forth before all the
nations.

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees
before the Father, from whom every
family in heaven and on earth takes its
name. I pray that, according to the
riches of his glory, he may grant that you
may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit, and that
Christ may dwell in your hearts through
faith, as you are being rooted and
grounded in love. I pray that you may
have the power to comprehend, with all
the saints, what is the breadth and length
and height and depth, and to know the
love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the
fullness of God.

Scripture from:

New Revised Standard Version

Psalms 61, 57, 139, Luke 12, 2 Cor. 1, Isaiah 61, Ephesians 3

Serendipity Bible for Groups

Psalms 6, 30, 13, 69, 22