

Devastatingly beautiful

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It's dark.

What?

My husband, Rick, is sitting beside me. He's been crying. Surgery was at 1 p.m. I had my hysterectomy. My ovarian cyst is gone. But what is it? Why is he crying? Something else?

The surgeons found cancer throughout my abdomen.

It's bad, isn't it? It's the worst-case scenario, isn't it?

That evening, we just hold hands.

A month later, we meet with the oncologist. She hands me an eight-page pathology report. "Lillas, you have stage 3C cancer. It's serious and treatment will be aggressive." We cry. Tears of relief, actually. We know that if it were stage 4, my chances of treatment would be very small. Chemotherapy begins immediately.

I am grateful for the treatment, but I have so much loss and grief to process: my health, my identity, sturdy walking ... my beautiful long, dark hair. Life as I know it is over. I'm in shock.

It's early 2019, my first morning home from the hospital after chemotherapy. I don't want to move. I'm exhausted. Leave me alone! I have every right to stay in bed all day! Wait a minute. No! I get out of bed and look in the mirror. I look like hell; this could go very badly. Unless ... God, I am not ready to die. I don't know what to do. Please help me to heal. That's the moment I vow to act. I drop everything — I mean everything. I devote myself 100% to my health. Forty-eight ounces of green and red juices every day. I can't even carry the bags of vegetables myself. I wake up at 5 a.m. for meditation, yoga, journaling and gratitude practice. I focus on self-care, compassion and love. I surrender.

Several months later, there is a familiar pulse to my treatments: deep breaths, hospital visits, sleep, counselling, yoga, chemotherapy, prayers, meditations,

vomiting, juice, crying, the hum and beeping of medical equipment. Then repeat, repeat, repeat until the regimen blurs into an uncomfortable rhythm.

Yet, within the cycles of exhaustion, devastation and grief, there is a gradual and deepening sense of breaking open. I can feel something in that broken-open space; something that moves me, that leads me. It escapes words. I sense it as a gentle presence of beauty. Not like the beauty that's admired, attracts or catches the eye; more like a feeling, something washing through me and around me. Perhaps approximating a quiet presence of love, gratitude and joy?

It was there all along within me. Once covered by the bustle, the noisy cluttered thoughts, the grasping outside myself for happiness, and my overidentifying with my professional self, which I loved. It is all broken open by this new life with cancer. My true identity surfaces: I am home, I am safe, I am secure, I am free.

A few months later, I get good news from the oncologist: "Lillas, you are in remission. Live your best life *now!*"

All that fall of 2019, I rebuild and I start to feel alive again. I go on an amazing meditation retreat in Cancun, and I'm so grateful to spend Christmas with my five grandbabies — oh, my heart. Everything looks up for me. I am so ready to put 2019 behind me.

Two months later, I am blindsided. The oncologist tells me, "I am sorry to say, your cancer has returned. You will start chemo again next week."

What? Oh no! I can't do this again! Another experience that escapes words. God, what do you want from me? I plunge into solitude for weeks, to rant and rave, to cry. One night I polish off nearly a whole bottle of Malbec and a giant bag of Doritos. To hell with green juice!

It is now the spring of 2020. Enter a global pandemic. The hospital culture changes; my visits become more tense, less

frequent. Added to the returning rhythms of my treatment are new depths of fear and protocols: hand sanitizer, gloves, masks and, given social restrictions, attending chemotherapy and oncology meetings alone, with no support person.

The once bright and helpful faces of health care teams now comprise weary eyes, peeking above and behind masks, gowns and shields. Their eyes are eclipsed with worry and fear; death now creeps closer to us all. I recognize their exhaustion, devastation, loss and grief; they are partial reflections of my own story. My cancer, their COVID-19; our cancer, our COVID-19. *I am tired* becomes *we are tired*. All of us thrust into chaos, struggle and a closeness with the unknown.

And life amid the pandemic continues. What more could possibly happen? What more?

I shouldn't have asked. I am back again, in the familiar hospital setting, but this time it's not for me. Death beckons closer; for some reason, I'm still spared. My father dies at the time of my recurrence. Then my beloved Rick also unexpectedly dies, near the end of 2020. We hold hands for the last time. My stepson, Andrew, crying with me as together we mourn yet another loss. Our hearts joined through grief; our healing continues through these reflections we share. It is more than I could and can contain. My heart broken open again, again and again. Tears flowing daily.

Yet, through it all, I'm still enveloped by beauty — a quiet calm. It helps me surrender the pain and grief to a greater power within me and around me. It leads me through these dark days and nights. Letting go. Letting go! I surrender — a now-daily ritual. I practise "leaning in" to the quiet of my heart and soul.¹ Bigger questions are now regular companions: Who am I? How do I find meaning in my life? What do I need to heal from this grief and pain? I slow

down and listen to the quiet beauty within. I continue my reflective practice: meditation, mindfulness, prayer and journaling. I practise “leaning out” as well — my term for reaching out for help and support. I am becoming comfortable with saying goodbye to independence and self-reliance.

In gratitude, I learn that I am at home; I am safe.

The truth is, I’ve yearned for a softer, sweeter and gentler life for a very long time. In a strange and surreptitious way, I have that now. I had to let go of being in control of my life. I had to let go of all expectations of my future. In that darkness, I realized, I have put myself under so much pressure and responsibility all my life to hold it all together. It’s time for me to let it all go, and quietly rest into being.

I am currently on maintenance therapy, which means I am living in the mystery. I surrender again and again, living moment to moment. So, here I am, a spark of the calm, joyous divine. Devastatingly beautiful.

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Reference

1. Sandberg S. *Women, work and the will to lead*. Toronto: Random House; 2013.

This article has been peer reviewed.

This is a true story.

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