Breathing Lessons

Lesley Kailani Glenn, 56, lives in Oregon. She has Stage IV metastatic breast cancer.

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Not long after my cancer diagnosis in November 2012, the automated voice coming from the CT scanner instructed me: Hold your breath. Then, 10 to 20 seconds later: Breathe.

I realized at that point how natural it had become for me to hold my breath. I wondered how long I had been holding it because of, well, so many things.

Cancer taught me to breathe. Again.

I am a native Hawaiian, born and raised where the Indigenous have a special relationship with the land (Aina). I thrived in the ocean. I enjoyed diving through waves as they came to crash on the shoreline. Snorkeling was a favorite pastime, and I had to be mindful of my breath so that I could swim with the reef triggerfish, Hawaii's state fish, which we call humuhumunukunukuapua'a.

But at some point in my life, I forgot how to breathe.

Was it adulthood, the stressors that come with life? Parenting, marriage, career, church, volunteer work, finances?

The list could go on.

When the voice in the machine told me to breathe, though, it was a wake-up call. Now every single breath would be the most important one I took.

It's not that easy learning to breathe again, especially living with an incurable disease. There are treatment changes, scans every three to six months, the bills, the bone pain, the grief of losing fellow cancer friends, progression, the unknown, relationship changes.

It is easy to hold your breath.

I had to change, to be intentional, to breathe again, to be thoughtful about the experiences, adventures and moments that would fill up my life and lungs.

I took up hiking to train my breathing to take me to magical places 14,000 feet above sea level.

I sat by waterfalls and lakes with my hands on my belly to feel the rise and fall of my breath.

I learned to meditate, which meant learning to focus on my breathing by counting as I inhaled and exhaled: 1, 2, 3, 4.

I took time to laugh with my children, deep guttural laughter that either has you crying or coughing, catching your breath.

I found my love for snorkeling again, listening to the rhythm of my breath as I swim with turtles.

Then there are the benefits of learning how to breathe and be mindful. A breathing practice improves the immune system, helps get rid of stress hormones, reduces blood pressure and releases trauma.

Life can be hard; life with cancer is harder. But life without breath is an end, and I am just not quite ready to go yet.

As the character Mr. Miyagi put it in the The Karate Kid Part II, “When you feel life out of focus, always return to basic of life. Breathing. No breathe, no life.”

Lesley Kailani Glenn is the CEO and founder of Project Life (ProjectLifeMBC.com), a free virtual wellness house for those living with metastatic breast can-cer and their loved ones. It offers monthly breath work classes.

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