An Education in Breast Cancer — Cancer 101

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I am a big believer in education. It is partly why I taught college even with the 6 figure salary at my last full time job. Even while pregnant and swollen, I still commuted from midtown office to downtown classroom larger than life to teach.

It is why when I decided to get back to work, I focused on being an educator — especially in college, wrongfully eventually thinking that teaching is teaching is teaching (spoiler alert: it is not). There are differences, some nuanced, some grand. The difference from undergrad student vs the graduate student — big difference, but not surmountable. Online teaching vs. in person — ah pros and cons to both. Then, the K-12 life — oh, the dreaded K-12 classroom <insert shudder> with its "the student is always right" mantra and no room for any error — to be a teacher today in K-12 particularly, you must be always right, always calm, never emotional and able to withstand the attacks of parents, media, etc.

Until, of course, you are in the breakroom — oh my goodness, the THINGS I have heard in the breakroom from teachers, OMG, you would collectively all home-school your children (well, just from the the teachers' rooms I have been in…).

Anyway, I digress … I was the first in my immediate family to receive a bachelor's degree and the first in my family to get a master's degree. I even began a doctoral program when my daughter was 1 — I do not know what I was thinking, either. After a year and a half, I withdrew and focused on my growing family.

But I never lost my love of learning, my passion for reading and just being well informed about whatever was going on in the world. My husband complains that I know everything but without irony — he is serious. There is no news he can tell me that I did not already know of in some way, shape or form.

I researched everything. When I got weird ailments (like the time my lip blew up to the point that it appeared I did just one restylane injection and balked at the second) or when I was diagnosed as being allergic to "corn" — do you know how much food has CORN in it — it is unfathomable — well, I researched.

When I was diagnosed with cancer, though, my love or interest in learning STOPPED dead. I no

longer wanted to research something — I did not want to know what was going on or what could go on. My information stream was now limited to my guru, my contact between both worlds, the only person I knew in real life who had once had cancer and now did not. She kept me calm when I stumbled upon a Facebook post commemorating the life of someone who had died from breast cancer. She supported me when I disabled my Facebook account to avoid finding that fact hitting me again that death was an option.

At that point, though, I was not sharing my story and thus my education was limited. I did not want an education. It was bad enough I was learning words like, "staging," "cancer cells," "lymph nodes," etc. I had no interest in knowing more. I was good at accepting chemotherapy at face value and just saying, crazily or bravely, however you want to consider it, "I am here, start it now if you can!" as a response to my oncologist who seemed to be imploring me to accept the chemo…

When you google my oncologist's name, you find a blog kept by the now family of someone who was diagnosed too late — or who had already been Stage 4 from the get go (stage 4 "de novo" it is called). I do not know which it was and at the time, I knew even less — I just knew her posts went from talking about appointments to her family's service for her as she had died. And then I did not understand how but nor did I ask. I knew with my first visit to my oncologist that I would either be cured or if it spread I would be treated but not cured. I did not ask anything.

Slowly, I started to share my story, to go on Twitter and Instagram, to cobble together my tribe. My first real education in "what this shit means" was with the formidable Jo Taylor of ABC Diagnosis. She created an infographic that talks about where breast cancer might spread and what to look out for regarding symptoms. This was eye-opening, along with the understanding that these symptoms had to last at least 2 weeks in mild annoyance level but if incapacitating should be brought to your doctor's attention immediately (in my words or understanding of the whole what to do if you have pains)…

I also found others, people who shared and I learned from and people I shared and they learned from me but through it all, I continue to learn and I continue to think in my mind that I am cured and that no matter what I will not worry because I cannot control it so why should I torture myself … the old me, that would have never been accepted, I would have tortured myself to death.

All we who have had cancer can do is just focus on the moment — we know the line between health and sick is thinner than the line between love and hate. We know that each day is not a given that the little things are just that, little things. We live scan to scan, mammo to mammo, appointment to appointment trying to make sense of the new world order in which our doctors can make one face, one shake of the head and we can be on the floor and destroyed. Or they can look at us and smile and we can live to die another day…

This is what we do in the time between… we wait, we hope, we pray (if we pray) or we just focus on what we can control (not much) and try to make it through to the 1 year, the 2 year, the 5 year, the 20 year … the natural progression of what we think our lives should go to — maybe 75, 80 for

me — that is the goal. To die of anything OTHER than cancer. Because Fuck cancer.

This is what I do in the time between…

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