Grace Goddess Photos — The Grace Project & Me...

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December 28, 2018 By Lisa Vento Nielsen

This year in February, I posed for a photographer, Isis Charise, working on taking photos of 800 women who have experienced breast cancer and have had a mastectomy, styled as Greece Goddesses, inspired by ancient art where we see statues of women that are broken but still beautiful.

Her initiative is part of a nonprofit and has been shown in galleries and also on television. You can learn more and donate to support her work here.

I, as a 40-plus-year-old mom of 2, spent a lot of time topless this year in front of photographers — something I never expected to write or do or say. I found it important to represent that having to get rid of a diseased breast did not ruin my life. Being told by a nurse in the plastic surgeon's office (that I was required to meet with despite knowing I would not reconstruct) that I would regret not having a breast and that I was too young to spend the rest of my life "like that" definitely was a bit of a catalyst to get me sharing and being out there as a unicorn.

I was diagnosed at 39 years old and I have always maintained that deciding to reconstruct or not is a very personal decision and there is no right answer. Period. There is just what you in your heart want and need to feel whole. For me, having one breast was more than ok but it is not so for everyone.

That being said, I still woke up from my surgery petrified of looking at myself and wore a prosthetic for a while to balance out my boob situation. One day, though, I woke up, donated my prosthetics and got about the business of being one-boobed. It was a process, despite knowing I did not want to reconstruct, it still took me time to appreciate and love my body. I was going to say "again" but the truth is I never loved my body ever — as a woman, it is hard to embrace yourself when you constantly judge yourself.

In 2018, I sat for photos with Jessica Leigh Photographers through a nonprofit called The Magic Hour, an initiative for photography of cancer survivors. I posed topless showing just my scar. Then I posed for the Behind the Scars project with Sophie Mayanne, a London-based photographer, and those photos have been all over social media and also on Elle magazine's website, too.

Also in 2018, I posed for these photos — and many women have said that this process with Isis is the ultimate of accepting your body and I have to agree. She made me feel safe and beautiful and this is the only photo series where I am completely bare and not covering my remaining boob.

It was scary at first as I am definitely a puritan in terms of nakedness and though I did slowly find myself falling in love with my body, the idea of showing my breast was petrifying, and I both was excited for and scared to death to see these photos.

Here I am, as a Goddess, topless (NSFW) — please do not tell my parents! Thanks!

What have you done that you never thought you would after a life-changing diagnosis? Do you love and appreciate your body for all that you survived — scars and all?

XOXO, Li

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