

The Rebirth — One Year Post Mastectomy & Lymph Node Extraction

December 16, 2017 By [Lisa Vento Nielsen](#)

So as a December girl, my birthday has always been a great way to celebrate the holidays in overdrive. I used to (before kids) decorate my house and tree right after my birthday (or the day of it)—now, of course, we decorate after Thanksgiving.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly before my birthday last year—actually almost 2 weeks before my birthday to the day. This year, on my actual birthday, I have to admit, I had tons of mixed emotions. I was of course happy and thinking myself blessed and lucky and all that jazz but I also experienced a lot of fear. A lot of dark thoughts about what could happen and if the worse would happen and I would die before seeing my kids grow up or not have the chance to do my renaissance my new me my unveiling of whatever it is my goals in my new life will be to give back, to do more and all that jazz.

I know I have some PTSD and some other lovely issues to work through but I know it takes time. I do all I can to stay focused and positive but sometimes, of course, I falter—hey, I am only human.

Today is the day I can truly celebrate, though, and stay focused on the prize, which is this moment, today, this exact moment of knowing that one year ago today, I had my surgery. My surgeon took out everything—my mastectomy is quite radical; I mean, hey, my tumor was almost 6cm after all. Also, I lost 25 lymph nodes a year ago today of which 5 were positive for cancer.

One year ago today - though it feels like many years ago - I got my surgery to remove the cancer. From the minute I was diagnosed on November 25 2016 I wanted the cancer out any way possible. The first hospital told me the operation would be in late January early February and I walked right out of the consultation. Thankfully, I had already made my appointment with @sloankettering and a few days after I walked out of that first hospital I was meeting with my surgeon at Sloan, Dr El-Tamer on 12/5/16. When someone really cares for you and wears a white coat and has years well decades of experience and that person holds your hand while you cry and beg to have a surgery scheduled as soon as possible because you just cannot imagine going through Christmas with cancer in your body and that surgeon looks at you and goes “ok, I do not know yet which surgery is best for you but I will schedule your surgery for Friday, December 16th and we will figure out which surgery between now and then.” That was amazing and it helped me find my peace, have a plan, have that date to know when I could go in and get the bad cells out of my body. I did not know much of anything about cancer then but to me the surgery was the big key - I would be

learning soon about chemo and radiation and learn even more once I began to share my story and blog. At this point, in this picture, it was a few hours after surgery, I felt fine and though I was missing a breast and 25 lymph nodes, I was able to move around and even began my arm exercises that afternoon. One year later and it's not all unicorns and roses but I am here and my husband does not let me forget that that surgeon, who hugged me when I walked into my operating room and held my hand until I fell asleep called him right after the procedure and said, "I removed all of the cancer; it is all gone." At that point, my husband believes and makes me believe whenever I doubt that I am "cured". After #breastcancer the only way to live life is to imagine / believe you are cured unless you God forbid hear otherwise and even then, God forbid, is to hope for a cure and for all of my stage IV sisters, I pray and hope every day for that cure

When the surgeon spoke to my husband he told him emphatically, "I removed all of the cancer. It is all gone." I posted about that on Instagram today (@thetimebetweenis); from that point on my husband has been convinced that I am cured, that I am cancer free. I live my life to try to believe the same, every moment of every day because if I did not, I would not have any peace. I know that this might not be true as it is not true for 1/3 of breast cancer patients who wind up having cancer spread to other parts of their body and become "terminal" at some point...

I also know that some people have local recurrences and all that jazz. I try instead to be positive and not think about those possibilities, but sometimes like the night of my birthday, those thoughts were taking over and winning which sucked.

I did have an awesome night and was able to not cry—because at one point, at dinner, surrounded by my loved ones, I did want to cry. I think the tears were a mix of self pity and fear and I do not like those feelings not one bit. I am thinking about making a post about how pity is one of the worst emotions and why I think so but for now, I will just say that it was a moment of weakness—which everyone can experience at any time though in the old days, I felt this weak all of the time -- now ,though, I truly do (try to) live in the moment.

I am going to share something now that might make you think I am insane—and if that is the case, it is ok, sometimes, I think I am insane, too (lol).

On the night of my birthday, when my peace was rocked, as I was sleeping one of my children called out to me and said, "Mommy, I am scared!" (This happens sometimes as they were impacted by my cancer plot twist and it is the reason why I worked on the children's book told from "their" perspective—see it here.

Anyway, when they called out, I wanted to say, "I am scared, too." but I did not of course - I told them, "Everything is ok, there is nothing to be scared of..." then, I quickly fell back to sleep but I was not asleep. Instead, I was bathed in a white light that was so strong and so bright and yet I could look at it without having to shield my eyes. I was in a white bright room and in that room were 2 other people - Mary, the Blessed Virgin and Padre Pio. I have written before about my experiences with Padre Pio here.

This experience was more deep, more profound and even if I created it in my head alone (which I do not believe) it was still something that brought me great peace and made me feel that no matter how much I worry, it does not help and that I should just follow my original gut instincts to “pray, hope and don’t worry”. There was more that happened during this “vision” or “dream” but I cannot put words to it...

I woke up suddenly because I felt something in my hands. When I opened my eyes, I was holding my green scapular in my hands, tight. I will write more about what a “scapular” is at another time because this post already is turning into a book and I have some living to do today! On this day, the day of my “rebirth” there is no bad feeling or fear—there is just this moment, this moment when last year, we heard the magic words, “All of the cancer is gone.” I am going to hold on to that and keep it with me so that I can continue to have my peace, no matter what.

What do you do in the time between to help you cope with the fears, the bad stuff, the PTSD? I would love to know! Thanks!

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