

The Heart of a Survivor



The Heart of a Survivor™
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by Kathleen Hird Kostner

*L*ife has a way of throwing us curve balls. You know the ones I mean - without warning, like a fist-punch to the gut, hard and deep; the ones that knock even the strongest person to the knees.

There are no exceptions to this rule. No one is exempt; certainly, not me.

Within a short period of time, several of those curve balls delivered painful losses in my life.

I feared I would lose my mind. As things have a way of unfolding perfectly, it was my saving grace that I *did* lose my mind. To heal those broken pieces of my heart and mind required changes in some attitudes toward myself - inside those most secret places hidden within my heart, where I am alone with me. It also required using courage to shine a mirror of light upon who really I was to reflect back the person I wanted to become.

I would like to share with you the story of an ordinary - but remarkable - day when past and future events merged into one spectacular moment; where, for the first time in my life, I met the real me. And, without those very tough curve balls, an event that I might very well have missed.

Along my path, there were those people who could see what I could not; their losses were far greater than mine. It was kindly suggested that I look for the opportunity within each day to find *the gifts*. I knew they had thrown me the lifeline. I wanted these *gifts*. Determined to find just one, each day, I began to look for something good that happened, and to feel grateful. It was a struggle to move forward as the pounding waves of grief and heartbreak washed over me - often at the most inconvenient moment. I began to realize this dissolution of equanimity kept me trapped in a time capsule of past events, and would inhibit my expansion to become the creative artist I am.

Grief and creativity could not co-exist within me. These antagonists competed for my thinking mind and heart. In a heartbeat, I would find myself rising and falling upon a rollercoaster of emotions. If I wanted harmony in my life, this rollercoaster must stop. Several years earlier, I faced the harm I caused myself after surviving breast cancer. At that time, I vowed to be true to myself by doing whatever it took to achieve my dream of a creative life. I would learn how to live as my best self. It was, unquestionably, the hardest thing I had ever done.

On that particular Saturday morning of May 23, 2004, I awakened with that old, familiar dysthymic thinking. I felt quite out of sorts - somewhat antsy and edgy, I did not want to waste this precious spring day mired in another pool of sadness. Creative experience had taught me to listen for the whispers of the still, small voice - those simple packets of wisdom tucked between the constantly streaming thoughts in my head. Experience had proven such uneasiness can be a harbinger to creativity's birthing process.

Wandering around the studio that beautiful morning, I looked at the few belongings of my departed loved ones; remnants of their things - now left behind. Painful reminders of their loss, each thing contained a memory which needed to be sorted and given away. That morning even the sight



of these amplified a growing contradiction of emotions within me.

Exactly one month prior to this particular day in May, a most unexpected event transpired. In retrospect, I think it is best described as having been orchestrated by the unseen helping hands of the angels. Driving alone to an artful event, I had a moment of heartfelt longing where I wished for someone special in my life; someone with whom I could share my joy. I burst into tears as I told God that I would live my life alone if that was what He wanted; I had proven I could do it... but... suddenly pouring out of me, came this deep and sincere prayer of gratitude, delivered with thankfulness for the gift of love I *was given*. I understood there were no guarantees how long this would last. My gift was simply having experienced, in my lifetime, really loving and really, really being loved... *Thank you so much for this gift*, my heart sang to God as I drove along the highway into town.

One hour later, I accidentally bumped into *him*. In that single moment of connection, I knew who he was. *It's him, it's him*, sang my heart. While I had never met him before, I saw my entire future, and it would be with this beautiful man. Simply touching his shoulder with mine, instantly and intimately, I *knew* him. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

The experience of losing someone I loved deeply was really close to the surface that morning in May. I walked around the studio, thoughts about what it felt like to love and lose love were simultaneously interwoven remembering the magic from one month earlier where I met this wonderful man named Ricardo. This new relationship was quickly becoming very special. I had to admit, honestly, how much I liked him already. These feelings of new love filled me with anticipation, hope, and fright. All my hopeful thoughts for the future were offset by thoughts that expressed heartache. I did not think I could not bear to lose love again - it was easier to avoid love altogether. However, if I chose that path, creativity - as I knew it - would die within me.

The overwhelming evidence was right in front of me still sitting around the studio. It was truly the proof that losing love really, really hurts. The mere idea of allowing my broken heart to love again - completely and deeply, with every fiber of my being - filled me with a mixed bag of emotions. What was I going to do to move myself forward in time, not backwards? Love had arrived. I got my wish. I had been blessed, again. I prayed from my deepest and most secret heart for this gift. Now, what was I going to do with this gift?

I realized I had successfully strapped myself in for another ride on the rollercoaster. This wasn't what I wanted for myself. I had to do something



different - but what? From the bottom of my heart, I prayed for guidance. "Please God, show me what to do. Please, show me the way. I'll do it."

Unresolved grief is exhausting. All too easily, this can become just one in a long line of bad habits. The emotional toll undermined my self-confidence and my self-esteem. It robbed me of my precious creative energy. I so wanted to love and be loved. I wanted joy and laughter in my life. I wanted to be a creative artist. I knew I was willing to do whatever it took to make that happen! That very moment, while connecting to that burning desire and heartfelt longing for love, my thinking suddenly shifted towards a new thought. It was a *knowing*; this became that pivotal moment where a complete paradigm shift changes from what was into what is. The transformation occurred in a split-second. In that magical moment this thought streamed into my consciousness: *How can I ever love or receive the gift of love with this wall of fright around my heart?*

It was as if the dark sun had suddenly risen to dawn with this golden burst of insight; this stroke of clarity *surely* was the nut of what I was missing - *the pithy essence*. Until I could attain respect, appreciation, and love for myself, I would remain stuck. I understood what was required of me. It was simple. Be good to myself: practice good self-care with each word, each mouthful of food, each thought, and each action. Be kind and thoughtful to myself, speak kindly about myself, and treat myself as well as I did others.

As this fragile awareness unfolded into my consciousness, its simplicity still ringing in my mind, I knew had also been given the answer. As my heart opened to hear this new truth, I grasped that *right now* would begin the process to eliminate fright from my life. I would learn how to dismantle the wall around my terror-scarred heart, this place where I was vulnerable and unsafe - particularly with myself. In that moment, I struggled to view myself with kindness, empathy, or compassion.

I would need to change my habitual reaction of fright, both to internal and external events. This behavior was fed by my lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. My own thoughts could frighten me. My self-deprecating quips hid my anguish, bolstering up a false image projected onto the walls of my heart. With one breast, and a trail of tears behind me, secretly, I felt like an incomplete woman lost within the incongruity of my black or white world. *Ah*, I suddenly understood as I thought, *there is the source of the rollercoaster*. Self-doubt too easily eroded the heartfelt link between the woman and creative artist, both struggling to emerge. I longed for harmony between my selves; that my actions would mirror beautiful reflections from one to the other. What I say and what I do must emanate from the same source, not from all those fragmented pieces.



With each thought, action and word, I must speak the truth, with love, from my heart. *Where had I gone?* I had to find me.

In that crystalline moment, I became fully aware of the life-altering blow breast cancer had delivered to my tender heart. The act of removing my breast confirmed what I already secretly believed: I wasn't good enough, and with that action, I was defective as a woman. The last chinks in the armor of my heart were sealed behind this wall. Buried deep in this secret place were all the emotions so painfully experienced with the removal of my breast. Also buried here were the events that followed in its wake. All of this had brought me to this particular day in May, and to this very moment. This awareness had my complete and full attention.

The choices I had made up till then weren't working very well. I could continue to do what I had done for years - pretend that *I'm fine* by ignoring the past and present, and remain forever isolated from myself. I reminded myself that my best thinking had brought me to this very moment. It was unacceptable to, once again, bury my heart in the bog of denial while, sinking past my chin, my mouth spouted, *everything is fine, really it is*. I was proficient at skimming along the top of life, proudly wearing the word *busy* like a medal of achievement, while I made everything else more important than taking good care of me. My behavior was reminiscent of one of those water bugs zipping at light speed across the pond - I was not fine - I was not even OK. I was in danger of losing myself again, but this time, I knew it.

My sincere prayer had stimulated my heartfelt longings. I wanted joy more than anything. Losing loved ones had awakened in me the power of gratitude as my best survival tool. Along that path, I also learned that joy is the by-product of continuously thinking with gratitude. Here I was: I was still alive when by all rights I should be dead - with thousands of pre-menopausal women my age who had lost their fight with cancer. I knew there must be a reason why I was still alive. I knew in my heart of hearts that my life is my greatest gift. I was to do something with this experience; however, grief continued to undermine my confidence. This had to stop - now. I could do something creative.

I recalled that in 1991, I allowed myself one month to recover after having my breast removed - that should be enough time. I had to get back to work. I had to get on with things. I did not dare slow down to think, to process what had happened to me. I feared I would come unstrung as I pushed down my feelings only to have them pop up elsewhere, and always at the most inconvenient moments. The shock became a launching pad to work harder, move faster, do more, and think less.



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Except, there was that dratted *what if* monster that lurked in the tall weeds growing around my heart. Then, there was that awful feeling of terror that gripped my mind, again at those most inconvenient moments- the ones that slither through the mind, and hiss “what if the cancer’s back.” *Oh, push that down, quick, don’t let that loose.* And, there were those twice-yearly mammograms, just to check and see how things are in the other breast. I think I stopped breathing for about 8 years. I was just fine, *really*, I was.

The truth was, somewhere deep down inside, I knew I was like Humpty Dumpty who fell off the wall and broke into thousands of pieces. I tried to glue myself back together, but I kept falling apart. This manifested in some of the choices I made along the road of my life. Not for a month or two, but for years, as I became this woman I did not even recognize as myself. There was no mind, body and soul connection; there was only *busy* - a socially acceptable and convenient state of avoidance. Along with *fine*, *busy* became a four-letter word.

With my attention focused on the *what if* monster, I was experiencing fright. That morning, I realized I wanted the love that had come my way. I refused to capitulate to grief and fear. The consequences could be devastating. On that particular Saturday in May, I chose love. I decided to do whatever it takes to live my very best life. And, with that decision, a new thought floated into my head. This one kindly directed me to do something creative: *take a picture, go find joy.*

For years, an urge bubbled around in my head - create a work of art to commemorate breast cancer survivors. Something that would serve as a medal of honor, a badge of courage, a joyous announcement whose unmistakable message sings, “I survived. I am alive.” Unsure if this was to be a piece of jewelry or a photograph, I also considered creating a book of portraits - stories about women who had survived breast cancer.

Walking around the studio thinking about what kind of picture to create, this urge surfaced again. This time, however, it occurred to me that perhaps the best place to start was with photographing my own scar. *After all, I thought, how can I possibly photograph women, and properly tell their survivor stories if I haven’t honored my own journey first?* Such an intimate look into their lives would require my own heartfelt connection - to myself - before I could ever connect intimately with other women. Perhaps if I shared my story and my survivor tools, I could earn their trust in me.

Shaking off that heavy coat of grief, suddenly, I was inspired to take my first survivor portrait - this one of my own journey. It would be a



good practice session. *Who knows*, I thought to myself, *I might learn something*.

Logistically, I thought this would require two people to take the shot: the subject and the photographer. Ric had stopped by unexpectedly. I asked him if he would help me. Wisely, he suggested I was in an important process, and said he would remain in the next room. Undaunted, I set up the studio to take the photograph. I had no idea what I would do, or what would unfold. It just happened.

I loved playing in this studio. I transformed this building from a steel barn into a wonderful play house for creative minds. I learned about creative freedom within these walls. Closing the big garage doors at each end of the building blocked the mid-day sun from streaming through the windows. The computer was already tethered to the portrait camera perched on the heavy-duty tripod. Already on the camera was my favorite, the macro lens. Like best friends, my creative companions stood ready as silent witnesses to creative action in progress. Creativity is an impelling force which can change things going one way and unexpectedly divert things into another direction - often at its whim. I was along for the ride. Whatever was happening now was infinitely better than where my morning had begun.

I recalled being told discomfort can be a place where unseen gifts are found. I thought about this journey into the unknown as my palms began to perspire. *Just set up the equipment*, I urged myself as I kept myself moving in the darkness. Less than 20 feet from the sunshine, intrinsically, I knew that something profound was waiting to happen. I needed to know why I was compelled to take this picture now. *It's time*, whispered my creative self.

An intense energy surrounded me, filling the building. I held my breath, brow furrowed, my lips pursed, and my hands shook. I was trying to move too fast; I felt like had to hurry up or *that moment* might disappear as fast as it had appeared. I was nervous - never before had I been my own subject of study. Releasing my breath calmed my nerves, as I thought about the magic from every session in that studio. Without exception, from each artful adventure, had emerged something very special. All that was required was an artful state of mind, and confidence in my abilities as a creative artist. It didn't matter if I lacked the know-how. By the mere act of doing, I learned how.

Becoming more confident in the current process underway, I recalled the amazing synergy between the eye of the hawk and the velvet-gloved finger, held aloft, ready to depress the camera's shutter button. There



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is magic in this synergistic action. When, united into one simultaneous movement, these elements become that igniting spark which, in that single click of the shutter, captures the core essence of a person. A permanent visual record of their personal being - thus revealed. It was amazing magic, and I loved it.

I sat at the computer and created a file to hold the images called "Breast Cancer Photoshoot." I would act as both participant and observer. I wondered what this would reveal about me. I felt like I was on a hunt, determined to find me. Thinking about this revelation, I realized I was holding my breath. I reminded myself to breathe deeply. With each breath, the fear dissolved into excitement. Something wonderful was happening.

On one side of the wardrobe mirror stood the lone studio light. The power head was aimed towards the open space where I would stand. Guessing the distance, and focusing the lens, I thought about how much I trusted and relied upon this particular lens. I could count on it to bring out the best in any subject I tackled. Now, it was my turn. With my hands busy setting up the equipment, my mind was occupied, now in anticipation of how this would unfold.

I locked the cone-shaped snoot securely onto the studio light. It was ready to disperse the light across my chest. Everything was within my reach. I walked across the studio to turn off the overhead lights. Instantly, the black walls of the photography cave swallowed the last vestiges of light.

I stood alone, completely enveloped by the darkness contained inside this huge expanse. It felt like I was alone in the universe. It was as black as that October day in 1991 when I heard those unforgettable words, "You have cancer." I remembered in that split-second, another paradigm shift as my world forever changed. Try as I might to forget, I could not pretend it didn't happen. The scar running across my chest ending under my right arm speaks volumes. The small rose tattoo, sitting above the scar where my cleavage used to be, now served as kind reminder to do no harm to myself - instead, practice good self-care.

Standing there, enveloped in the thick darkness, it felt perfect - like being in the womb. This process felt like I was giving birth to something I had yet to understand. I thought about what had inspired me to do this today, especially after such a tough morning. Moving through the inky blackness with the flashlight, I was confident a purpose would be revealed if I would just continue to do whatever was next. I took another deep breath as I exhaled a silent prayer for guidance. *Please show me the way. I'll do it,* adding, *Thy will not my will.*



Infused with courage through this simple, but effective, heartfelt prayer, I began that magical process I know as creative art. While I thought my scar was the subject of this photograph, somewhere on an intuitive level, I believed the real subject was to inspire those who have experienced the devastating effects of cancer - and the wake left behind. I just didn't know how I was going to inspire anyone with a scar. It didn't sound too appealing, but I went about it anyway. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I *saw it* standing there. A chill ran down my spine, and goose-bumps appeared on my arms.

Like a big eye that could see into my soul, the lens on the camera stared at me, patiently waiting for that moment of synergy. Suddenly, the room got really hot. Even though the studio was air-conditioned, it was very uncomfortable - too intimate. I knew the heat was emanating from inside of me. This project was moving way too close to something deeply personal. Standing in this blackness, I had to quell the primal urge to run that nearly overtook me. I wanted to flip on the lights and forget about it - another day, perhaps. I wondered how many of my subjects had wanted to run away from the staring lens on that imposing camera, oblivious to their discomfort while merrily chatting and enjoying my work.

I walked in front of the mirror where the strobe light was angled, aimed to discharge light across my body. It would not take much light, so I set the output at 1/8th power. Taking another deep breath, I pulled off my shirt, and then, removed my bra and the soft, fleshy prosthesis that served as a replacement of my missing breast. Now, bare from the waist up, I pondered how best to portray this scar - I hoped for an esthetically pleasing angle.

Thanks to the artful hand of my surgeon, the line across my chest has faded with an imperceptible feel. On the surface, I considered the absence of my breast *no big deal* as I would explain with careless bravado, *I told'em to cut that sucker off!*

Inside my most secret place however, that soft and tender place carefully ensconced behind the wall of my scarred heart, hid a world of hurt. The idea of going near this place was so painful I did not think I could bear to suffer any more. While I knew I had made the right decision, there had been very little time to think about this action - my life hung in the balance. The truth remained: removing my breast had really, really frightened me. It was a constant reminder that something had gone terribly awry inside of my body, and there were no guarantees that it might not return.

And, I really missed having cleavage; I missed wearing sexy bras and



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revealing tops.

Without thinking, my hand moved across my bare chest almost as if touching this empty space would provide the answer to *what's next?* Thoughts flowed through my mind, as, one by one, years full of memories connected the dots revealing more layers of truths.

Over a period of years, I ate my way from a size 8 to a 22W and back. Every 15 pounds meant buying a new prosthesis. I did not like to look lopsided. I was amazed at how much one breast could weigh, going from a #2 to a #6. While they were always functional, serving to fill that empty space, these silicone appendages never felt quite right. I really missed seeing and feeling my breast. That part of me was gone forever. I had chosen to not have breast reconstruction. Somewhere deep in my brain was that tiny fear the other breast might be next. Fear said, *why bother?*

In the dim light from the power head, I could see the reflection of my chest in the mirror. I remembered the lovely rose tattoo was my 50th birthday present to me. It was a supposed to be a valiant reminder that while I might have lost a breast, I gained my life.

Then the memory floated in - of the evening I had the tattoo permanently etched on my chest. I recalled using liquid courage, quickly downing three, double-Margaritas before sinking into the artist's chair. This marked the beginning of nearly five months of daily drinking - more and more alcohol every day - something I had never done before this tattoo. It didn't take long for this technique to become a monstrous coping mechanism to suppress my overwhelming sorrow and grief as my father lay dying. Ironically, while my life unraveled in every direction, I was slowly and deliberately killing myself. Looking back, my actions made no sense. The tattoo was a bittersweet reminder of the choices I made after I had survived cancer. I was very much aware how profoundly blessed I was - simply to be alive.

The dark studio snapped me into the present moment. I stood in front of the camera, naked and vulnerable, but ready. An awareness began to grow as I realized there really was greater purpose; one that would explain why I was compelled to create this image on this particular day. This picture was *my story*. All those experiences along the road of my life - some, now made sense. Over time, years of unresolved grief had created outlets that often surfaced in less-than-desirable behaviors. Now, I chose to live. If I was willing to be honest about my feelings, grief could become a choice. I would no longer allow myself to be trapped in a time capsule of past events.



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If I wanted to share love in my life, this growing discomfort about my physical appearance had uncovered a very poignant and painful layer of truth: *until I could accept myself... just as I am...how could I possibly ask for acceptance from anyone else? If I wanted to share love in my life, it began with me loving me.*

“Men want women with both breasts. You need to have reconstruction surgery if you ever plan to get into a meaningful relationship.” From out of nowhere, I remembered these unkind words, a conversation with someone I thought of as a friend. It had taken me years to realize the impact of these few words upon my self-confidence. There it was - what secretly I feared might be true: I was incomplete, lacking, and therefore unsatisfying. Those words struck deep, a wound that caused a world of hurt, and brought me right here to this day, May 23, 2004 as I wondered how I would reveal this to Ric, this wonderful man who had arrived carrying a bushel basket of love into my life just one month earlier.

How do you photograph a scar like this and make it appealing? I thought, wondering why I found myself heading towards the light table where I picked up a thick piece of black velvet cloth. Something had shifted. Something remarkable was happening. I allowed this intuitive feeling to guide my hand to drape the luxurious cloth over my bare chest. The fabric covered the rose tattoo and the long scar.

How odd, I thought to myself. I thought this picture was about the scar. Aren't I going to photograph the scar? Why did I cover the scar? Babbling questions streamed through my mind, but I let them go on through. Instead, I kept following those unseen helping hands with those intuitive nudges as they miraculously guided me with *do this, now, do that.*

Ever so gently, my left hand moved to hold my breast, as my fingers tenderly caressed the surface like it was a fragile crystal glass. I felt very vulnerable and exposed as I raised my right arm over my head; I held the shutter release in my hand, my thumb hovered over the button, ready to fire the camera shutter at the right moment.

Every muscle in my body tensed as I turned my head to the side, slightly lifting my chin. I knew this wasn't about my face. *I hope the camera is aimed, and what about the focus?* I asked of my finger. I held my breath as my thumb depressed the button on the electronic shutter release. The shutter made its familiar ca-chunk sound as the brilliant strobe exploded light across my skin. I had taken the first image.

Exhaling and inhaling big breaths as if to protect myself, my body tensed, ready for the next image. I didn't dare stop this creative process to



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check the images on the monitor. I would remain as the subject to be photographed, and allow the camera to do what it does so well: stop time. I only took a few images. I knew I had what I needed. Walking into the production room with a big grin on my face, I felt so grateful and relieved. I was both scared and excited to see the images appear across the screen.

The images appeared on the monitor. Suddenly, I was very shy with myself. This was an overwhelmingly intimate moment and my discomfort returned. I forced myself to look. As my eyes scanned the screen, my attention was caught by one image. There was something that appealed to my artistic sense, a line, perhaps a shape. It was the longest second to click on that image. I held my breath in anticipation. When the picture appeared on the monitor, I gasped in shock. *Who is this woman?* I thought to myself. She was vaguely familiar, like looking at someone I used to know long ago. She was a woman whom I respected, as I recalled. This woman in front of me exuded an inherent strength and beauty. Inside the image, the shapes drove my eyes around the screen. I wanted to know more about her. Immediately, I liked this woman. She seemed to have a purpose, and her determination jumped out of the screen.

She is a warrior woman, I sat staring at her - mesmerized, unable to take my eyes off the screen. I saw the resolute will to survive in her neck and jaw. I saw the powerful movement of her spirit as she shed that heavy black coat of grief. Right before my eyes, this beautiful and powerful creature had emerged out of the shadows of her past, unfolding into her true and remarkable self. In that moment, my mind and my eyes finally connected the dots of familiarity as I realized in shock, *Oh, my God, it's me!*

Right there in front of me unveiled the complete story of my life. I saw and understood the survival process which had brought me to this day and time. This was my turning point. This woman with the steely jaw line and tender hand who had so quickly captured my interest was me. A tide of emotions suddenly poured from a deep well of sorrow as I burst into tears and wept for all those years I held together that poorly-patched wall protecting my beautiful heart. In that moment, I fell in love with *me*. The woman in the picture, her familiarity ringing the bells of my heart with joy, sang, *It's me!! It's me!!*

This simple photo shoot did capture that magical essence I wanted for this particular subject. It revealed my emergence from cancer's blackness into a new world where that magnificent spark of life shines like a neon light which announces: *I am alive! I am perfect and whole just as I am.*



Later, as the printer zipped back and forth across a big 32" x 40" canvas print, spraying ink into varying shades of gray, I saw a distinct shadow that was created by my fingers gently holding my precious breast. This shadow magically emerged in the shape of a heart, directly above the heart of this survivor.

My trusted camera lens had simply captured me as I am. I was given a profound gift, a connection to my own self, with compassion and empathy for the journey I had traveled. Things were different now. I understood: no longer would I allow myself to be held captive with a heart of grief - trapped in the darkness of sorrow and loss. Living my best life - in joy - became my prime directive. I had been given a powerful gift of insight into myself: *I am so worth loving - just as I am.*

So many gifts emerged out of this simple, spontaneous act of creative courage intended to quench the pain of that very ordinary morning. But, determined to find the gifts that day, I was set free to flourish in my life as a creative spirit, and to be the best that I can be each day.

While I might have lost a breast, I gained my life, and, in so doing, I found a woman I absolutely cherish. Finding me that day opened the door to the love I had so longed for in my prayers. Only in this way could I share my life so completely and totally with my wonderful man who loves me just as I am. That morning, he *knew* that he had fallen in love with me. He also knew that, first, I needed to fall in love with me before we could fall in love together - in that very special way our hearts dreamed it could be.

Each day, my life *is* the gift. Love is the by-product of living my best life.

November 2010 celebrates 19 years, free of cancer.

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