

How to Nurture Yourself Through a Cancer Diagnosis



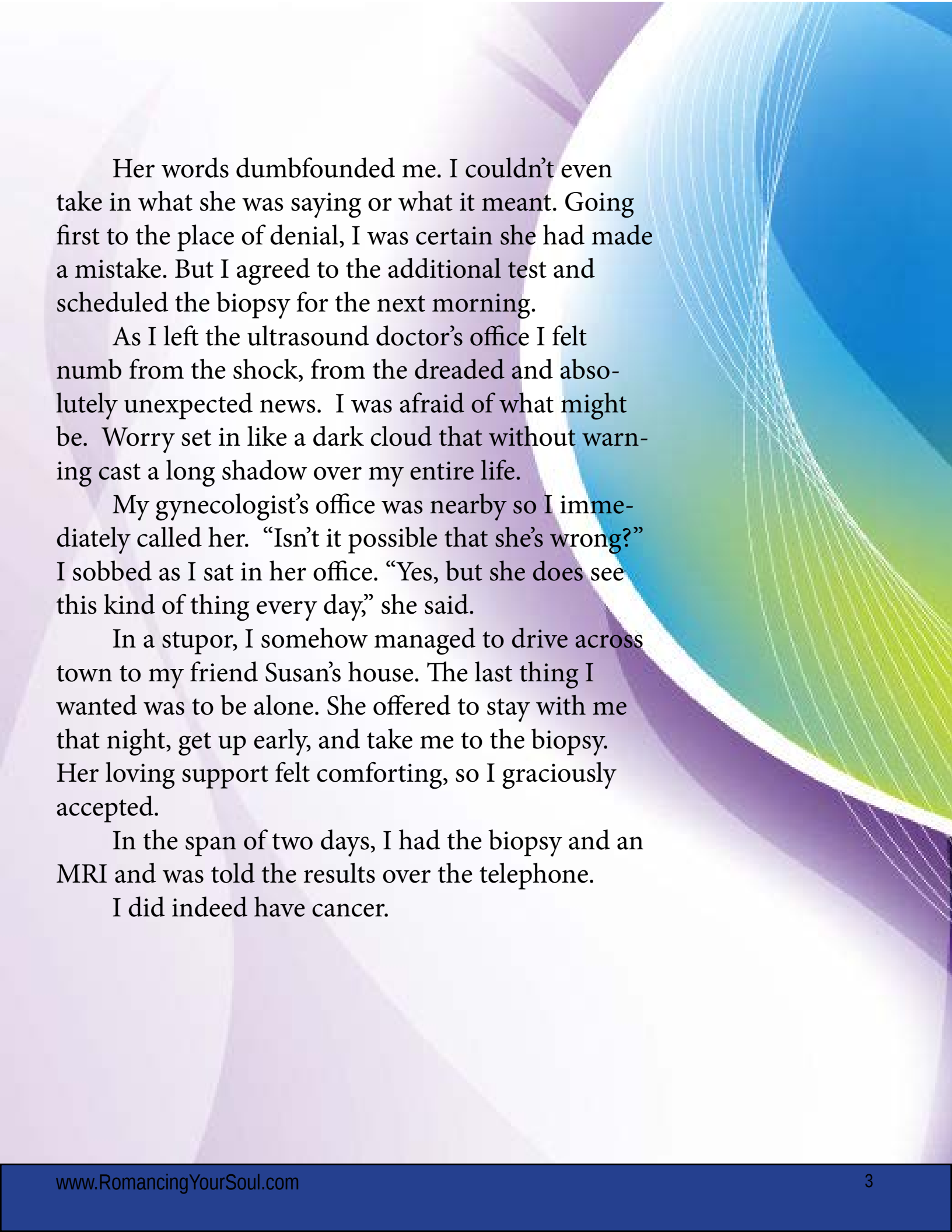
by Nicole Stanton

In January of my 45th year, as I was busy going about my life worrying about my career, lamenting over not having a boyfriend, and wondering what this new year would bring, I learned I had breast cancer.

It was quite a shock. The mammogram I had the previous summer was clear. However my concern about radiation exposure from yearly mammograms motivated me to find alternative ways to look for issues in the body. One method is Thermography, which produces an infrared image showing the patterns of heat and blood flow on or near the surface of the body. Cancer cells read “hotter” than normal cells. Red is an indicator of a potential problem, and I had a hot reading on my left breast. The normal course of treatment was to see my gynecologist and have a physical exam, which I did. She didn’t find anything substantial, only what she thought was a cyst. She suggested I have an ultrasound on the left side, just to be sure. I felt confident nothing was wrong and made the appointment.

The physician who performed the ultrasound confirmed there was nothing on the left side, but lucky for me, she followed her instincts and decided to give my right breast a look. Even though nothing seemed out of the ordinary, as she was conducting the examination she became quiet and told me to get dressed. Then I was put in a large conference room and given a box of tissues. She came back with a consulting doctor. They suggested I immediately have a biopsy. Her tone had changed from a professional taking care of business to one of sympathy. She explained it seemed almost certain I had something that looked like cancer on my right side.





Her words dumbfounded me. I couldn't even take in what she was saying or what it meant. Going first to the place of denial, I was certain she had made a mistake. But I agreed to the additional test and scheduled the biopsy for the next morning.

As I left the ultrasound doctor's office I felt numb from the shock, from the dreaded and absolutely unexpected news. I was afraid of what might be. Worry set in like a dark cloud that without warning cast a long shadow over my entire life.

My gynecologist's office was nearby so I immediately called her. "Isn't it possible that she's wrong?" I sobbed as I sat in her office. "Yes, but she does see this kind of thing every day," she said.

In a stupor, I somehow managed to drive across town to my friend Susan's house. The last thing I wanted was to be alone. She offered to stay with me that night, get up early, and take me to the biopsy. Her loving support felt comforting, so I graciously accepted.

In the span of two days, I had the biopsy and an MRI and was told the results over the telephone.

I did indeed have cancer.

All alone and overwhelmed by the news, I dropped to the floor. This was so not what I expected. *My life is over, I thought, and there is still so much I want to do! I want to get married! I want to have more time with the people I love! I want to act, create, dance, travel, live!*

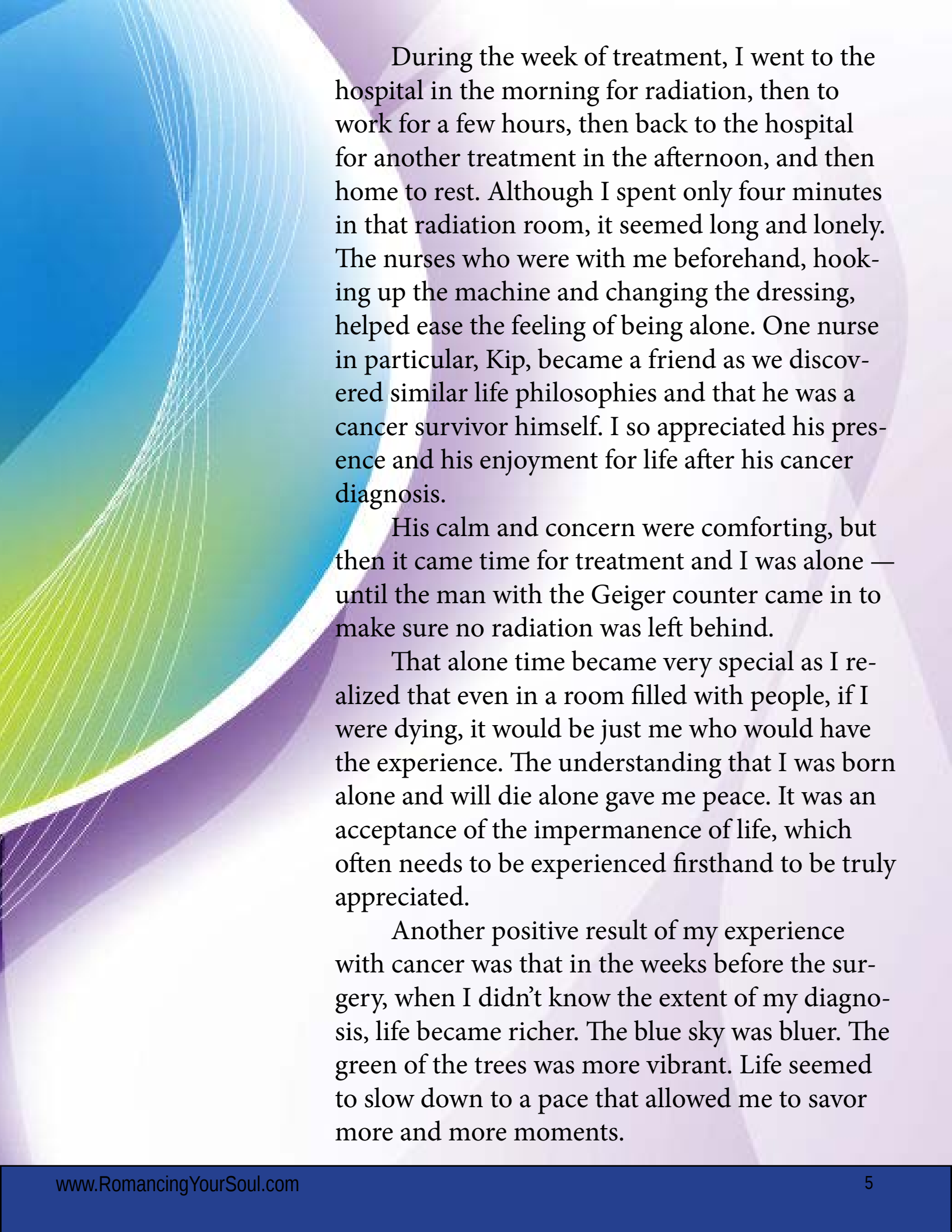
Fear closed around me so tightly I could not breathe. Not just from the news but also from the memory of my sister. Until I received the diagnosis, what I knew of cancer firsthand was only that my sister had died from it. She had liver cancer, very rare for someone to contract at the age of twenty-three.



So rare, in fact, that her doctors were befuddled and sent her case to be studied at Johns Hopkins University. But that was in 1979. What we know of cancer has changed dramatically.

The most difficult and fearful time was waiting to find out what stage the cancer was in and if it had spread. No matter how hard I tried I could not stop my mind from going to the worst-case scenario thought, *'What if this is it? What if I don't get any more time? This is so unfair.'* It took concentration and intentionally challenging those negative thoughts to remember - I don't have all the facts yet so don't jump to conclusions.

The lumpectomy surgery was successful. The cancer was Stage 1 and it had not spread. Hearing the news I was so grateful the cancer was discovered early. That meant I was a candidate for a newer form of therapy that placed a small radiation seed, delivered through a catheter, directly inside my breast at the site of the tumor. The seed stayed in for about four minutes twice a day. This type of therapy lasted a week, compared to the six or seven weeks of typical external radiation.



During the week of treatment, I went to the hospital in the morning for radiation, then to work for a few hours, then back to the hospital for another treatment in the afternoon, and then home to rest. Although I spent only four minutes in that radiation room, it seemed long and lonely. The nurses who were with me beforehand, hooking up the machine and changing the dressing, helped ease the feeling of being alone. One nurse in particular, Kip, became a friend as we discovered similar life philosophies and that he was a cancer survivor himself. I so appreciated his presence and his enjoyment for life after his cancer diagnosis.

His calm and concern were comforting, but then it came time for treatment and I was alone — until the man with the Geiger counter came in to make sure no radiation was left behind.

That alone time became very special as I realized that even in a room filled with people, if I were dying, it would be just me who would have the experience. The understanding that I was born alone and will die alone gave me peace. It was an acceptance of the impermanence of life, which often needs to be experienced firsthand to be truly appreciated.

Another positive result of my experience with cancer was that in the weeks before the surgery, when I didn't know the extent of my diagnosis, life became richer. The blue sky was bluer. The green of the trees was more vibrant. Life seemed to slow down to a pace that allowed me to savor more and more moments.

No longer busily going on to the next thing on my to-do list, I was more invested in every activity of life. Food tasted better, people seemed more joyful, and I felt a new sense of being in tune with life.



As my treatment finished, my surgeon said, “Well, you’re cancer free now!” I thought, *Fantastic!* What an incredible, whirlwind experience. In a span of two months, I was diagnosed with cancer, treated, and released cancer free. From horrible to gone, in what now seems like no time at all.

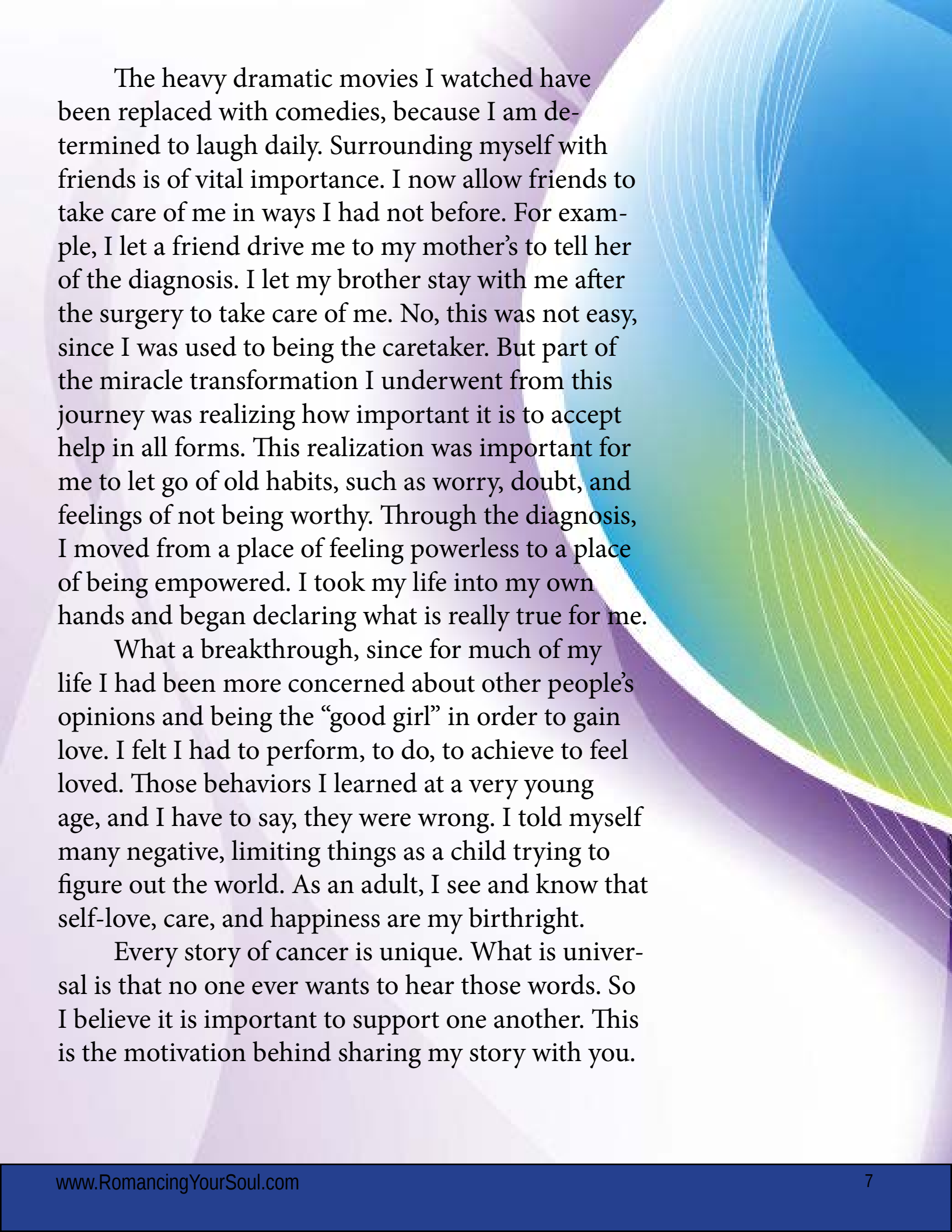
To ensure that my body does not create another tumor, I am taking a drug for the next five years. The side effects are not without risk. I might be thrown into menopause instantly, but as I am well into my 40s, that risk is much better than a

recurrence. Physical therapy helped me regain full motion in my right arm. But the wide range of emotions that accompanied the experience still lingers.

Things about my life became so much clearer with that diagnosis. It seemed that what was truly important came to the forefront of my life’s to-do list: to fall in love, laugh a whole lot more, and be happy. That was really it. All of the other things I had worried about, such as getting a new theatrical agent or lamenting not booking television roles, now seemed so silly.

The big C diagnosis was a great clarifier that made life really simple. My newfound appreciation for life changed almost everything as I now evaluated what was really important to my happiness and peace of mind.





The heavy dramatic movies I watched have been replaced with comedies, because I am determined to laugh daily. Surrounding myself with friends is of vital importance. I now allow friends to take care of me in ways I had not before. For example, I let a friend drive me to my mother's to tell her of the diagnosis. I let my brother stay with me after the surgery to take care of me. No, this was not easy, since I was used to being the caretaker. But part of the miracle transformation I underwent from this journey was realizing how important it is to accept help in all forms. This realization was important for me to let go of old habits, such as worry, doubt, and feelings of not being worthy. Through the diagnosis, I moved from a place of feeling powerless to a place of being empowered. I took my life into my own hands and began declaring what is really true for me.

What a breakthrough, since for much of my life I had been more concerned about other people's opinions and being the "good girl" in order to gain love. I felt I had to perform, to do, to achieve to feel loved. Those behaviors I learned at a very young age, and I have to say, they were wrong. I told myself many negative, limiting things as a child trying to figure out the world. As an adult, I see and know that self-love, care, and happiness are my birthright.

Every story of cancer is unique. What is universal is that no one ever wants to hear those words. So I believe it is important to support one another. This is the motivation behind sharing my story with you.

There are certain actions and attitudes I found helpful. And, as one of my favorite slogans goes, “Take what you like and leave the rest.” What I do know, without a doubt, is that every moment of life is precious. So my best piece of advice is to remain focused on the big picture, treating each moment of life as the most incredible gift you will ever receive.

DO WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

Really follow your heart’s desire, even if you do that for only five minutes at a time! It’s a start. Give yourself permission to be happy by taking time to do something that makes your heart sing. The idea that striving for one’s happiness is selfish is wrong. Being happy is self-preserving and self-loving.



GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO TELL THE TRUTH

... to yourself and to other people. That doesn’t mean you tell Uncle Phil no one is being fooled by his comb-over, but it does mean that you can say “no thank you” when you don’t want to do something. You can own how you feel, with no apologies necessary. When you face this type of diagnosis, it is especially important to be honest with yourself about the choices you have made and are making in your life. Does what you are choosing to do feel right and true? Or do you make choices because you are worried about other people’s opinions of you?

RECEIVE

It’s wonderful to be giving. Now is the time to practice being a good receiver. Let others help you. Love them by giving them the opportunity to practice giving.

PUT YOURSELF AND YOUR HEALTH FIRST

One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Abraham (Abraham-Hicks), says, “The purpose of life is joy.” Abraham encourages people to make feeling good a priority in their life. We are all born with an inner guidance system known as our emotions. Emotions let us know how we feel, but so often we learn at a young age to override those feelings. Let this be a time in your life when you respect your emotions. Honor your feelings. If you wake up feeling resentful and angry, feel it fully. Do not allow guilt to take over. Refuse to believe limiting thoughts, such as, “I am spiritual, a good person, a former girl scout, I shouldn’t feel those kind of negative things.” One thing we tend to forget when going through hard challenges is how quickly our emotions can change. Within seconds, with the birth of a new thought, we can feel completely different.

We see this in toddlers all the time: two little ones start to fight over a toy, then all of a sudden a remote-controlled toy car drives into the room, attention is shifted, and now there is nothing but joy and wonder.

We all have the ability to shift quickly, so why be afraid of feeling that hurt or anger.

Feel your feelings fully and you will release and shift them quickly.



SURROUND YOURSELF WITH A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

This can be your friends or individuals who have gone through the same experience. Right after my diagnosis, surgery, and treatment, I found it helpful to be in a breast cancer support group. It was a safe place to share all that I was feeling, no matter how ridiculous (“Can you get cancer from eating too much cheese?”) or how poignant (“Will they find another tumor on my one-year anniversary mammogram?”). It’s all valid, and none of what you are feeling or questioning will be judged.

Support groups are the place to let it all out. Cry, yell - it’s all important to your coping and healing.

LAUGH!

Watch movies, videos, television shows that make you laugh. Joy and laughter are healing and so important in dealing with the stress of a cancer diagnosis. Continue adding positives throughout the recovery process. Laughter is a proven benefit to health, and it is wonderful in shifting negative emotions to a more positive outlook. We can’t stay angry when watching a little pug puppy snort, bark and chase around a robot vacuum cleaner.



STAY HOPEFUL

Know that no matter what, no one knows for certain what the outcome will be. A lot of what I was told when figuring out my course of treatment was based on percentages and comparisons. You are unique, and recovery can happen at any time. Western medicine doesn't have all the answers, so don't be afraid to ask questions, get second opinions, and most importantly, trust yourself. You are the best advocate for your body and its health.

ENJOY THE MOMENT

Meditation can keep you present. I practiced mindful meditation at the time and found it very helpful. Meditation allowed me to slow down, to remain present with the moment. Focusing on your breathing is a great tool for keeping yourself calmly in the present. Give yourself permission to stop, relax, and rest. Honor what your body is telling you - let yummy.com or a friend bring dinner to you without your feeling guilty.



UTILIZE SUPPORT FROM BOOKS, SPIRITUAL CENTERS, COUNSELORS and THERAPISTS

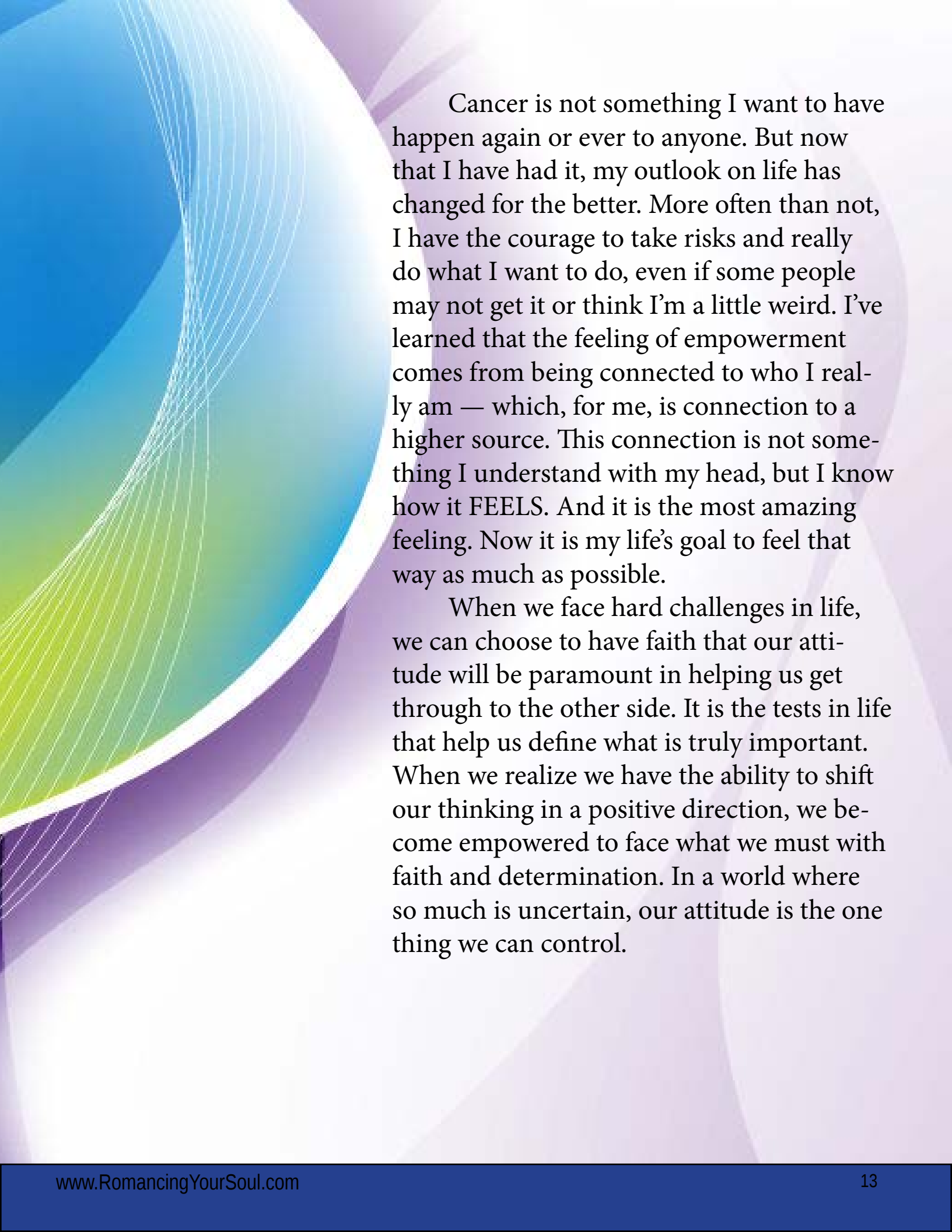
Depending on your belief system, there are wonderful resources available that explore the mind-body connection in regard to health. We really don't know how our body contracts cancer.



The mind-body connection is a wide open field and there is great potential to explore different emotional and spiritual beliefs to find what resonates with you.

For me, one thing that really resonated was being authentic. If I wasn't genuine in my relationships, I felt sick in the pit of my stomach. I ignored the feeling so many times and crafted answers I thought someone wanted to hear. My diagnosis changed that for me. The reality of having cancer forced me to learn to love myself more deeply than ever before. Being authentic and honoring who I truly am by speaking my truth results in a feeling of freedom and relief.

Since I became genuine with myself and others, that sick feeling in my stomach went away. Maybe I would have realized the power of being honest on my own, or maybe not, if I had not been forced to face the truth of a cancer diagnosis.



Cancer is not something I want to have happen again or ever to anyone. But now that I have had it, my outlook on life has changed for the better. More often than not, I have the courage to take risks and really do what I want to do, even if some people may not get it or think I'm a little weird. I've learned that the feeling of empowerment comes from being connected to who I really am — which, for me, is connection to a higher source. This connection is not something I understand with my head, but I know how it FEELS. And it is the most amazing feeling. Now it is my life's goal to feel that way as much as possible.

When we face hard challenges in life, we can choose to have faith that our attitude will be paramount in helping us get through to the other side. It is the tests in life that help us define what is truly important. When we realize we have the ability to shift our thinking in a positive direction, we become empowered to face what we must with faith and determination. In a world where so much is uncertain, our attitude is the one thing we can control.

Helpful Resources for Support

For more information on Thermography:

<http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2012/07/08/gaea-powell-on-thermography.aspx>

<http://www.cancer.org/treatment/understandingyourdiagnosis/examsandtestdescriptions/mammogramsandotherbreastimagingprocedures/mammograms-and-other-breast-imaging-procedures-newer-br-imaging-tests>

For those in the Los Angeles, California, area:

My surgeon:

<http://pinklotusbreastcenter.com/>

Complimentary support:

<http://www.simmsmanncenter.ucla.edu/>

Additional support resources:

<http://www.cancersupportcommunitybenjamincenter.org/>

Crisis support/ prayer:

<http://www.agapelive.com/index.php?page=212>

<http://www.agapelive.com/index.php?page=29>

The work of Abraham-Hicks:

<http://www.abraham-hicks.com/lawofattractionsource/index.php>