

## Healing Restored

After forty years of living an active and healthy lifestyle, I was shocked to be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2002. I went through a year of traditional treatments which included surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and Herceptin. As a result, I experienced side effects of fatigue, joint pain, chemobrain (i.e. compromised mental function), and lymphedema. When treatment ended, I moved forward in my journey with the expectation I would regain my strength and endurance and the ability to work. I was wrong.

My cancer survivorship has been much harder than the cancer itself. It quickly became apparent that the side effects were not dissipating. In fact, not only was I unable to engage in physical activities, I could barely do the basics of daily living to care for myself. As I relentlessly searched for physicians to acknowledge and support my conditions, I found only a few who tried to help. When their efforts proved unsuccessful, I began to do what I never thought I would. Despite my more traditional background as a registered dietitian working in the medical community for ten years, I sought alternative solutions.

It took two years before I found relief with the lymphedema and joint pain from a lymph drainage therapy (LDT) specialist in Texas. I lost access to him when I moved back to Boise, Idaho. Similar outcomes did not manifest with local LDT specialists or other alternative therapies. An acupuncturist suggested I try yoga. She referred me to Jeanne Dillion, RYT, a Certified Yoga Therapist and Director of Yoga for Wellness.

My first session with Jeanne taught me to focus on my breath. Following three years of limited movement, this seemingly simple act engaged my body without flaring up symptoms. Over time, I was able to follow a personalized practice Jeanne created that involved gentle movement with my breath. I was encouraged with this renewed ability to move without it worsening the cancer treatment after effects. Consistent home practice gave me the strength and confidence to attend her weekly gentle yoga classes. My spirits lifted with this sign of progress. A year later, I was even able to add a mild walking rehabilitation program to my routine.

Recently I participated in one of Jeanne's Yoga Nidra classes. She describes Yoga Nidra as an ancient guided meditation which combines a systematic exploration of physical sensations, respiration, visualization, relaxation and self-inquiry of emotions, feelings and beliefs. It differs from other meditation practices in that you are invited to relax in a comfortable resting position, such as lying down or seated in a chair. The practice awakens the realization of one's deepest desires and great potential for healing.

This teaching became paramount when I faced yet another challenging health crisis. I was unexpectedly hospitalized with a life-threatening staph aureus blood infection. It lodged in my cervical spine as osteomyelitis. I was advised that the damage left me permanently vulnerable to serious injury. All my hopes of resolving my cancer treatment after effects to return to my once active lifestyle disintegrated around me. When discharged home, my neck pain remained severe, limiting my ability to move, and heightened my despair. Jeanne reminded me to use the recorded Yoga Nidra CD from class during this difficult recuperative period. The practice proved invaluable as I reconnected with my inner sense of wholeness and experienced a calmness which transcended my pain to allow me to have more restful sleep.

However, when I returned to yoga class three months later, I found myself terrified to move. I met privately with Jeanne as I knew I was floundering on this new path of recovery. Her gentle inquiries brought to light my lingering fears and old beliefs that I was somehow inept and at fault for the demise of my health. It was a feeling I had held most of my life after being

diagnosed with diabetes at the age of four. Though my cancer journey helped me become aware of this belief, I was unwittingly trying to disassociate from it rather than accept it as it was. Through Jeanne's wisdom, she created a customized Yoga Nidra CD which specifically addressed this wounding, internalized self-judgment.

Jeanne also gave me one of her teacher's books, *Yoga Nidra: The Meditative Heart of Yoga* by Richard Miller, Ph.D. She shared with me her own experience with Yoga Nidra and the discovery of Richard's more modern-day approach to the practice, called Integrative Restoration (iRest). This form of Yoga Nidra is more approachable to the general public in that the more mystical methods of the ancient yogis have been adapted for the contemporary world. Studies show success using iRest at Walter Reed Army Hospital with active duty soldiers suffering PTSD, insomnia and anxiety from wartime experiences, as well as various sites around the United States with the homeless, college students, children, and other populations suffering from a multitude of ailments. Jeanne is currently on a research team at Boise State University developing studies on the effectiveness of iRest.

For me, the continued use of this practice has taught me to truly welcome and accept all of my feelings and sensations just as they are, not ignoring them and not becoming enmeshed in them. I quit defining my Self through these experiences and came to know I was enough, just as I am. Suddenly I felt less pain, both physically and emotionally. I sensed peace and joy expanding outside of my practice and into my everyday moments. Even my relations with others were enriched.

I am deeply grateful to Jeanne for her teachings and the introduction to Yoga Nidra. It is a profound tool which can enhance any therapy being provided by other practitioners. My hope is that anyone struggling with their own life challenges, or searching for that deeper meaning to life, will have the same opportunity to experience this life-giving practice as I have.

Teresa McQueen is a freelance writer with her most recent contribution, "It Was Only a Breast," published in the *Voices of Breast Cancer: The Healing Companion: Stories for Courage, Comfort and Strength* by The Healing Project (Oct 2007). She maintains her credentials as a registered dietitian and continues her cancer recovery process with the support and love of her family, friends, the Boise, Idaho community and the nurturing power of the written word. You may contact Teresa at [Waterhythms@mac.com](mailto:Waterhythms@mac.com).