

When Megan Met Meredith

*Each friend represents a world in us,
a world possibly not born until they arrive,
and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.*

ANAIS NIN

As I go through life, I recognize more and more that everything happens for a reason, although it is sometimes hard to figure out at the time what the reason could possibly be.

In September of 2000, my life partner Sharon and I started taking sailing lessons in San Francisco. We'd never really sailed before, but we had dreams of chartering a boat and sailing the Greek Isles. I had no idea at the time where that decision to learn to sail would take me.

Five days later, halfway around the world, Meredith had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was a healthy, active 33 year old, lifelong sailor living in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and son.

It seems to me, looking back on events, that we were destined to meet. Destined to meet and become friends and create this book. But that all happened two years later.

Through the course of our sailing lessons, Sharon and I learned of the Gay Games (an inclusive sporting and cultural event modeled after the Olympics, open to all). The next one was in November of 2002, in Sydney, Australia, and sailing was one of the events. We decided we had to go and participate, so our sailing efforts shifted from cruising to racing.

In June, 2002, almost two years after we started our sailing lessons, I too was diagnosed with breast cancer as a healthy, active 35 year old. Meredith had finished her treatment one year earlier, and was now considering her own Gay Games appearance as Captain of the Three Cheese Fagottinis.

I was determined to get to Australia that year, and influenced the timing of my treatment as much as I could to ensure I could not only go, but actually compete. Five weeks after my last chemo treatment, my sailing team took silver medals in Sydney Harbour as competitors in the Gay Games. Meredith was there too, captaining her team to a double gold medal performance.

In retrospect, it is amazing how close we came to almost not meeting at all. It was day 5 of a 6 day regatta. It had been an especially terrifying, windy, challenging day on the

water, and many of the sailors were enjoying a post-sail recovery drink in the yacht club. OK, it was all of the Australian sailors plus Sharon and me.

As "luck" would have it, Meredith and I were sitting next to each other. We probably still would not have talked to each other left to our own introverted ways, so the Universe stepped in to give us a nudge. Sharon mentioned that I had just finished treatment for breast cancer, and Meredith turned and gave me a high five. I was totally stunned to meet someone so cool who had been through it too.

The connection and bond between us was immediate. It helped that we were able to laugh about our experiences, that we had similar interests and were the same age. And there was something even deeper than all of that. We both really connected with each other in an instant.

The next day, Meredith gave me her team uniform from the opening ceremonies and I gave her my Team San Francisco jacket. I greeted her and her team at the dock after they clinched the gold. I cried when she stood on the podium and received her medals. Her victory was symbolic for me. Symbolic of her triumph over breast cancer, and that moment was a celebration of living life fully.

I kept thinking about her and the impact she'd had on me for the rest of our trip. I was so amazed to see a survivor go on with their life, being active and fun and happy. I sent her a postcard to say how much our meeting meant to me. And she sent me an email saying the same thing.

By January, we had developed the most amazing friendship through email conversations. We shared the nitty gritty awful stuff about breast cancer. And we shared other aspects of our lives since all of those experiences are interwoven. By February, we both concluded that we'd like to write a book and share our experiences with others.

And here it is. A book that is bigger than either one of us. A project that seemed destined to be way before we met, and maybe even before either of us was diagnosed with breast cancer.

How the Book Came to be

From: Megan

Sent: February 5, 2003

I do have to share this idea. I've been wanting to write some kind of breast cancer book that would be of value. I haven't figured out exactly what the content would look like. I'm thinking that we are compiling a lot of great material with our emails. Maybe 10 years out, when it's not quite so painful, we could write a book together. We could do Oprah together. Of course, we change names to protect everyone (mostly us) and cut anything we feel like cutting. In flipping through my journal, I found the name I came up with months ago that seems to support the email compilation, "So, you think you are done? A

guide to surviving breast cancer when treatment ends." Could be a way to create our own life insurance.

From: Meredith

Sent: February 5, 2003

Love the idea of the book - I was going to suggest much the same thing myself. I got sick of people giving me naff books while I was sick about how to cure yourself of cancer by following the perfect diet and giving up sailing and anything else that was fun. I resolved that I was going to write a book titled, "How I Cured my Cancer by Drinking Champagne, Eating Fattening Food and Traveling to Italy".

I never really made any progress with it - probably because the topic was all still too raw, but also I think through our joint email exchanges we are finding a really unique perspective on things that would be a stronger book anyway.

Honestly I think there are probably a lot of other women out there who feel the same way about all of this as we do, but don't have anyone with the same viewpoint to talk about it with - I mean, we didn't until we met. I can see us now on Oprah's Book of the Month!

Our Point...and we do have one!

*Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything.
They just cry over their condition.
But when they get angry, they bring about a change.*

MALCOLM X

Cancer is so overwhelming and so out of the range of any individual's experience, that when we were diagnosed we both looked actively for role models and resources to help us make sense of what we were experiencing and how to cope.

And although we did come across some extraordinary individuals and useful books, none really matched what we were feeling in the moment and our attitude towards life. At the time in the back of both of our minds was the thought that one day we should each write our own book on how to cope with breast cancer.

Despite that thought, we never got started. It wasn't until we met and started working through the impact of this illness on our lives with the support of each other that we began to clarify the key learnings from our experience and what would be most important to share.

The many email conversations we had shared about the hard stuff became our starting point. When we actually had the opportunity to spend time together again and discuss issues in more detail, the book you are holding began to take shape.

This book is based on a collection of email exchanges, transcripts of live conversations and separate essays we wrote at different stages of our journey. It is episodic in nature, because we focused on key points in our experience that we wanted to explore.

It isn't chronological, because one of the most important things we learned is that this journey is not linear. During diagnosis, treatment and, most importantly, when learning to go on with life afterwards, there are moments of great clarity and insight and moving forward, and those days when things just all fall apart. The key is to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

In writing the book, we discovered some major themes that we wanted to share, and which wind through the conversations on every topic:

How the Heck Do I Cope with This?

Without consciously thinking about and choosing coping strategies, there are things we did during our journey that helped us to make it through the day and keep our momentum, even when things got really hard.

Setting short and long term goals, keeping good things in life, giving ourselves rewards to look forward to, creating reasons to get up out of bed and keep moving – whether it was going to the gym or visiting family - all helped to keep us on track.

Living Life Fully

One of our greatest frustrations after diagnosis was the feeling that someone or something had put restrictions on our life for the first time. We focused on continuing to do the things that were important to us in our lives, and then looked at those things we hadn't done that were important to us, and found a way to make them happen.

Whatever You Choose is OK

Going through the experience of cancer, we found that there is a lot of pressure around choosing your treatment options and in deciding what lifestyle changes should be made, if any.

At a time when you are most vulnerable and scared, you have to make decisions about your health that are far reaching in terms of surgery and further treatment regimes and it is a struggle to maintain your power and be your best advocate.

And there is all the pressure from outside to adopt radical lifestyle changes in the hope it may impact your future prognosis.

We learned how important it is to be a strong advocate, or to find a strong advocate for your health and treatment. And, at the end of the day there is no right or wrong way to cope with a diagnosis of cancer.

Everyone needs to find their own best way forward, learning from other people's experiences, and making your own choices.

Technology and Community

We were fortunate to be diagnosed in an age not only of incredible medical technology, but also communications technology.

Dealing with cancer by yourself can be an overwhelming and daunting exercise, and everyone's experience is different. Finding someone with whom you can connect and feel supported by can be difficult.

Also, dealing with the needs of those around you at a time that your mental and spiritual resources are stretched can be incredibly challenging.

Email played a huge role for us in providing a safe medium for us to get to know each other and eventually discuss the really hard stuff, but also as a key communication tool for our friends and family in updating them on where we were, without a drain on our energy.

The ability of email and the web to build community across great distances is enormous. One of our future goals is developing a web site for breast cancer survivors to help them find the same support. No one should go through this journey alone.

Medical Professionals

When we were diagnosed we found ourselves immersed in a medical world outside our experience. We were very fortunate to have some great doctors, nurses and other health professionals to guide and support us at various stages of our treatment.

Unfortunately, we also had some really negative experiences when the system in which we were caught did not seem equipped to handle our emotional needs.

We hope this book provides some insights to the medical profession about the emotional roller coaster their patients are riding, and how little things that are done through treatment can make a huge difference in their experiences.

Our Journeys

*I think that wherever your journey takes you,
there are new gods waiting there, with divine patience – and laughter.*

SUSAN M. WATKINS

Australia's Breast Cancer Day October 2002

by Meredith Campbell

This story is about journeys – physical journeys, emotional journeys, and spiritual journeys.

September 2000 was a pretty heady month. The Olympics were on in Sydney, Australians were winning just about everything in sight. Some of my friends were competing as members of the Australian Team in Sailing.

I was 33 years old, had a 6 year old son, and was at the peak of my profession. The following month I was due to travel to India to visit programs I had helped fund working with disadvantaged rural women and children. In November I was due to go to London to speak at an International Conference.

Life was pretty damned good. And then on the day that Australia won its first ever gold medals in women's sailing, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Twenty-four hours later I was recovering from surgery and spent my weekend watching the closing ceremony of the Games from my hospital bed.

My plans for traveling were pretty well shot – I was told that within a couple of weeks I would start three months of chemotherapy, followed by three months of radiation treatment, and then another three months of chemo.

Of all of the emotions that I went through at that time, the strongest were of anger and grief. For the first time in my life someone or something had tried to put limitations on me.

I was young and fit and I thought I was going to live forever. And even having made it through treatment and still being well, I can never look at my life going forward in the same way again.

Straight after surgery I sat down to read all the literature, including that on lymphedema, of which I was at risk in my left arm. There was a whole list of things one should avoid doing in order to reduce your risk.

Top of the list was vacuuming. I can happily report – two years, no vacuuming, no lymphedema!!! That’s what I call a clinical trial.

Unfortunately the list also had things on it like not carrying heavy weights, not having strain on that arm for a significant period of time, not getting sun burnt...all the things you generally do when you go sailing.

I spoke with the staff at the hospital and their physio and was told, “Oh no, you won’t be able to sail again.” Once again people trying to put limitations on me.

After a week of ringing around we finally found a physio who was prepared to work with me. After getting my shoulder moving again, she stuck with me developing a gym program so I could keep working out through chemo, and fixing the myriad of things that kept going bung as my treatment progressed.

Just as I was ready to start my second round of chemo, I was offered the opportunity to travel to San Francisco for a conference. My oncologist didn’t need too much persuading to let me go, and I boarded the plane two weeks to the day after my first shot of Taxol.

The only problem was I knew from experience that would be the day my hair (having grown back reasonably during radiation) would be due to fall out. My boss who was traveling with me and who was follically challenged himself had happy fantasies of falling asleep over Hawaii and waking up with my hair!

I packed it full of product, and made it to the hotel with it reasonably intact, before losing it all down the drain in the shower. I have to complement San Francisco as a town because the concierge didn’t bat an eyelid at having someone book in at 3 p.m. with hair and appear an hour later bald.

Not to mention that if you are going to be a bald woman anywhere in the world, San Francisco is guaranteed not to be surprised and in the right quarters you will be downright popular!

Five weeks after finishing my second round of chemo I boarded a plane to India to visit the programs I had helped fund working with poor children and women in the south – the same trip I had postponed a year earlier when I was diagnosed.

At that stage I had about two mm of hair grown back – devastatingly all grey! I have no idea if it’s still grey and have no intention, thanks to Clairol, of finding out!

Most of the kids I was visiting had the same hairstyle and I had great fun pantomiming to them how cool it was we had the same cut. Until one of the staff explained to me that the kids couldn’t work out if I was a Buddhist nun or just had head lice like them!

That trip was amazing to me, because whatever difficulties I had faced over the past year, it was nothing compared to the hardships these women and children faced with dignity and hope on a daily basis.

When I got home I followed through on another long held ambition – to get my motorcycle license and buy a bike! This kept me on the road and busy while preparing for my next challenge – traveling to Florida in April 2003 for the Avon 3-Day Walk for Breast Cancer.

As a professional fundraiser, I'd always been impressed by this fabulous event and had wanted to visit it to learn more. Now I had a personal reason to attend as well.

On 19th April 2002, I lined up with 3,000 other women to begin a marathon 60 mile/100 km walk over three days to raise funds for breast cancer. The weather was gorgeous for the beach but not for walking!

The temperatures were so high that by the time I arrived at the lunch stop on the first day I was greeted by the sight of a line of ambulances. The triage tent had 8 IVs hooked up to people who had become dehydrated. We found out at camp that night 6 people had been taken to hospital on the walk that day alone. Another two collapsed in the showers that night. This was a seriously tough physical event.

The walk was incredibly hard physically and an emotional rollercoaster – around 200 survivors walked in the group, and everyone else had a deep personal connection to the cause. When we finally reached Miami on the last day we were told the walk had netted an incredible \$1.8 million dollars.

At the same time, we were told that on the three days we had walked, 245 women had died in the United States from the disease.

This week I am starting on a new journey with new challenges. I've just left the charity I have worked with for the last 8 years to establish my own consultancy business. I have a brand new motorbike due for delivery next week, and next month I will travel to London to give the presentation I was due to give two years ago.

I don't believe that there is a right way, or a wrong way to deal with a diagnosis of breast cancer and its impact on your life. I did what worked for me – and anyone in this situation has to find their own way to move forward.

If there is a moral or wisdom that I would share from my experiences, it would be to not accept the limitations that others or the disease may try to impose on you.

As I move forward on the next stage of my journey, I live by the words of the American poet, Walt Whitman.

Henceforth

*I whimper no more
Postpone no more
Need nothing...
Strong and content
I travel the open road.*

Why I do Triathlons, June 2003

by Megan Dwyer

I always wanted to be an athlete, and yet never did much about it. I was in the marching band in high school rather than sports. I did play water polo in college and loved it. After graduating, the challenges of becoming an "athlete" seemed even greater if not downright impossible. After all, there are not a lot of adult water polo recreational leagues.

While vacationing in Kona a couple of weeks before the Ironman Triathlon in 1991, I found myself fascinated by people training for what sounded like an insane event. Completing that event would definitely qualify you as an athlete. I bought a T-shirt and started dreaming.

I completed my first triathlon in June 1992 - the Danskin in San Jose. It was a sprint distance (short) triathlon for women only that raised funds and awareness for breast cancer. I completed it with a tequila hang over and can't say I was completely serious about it. I remember being inspired by all the survivors who were doing the Triathlon to challenge themselves and to somehow celebrate being alive.

I spent the next 10 years doing one or two tris a year. Never getting very serious. Never making it past an Olympic Distance. Never feeling like a real athlete. I'd avoided joining the Silicon Valley Triathlon Club since its inception, although I kept close tabs on the progress of the club. I kept thinking I'd join when I was a real athlete. I finally joined last year and made it to my very first track workout in June, 2002. I was training for the San Jose International Triathlon, and decided it was time to get a little more serious about my workouts.

Two days after the track workout, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was 35. I finally knew I was an athlete when 1) my first thought was that I never wanted to compete in the Danskin Triathlon as a survivor, 2) I tried to schedule my surgery around the San Jose International Triathlon and 3) I was more concerned about my presurgery resting heart rate than the procedure itself.

Once I started treatment, I soon learned where the "survivor" term comes from. It's a struggle. A struggle to keep going emotionally and physically. A struggle to remain positive. A struggle to not give up. A struggle to not long for the things you can no longer do. And there really is no choice but to go on...and to survive.

I had started a new career in real estate two months before I was diagnosed. I got my first listing two weeks before my diagnosis. I managed to put together the contract for that sale the weekend before my surgery. I cannot claim that I worked full time during my 5 months of recovery and treatment, but I took care of my clients and took baby steps toward building a successful business.

I faced one of my biggest challenges when I lost my hair to chemo. In sales, appearance can seem like everything. How could I possibly meet with clients? I did what most

women do, I purchased a wig. And I hated it. It did not look like me. And it was hot. Really hot since it was July in Northern California. I couldn't stand it, and I eventually decided to just be myself. At this point of my life, that meant being bald, no matter how difficult that was for me.

I found my clients to be very supportive, and I think it may have even worked to my advantage in negotiations with other real estate agents! It also turned out to be effective in the world of triathlon as my competition thought I had merely shaved my head as a form of intimidation.

I missed the San Jose International Triathlon due to surgery. I refused to think in terms of limitation or slowing down, and I focused instead on my next two goals for the year. Getting through 3 months of chemo and competing in a sprint triathlon in Sydney, Australia in November as part of the Gay Games celebration. I managed both.

It was 110 degrees (42C) for the tri, which was held at the rowing venue for the 2000 Olympics. I had finished chemo 5 weeks before, was on a rented hybrid bike that took more effort to get my hands on than completing the race, and I had trained only as a serious couch potato for 6 months. I finished the tri in 1 hour and 58 minutes, just under my personal goal of 2 hours. And, I did not finish last, which I considered to be a major accomplishment.

I learned that day what makes me tri...I do it for the personal challenge. To push myself and find out what I am really capable of. To feel strong and powerful and unstoppable. To have the opportunity to hang out with some of the most fit athletes in the world. To know that I am fully alive and participating in the best life has to offer.

Because I am an athlete and a survivor.