

Not what I expected

The mammogram or breast x-ray was routine. I went because I knew I should. I had not experienced any lumps or pain. There was caution in the radiographer's voice. I was called back for a biopsy and later learned I had three cancerous spots in the right breast. I didn't cry then and I haven't cried since. That was 18 months ago and I've recently chosen to have breast reconstruction. Next year there will be the third and final operation for reduction of the non-cancerous breast.



Why haven't I cried? What good would it have done? Saintly passive submission to sickness as God's will is not my style. Neither do I want to waste time on 'Why me?' My College Principal said she appreciated my desire to be discreet. 'Oh no,' I replied, 'quite the opposite.' My way of coping was to tell the world: my Access students, my church friends, even my hairdresser. I faced cancer as a fact of life, as a fact in my life. I became fascinated by the euphemisms people used to avoid saying

breast cancer – they referred to my 'operation' and my 'recovery' trying hard not to have to say either 'breast' or 'cancer' and especially not the two words together!

Recovery

Several factors helped my recovery. I didn't need radio or chemo-therapy. I didn't lose strength in my arm. I'm fortunate to have good support from family and friends and had fifty visitors in a week while in hospital in April 2008. This was encouraging but not restful! After the recent reconstruction operation I asked people to text, which many did, rather than visit, and I thank God for the mobile phone. Several friends with breast cancer had been through most of the procedures just ahead of me and I could share with them. After both operations my sister and other friends have come to stay to try and prevent me from doing too much too soon.

I went back to teach four weeks after the first operation. 'Too soon!' cried some but I knew I had missed the satisfaction of teaching. My mental need for my students and colleagues was greater than my physical need for recuperation. Both consultant and GP have given me the responsibility for saying when I should go back to work, which is scary. Fortunately my College and Head of Programme are sympathetic and allow me a reduced timetable at first. Living alone accentuates the need for the structure of work. When you're used to being busy and needed as a teacher, it's a

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challenge to rest without getting bored and isolated. You need to plan people into your day and take yourself out regularly. You need to decide if you're going to travel in between hospital appointments and where to and when.

Three operations and weeks off work were certainly not what I expected in March 2008. Reflecting on why I could accept the loss of a breast without great emotional trauma, I conclude that my security and self-worth have never resided in being physically attractive. They lie in my intellect, personality and Christian identity. I am 'accepted in Christ' Romans 15:7. I have thought a lot about self-acceptance in relation to being single. Breast cancer seemed minor in comparison to living alone and 'complete'. I didn't feel less of a woman because of the mastectomy – breast removal – and I was happy to try using a prosthesis, that is a false breast. However, the weight of this silicone pudding weighing two pounds, stuck in a special pocket sewn into my bra, proved too

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heavy, which is why I went for reconstruction on the NHS. It will be good to be roughly equal after the reduction next year, instead of 36C on the right and 42F on the left! However, I care about comfort and convenience far more than cosmetic attractiveness.

So what have I learned?

Possibly to be content whatever state I am in, Philippians 4:11, doing or not doing, teaching or 'being'. I'm not indispensable as a lecturer. I have value whether or not I am working. This is a good lesson for the challenge of retirement. I'm even more aware of the need for a sense of humour, and I value good conversation as a gift to be enjoyed to the full. I have learned to be thankful; the cancer was treated in time and I suffered very little pain, only discomfort and inconvenience. I have been able to fill the unsought free time with the useful sorting out of decades of paper, plus reading and writing articles, like this one! It was not what I expected but "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. May the Lord's name be praised" Job 1:21. 'See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble'. Hebrews 12:15.

■ Jackie Gooding

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