

## A Hero's Journey — Savoring Life and Opening to Death When Breast Cancer Enters a Friendship

By Debbie Eisenberg Merion



Friends Carol Adams (left) and Debbie Merion (right)

Carol was reclining on the white sheets of a mechanical miracle of comfort we call a hospital bed. She was pushing the control buttons with her tender fingers, causing the mattress to fold and unfold, but still something wasn't right. "Help me adjust my pillows," she asked. "That one has to go in back of my shoulder, and the other one right under my neck." I fiddled with them. "No," she slowly pointed and said softly, "move that over to the left and that top one up." I did. Finally, she sank back into the pillows and relaxed with a deep sigh.

"I'm glad you didn't give up until I got your pillows just right," I said. Carol's cheekbones rose in a surprised smirk, "I learned that from you, you know."

I had forgotten. Four years ago her strong hands had fiddled with my pillows and then rubbed away my runner's muscle pains. She was my professional massage therapist then, my healing hero in her blue polo shirt and white sneakers, as well as my dearest friend and my neighbor one block away. We had met in 1990 when our two-year-old daughters shared a playgroup.

Now my hero wore a flimsy blue cotton hospital gown on the white comfort of a bed at University Hospital. Nine years of tackling breast cancer's hurdles had kept her in the race. She said, "Once you're in a certain place, the place should not be an issue, you just need to move on from there."

But each stumbling block was not gone, because she vividly recalled every decision and dream along her journey. A year earlier, when her hair was short and curly and just coming back in after chemo, she sat at her kitchen table and looked back at how it started:

"I had a routine mammogram in September of 1995 that looked different from the one before. Well, in October I was writing down my dreams a lot and I had a dream that I had this breast on the right with no nipple. And it was just the strangest dream, but when I woke from it, I just knew that I had cancer, probably—that it was going to be cancerous."

"I had a biopsy and it was invasive ductal carcinoma," Carol continued, "and the doctor said, 'I would recommend a mastectomy.' I'd never known about breast reconstruction. And sure enough, the doctor explained how it was done in stages and I would be with this breast with no nipple for a while."

So doctors gave her a new body on the outside as cancer tried to take over her insides. But my friend Carol Adams was a worthy opponent. She'd dutifully swallow pills that made her nauseous. She read books about cancer to her kids, and visited her son's elementary school class to explain to his friends why she had no hair. She'd say, "The will to live is very strong" and "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst."

When a terrific meditation teacher came into my life, I took her meditation class, and then suggested Carol take it too. We practiced peering at life through Buddhist bifocals to focus on both the far-away (death) and the nearby (living each moment to the fullest). It felt right: Carol was Catholic and I'm Jewish, but our spirituality drew us together. Carol learned to inquire into what her pain felt like, rather than flinch in fear. My goal was to release my own strangling reaction to dying.

Carol's love almost crowded the cancer out of her body. Living in the moment kept her going as she smelled her kids' hair, gave tight hugs at every chance she got, and clicked her knitting needles with nimble fingers to weave baby sweaters and intricate scarves. Friends and relatives received her frequent health updates via an active website, and posted inspiring messages back to her.

In her last month, after living with metastatic cancer in her bones and organs for five years, she said, "I've never felt healthier, except for this 'f——' cancer." She went indoor rock climbing. A new radiation oncologist met her and thought she looked so well he couldn't believe she was the patient.

In September Carol was admitted to the hospital to help her liver and kidney function. With closed eyes she patiently listened to me read her a long love letter, then with the potent, distilled speech of the seriously ill, said: "I loved you from the moment I met you." I felt something shift in me and thought, "If she's not afraid to die, I don't need to be afraid of living—without her."

The next afternoon I got a call from her husband Ken to come quickly. It was September 24, 2004, exactly one week after she had entered the hospital, and the start of Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish holiday. Carol had told me a couple weeks before, "I want to die surrounded with family and friends." We huddled around her bed, and took turns holding one of her precious hands. She was straining to breathe and saying her goodbyes, some mundane, some profound, like "I'm sorry" and "I've got to go" and "He speaks."

Death no longer felt terrifying. I envisioned that she was walking into a deep pond, and we could only take her so far, then someone else would have to take her the rest of the way. I watched as one minute she was there in bed, the next minute she had left, and only her body remained, in a blue cotton hospital gown, lying on pillows.

It was just like in her dream. A couple of weeks earlier she had told it to me: "A moving van is coming for me. I don't care if Ken will be ready, but I know I can be. Each night when I have this dream I sit up for real, strip the pillowcase from my pillow, hug my pillow, and I feel I'm ready." Now she had finally slipped off the skin of her pillowcase and her soul had flown away, like feathers rising on a warm summer night's breeze.

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Ken welcomed my synagogue choir, which Carol loved, at her packed funeral at St. Francis Catholic Church. We sang a heartfelt, wordless Chasidic melody as hundreds of church members silently filed up to the front to take communion. Carol's ashes were at the front of the line.

When I'm sad from missing Carol every day, I find some things comforting. "I think you guys are going to miss me a whole lot more than I'll miss you," she had casually mused at her patio table after a discussion about hospice. I'm also convinced our relationship isn't over. I'm still trying to learn what she taught me. And she's already come back to visit me in a dream.

I saw her in my sleep a week after her funeral as she clearly presented herself to me. I felt her same thin fingers I'd held in the hospital room. Her healthy skin glowed on a young version of her face. She said to me, "I had to take control of the disease in order to handle it. It was the only thing I could do." My hero, transformed by her journey, had returned.

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