

**Healing into Deeper Connection with Life:
The Challenge of Cancer**

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to a group of 300 healthcare professionals**

Raku rattle
Leslie story
glasses

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Dr. Cherie Martin Franklin

This presentation will address the journey of healing in body, mind and spirit from cancer. Taking responsibility for your own healthcare and learning how to tap into resources you may have never recognized as valuable before is a huge task when your life is on the line. But that is what is required. Based on her own experience, Dr.

Franklin will present a wholeness approach to healing that combines traditional medicine with the power of presence, community, nature, nutrition, energetic practices, yoga, massage, meditation, prayer, making room for the dark emotions as well as the light, choosing to live, gathering a wisdom team to help you make difficult decisions and trust your intuition, and cultivating ways to keep one's spirits up in the midst of suffering. With a daily focus on one's healing, the disease becomes an opportunity to deepen into your core and strengthen your connection with Source.

I would first like to thank you for offering me the opportunity to speak to you today. It is an honor and a pleasure being here with you. I'd also like to acknowledge Phi Theta Kappa for your study and service work in healthcare. From having to navigate my way through the healthcare maze myself in the past two years, I know how great the need really is. The American Cancer Society reports that one in every three men in this country gets cancer and one in every two women will get it. (CURE: Cancer Updates, Research & Education, The American Cancer Society, Vol. 1, No.4/ December 2002, p. 2.) My gratitude to Tony Ruddy for thinking of me to give this talk.

How many of you are now or have in the past struggled with cancer in your own health journey? And how many of you have someone in your circle of family and friends who has or is dealing with it? (Look around.) The truth is Cancer is an epidemic and no one is immune. There are disturbing environmental reasons—pesticides, toxic metals, etc. for this, but when you're dealing with the disease yourself or in your family, you often don't have the energy to address that bigger picture. We're going to focus during this time on things we can take personal responsibility for and have an impact on, which can provide a source of hope.

Before we begin today I'd like to take a few minutes to have you check in with yourself and bring yourself present here in this room this morning—a simple yet profound practice. So if you would get comfortable in your seat, scootch around in it until you are settled. And then take a long cleansing inhale and a long releasing exhale. (Ring Bowl) Then put your hands on your belly and take another deep breath and see how that is. Now check into your feelings, your emotions. See what is present there right now, without judging or trying to change it in any way. Just breathe and let it be as it is. And now shift your attention to your mind and see what kinds of thoughts are going on. Again, no

judgment, just being aware of what is. Good. Now be aware of your body, feelings and mind as a whole and see if there is anything you need to temporarily set aside so you can be fully present here this morning. (It will be there for you to pick up again whenever you want to!) And then see what the effect on you has been of simply noticing what is true for you in this moment. And finally, notice what it is like in this room right now, sitting with others who are present to themselves in this way.

Good. I'd like to dedicate this talk today and the gift of our attention to the highest good of all beings. So take another deep breath (ring bowl) and as you're ready open your eyes and we can begin. Thank you.

My name is Cherie Franklin. And until April of 2001, my life was rolling along quite nicely. I have a husband of 25 years, two beautiful daughters, ages 27 and 22, and a loving community of extended family, friends and colleagues. I am a psychotherapist specializing in work with women and spiritual psychology—work I love doing, and I've been a meditator for 25 years. But in the winter of 2001 I started to not feel well. After consulting with several different kinds of doctors, no one seemed to have any idea what was wrong. One night I was lying in bed reading when my hand slid across my ribs and felt a lump under my right breast about the size of a walnut. I sat bolt upright and knew this was not something to ignore. The next day I was at the breast center having a biopsy. I just showed up there with no appointment. It was Good Friday and I wasn't going to wait. I was 99% sure it would be benign since my mammogram in August had been fine. But it was very disturbing nonetheless. We had to wait the Easter weekend for the results. When my family Dr. called on Monday afternoon, her voice sounded shaky and she said "It's not good, Cher, it's not good." It was an aggressive form of Stage IV metastatic breast cancer that had already spread to the liver and bones. My oncologist said "This is about as bad as it gets." What do you do when you get news like this? I think I went into shock. And then, with the help of my husband, I started thinking about our treatment options.

But first I had to decide whether I wanted to live or not. Of course I wanted to live for my family. But I have to admit there was a part of me that thought, "I'm really tired. It would be so much easier to just go out." I didn't entertain this thought for very long and was somewhat horrified that I even considered it. But I think it's normal for it to come up. Personally, I found I needed to go beyond the choice to live for the sake of the people I love. I had to find reasons to live for myself, for the contribution I want to make and the simple joy of living on this beautiful green earth. It felt extremely important to clarify my intention because that would be the motive power behind everything I did on behalf of my healing. This meant valuing myself and my life enough to fight for it.

Searching for my truth, I realized what a gift it is to be alive, just to feel the sun on my face. I got really clear I wanted to live. And once I made this decision I could mobilize my energies to move toward treatment with the strong intention to heal rather than waiting for something or someone to heal me. I gathered around me images of women in their strength, taking a stand, goddesses with

weapons in every hand. I set up what we called 'base camp' in our bedroom with these images on the walls. I wore combat boots to my first chemo treatment.

In those early days and weeks after diagnosis, word spread fast in my community, and so many people came forward with prayers, e-mails, visits, cards, flowers, food—it was an awesome thing really—to know that all along this powerful love and goodwill had been waiting in the wings. I felt like it was a state of grace that was resourcing me.

People responded with an outpouring of support that came in every form imaginable. Friends drove for hours to sit by my bed, give foot rubs, go to treatments and cat scans with us, cook for us, and simply to listen to the suffering and fear. Others brought organic vegetables and fruit to our back door. Dear friends came and cleaned the house. Family brought food and tears and laughter. My mother cooked bone marrow soup, which my nutritionist said later was wonderful stuff and wondered how Mom intuitively knew to do that.

Love poured in in all forms. During those first few weeks, I had the uncanny experience of transcendent joy. Here I was with a death-dealing diagnosis of aggressive potentially end-stage cancer, and I was sitting outside on a glorious spring day watching the flowers bloom, listening to the birds sing and receiving love from everyone around me. I felt held and uplifted, like everything would be just fine.

How can we understand this phenomenon—was it just the initial relief that comes from suddenly not having anything expected of you? Or was it the influx of all that healing energy and prayer sent my way inwardly and outwardly? I can only hypothesize. But it served to hold me steady in those early days. Looking back now and knowing the painful journey that lay ahead, I feel like it was an influx of light—a gift really—given from all sides to strengthen me for what was to come. It surprised me. I thought, "Maybe I'm in denial!" This can't be real." But it was. *And* it didn't last. I mention it because I consider it an effect of the healing resources that were already coming to my aid on all levels.—as evidenced by the fact that the lump in the breast shrank to half its size before chemotherapy even began. When I told my oncologist, he looked incredulous and asked, "Are you giving me credit already?" I said, "No, I think it's all the prayers." And I do.

Although there are many things that I and others have found helpful in the healing journey, the reality is that cancer does not discriminate—meat eaters and vegetarians both get cancer. People who eat and drink exactly what they feel like and never exercise get it as do health food & exercise junkies. We don't know what causes cancer and we don't know what cures it. Everything heals somebody and no one thing heals everybody. So how does one approach the maze of options and decision-making involved upon diagnosis? There are not only the doctors' recommendations but the stories of well-meaning friends and family of amazing cures by teas, by traveling to sweat lodges out west with Shamanic healers, eating a total raw-foods diet, switching to a macrobiotic diet,

injecting mistletoe under the skin...How can you possibly know which course to pursue?

It can be confusing and overwhelming at the least, paralyzing at worst.

Of course the most pressing priority initially is the healing of the physical body. There were several things we found helpful in the decision-making process. First, we got opinions from more than one oncologist. Although they both agreed, it gave us more confidence in the treatment recommendations. And secondly, we turned to the people and professionals in our life whom we trust and can confide in. We have several physician friends, folks who work with cancer patients and their families, and other wise women and men who know medical crisis in their own lives. We named this group our **"wisdom team."** And whenever we had to make a treatment decision, we would call some of them and see what they thought. Then we took their input and held it up against our own intuitive sense of what felt most right. And invariably we were able to make a decision that turned out well.

Remember, you have to consider the person you uniquely are, not just what the statistics say. Both my oncologists predicted I would have about 18 months to live. When I heard that prognosis, I immediately threw it over my shoulder and forgot about it. I hardly let myself know I had heard it. That was 2 years ago. You have to insist on being seen as the person you are and not just as the disease you have. If I had listened to them, I might not be standing here today. I just knew that was not going to be me.

Healing resources abound, both inside us and all around us. And it helps to remember they're there. My sister, who is a physician, said when I was first diagnosed—"remember—your body has a lot of **health** in it, even though it also has this disease." And that supported my strategy of strengthening what was healthy in me to fight that which was diseased and destructive. So in addition to traditional interventions like chemotherapy, an absolute necessity without which I probably would not be here today, I added a number of alternative healing modalities. I went through a radical nutritional detox program of raw foods and then worked with a nutritionist to change my diet to reduce the stress on the cells and added nutritional supplements to strengthen the immune system and reduce toxins. I consulted a Chinese Herbalist who put together bags of bark, mushrooms, grasses, sticks and strange natural weeds which I cook up in a crock pot --"The Great Mother in my Kitchen" I call it. And I drink the herbal juice twice a day. It is the only substance known to humankind to put energy back into the body—drugs cannot do this.

I started juicing, I walked as much as I could and made time for rest as much as I needed it. I practiced yoga, meditation, prayer, and got massages and acupuncture. But the particular interventions that have been right for me are not what matters here. What is important is to put in place practices that you are comfortable with, have some faith in and derive some comfort from. Because this descent into the underworld involves not just a physical healing process but

a soul journey as well—a descent into the depths of who you are and why you're here.

After all the medical decisions are made and you've committed to a certain path, you have to surrender the outcome and live with the uncertainty of what lies ahead. And in the wake of all that initial activity, there come waves of feelings and emotions that can be extremely disturbing.. There is the fear of losing your life, the sadness of not being able to be the person you were before, the loss of identity of that person, the anger that this happened to you, the confusion and question of why it happened, and the anxiety of what your life will look like in the future, if you have one.

In my case, and I imagine many others, the people closest to me, especially my life partner, John, were going through their own trauma. Suddenly the person they are living with is not the same—she has no hair, she spends more time in bed, she's not as happy, she has to undergo all kinds of treatments that cause unpleasant side-effects. Everyone is fearful of the outcome and has no guarantees. Also, the balance of who does what at home may have to shift, as the sick person doesn't have as much energy as before. It can be a trying time. I have to thank my husband, John, for walking through this with me every step of the way, always reassuring me: 'whatever it takes, Cher, whatever it takes.' (of course, all the while going on inside of me was the fear that he would leave me.)

Embracing trust or faith in something larger than yourself—the Source in whatever form makes sense to you--and drawing on that to get through the day is an indispensable tool. But sometimes even this is difficult. There have been times when I couldn't pray or meditate at all. I was so angry at the Divine for letting this happen that I couldn't draw on it. I didn't know where to turn at times like these. And with all my tools, I judged that I should be able to do better than that. But beating myself up for how I was going through it was not helpful either. Accepting things as they were and knowing it was temporary enabled me to keep breathing and stay calm.

But one morning, I remember sitting on our front porch crying and filled with anxiety. John and I decided that going to be near the ocean was the only thing that made sense. So he made up a bed in the back of our SUV, I climbed in and laid down, and we drove to the shore. Walking on the beach, smelling the salt air, and listening to the waves enabled me to find my inner ground again. It was a matter of being able to get from one minute to the next. And the ocean helped—"Grandmother Ocean" who is always there, no matter what happens in our little lives.

Learning to nurture ourselves rather than do what others (or parts of ourselves) expect is essential for healing. Learning to say what Virginia Satir called "our real yes's and our real no's"—learning to value ourselves enough to live our life rather than everyone else's is life-saving. Women, especially, in this culture are conditioned to take care of everyone else and give their own energy away. I have learned in healing from cancer that this has to change. I have to see this pattern, recognize when I am doing it, and work daily on doing what is right for

me rather than everybody else. Not an easy thing to change after over 50 years of practice.

This little poem says it well: It's called "No Lifeguard on Duty":

- ☐ it is difficult
- ☐ when one is drowning
- ☐ to wave to the people
- ☐ on shore.
- ☐
- ☐ one wants to be
- ☐ friendly, of course,
- ☐
- ☐ but perhaps it is
- ☐ more important
- ☐ to keep
- ☐ swimming.
- ☐ --Lois Tschetter Hjelmstad
- ☐

There will never be a better time to find out what you want for yourself.

I wrote several poems about my real no's. Here is a short one:

No.

I will not give up my coffee.

It's only one cup—

That deep java joy,

That scent seducing me down the stairs to the kitchen

Welcoming me to the day

Like no other—

My morning lover.

How could such a thing

Be bad for you?

Finding your real yes's and your real no's sometimes involves telling people things they don't want to hear. When you have cancer, many people feel much better hearing that you're feeling and doing well, than learning about how awful you feel. Having the courage to speak my truth when it includes things others are not comfortable with has been part of my healing. This journey inevitably brings with it sadness, fear, despair, grief, discouragement, anger, depression, and other dark emotions. I felt tremendously disillusioned—I thought if you lived a good life and served others, things like this wouldn't happen to you. Apparently that is not true—and it uprooted a part of my belief system and left me not knowing what to believe. Again, practicing simply being with these feelings is powerful medicine, however difficult. It is what I help my clients do every day, and it is the medium through which healing happens.

The poet Rumi writes that 'being a person is like being a guesthouse. Joy, depression, illness, and fear come as unexpected guests. Our job is to welcome every guest, even if they are a crowd of sorrows. Each may be a guide to further

understanding.' Susan Kuner, one of the authors of *Speak the Language of Cancer*, says: "If I die of cancer, I do not want my obituary to say: 'She lost the battle with cancer.' Instead, please write 'She welcomed every guest.' And that she lived—and died—in the best way she knew how." (Susan Kuner, Ed.D. in *Speak the Language of Healing*, Conari Press, Berkeley, CA, 1999, p. 52)

Speaking of the battle, I find that I don't like the language "You're going to beat this thing." First of all it doesn't seem to me that it's only about "beating it." Going through it is such a transformational, if painful, process that to reduce the whole thing to "beating it" misses its power and gifts. Secondly, I know that I am not doing the work of healing alone. A profoundly important part of the healing process is **community**—which can mean many things. One thing it can mean is friends and family drawing near to provide support, soup, rides to treatment or whatever is needed. Another thing community can provide is sacred ritual, which humans have created throughout time. My loved ones arranged for a healing circle for me where we gathered in a circle and did things like sing, give voice to what is in our hearts, drum and pray. In my circle, my friends passed this handmade raku rattle around while music played in the background and when the rattle came to them, they would hold it in their hand, say a silent prayer, and then shake it forcefully with conviction. Now when I pray I hold this rattle and shake it and know that I am unleashing all those prayers at the same time, like a flock of white doves.

Before I was sick myself, I led many healing circles for friends and colleagues. In some of those circles everyone chose an object of nature to symbolize a strength or quality they wished for the ill person and then placed the object in a pouch we called a "medicine bag" which the person could carry with them to their treatments. In another circle we did laying on of hands. In another one, the person was too ill to be in the room, so we said all the prayers and sent them to him long-distance. He knew we were gathered and he opened himself to receive what was coming towards him. These are ancient rituals, ways of calling in the Sacred, admitting that we cannot heal alone and invoking the help of Sources beyond ourselves.

There is a reciprocity of giving and receiving that goes on which changes all who are involved. I had to allow and accept my vulnerability, my need for help and I had to be willing to let others see it and provide help. This wasn't easy for someone who had been identified with independence, self-sufficiency and Not needing help. Those who gave were changed as well—as they later told me—they were faced with the realization that if this could happen to me (someone they saw as doing good in the world and taking good care of herself then it could happen to them.) Somehow it brought home the reality we lose sight of—that we're all the same and we're all in this together—that in fact we are One and Life is sacred. My illness brought into the foreground the preciousness as well as the fragility of life and prompted me and others to make profound life changes.

Personally, it has given me an opportunity to discover which parts of myself had gotten too much air time in my personality and which parts had been left behind

in the process of trying to live up to others' expectations. There is the invitation to major transformational healing on many levels—a stripping away of well-developed parts of my persona and making room for other parts that need more expression. I've started playing the piano again and sketching. I'm taking up archery which I loved as a child. And I plan to do more singing.

You know people ask you lots of questions when you have cancer---questions like 'what kind do you have?' 'How are they treating it?' 'When is your next chemo?' And 'how are you feeling?' Some people make comments like "Oh, your face is puffy from the steroids." Did they think I hadn't noticed? The truth is, most people want to be helpful or comforting, but don't know what to say or do. It is not always easy to answer the question "What can I do to help?" when asked. We found two ways to deal with this. Have friends help you make a list of things that others can do to help. Or ask the person offering help: "What *can* you do? What would you *like* to do?" I found people bringing prepared food that I could eat, given the choices I had made, and someone sitting with me rubbing my hands or feet to be especially comforting and helpful.

Hardly anyone asks: 'What are you learning?' Yet, the journey through the fire can't help but teach you things. And if you pay attention to this level of the experience, this question, "What am I Learning?" you will gain insight into parts of your personality that may have served you in the past, but now need to change. Like practically every woman I've worked with has a part of her that wants everyone to be happy and taken care of, so much so that she loses access to the knowledge of *what she wants* and needs as well as the entitlement to let herself ask for it. My journey has given me plenty of opportunities to see myself giving my energies away instead of getting nourished myself. This is definitely part of my disease because it results in a loss of soul. It is not life-giving. The fact that your life hangs in the balance brings these patterns into focus and makes it possible to look deeply into them and their roots. Not a comfortable process! But inevitable in a rite of passage. And again, you need rituals to help you through: personal rituals like lighting a candle every morning and drawing energy up into your body from earth with your imagination and breath, saying a prayer, seeing a therapist, or writing in a journal.

It is a temptation to try to figure out why you got cancer or what it means. And there are many people out there who are ready to tell you what they think. But no one can interpret another's disease. Meaning takes time to unfold, and only the person living it can know that meaning over time.

There is also a temptation to try to always be strong. Other people want you to feel good and stay positive. But that is not always possible. And it's not about being strong all the time. It's about knowing when to mobilize your strength in order to deal with something hard, and knowing when to let go and allow yourself to be taken care of by people who love you. Both are helpful at the right time. Plus you have times when you are not feeling strong. You feel sad and weak, you feel grief for all the losses—the many things the disease has taken from you, including life as you've known it, your identity as you were before cancer. These are tough things to be with and let yourself feel. But that is what

is most helpful—to be present to these experiences, cry the tears, yell the rage, face the terror. Having someone sit with you as you do provides a container that makes it much easier to go through.

There is so much learning that goes on in the depth places of who you are—like the questions: ‘why am I in this world? What did I come to do? What do I love?’ And my favorite—‘What is mine to do?’—Because it becomes obvious how precious life is and you start wanting to live it to the fullest while you can, enjoy it, and find the things that bring you pleasure and joy. Roberto Assagioli said “When joy is present, war is impossible.” Think about this being true inside the body as well as outside.

To experience joy, you have to be present for it—you have to be awake and aware in all your senses in the present moment, not preoccupied with the past or the future. This is not the way we usually live. So learning how to be present to yourself is an essential part of healing. Because you have to be present in order to know what is going on in your body, your feelings, your mind, your spirit and your relationships. And there are healing resources to draw from in all of these. The little exercise we did as we began today is helpful in becoming present to whatever is going on inside.. We tend to welcome the positive feelings more easily than the negative ones, but a healing journey includes an abundance of both. Often, part of the work involves learning how to just be with, feel and not run from the dark side—the sadness, grief, anger, depression—to let it have the time it needs to flow through, be felt and named. Having a trusted friend or therapist to do this with is invaluable. Because again, you are going through a rite of passage that requires containment. The focused and unconditional presence of another person provides that containment within which the feelings and deeper meanings can be safely unfolded and understood.

At the same time, when the depression gets very dark and takes away all your motivation, you have to find ways to lift your spirits and get back to radical hope. This happened to me this fall when the cancer spread to my brain--a scary thing in itself. I had to have whole-brain radiation—every day for 18 days. I found myself deeply depressed, unmotivated, and not knowing what to do with myself. I felt fatigued and disconnected from any sense of Source. I simply did not feel like myself at all. It scared me and those close to me. And I had to find things to say to myself to counteract my fear that I would never be the same.

Whatever you are saying to yourself inwardly has a powerful effect. Because **energy follows thought**. We have things we say to ourselves all the time without awareness that deplete our energy rather than lift it—negative judgments, criticisms, hopeless statements. When we can notice that these are going on, we can replace them with affirmations of what we want to have happen, such as: “Every cell in my body is filling with light, vitality and life.” “My heart is pumping to every cell in my body all that it needs to be in perfect health.” “I will be here to live a long life with my family.” Your unconscious only hears the words whether you believe them or not. So, even if parts of you don’t believe these affirmations, they have a beneficial effect on your body, feelings, mind and spirit. During the radiation, I would remind myself that this is temporary, my

brain can regenerate any good cells that might get damaged, and my creativity will return. It was the most difficult thing I've ever been through, but eventually the light began to return, as did my imagination, sense of humor, creativity and motivation.

Another tool I created for myself I call "Royal and Loyal." I imagine that I am a royal personage wearing a crown and standing with dignity. My first job is to be loyal to this royal person—myself. Where in our culture are we taught this? Especially when we're sick (and all the time really) we need to keep a healing space around ourselves in which we can deepen inwardly and things can change or be at peace or whatever they need to do so we can come back into balance.

A friend and colleague asked me recently a wonderful question for anyone to consider: *"What do you say to yourself to help you stay hopeful?"* The first answers that came for me were:

- *I go moment to moment, staying present, trusting and having courage.
- * I keep affirming, envisioning and feeling the desired outcome of health, vitality, light and healing in every cell of my body. And
- * I am determined not to leave my family early!!!"

Dealing with the possibility of death is an important part of coping with the disease. I dealt with it emotionally first and then through some sand-tray work, which is an artistic and therapeutic way of working with the psyche using symbols. You choose objects to place in a tray of sand to tell the story of your life in some way. When I was doing mine, I chose a Native American figure paddling a canoe. I placed the canoe at the top of the sand tray, not knowing what it represented. The art therapist said "do you know what that is?" I said "no." She said "It's a Spirit Boat. The Native Americans would put their mother's body in it at death and send her down the river to the next world." Without knowing it, I had chosen an object that symbolized death. So I decided to "keep the Spirit Boat at the top of my sand tray" —meaning stay aware of death as a possibility—just keep it there so I didn't forget about it. To name it and acknowledge the possibility can free up energy around it and reduce fear. And thoughts and feelings about the possibility wash over me in waves, sometimes when I'm least expecting them. They are just a part of the process.

I also don't save my good clothes anymore for some distant special occasion. This is it—right here in the present, what we choose to see and what we do with it. And we lose the present when we spend time worrying about the future. So find things to be grateful for and feel joy in—it's good medicine.

As Marion Woodman reminds us, the images we eat are as powerful as the food we feed our body. Studies have shown that healing images change the chemistry of the body for a month afterwards. Negative or destructive images do too. This means that if you watch a movie with an uplifting theme, those images will have a positive effect and stay with you. The same is true however for movies with brutality and violence. Or images in the news for that matter.

In having the privilege of working with people with cancer in my practice, I have seen the transformative power of visualization and imagery. Some of my clients tell me they can't "do imagery." Rachel Naomi Remen says in response, "do you know how to worry? Then you know how to do imagery—we're doing it all the time!" But when you're facing a death-dealing disease, this is one inner process you can take charge of and use in service of your healing.

One woman I was working with had cancer in many places throughout her body. I asked her to get an image of a wise being who was important to her. For her that being was Jesus. What followed was a dialogue in which she cried and talked with him about what she considered her "failures." Jesus, of course, was compassionate, encouraging her to forgive herself and assuring her that He had forgiven her. And then she got quiet. I asked her to tune into her body and tell me what she was experiencing. She lit up all over and said "It's like my whole body is tingling—my whole body is a butterfly bush with hundreds of butterflies around it. It's so beautiful!" As you probably know, the butterfly is a symbol for transformation. When she opened her eyes, she looked down and saw my butterfly ring for the first time. She was amazed that it was there the moment she opened her eyes.. She loved it. So I took it off and slid it onto her finger. I didn't see it again until several weeks later when her husband gave it back to me after her funeral. She was very ill. But her soul sent her this profound healing image that helped her in her last days. (Not one butterfly, but a whole bush full!)

The psyche is trustworthy in its symbol-making. Whatever comes is what is needed. We can't possibly know what the person needs. But their Soul knows.

Another woman came to me wearing a wig, wanting to learn how to use imagery with her cancer. At first she thought she should have those little pacman figures eating up the cancer cells. But the truth for her was that she saw her cancer as "a pearl"—positive and necessary—helpful to her. It prompted much inner work and outer artistic expression. We worked together for about 8 years. Her hair grew back, she changed her life, she created more paintings, and she became a grandmother.

Another way our psyche speaks to us is through dreams. I look back in my journal and see many prophetic dreams. In terms of my cancer, there was a dream of me being in a huge truck that was speeding out of control toward the ocean.

Then I had a healing dream--a reassuring dream at a time when I very much needed it—the dream was happening before I was born. And in it, I knew the purpose of my life, I knew what I was doing here and it was all good.

In another dream during the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament, Serena Williams told me it was "ok to win!" I laughed and took this as a message to "Go for it, Don't be afraid to fight for it, heal and win over the cancer." In another dream, someone named "Travel Lightly" was writing me a letter. The psyche is often not subtle! Let go of old baggage and simplify my life!

The woman I quoted earlier, Susan Kurer and three other women wrote a book called *Speak the Language of Healing: Living with Breast Cancer Without Going to War*. It is about seeing cancer as an initiation rather than a war. Cancer IS an initiation—in that it transforms you—it is trial by fire. And if you're only seeing the healing process as a battle, the subtler journey of the soul can get missed. At the same time, in my own process, I found I also needed to mobilize aggressive **fight** energy in order to go through the treatments and do what was required. I needed to find inside myself what I call "**my fight place**." It took over a year to find. And it happened when I wasn't looking—I was walking across the grocery store parking lot, thinking, "I want to fight for my life but I'm not sure I know how." Once I realized that's what was going through my head, I saw how this issue of having to do it *perfectly* was stopping me. I said to myself—"There is no right or perfect way to do it, I know lots of ways!"--setting my intention, using my sword to set boundaries, being a mother lioness protecting her cubs, using all my tools. And instantly, I felt my head lift up, my shoulders go back with a sense of personal dignity, my feet solidly root down into the earth, my breath expand, my determination spread out deep and wide. And I thought: "This is **my fight place**. I have to remember this place and find it again when I am feeling dissipated or tired of going through this ordeal. " It takes courage and that deep intention to live. I keep the image of my whole being filled with healthy, radiant, vital life force in my mind as much as I can. I breathe it in through every pore. And I let the energies of the earth, the air, the sun, moon and stars help me.

Nature is a vast healing resource that is all around us all the time. I had some experiences with it that taught me that it is a part of my community--that old phrase "communion of saints." The first instance of this involved mice. All winter before I got sick, mice had been showing up in my bathroom. We had lived in this old farmhouse for about 18 years yet this was the first time the mice had ever stormed the bathroom. They were nibbling the soap and leaving droppings everywhere. I had to do something because it could be, I thought, a health hazard. I wasn't feeling well and even wondered whether I could be picking up some contamination from the mice. So, reluctantly, I bought mousetraps and began catching them at night. In all, over a dozen lost their lives. Only months later, after my diagnosis, did I learn that one of the cancer drugs that would save my life, Herceptin, was an antibody derived from mice. And I thought: "The mice were carrying something I needed and were coming to me to help." I was so touched that I had to draw a picture of these little furry creatures who had died in that effort. It was my way of giving gratitude to them.

Secondly, the bluebirds: bluebirds kept showing up all around our house. I would be sitting on the front porch and they would land on the branch of the pine tree closest to me. I would look up and they would be flying across in front of me. One day, I was sitting in the living room and a bluebird started flying against the window, as if she were trying to get in. I went outside and shoed her away, afraid she'd break her neck flying into the glass. But she kept at it. I felt she was trying to help somehow in my healing. So I went outside again and talked to her—I thanked her and told her I was ok and she could fly away now. But the following day, I found her beautiful blue-feathered body limp on the

ground out back. I couldn't help thinking that she had sacrificed herself on my behalf. It may sound like a naive or self-centered interpretation—I've thought that myself, but people I trust have encouraged me not to discount my intuitive sense about it, so I haven't.

And there were other creatures who appeared in unusual numbers and places—hummingbirds on the front flowers, chipmunk, squirrels and groundhogs who ran up on the porch and deck, which we had never seen happen before. A pack of fox-kits playing in our driveway. And a mother rabbit nursing her babies right out in the open in front of us. I felt gratitude for them all. As if they sensed that something was wrong, and were showing up to offer their energies. The earth and her creatures are part of our Source and they can be allies in our healing. Our culture is for the most part disconnected from Source, so it takes a shift in perspective to reconnect with this awareness.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen reminds us that "for 3000 years, the meaning of medicine has been the service to Life, and this is what we have the humility to serve it." She says "Now medicine sees its task as fixing life. But we serve life not because it's broken but because it is holy."

To me, inner community is also what is meant by "the communion of saints"—the coming together of Beings on the other side, spirits not embodied who are called on to assist and who respond. I have called daily on my healers and helpers on the other side. I have communed with them and visualized their healing hands on my body, transmitting to it light and energy. My experience is that they always answer the call.

In ancient cultures these things were taken for granted. Families put out food at night for the ancestor spirits to ask them for healing, guidance and wisdom when needed. Calling on those who have gone before us is something we can do as well. Those who have crossed into the invisible world can continue to be a resource for us. All we have to do is turn to them and ask, as we do our friends and family.

Take a deep breath right now if you would, and close your eyes for a moment. Center yourself inside and call around you a circle of your most supportive loved ones—living or dead --and imagine yourself in the middle of this loving circle, receiving their energetic support. Feel what it is like to be in their presence.

See their faces. Look into their eyes. And take a moment to ask for their help in some aspect of your life at this time. Just stay present to what happens in your imagery, what is done and what is said. Be receptive to their energies extending to you in whatever way you most need it right now.

Then thank them for being there and for whatever they may have given you. Feel your feet on the floor. And, if it feels alright to you, reach out and join hands with the person on either side of you. Let us just hold and feel the energy,

connection and presence that is in this room right now, and if you like, imagine radiating it out to anyone you know who needs it.

As you do that, I'm going to end with a poem, *Love after Love*, by Derek Walcott.

The time will come
When with elation,
You will greet yourself arriving
At your own door, in your own mirror,
And each will smile at the other's welcome,

And say, sit here, Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you

All your life, whom you ignored
For another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf.

The photographs, the desperate notes,
Peel your image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

(Shake the rattle.)

Thank you very much.

Q&A

Please take one of these on your way out—it is a story I wrote about a visit to see my college friend, Leslie, who was living with and dying from cancer.