

An Interview with Ann Arbor Attorney and Activist, Molly Reno, on Cancer, Photography and Healing

(Molly Reno is a known and respected lawyer, feminist and political activist, with deep roots in the Ann Arbor community. She is a resolute and kind woman of great humor, never far from a mischievous twinkle. She is also a long-time friend of Crazy Wisdom Bookstore. Last year, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and her medical challenges have motivated her to do some very interesting, and beneficial, healing work. Living with cancer, and growing from the experience, is such an important issue in our society, and we are grateful to Molly for her willingness to talk about her own growth and healing. The interviewer is Molly's good friend, Jonathan Ellis, a Florida-based spiritual director with strong ties to Ann Arbor, and to Crazy Wisdom.)

Jonathan Ellis: When I was a child, a relative gave me a very old camera. It was so old that it took me a while to find the right size film for it, but when I did, I spent the whole next week looking for things to take pictures of. I can remember how excited I was when the pictures came back and I got to see something I actually photographed. I mounted the photographs in an album and was so excited by the process and the result. Tell me about your interest in photography and how it developed.

Molly Reno: My interest in photography took off last year when I attended a Healing Retreat in Maine entitled Photography as Meditation. The premise of the retreat was that taking a good photograph requires being present to what is in front of you — thus photography as a

and leaning on it to express my sense of being weighted down by commitments. Each day, the photographs were printed. We met as a group and used the photos as a springboard to discuss our lives, changes we wanted to make and ways to bring about those changes. It was an innovative way to get to know each other and to engage in deep personal learning.

Jonathan Ellis: What were some of the other photography assignments?

Molly Reno: One exercise was to photograph both 'the death of beauty' and 'beauty in death'. We walked to a bog where there were dead trees, decay and new life. People took some amazing pictures. In our discussion afterwards we discussed the cycle of life, our images of death and our feelings about our own death.

Another day, we examined the shadow side of ourselves using the Jungian concept of shadow and contrasted it with our higher selves. Two of the co-leaders were professional photographers, and they posed each individual so as to show her shadow side and then took a second photograph of each person's higher self. We were given copies of these photos with a recommendation that we look at them each day to remind ourselves that with intention we can choose which aspect of self we want to operate from.

Jonathan Ellis: The Healing Retreat you went to was offered particularly for women with cancer?

Molly Reno: Yes. The Healing Retreats are offered to women with cancer or other life threatening illness. Doctors, nurses and other caregivers can also attend the retreats to replenish themselves.

Jonathan Ellis: Molly, when were you diagnosed with cancer?

Molly Reno: I was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2003.

Jonathan: Those who encounter cancer often go through a number of stages from the first suspicions to diagnosis to treatment, hopefully, to cure or remission. What was it like for you? What were the stages of your experience?

Molly: I had what I thought was a routine call back on a mammogram. I was somewhat annoyed because I had been called back 4 months earlier and had a biopsy for what turned out to be calcification. I assumed I was stuck on the medical treadmill and more of my time would be sucked up over nothing. I was totally blown away when the surgeon told me it was breast cancer. I have been a vegetarian for many years, I exercise, I meditate, do yoga. I did not consider myself a candidate for breast cancer.

Jonathan: As you began to deal with the shock of it, what helped you, I suppose first, with the acceptance of it? The reality of it?

Molly: My first thought was to get on the phone and call my brothers and sisters and close friends. As I tried to decide whom to call first, I experienced a moment of grace. I realized that rather than stepping into action, I needed to just sit with the news that I had cancer and try to let it sink in. I needed to ponder what it would mean to me to undergo treatment over the next few months before I

Photo by Nina Hauser



Photo by Molly Reno



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form of mindfulness meditation. One of the course leaders was Elizabeth Opalenik, a professional photographer. Elizabeth believes that every photograph is a self-portrait, that every photograph reveals the photographer.

Jonathan Ellis: Tell me about the photography aspects of the Healing Retreat.

Molly Reno: Photography was used as the primary form of expression at the retreat. Each day we were given digital cameras and a photography assignment. The first day's assignment was 'Using nature as a metaphor, take a picture of yourself as you are now and another picture of yourself as you would like to be.' So we were asked to photograph an aspect of nature that illustrated a characteristic of our current lives which we found problematic.

The retreat center is located in the woods and on the ocean so there were many beautiful areas to walk in contemplation and take pictures of nature. I was feeling burdened by too many work commitments and I photographed a rock formation which had a tree growing around

externalized my experience in conversation with others.

My partner, Susan, and I lit a fire and sat down in front of the hearth with our best bottle of wine, fruit, some bread and cheese. As we tried to absorb the breast cancer diagnosis, it came to me that there were many things in my life that I still had to be grateful for starting with having a partner like Susan with whom to face this challenge.

We began to name all of the things in our lives that we were grateful for, realizing that these things would still be present despite my cancer diagnosis. I consider it a moment of grace to have focused on things we were grateful for in order to create an overall context in which to approach the news of cancer and the upcoming treatments.

The other thing you have to do when you get diagnosed with cancer is to become an 'expert' on available treatments so you can make your own treatment decisions. So first you are hit with this stunning news and then you are galvanized into action in order to understand what is being recommended and to be able to make wise decisions.

My first surgeon made a treatment decision to do a lumpectomy instead of a biopsy without discussing it with me. I thought I was having a biopsy and only found out later that he did a lumpectomy. That was a wake up call for me to do my own research and to take charge of my treatment decisions. Needless to say I got a new surgeon.

Jonathan: You underwent cancer treatments?

Molly: I was fortunate that my cancer was detected early — it was Stage I so I had a lumpectomy and a re-excision but did not have to have chemo. I declined radiation treatments but I take tamoxifen.

Jonathan: Some people speak of the gifts of cancer.

I was totally blown away when the surgeon told me it was breast cancer. I have been a vegetarian for many years, I exercise, I meditate, do yoga. I did not consider myself a candidate for breast cancer.

Molly: I would not describe cancer as a gift. Too many people's lives are ravaged or ended by cancer to call it a gift. However, facing the personal challenges that come from cancer or other life threatening illness can bring about personal transformation. For me being diagnosed with cancer triggered a feeling of deep vulnerability, which although very disturbing and tremendously uncomfortable has overall been good for me.

I think I have avoided feelings of vulnerability all of my life. In retrospect becoming a lawyer was probably a hedge against feelings of vulnerability, a way of protecting myself by becoming more powerful. Being diagnosed with cancer was such a jolt; my illusions of control over my life were decimated. I could not help but face my vulnerability.

When I was at the Healing Retreat, I had an even deeper experience of my own vulnerability. Something about the setting of Retreat, the exquisite natural beauty, watching the tides come in and out, witnessing the sun rise over the ocean every morning, having someone prepare delicious, healthy food, morning yoga and meditation all served to create a very deep sense of safety which in turn allowed me to experience my vulnerability on a deeper level. I came to understand that for me owning my vulnerability is tied to self-acceptance. I think feelings of vulnerability have softened me in a good way.

Being diagnosed with a life threatening disease has forced me to face my mortality. Life is finite and my life is finite. From this understanding I have new motivation to make sure I use my time well. The cancer diagnosis has provided me with motivation to pursue new paths now rather than later.

Jonathan: What are the life changes you have made that you attribute to cancer?

Molly: Cancer has given me motivation to make certain changes in my life. I have been a lawyer for over 25 years. As a lawyer, I rely to a great extent on my intellect. This is not to say I don't use my heart when practicing law but most often people come to lawyers to analyze legal problems. I brought a certain intellectual capacity to the law and practicing law has served to further develop my mind. For some time, I had been looking for an opportunity to focus more on feelings and have more heart based connections.

I resonated in such a deep way with the experiences at the Healing Retreat Center in Maine that I asked if there might be a role for me. I was offered the opportunity to train to lead Healing Retreats. I have gone to a couple of training sessions including a weeklong training in somatics at the Feathered Pipe Ranch in Montana. This summer and fall I am apprenticing at the 5 Healing Retreats in Maine. I am excited by the work of the Retreats.

Jonathan: What's the training like?

Molly: The training is very humbling. Very humbling because to be a good retreat leader, you have to speak from the heart. I am used to speaking from my intellect. As a lawyer, when I speak to juries and other groups, I'm always

Photo by Nina Hauser



emotions live in the body and emotions such as anger, anxiety, grief and depression cause chemical changes which have many negative effects on the body such as raising blood pressure and/or depressing the immune system to name a few. Other emotions such as joy or peace of mind serve to stimulate the immune system.

This is not to say we are to blame for our cancer or illness—genetics, environmental contamination and some traumas are beyond our control. However we can create an interior environment to promote healing and the optimal functioning of the immune system.

At the retreat we explore what it means to heal. A premise of the retreat is that healing occurs on the emotional, spiritual and physical levels. We can take responsibility for healing on the emotional and spiritual level and such healing will not only make us feel better and allow us to lead more fulfilling lives but spiritual and emotional healing serve to promote an internal environment which supports the immune system and promotes its optimal functioning.

We do not have control over whether we heal on the physical level due to factors such as genetics and environmental contamination. However, spiritual and emotional healing enhances the likelihood of physical healing or cure.

Jonathan: Are all of the retreats aimed at women with cancer?

Molly: All of this year's retreats are aimed at women. Next year there may be some retreats for men including a retreat for men who have had heart attacks. Research shows that anger is more of a determinate than cholesterol as to who is a candidate for a heart attack

Jonathan: Some of the retreats include photography as an element, or do all of them?

Molly: All of the retreats include some form of creativity—photography, writing, story telling, and movement. Creativity is important because to create something is to bring an idea or concept from the realm of possibility into existence. In the retreats we exercise the same creative muscle needed to become the creators of our own lives and bring things from the realm of the possible into being.

Jonathan: Tell me about the location of the retreat center you attended.

Molly: It's located in Georgetown, Maine on an island in Boothbay Harbor about an hour north of Portland. It is a relatively undeveloped area. Lots of space between the houses and lots of trees. You don't really see other houses from the retreat center.

Jonathan: What's the retreat center itself like? Is it one building?

Molly: It's one building. It's a wooden chalet that was built around the turn of the last century by a Boston photographer, F. Holland Day. Fred, as he was called, often brought immigrant children from the tenements of Boston to his chalet to spend a couple of weeks during the summer. One of the children he mentored was the poet, Kahlil Gibran.

Jonathan: Yes, who went on to be an author of The Prophet and so many other books.

Molly: Yes, so the house has a history and a certain energy and presence to it.

Jonathan: How would someone find out about the retreats?

Molly: There is a web site www.fhollanddaycenter.org and anybody who might be interested could contact me. I would be glad to talk with them about it and there are scholarships available.

Jonathan: Do you feel that since you are a woman who has had a serious illness that this gives you a particular base to work with other women who are confronting serious health challenges?

Molly: Yes, I think that it does. One of the powerful aspects of the retreat for me was being with eight other women, all of whom had a diagnosis of cancer. All of us had faced the fear or been confronted by the fear of death and it felt like a safe space in which I could look at the ramifications of my mortality. Because I have done that, because I continue to wrestle with my personal mortality, continue to be aware that life is finite, that my life is finite, I think that I can be present with other women in their journey in a way that I couldn't have been if I didn't have a cancer diagnosis. Without such a diagnosis I really wouldn't know. I could only guess.

Jonathan: You went from being a person who discovered they have cancer, through it's treatment, finding this retreat using photography as a creative way to support women with major illness, and now to training to help with such retreats in the future.

Molly: Yes.

Jonathan: Sounds like a pretty full circle.

Molly: Yeah, I couldn't have asked for more. Through the challenge of the cancer diagnosis, I feel like a path has opened before me. I don't know what will come of it, but at least I have a direction, a road I'm starting down. Susan, my partner, is also involved in the retreats. She creates a ritual for the end of each day and selects poems and readings for the start of the daily meditation. It is a real gift to be part of this together.

Jonathan: Will you continue to practice law?

Molly: Yes. I expect to continue practicing law as well as leading retreats for at least another 5 years. For the past 10 years, I have represented women prisoners who have been sexually assaulted or sexually harassed by prison guards in a large class action lawsuit. I want to see that case through to the end.

Jonathan: I want to go back to the use of photography at the Healing Retreats. How does what you see, as the basis of a photo, effect your ability to deal with cancer?

Molly: I don't dwell on cancer, although the fear of recurrence is always in the back of my mind. I use the awareness of the risk of recurrence as a springboard and a motivation to try to live life as fully as I can and to realize that life is finite and to take responsibility for creating my life and using each and every day.

Photography is one way to focus on the small aspects of life. To slow down and look at what's in front of you. To look at a flower. To look at a leaf. To look at a tree. To look at the play of light on water. To look at the reflection in a puddle. To look at... Just to look and to see all of the beauty that is in front of me that I don't see when I get busy and I'm just trying to accomplish more, rushing around and putting too much on my plate. Then I don't see what's right in front of me.

When I have a camera and I'm looking through that camera lens, there's only a limited space that I can see at one time. So it really helps to focus me on the micro. That enhances my appreciation of the present moment. It has really been a great gift.

Jonathan: Thank you.

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talking about an issue outside of myself. I'm talking about what happened to other people. I'm reciting facts. I'm advocating on someone else's behalf.

In the training, it's very clear that I have to speak from my heart and I have to self-disclose my own process and share my struggles and ways in which I learned certain things. The concepts of the retreat— healing, forgiveness, conditioned tendencies and assessments are all illustrated through one's personal experience. I found that at the first training I stood up in front of the group and my mind went blank and I just froze. I was overcome with fear. I didn't know where to go. I couldn't rely on my usual skills, my intellect, in presenting this information.

It's traumatic to just go from being an attorney for more than twenty-five years; I've developed a certain competence as an attorney and now I'm a beginner. A beginner makes mistakes because, by definition a beginner doesn't know. A beginner has to learn. It's humbling to go from a feeling of competence to being a beginner.

Jonathan: Tell me some about what is meant by a Healing Retreat?

Molly: The retreat center was started by a Harvard trained internist, Matthew Budd, who prior to retirement taught at the Harvard Medical school and was an architect of the Body Mind program at the Harvard Community Health Plan. Matthew has led courses working with the body mind connection for over 25 years.

In the retreats, Matthew helps people to see that