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# Foreword



OH, HOW I WISH THAT I HAD THE BOOK YOU ARE ABOUT to read when I was initially diagnosed with breast cancer in April of 1992! I remember sitting in the doctor's office across the desk from him while he spoke to me about my treatment options, outcomes and statistics. I have this visceral image of myself, nodding in agreement, while the words floated over my head. It was as if a glass window had come down between us; I could see my doctor talking but couldn't hear the words. Thanks to cancer, I decided to become an oncology social worker so that I could accompany patients to their appointments to be a second pair of ears; someone who could ask questions, take notes and offer support. When the meeting was over, I could process the session with the patient, clarify the information that had been given and offer to assist if further research was required.

Fast forward eleven years to December 2003—I had been accompanying patients to their medical appointments for ten years and knew personally and professionally a great deal about the stress and anxiety they undergo. As I was sitting with Puja Thomson waiting for her appointment with her surgeon, we began to review her questions and concerns.

She then wrote down some notes in her loose-leaf binder. I asked to look at her book and she showed me how she had begun to organize all of the aspects of her cancer experience.

Now, I've always advised patients to keep a book where they could write down their questions, reflections, information, resources, thoughts and feelings. Yet what Puja had organized was far beyond anything I had seen even though I had had the opportunity to review a great deal of published material collected by our Oncology Support Program. It was amazingly comprehensive. I immediately asked her if she would be willing to develop what she had structured for herself into a book, which I knew would be of great benefit to newly diagnosed cancer patients.

Here it is...all in one volume, beautifully written and organized, guiding you on your inner and outer journeys as you make choices of doctor and treatments, mainstream and complementary medicine, and deal with the many practical matters, questions and feelings that can easily overwhelm you. Puja's personal experience with breast cancer and her professional training and experience as an interfaith minister, creator of rituals, massage therapist, and Scottish organizer is a perfect combination to make the material that you are about to use the best possible method for organizing your cancer experience. We've gotten a lot of wonderful advice in the development of this project and I've been happy to encourage its unfolding. I believe that *After Shock: From Cancer Diagnosis to Healing*, thanks to Puja Thomson's talent and skill, continues to be unparalleled material for the successful navigation of anyone who wants to reduce the stress of their cancer journey. It will undoubtedly guide you step-by-step as you find your own way to recovery.

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# Introduction



WHEN THE NEWS THAT I HAD CANCER EVENTUALLY PEN-  
etrated my being in the doctor's office, I felt very  
shaky. Caught off guard, I was surprised at how vulnerable  
I had suddenly become. Nothing—not my competence as a  
health practitioner, nor knowledge of cancer, nor experienc-  
ing the personal pain of an intimate friend's struggle to beat  
“it” during the previous two years—nothing—prepared me  
to face the verdict of cancer in my own body.

Pressured to make a quick decision about treatment, I felt  
as if I was being sucked into a big machine and onto a con-  
veyor belt. My doctor seemed to know exactly what I should  
do before I even had a chance to get my bearings. Weighed  
down by these demands and decisions, I took time to walk,  
to meditate, and then share my news with a very few close  
friends.

I realized I faced three challenges: I needed to ask for sup-  
port from others, to find a way to bring clarity and order into  
this fearful, confusing experience and to tap into my own  
intuitive understanding. Along the way, as I acted in accord-  
ance with these awarenesses, I discovered precious gifts in  
addition to those offered by my health practitioners. In asking  
for what I wanted from others, my heart opened to the gen-  
erosity of friends; I found that good organization lessened my

scattered energy; and in listening to myself, I began to allow a new balance to come into my life.

*After Shock: From Cancer Diagnosis to Healing* evolved out of my attempts to create a container and structure that would support my journey. From my first fledgling notes grew this tool to assist you in organizing your cancer experience, especially during the first crucial year. If you are facing an unwelcome recurrence, I hope you too will find this book helpful and encouraging. Its purpose is not to give detailed medical information or advice. I call on my personal and professional experience and training to offer practical suggestions and guidelines to help you clarify your own process, perspectives and choices. Woven throughout are stories shared by friends and fellow travelers as well as my own.

## **REACH OUT**

With the discovery of cancer, it's really helpful to ask for support from trusted friends and family. It's advisable to find out as much as you can about your type of cancer from sources such as your local library, cancer resource organizations and the Internet. Your life will shift, as mine did, to include an all-absorbing round of medical visits. As you search for the best possible professional care, you'll probably meet with your primary physician, surgeon and oncologist. Next come tests and treatment, waiting for and receiving results. Perhaps you'll get a second or third opinion, or seek out a complementary practitioner. You will make decision after decision about your treatment and deal with all sorts of medical records, financial statements, bills and insurance plans. At times such tasks may seem endless.

## **GET ORGANIZED**

Disorganization is definitely hazardous to your health! I quickly discovered that good record keeping was essential if I were to avoid ending up under a mountain of paperwork. I was amazed at how quickly papers accumulated—personal jottings of conversations or dreams, medical prescriptions, exam results, bills and so on. In the early days I just lumped everything together and I dissipated precious energy by scrambling around to find a crucial piece of information from a pile of haphazard notes. Sorting things out is in fact a way

of controlling this “runaway train.” It will save lots of time and contribute to your sanity.

## **REACH IN**

In the midst of all this hard work, I felt pulled in another direction. While first and foremost I wanted to heal my physical body, I knew that more than my body was out of balance. I'd been neglecting some of my own advice for a healthy life. I had to reach inwards to find a centered place where I could create my own prescription for healing. Friends were vital, but I felt challenged to come to terms with my inner fears and questions such as “Why me?” “Who will take care of me?” and a host of “What if this, or what if that, happens?” It wasn't easy. Yet doing so led me to choose activities that nourished my mind, emotions and spirit as well as my body and had a profoundly beneficial effect. I thought of myself as being on a pilgrimage—a sacred journey towards healing and wholeness.

## **OVER TO YOU**

There was a time when cancer was generally understood to be a death sentence. That is no longer true. In the last few years, at an unprecedented speed, new avenues of research, such as the personalized medicine revolution, have led to a greater knowledge of the variety of cancers and to hopeful new treatments. However, your active participation remains key to healing. Use this practical handbook as a tool. Adapt its many suggestions to your needs and temperament, as you make decisions, follow through on treatments, organize it all in your own loose-leaf binder or notebooks and create your wellness program.

*Take heart, we are now among over 14 million living Americans who are cancer survivors.*