

take more risks

THROUGH THE GATE between our yard and what was once Carmen's, our young neighbor Berto trundles a wheelbarrow of leaves and vegetable peelings in various stages of decay. It's hot today, and the air still. I breathe in a faint scent of rot as load after load is carried to our compost heap by the willow from the compost heap in the yard next door. We are hoping to protect the new owner of Carmen's house, Cathy, whose immune system has been destroyed by leukemia. Cathy has no way to fight the bacteria that feed on this decomposing life.

As Berto hauls, the pile of refuse mounts. Restless, I watch his progress as I try to make myself a comfortable place to sit on the ground. Frayed blue notebooks are spread around me. These are my cancer journals. It was five years ago—twenty-two years after I had fled to California—that I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Panicked, I descended into dread. Would I die young, be shut out from life, leave behind a motherless five-year-old?

Beneath the dawn redwood, the needles darkening now in late spring, I'm mustering stamina this morning to read through these journals, to decipher a scrawl I've never reread. I hate to think about that scary time. But I am convinced: terror of death

sent me into the broad terrain. I've got to understand how that happened.

Pasted inside the cardboard cover of the first cancer journal is a photograph of Katy. In thirty years of keeping journals, this is the only picture I have pasted in. It's an Easter photo of her at five, embracing a basket of colorful eggs. All revolved around her. To take care of my babe, I had to survive.

I study this picture, quintessential Katy: shiny brown hair like Patrick's, tilted head, teasing eyes, crooked grin, blood glowing in her cheeks. On her dress of striped pastels is a polka-dot palm tree; over her heart, a yellow sun. With arms encircling the brightly painted eggs, she looks like an Easter egg herself, bursting its shell.

Reading through my thoughts on life at this scary time brings back many memories.

EXHAUSTED AND DRAINED ONE MORNING, I had descended into the backyard and thrown myself onto the grass. As my breast, pelvis, and thighs sank into the contour of the land, for the first time in many weeks, I felt as if my body might be able to relax; the toxins in my chest, in my limbs, even in my mind, might drain into the ground. In those difficult months, this became a practice to which I return sometimes even today: "lying on the earth."

After I tried it once, I did it again the next day. Each day, after a walk, I sank gratefully into a bed of clover and dandelions. Hauling my work out into the sunshine, I set up an outdoor office and did my editing right here in the yard. And belly to belly with the earth—knowing its heat, its breath—I rested.

Driven by my imperative as Katy's mom, I was making an all-out effort to survive. I followed all recommendations, Western and Eastern: surgery, radiation, visualization, acupuncture, Chinese herbs, walking, resting, meditation. After a biopsy and diag-

nosis, I turned to Patrick as he drove me home from the hospital and said, "Whatever comes, I want to keep my eyes wide open." In the ensuing months, I groped to remember anything I had ever learned about how to live. And how to die.

Twenty years earlier, when I had begun to explore Buddhist meditation, it was to learn exactly this. Now, with urgency, I turned to what I had gleaned. Finding myself unable to sit on a cushion with any regularity, I began vigorous daily walking to complement the practice of lying on the earth.

Craving green, quiet, and solitude, I began to walk in the Berkeley Hills. Early each morning, I drove up, leaving behind the noisy city streets by my house, and hiked along the borders of Tilden Regional Park, our Bay Area patch of wilderness, 2,065 acres of meadows and forests in the upper valley of Wildcat Creek. But wary of wildcats and coyotes, mountain lions and rattlesnakes, and most of all, the human predators known on occasion to make their attacks on remote trails, I chose the manicured streets beyond the gates of the park. Wary as well of my own poor sense of direction, of my tendency to distrust my instincts and end up lost and disoriented, I chose familiar streets, well labeled and neatly ordered. Here I could catch glimpses of scrubby hills and wooded ravines. I could watch deer foraging in the gardens of the well-to-do and reflect in silence. And safety.

Along with this walking practice, I met with both Western and Eastern doctors. A local genius of a healer—acupuncturist and herbalist—told me, "Cancer is a chronic disease, it cannot be cured. But it can be contained." Sensing my resistance, he coolly invited me to open to this uncertainty. After several hours of questions from me, he took my pulses. He described the imbalances in the flow of energy through my body. "Here's the prescription." He paused, meeting my eye. "Take more risks!"

Oh, sure! "Do you say this to everyone?"

"No," he said. "I read your pulses. I'm saying it to you."

“What do you mean, ‘risks’? Bungee jumping? Camping I can imagine; backpacking, maybe. But if you mean rock climbing or spelunking, no way!”

“More risks in your actions and in your thinking. You’ll have to figure out what is appropriate for you. But,” he laughed, “once you’ve gotten used to something, then it won’t qualify as a risk anymore, and you’ll have to find something else. Once you begin to call that home, you’ll have to dive deeper into the unknown. At some point in camping there may be nothing left to do but to try scaling a cliff . . . or exploring a cave.”

Scared, confused, even outraged by this prescription I didn’t understand, I rebelled. Who did he think he was, challenging me in this way? Yet something resonated. Wasn’t this the task I was taking on in Buddhist practice? The risk of meeting each moment as a surprise, without expectations, and letting it go, without holding on to it or pushing it away. I scoured my everyday activities, my relations with Katy and Patrick, for ways that I clung to the expected, to habits and safety. And I continued to remind myself of this dictum: Take more risks.

One morning, I turned off the predictable streets and, with a reckless energy, risked a wandering path into the wildness of the wood. Heart knocking, I kept right on walking through the dry grasses and sharp-toothed blackberry brambles, plunging through fears about my safety (What or who might be around the bend? Would I know how to get back?). I stepped out into the unknown.

As I STRUGGLED over my first treatment decision—whether to have the breast removed or excise the tumor—I felt stumped. Alarmed that an early death would bar me from everything I knew—as a mother, a wife, a friend—I yearned to tap into my own deepest intuition.

From inside myself, from someplace deeper than my intellect,

deeper than my heritage as agnostic Jew or Unitarian, I heard the strict and bold voice of a nun: “Who needs hair? Who needs breasts?” This ascetic voice had influenced many decisions over the years—to keep my now-white hair undyed, my clothes and possessions simple. Here, the verdict was absolute. On some vast and fundamental scale, it doesn’t matter whether I have two breasts or one or none, or even whether I live in this earthly form or not.

I’d planned to tell the surgeon, “Cut the damn thing off!” But all the experts, and even the acupuncturist, urged me to simply cut out the tumor and follow that with radiation. I searched my mind and heart for an internal reason to do the more limited surgery. My thoughts ricocheted back and forth over this decision: breast or no breast. I wrested with the whole question of what it means to be embodied. What is this body? If I am not my body, can I simply let the body go and take to the mind as refuge?

As I TOOK MY MORNING WALKS, my mind contracted in fear. It was hard to pay more than cursory attention to the green and brown world I walked through. But I urged myself to keep my eyes wide open, my senses keen.

Eucalyptus pods crunched underfoot. Lupine sent out its sweet scent. Startling blue flowers burst through the spiky crowns of wild artichokes. Sticky stems of monkey flower and manzanita branches with their tiny apples brushed my bare arms. If a scary scenario took over my thoughts—of dying, of Patrick trying to care for Katy all by himself—I wrenched my attention back to flowers, trees, and nests. High in an oak hid a wood-rat nest where generations of diverse creatures had made their homes. By the creek waved frothy horsetail—ancient plants, four hundred million years old, reproduced by spores ever since plants first invaded land. With a sense of continuing life, with

primexal presence so tangible here, many of my terrors dissolved.

Back at the house, when tangled thoughts closed my mind, I opened the kitchen door, as I do now, and from our second-floor landing, looked out over the garden. Carmen, weeding in her yard, waved; so did Sheryl, putting out bowls for the cats. The dawn redwood, our resident elder, rose high, proclaiming an ancient lineage, vast spans of space and time. I felt somehow more permeable, expanded.

A day before the appointed surgery, still undecided as to whether I would keep the breast or not, I spent a few feverish hours digging narcissus and anemone bulbs into the hard February soil by the cherry tree in the backyard and the princess in the front. Then I laid my body down on the ground in my favorite napping place beneath the dawn redwood. The breath of soil in my nostrils, dirt under my nails, and mud on my bare feet, the basic elements—air, water, earth—moved through me. From deep inside, a more gentle voice urged, “I through gardening you honor the body, the body of ground. Appreciate the human body too.” So, cradled by earth flesh, I pledged to honor my own. The next day, I finally confronted the cancer and made my decision. I told the surgeon that unless he saw signs that the cancer was spreading, he should save the breast.

And instead of having the breast cut out—of body, sight, mind—I took another risk, to feel what I might lose. So I remembered: delicate nipples of adolescence like tender pink stars, new breasts, velvet to my touch under my nighttime erotic breasts caressed by Patrick and past lovers over these many years; milk-filled mother’s breasts that suckled Katy. I felt through the history of this embodiment, always changing.

How much easier for me to be absolute and drastic (“Cut it off!” “Forget the breast!”) than to fook fook, to allow myself to love this changing form of flesh, bones, and blood in an open and uncertain way—not to hold on to it. Katy’s plea came to

mind: “Mommy, you can hug me, but don’t grip.” All of my habits pulled the opposite way, to clasp tight and resist change. Could I live fook in this body without insisting that it stay young and healthy and never die? The task seemed almost impossible.

ON A MORNING WALK weeks after the surgery, I took another risk. I turned off the ranger-made trail onto one beaten into the earth by hoof and paw. Braving this high trail, I wound my way up toward the crest of a hill. At a sudden twist in the path, two mule deer, a doe and her fawn, loped down past me as I climbed up. The doe was so close that I could see the quivering of her nostrils and the pink glow where the sun shone through her cocked ears. Was she heading for the gardens in the city below? What reciprocity. I hiked up from the city into the hills to be nourished, and the deer descended from the hills into the city to feast in the backyards. We crisscrossed and exchanged.

Up a steep incline and around a turn, I unexpectedly arrived at the summit. Winded, I staggered around the small circular crest of the hill. Then I lost my bearings. Which path had I followed? On all sides, narrow trails descended the downward slopes, passing through anonymous groves of trees. Below me shimmered several lakes and what looked like the Bay on both sides. From far below what sounded like a train whistled. I couldn’t tell from which direction it called. Where was I? What time was it? Dizzy, I looked up to the sun high in the sky. Light-headed, unhooked for a moment from time or place, I rested in exhilaration.

Suddenly, I felt a surge of fear. Would the cancer recur? Would I die young? Concentrating all of my effort, I drew the landscape into my awareness, risked to see myself in this land. Welcoming the hills of dry summer grasses, the glimmer of the

Bay and sky. I opened the field of who or what I perceived myself to be. I saw the vast exchange.

For hundreds of years, a wood-rat nest has offered a home to frogs, salamanders, scorpions, and mice. The stems and leaves of monkey flower have offered healing poultices to generations of Ohlone people, while the manzanita apples have provided cider. With bumblebees, the lupine exchanges nectar for pollen; and with soil, nitrogen for other nutrients.

I ran my palms along my own arms and thighs. Isn't this narrow self within this particular package of mortal flesh an expression of ongoing exchange? Resting my full attention on this possibility, I felt, for a moment, more fully alive and also not so afraid to die.