

Acclaim for Diana Raab's *Healing With Words*

“Healing With Words offers unique therapy for cancer patients. Raab is a registered nurse, author, mother of three and a happily married woman. Her compelling and inspirational book reflects her two episodes with cancer over several years. She expertly tells her story and captures the reader with her feelings, frustrations and fears that overwhelmed her from the diagnosis of breast cancer through the reconstruction and recovery through her subsequent bout with multiple myeloma.

Descriptions of her personal journey are accompanied with powerful poetry and journal entries she wrote at various stages of her illness. What is unique about this book is that its messages are universal. Any cancer patient or survivor can relate to and learn from what she experienced. Included in the masterfully written book are writing prompts to encourage readers to write about what is happening or has occurred in their lives.

As a college writing professor, I give Diana Raab an A+ for her writing. As a two-time cancer survivor, Diana who has taught Writing for Wellness classes for patients at the City of Hope Cancer Center for eight years, I congratulate for her significant contribution to the field of writing-to-heal techniques. Her book is a must-read for any woman diagnosed with breast cancer.”

Julie Davey, author,
Writing for Wellness: A Prescription for Healing

“Diana Raab has shared her breast cancer journey with such honesty that is truly compelling. Anyone receiving a cancer diagnosis should have *Healing With Words* to turn to time and again for comfort and guidance. Highly recommended!”

Beverlye Hyman Fead,
Legislative Ambassador and *Hero of Hope*
for American Cancer Society and author of *I Can Do This*

“Healing With Words is a riveting memoir which follows the author's journey through two cancer discoveries in eight years. Within the first thirty pages, tears filled my eyes as I

felt Diana's pain and rebellion entering a new life, a new world. The book's structure allows the reader to find her own words to write beside Diana's enlightening story, which enlists it as a personal journal. Her poetic flavor of writing with lines like, 'My cancer diagnosis became like a stir-fry of emotions cooking inside me,' stretched my writer's mind and urged me to post my own note to my computer screen which was gleaned from this book, When it hurts—Write harder.”

Barbara Sinor, Ph.D., author,
*An Inspirational Guide for the Recovering Soul and
Tales of Addiction: Stories from the Soul*

“Although Diana Raab is a medical professional, she documents the recovery process also as a woman, daughter, friend, wife, and mother using words juxtaposed with journal questions, entries and poetry. One such poem, “A Woman’s Life,” uses 37 words to describe our many developmental stages. One of these is *writing*.

Writing is a gift that Diana shares with the reader. For any individual surviving a trauma, there need to be strategies and tools that can be utilized to help the individuals move from feeling like a victim to knowing that they are a survivor. Diana’s book shares not only how writing impacted her journey, but also makes the suggestion that readers use writing as a process that can help to increase feelings of strength and personal power. This is a thoughtful book that will touch the hearts of women and those who love us.”

Theresa Fraser, MA, author,
Billy Had to Move: A Foster Care Story

“Though I am a professional writer, it's hard to find adequate words for the admiration I feel for Diana Raab and her inspiring true story: *Healing With Words*. Time after time, Diana articulates incisively the thoughts and feelings that convey the hoped-for meaning and encouragement. She is a woman who knows what it is to live fully in the face of mortality. She will add value to the life of every person who reads this book. That she includes the creative impulse to write and the solace offered by contemplating the beautiful as a vital part of human existence resonates at a spiritual level for me.”

Sena Jeter Naslund, author,
Ahab's Wife and *Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette*

“One woman's story, beautifully told and inspiring to those
for whom journaling will ease a breast cancer diagnosis.”

Barbara Delinsky
New York Times bestselling author of *UPLIFT: Secrets
from the Sisterhood of Breast Cancer Survivors*

Healing with Words

A writer's cancer journey

Diana M. Raab, MFA, RN

LovingHealingPress

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Dedicated to Simon

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Disclaimer

The material in this book is intended to provide the personal medical journey of one woman with breast cancer. When the medical information was shared, every effort was made to provide accurate and dependable information. However, professionals in the field may have differing opinions in terms of treatments, and medical advances continue to happen. Any of the treatments, medical, homeopathic or emotional described herein should be undertaken only under the guidance of a licensed health-care provider. The author, editor, and publisher cannot be held responsible for any error, omission, professional disagreement, outdated material, or adverse outcomes that derive from the use of any of the treatments or resources shared in this book, either in a program of self-care or under the care of a licensed practitioner.

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It is impossible to write a book like this without the professional and emotional support of important people in my life.

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whose assistance in the final touches of this manuscript was invaluable. Special hugs to my dear friend Jean Harfenist for her insight and boundless love.

Last but not least, to all those people in this world who have, and continue to battle, the same demon.

Foreword

For the past forty years, my medical expertise has been exclusively in the field of breast surgery, and more specifically caring for women with invasive breast cancer and DCIS (*ductal carcinoma in situ*). DCIS is considered an early form of cancer where abnormal cells multiply to form a growth within the breast ducts but they have not yet invaded the surrounding support tissues. If left untreated, many DCIS will develop into invasive breast cancer requiring more serious treatments.

The author's cancer was detected early during a routine mammogram, generally the only way to identify this type of breast cancer. During her first visit to my Los Angeles office, I commended her on her diligence in tending to the results of her abnormal mammogram, because early detection and treatment are key to a good outcome.

In *Healing With Words*, the author shares her breast cancer journey in a wry, compassionate and professional way. She chronicles her story with poetic charm coupled with her nursing and teaching knowledge, a combination guaranteed to result in an engaging page-turner, while also offering tips, solace and encouragement for others who may find themselves in similar circumstances.

Throughout the book, the author stresses how writing has helped her cope, and she encourages readers to write. She also discusses the importance of orchids during her own healing and recovery. As her surgeon, I vividly remember her hospital room filled with their vibrant energy, which she claimed helped heal her spirit.

I applaud the author for having the courage to share her very personal story in the form of narrative, journal entries and poems. I understand that everyone reacts to and copes differently with the diagnosis of breast cancer and naturally everyone's story is unique, but this author's journey may serve as a guidepost for other women, motivating them to seek early detection.

The author describes, in simple terms, her medical and emotional journey, beginning with the news of an abnormal mammogram, to seeking out the best care, to six months later receiving her breast tattoo, and finally, to her very revealing afterword which further impresses the reader's appreciation of the author's commitment to this book.

Those who have dealt with cancer will say that the disease has transformed them, and this author is no different. However, what is remarkable is how she responded to her cancer after the initial shock wore off, and what's even more impressive is what she did with her transformation. The reader should observe and absorb and be inspired by her story, and how she did not let her cancer get in the way of her goals in life. On the contrary, her cancer gave her a reason to forge ahead toward her passions with determination and empowerment. Enjoy this profoundly supportive and inspiring story.

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Introduction

During my breast cancer journey, my lifeline was three-fold: immediate health care, an extremely supportive family, and the creative arts as a source of strength. For a long time, the arts have been associated with relieving tension and fears. Creative expression is a healthier alternative to keeping emotions bottled up inside or reaching for medications. Author Virginia Woolf confessed that she wrote in her diary “to bring order to the chaos in her life.” Those of us who have been afflicted by cancer know there are no magic wands to take the cancer away, but we can try to cope with our situation and reduce stress by finding our passions, whether it is writing stories, crafting poems, journaling, drawing, painting or sculpting. If writing is your passion, then you understand how the very act of putting your words on the page is a productive way to ground you in your experience and give voice to your feelings. At times, you may find it difficult to express how you feel, but if you document your breast cancer journey, you will soon discover that your writing shines with power and beauty.

I have long understood the healing qualities of writing. Thus, it was no surprise that the first thing I did when returning home after my abnormal mammogram was to pull out my journal. From then on, I made a point to write early in the morning when my thoughts had the most clarity and purity. It is not essential to have a writing routine, but most writing instructors will advocate some sort of regularity, particularly in the beginning. In the writing classes I teach, I instruct my students that journaling is a reality check.

Writing about the traumas in our lives is not only cathartic, but it can help provide answers to mysterious questions. Journaling brings you face to face with your own truths and what has happened to you. The simple act of moving your pen across the page can be soothing and meditative. I used my journal to validate my feelings during my breast cancer journey.

For some people, it is difficult to begin the writing process, so for your convenience writing prompts are provided at the

end of each chapter and in Appendix A. If you have borrowed this book from a library, I suggest you buy yourself a journal to write answers to the prompts. If you have bought this book, you can answer the questions right on the page, but you may also want to buy an additional journal for lengthier reflections.

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of journaling your feelings. After my surgery, my plastic surgeon encouraged me to write every day. He even asked me to mail him my musings. Because of their intimacy, there were certain things I preferred not to share. So in addition to the journal written especially for him, I kept one for myself, sections of which I have included in this book.

My journal also included poems crafted during and after my breast cancer journey. I have included most of them in this book, such as the poem below, inspired by a passion that began while I was in the hospital recovering from my breast surgery. All of the beautiful flower arrangements that filled my hospital room had died by the time I was ready to go home, all except for one white *phalaenopsis* orchid. In my heart, I took this as a message. I believed that like the orchid, I also would survive. I brought the plant home and placed it on my bedside table. As time went on, I became increasingly intrigued by its magic. Unlike any other flowering plant I had owned, it seemed as if it would bloom forever. In some parts of the world, orchids have been transformed into talismans, amulets, and good luck charms to ward off evil spirits, improve health, and help destiny take a more positive course.

I'd like to think they work, for it has already been eight years since I received the phone call informing me of my abnormal mammogram. In many ways it seems like yesterday, but in others it could have been a century ago. The journey of my diagnosis, treatment and recovery from breast cancer has been a life-altering event. When the fear gets overwhelming, my best remedy is to direct my creative energy to writing. I once had a writer friend who said, "When it hurts, write harder."

Those words remain on a Post-it® above my computer.

Conversation with Flowers

Slipping into my own dreams
I glance out the window
and spot the lavender
glistening under the energy of
another day going down,
touched by the evening vapors
ever so lightly in the night's breeze
waving another subtle good-bye.

When morning knocks,
I gently open the back door.
peak over the balcony's ledge
in anticipation of
the morning's dew once again
glistening on my lovely lavender.

I wonder if the bush ever sleeps,
or if it keeps busy watching
over me as I sleep.
The answer must be in its
everlasting fragrance
and in my dreams.

After the Orchid Show

Driving home two hours later,
sports car convertible down
crammed ten orchids high,
a warm welcome to this new obsession.
I stop at a red light, stare and sigh
at the lady slipper beside me. Its veined
pouch collects insects, the way I collect
your love in the arteries around my heart.

Its erotic glances paralyzing,
like the ones you toss over dinner
every Friday night to celebrate us.
You promise to plant an orchid
on my grave, the little green psychiatrist
which calmed me during difficult times
and which will bring me back again.

Truth is, I dreaded another plant
to care for or even let die. Water. Fertilize.
Water. Fertilize. But my new passion
pulled me in deeper, yanking me
to another focus, this marvel
of nature, mystified by rifles, thieves
and crazy characters.

1 Mammograms and More Mammograms

“Those who don’t know how to weep with their whole heart don’t know how to laugh either.”

—Golda Meir

There is no breast cancer in my family. No cancer of any kind. Except for mine, that is.

Two days after my annual mammogram (I was a month late scheduling the appointment), the nurse phoned to say that the radiologist wanted to take additional views of my right breast. “He just wants to make sure that everything is okay.”

This was not the first time I had been called back to the mammography department of my local hospital. A year earlier, I had had a surgical biopsy on the same breast, after a clinician detected a small lump during the manual examination before my mammogram. She had me sit on the edge of the examination table in my hospital gown during that fateful appointment, facing the mirror hanging on the wall. She asked me to raise my arms to see if she could detect any abnormal dimpling on my breasts. Then she asked me to lie down as she did the familiar circular examination that I did faithfully every month, on the first day of my menstrual cycle. I had cystic breasts, but the little cysts moved when I touched them. As a nurse, I knew that if a lump was fixed and did not move, then it was probably malignant and should be looked at right away. I never had any lumps like that.

“I feel a little lump here,” she said gently, her hands still on my right breast. “Here, you feel it.”

She took my index and middle fingers into her hands. “It’s small and moveable, which usually means it’s not cancer, but I’m sure they’ll want to biopsy it.”

Two weeks later I was admitted into the hospital for a biopsy. Thankfully it was benign.

So, when I received this second call from the nurse, part of me was pissed off at having to return for another false alarm. Although the biopsy was negative, the entire surgical ordeal was not something I wanted to endure again.

To be on the safe side, I booked the follow-up mammogram. The weeklong wait for round two was long enough for my imagination to go absolutely haywire. Studies were popping up in newspapers and magazines hypothesizing on what might predispose women to breast cancer. I tried to fit myself into a category, any category, that would indicate that I was at risk, but I could not. I had breast-fed all three of my kids, I exercised four times a week, ate lots of fruits and vegetables, avoided red meat, was not overweight, and drank lots of water. I visited a nutritionist regularly. I ingested a kaleidoscope of herbs and minerals three times daily. I was doing everything right. How could I have breast cancer?

On the morning of my appointment, the alarm rang at six a.m. I slammed the button, showered, and got dressed. My husband volunteered to accompany me to the hospital, but I said I would be okay going by myself. I kissed him good-bye and told him not to worry because it would probably be just another false alarm. What I did not say was that lurking inside of me was a growing sense that things would not be okay this time around.

I drove our twelve-year-old son, Josh, to school, then, hopped on the congested highway, heading to the women’s health center. After parking in the hospital’s early morning half-empty lot, I went directly to the radiology department, signed the receptionist’s clipboard, took a number from the box, and sat in a waiting room crammed with women and old magazines splattered on laminated coffee tables.

Two out of the four magazines displayed headlines pertaining to breast cancer. My friend, Ellen, a radiologist, had (prior to my most recent mammography,) told me that the incidence of breast cancer had risen to epidemic proportions: one woman in eight would be diagnosed with it at some point in their life. This meant that whether at a dinner party or in a shopping center, chances are you would meet someone who already had breast cancer or would succumb to it later in her life. To me, this news was astounding. Another shock: 75 percent of new cases were not genetically related. It was this discussion that my mind kept casting back on. As I flipped through the magazines, pretending to read, my mind churned into a fast-paced movie laden with unanswered questions. *Do I have cancer? How will this affect our family?*

“Diana Raab,” I heard the receptionist call my name.

A Woman's Life

Kicking
Wiggling
Sucking
Pushing
Nursing
Sleeping
Eating
Growing
Crawling
Sitting
Walking
Counting
Reading
Writing
Biking
Dancing
Flirting
Necking
Loving
Cramping
Rebelling
Driving
Exercising
Studying
Working
Marrying
Nurturing
Obsessing
Separating
Crying
Dieting
Menopausing
Wrinkling
Grouching
Forgetting
Slouching
Dying.

Describe your family and note if there is any history of breast cancer in your family tree.

Write about the day you first thought that you had cancer.