

Breast Art and Cancer

By Jill Kuhn, Ph.D.

For what are breasts? For breastfeeding? For sexual enjoyment? For sexual objectification? To be the depositories of cancer? Breasts have been incredibly sexualized in our culture and many women feel the need to undergo surgery to have larger breasts that are human made. It's too bad that breasts have been so sexualized that when a breastfeeding woman attempts to breastfeed in public she may be accused of indecency. We have lost a lot as woman when breasts are objectified. Once while teaching Human Sexuality I asked the class, why they thought the nipple was darker colored than the skin around it and often deepened in color during pregnancy? The response I got from a male student was, "to get the attention of a man," rather than the obvious purpose of these adaptations, which is to help the infant find the mother's nipple. These are topics on which I could write more about (and may at a later date), however my focus for this column is on the scarier realities of breasts: breast cancer.

Any of us may be struck with breast cancer. We try to do self-exams and have regular mammograms, but these efforts do not prevent the devastation cancer brings. For many of us, isn't it always in the back of our minds, especially as we get older, that we could be next? Because the breast is so confused with sexuality, attractiveness and function; when breast cancer strikes, a woman may be rightfully confused as to how to feel with the change in her breast(s). A friend of mine, Heather*, developed stage IV metastatic breast cancer in 2008. One way my friend has coped with breast cancer is to hostess an art event that she heard someone in CA had also done. This is an amazing breast cancer event where women create paintings by, using their breasts painted with acrylics or other preferred paints to create unique pieces of art. These incredible pieces of art are then auctioned off to benefit breast cancer research.

This year, in spite of incredible nervousness I decided to join the 15 or so women who gathered at Heather's home for the 2nd annual occurrence of this event. I did not know anyone at this event very well, which probably turned out to be a good thing, not only because I made new friends, but also because I was a bit less nervous barring my breast (one at a time) to be painted with the colors I had chosen. It also seemed to me that if Heather could walk around topless, with her missing breasts and scars from her bilateral mastectomy, that I could bare my own breasts. A new friend offered to help me paint a round circle around my breast and nipple and then helped me plaster each one on to my canvas. I created a backdrop of sky and grass and decided to use one breast to create a sun and another to create a flower (see picture above). What a strange experience to have someone paint my breast. How often do we bare our breasts for others to see, let alone touch, except those we are sexually intimate with? It certainly wasn't a sexual experience, but it was an amazing experience. I was glad I took the risk to support this very important cause.

About a week later Heather was the keynote speaker at this breast cancer fundraiser which auctioned off our paintings. All proceeds were sent to the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. It is important that donations go to places that are working on quality research and

treatment and hopefully someday a cure. Too many organizations have co-opted breast cancer and have created cute pink items, with only small amounts of the proceeds going directly to breast cancer work.

I cannot do justice to describe Heather's process with living with breast cancer, but she graciously allowed me to share parts of her speech from the breast cancer fundraiser.

"I spoke last year about how my body was in tatters. I've mostly made peace with my deformed body. My scars are healed and mostly invisible, and I'm getting used to this "new," albeit plumper, me. They serve as reminders—sometimes painful, but more and more, as bittersweet reminders of the terror we faced when I was diagnosed and the subsequent relief we've had as I've gone well past my "use by" date, if you will."

"What I haven't been able to piece back together quite so seamlessly are the internal wounds. They're still wide open and bleeding, not yet having had a chance to scab up and begin the scarring process. They keep seeping through the bandages of denial I attempt to use as salve. Simply put, cancer has broken very nearly everything in my life. I've watched my husband break, my own resolve break, the woman that I was break, my daughter's innocent childhoods break. It would be one thing if we could have gone through cancer and were now done with it. Then perhaps the damage could be left alone for awhile to heal without new trauma. But we don't get to "leave it behind."

"I hate cancer. I hate that it puts me in a full nelson of guilt and shame that I'm still a mom without enough time for myself or energy to give to my girls as much as I'd like. I hate that it's the big, ugly, fat elephant in the room when my husband and I try to talk about the future. I hate that it's made having even the most benign conversations, sometimes with strangers, wrought with awkwardness due to my inability to respond in a socially expected way, i.e. don't mention the cancer. Except that now I do. I tell everyone who gives me even a moment of their time or a portion of their ear that I am LIVING with cancer. Not that I HAD cancer and am now "cured." Not that I "beat" cancer. I say, "No, I'm not done 'with all that' yet and explain that I will most likely be in treatment forever, god willing and if they keep coming up with drugs to keep my cancer at bay. Because I've decided that, for me, it's really important that people understand that it's a part of what makes me "me." It's also what makes far too many of my sisters and brothers battling metastatic disease who they are. Part of the "Ride on the Cancer Rocketship" freak show--whatever I'm thinking just comes right out. I talk a lot about living with this disease, salted throughout with heavy sarcasm and an unhealthy dose of profanity, all in an effort to keep this reality from pulling me into constant, chronic grief. It's one of my most powerful weapons; if I can laugh, if I can cry, if, for the love of pete, I can dance a crazy dance, then it's not winning. I am. I win. I will not roll over and die to this monster that has broken my life in irreparable ways. I will however, take those pieces and patch them together with my voice, my humor, my loud and obnoxious singing, my ambition, my mothering, my friendship and my belief. I will refuse to allow it to break anything more."

"The truth is, we're all dying. Some of us just live with the reality and its nearness closer than others. It's morbid, for sure, but it's also a brutal reality. My life is lived in a middle earth between life and death. But really, when I look closely, when I'm dancing, it's an earth full of life being lived apart from illusions, with death no closer than my last breath."

*Heather Janssen is also co-editor of *Get Born* magazine” It “is a quarterly literary magazine by mothers, for mothers featuring smart, witty, sometimes irreverent, often sarcastic, always authentic writing for mothers.” (check them out and subscribe at <http://getbornmag.com/> Also check out their blog and join them on Facebook).

Mother Watch: I have still not heard from anyone in the division about how we can help psychologist mothers be addressed within the division. We lose too many women psychologists and never hear their voice. They must be heard, before they are out of sight and thus out of mind!