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Posted at 01:56 PM ET, 05/11/2012

The healing path of sewing and domesticity

By Donna Trussell

I recently bought a sewing machine.

Yes, I know that these days it's cheaper to buy finished clothing than to buy cloth and sew a dress yourself. But I bought a sewing machine.



Compounding the horror, I also bought a waffle iron.

Waffle irons are frivolous. Ridiculous. One more thing to lug around. And what's wrong with pancakes?

Despite all that, I bought a waffle iron. And I've been gardening. Hauling dirt. Planting bulbs. I kill almost everything I plant, but that's beside the point. I'm trying.

Perhaps my 2001 diagnosis of ovarian cancer is to blame? Brain damage from the chemo? Or is it something deeper?

There's a lot of talk about PTSD ([Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#)) in military circles, but very little in cancer circles.

At first you just try to survive, and that takes up almost all the room in your heart and mind. If you make it to the end of treatment, and the holy grail of remission, the oncologist smiles and shoos you out the door with the words: Go live your life.

Then you're in the parking lot, blinking at the sun. What now?

You can channel your energy into raising money for gargantuan charities, but beyond that, there's not much in the way of post-cancer guidance other than the tired homilies "everything happens for a reason" and "count your blessings."

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I wish. If the cancer doesn't get you, the fear of recurrence (if not the actual recurrence) will. Even after 10 years, as in my case, you can't quite make it back to who you once were. Not that you were so great back then. But you loved "you" more than you thought.

Patients will understand the poem "Prefatory" by ecologist, author and cancer survivor [Sandra Steingraber](#) (posted with permission of the poet).

Prefatory

by Sandra Steingraber

I am often unsure

how to begin

as a bird

who holds in her mouth

the first twigs

of a new nest

and not far below

the gray cat

squinting

in the full sun

I used to be a poet. I even published a book. These days, I invent just the titles of poems. I'm unwilling to commit the time and effort required to turn the outline of an idea into verse.

One title floating in my head: Goodbye My Parallel Life.

After cancer, I realized I would never become the woman always sprinting ahead of me, just out of reach. The kinder, more poised, more successful version of myself. The woman I wanted to be, that someday maybe I could be.

Even if that were possible, cancer told me I'd run out of time.

After cancer, my parallel woman disappeared. She had, in the past, tormented me with her perfection. Even so, I found that I missed her.

What would take her place? When you no longer care about the outcome of any endeavor, how do you move from day to night and back to day again?

Good question.

No, talking to professionals did not help. They throw out things that you already know. If you're polite, you keep your thoughts to yourself: Easy for you to say. You don't have cancer. I do.

The one who didn't toss easy answers in my direction was — surprise, surprise — my mom.

I fully expected her to change the subject, allergic as she was, to unpleasant realities. She had good reasons for that habit, but it made meaningful conversation difficult.

After cancer, I found out how much my mother loved me. She got down in that dark place with me. I'm afraid to die, I said. I don't know how to move past all this fear, I said. How do I become me again?

My mother was well acquainted with darkness. There was a time when



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she could not fix what was wrong in our family, although she would have given her life to do so.

But she did have the fabric store.

We would wander among the colors and textures. For her, that was a relief from our problems. She'd spend grocery money on patterns, fabric, elastic and thread, most of which ended up in storage in our dining room buffet, never to be touched again.

At the time, I did not understand, since I liked cutting fabric and sewing the pieces together. I could make each piece fit, unlike the pieces of my life at school and home, where nothing fit.

Now I understand my mother. Some things can't be fixed. Incurable illness. Human nature. Actions, over and done.

But we are alive, after all. To quote a line I recall from a novel read decades ago (Larry McMurtry's "Terms of Endearment") by a barefoot woman on a sunny porch: Maybe warm boards are the best part of life after all.

Maybe so. Warm boards. The hum of the sewing machine. The push of a needle into a tomato-shaped pincushion. The smell of food cooking in the kitchen. The rich earth that supported the flowers my grandmother loved, and that now sustain my mother, who just turned 80.

These rituals connect me to my mother and grandmother. I trust they'll ferry me to my end too, whenever it comes.

Donna Trussell is a Texas-born writer living in Kansas City. Follow her on Twitter @donnatrussell.

By Donna Trussell | 01:56 PM ET, 05/11/2012

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