

BOOK REVIEW

Aftershock

From Cancer Diagnosis to Healing: A step-by-step guide to help you navigate your way

By Puja A.J. Thomson • Roots and Wings Publishing, New Paltz, NY • \$19.95

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Life changes after hearing the words, “*you have cancer.*” Among other things, days become filled with doctor visits, more tests, the need to make difficult decisions, checking on health insurance coverage, and undergoing treatments with their sometimes-severe side effects. It’s not unusual for patients to feel they’ve lost control of their lives and, with that, their sense of security. How easily can someone, who is now ill, deal with all of that?

Puja Thomson, a survivor of breast cancer, knows what worked for her and, in the hope that the insights she gained might help others, shares them in this book. Although she clearly states that one approach does not fit all – in fact she makes a point of saying that each person will need to create his or her own plan for becoming healthy again – she does offer a number of very important guidelines and suggestions to help people figure out what those plans might be.

Perhaps because of the loss of control that generally accompanies any serious illness, retaking control is at the heart of her advice. In doing so, Thomson suggests that patients focus on three areas: *reaching out*, *getting organized* and *reaching in*. Just what she means by each of these is clearly explained and, in some cases, illustrated by the voices and choices of other cancer survivors.

By *reaching out*, Thomson first refers to asking for and accepting the help and support of trusted family and friends and offers suggestions for putting together a personal support team. She also, however, provides guidance for putting together a professional support team. Because choosing doctors and other healthcare practitioners is not always easy – a task made harder by the fact that there are different approaches to treating cancer – Thomson provides brief descriptions of those approaches. She begins by describing two broad categories of medicine – western (allopathic) medicine typically practiced by MDs and DOs and “holistic” medicine, offered by a great variety holistic practitioners. She then goes on to explain that, when forms of holistic treatments are used in addition to allopathic (also referred to as mainstream) treatments, they are called complementary medicine. When holistic treatments are used instead of mainstream treatments they are called alternative medicine. More recently, she reports, another, integrative, approach is emerging – where mainstream practitioners are also trained in, and use, one or more holistic forms of treatment together with their mainstream treatments.

What makes this section of the book especially helpful is that Thomson clearly explains this very complicated web of choices – describing many of the different practitioners and their approaches to cancer care. Even more important, she not only suggests questions to ask of each when choosing treatments and practitioners, but also suggests questions for patients to ask of themselves, to help them decide which type(s) of treatment feel right for them.

Because paperwork of all sorts quickly piles up – lab reports, exam results, bills, doctors instructions, insurance forms and much more – *getting organized* is a very important step to take. By setting up a system that organizes these papers, patients will be better able, she says, to control their “runaway train.” That control, just by itself, can go a long way to reducing stress and allowing patients to more fully focus on the business of getting better. To that end, Thomson provides guidance for those who are not ready for anything more than a simple organization of papers as well as for those who are interested in setting up a more detailed system.

Her advice with respect to *reaching in* and “nourishing” one’s mind, emotions and spirit makes sense when we consider the fact that scientific studies have repeatedly shown that there is no real separation between mind and body. Changes in one are accompanied by changes in the other. This has been reported by many healthcare professionals, not the least of whom was David Satcher, a former U.S. Surgeon General. While seeking and even reaching a state of mental and emotional wellbeing may not guarantee that our bodies will rid themselves of disease, at the very least it gives them the very best chance for healing.

Thomson devotes four chapters to *reaching in*: Seven Ways to Enhance Your Healing; Heal More Than Your Body, So Your Body Can Heal; Quests, Questions, Mysteries and Miracles; and Ancient Pathways to Healing. While the appeal of the suggestions offered here will depend upon where readers are coming from with respect to their views regarding healing, every reader should find something helpful in these pages.

In keeping with her interest in helping other cancer patients navigate their way through the healthcare system, the end of the book contains two appendices. The first, an organizational aid, is a form for creating one’s own “yellow pages.” It provides places to note all cancer-related contacts and frequently used resources. The second appendix is a comprehensive directory of cancer resources. Listings include: organizations and websites; newsletters and magazines; books; audios and videos; consulting, treatment information and referral services; and miscellaneous resources. In each category, both free and for purchase resources are identified.

In writing this book, Puja Thomson has given patients a gift. Please note two things about this statement. First, I intentionally did not identify any particular type of patients. That’s because, even though this book was written for cancer patients, much of what is included can be useful to all patients who are experiencing any serious, life-changing disease. Second, it falls into that category of books I consider gifts because, not only does it give patients the practical tools to make hard decisions and manage their care, but it also suggests ways for them, in Thomson’s words, to bring balance to their lives, replenish their energy and renew their spirits. Well done!□

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