

Art as Philanthropy: Triptych and the Reasons Behind Donating Half of My Net Proceeds

My third novel, Triptych, emerged in December 2008. I have committed half of the net proceeds from the sale of the book to two organizations actively engaged in the fight to make cancer a distant memory.

Why, you may ask. Like everyone, I had a general awareness of cancer itself. Like just about everyone, I had either known someone affected by or who had suffered from cancer. I'd been remotely aware of the cancer statistics. I'd had one scare when I was 26, but after a breast sonogram, my gynecologist advised me to have my first baseline sonogram at forty. Even with all that, I was, admittedly, lax about breast self-exam.

Flash ahead to the fall of 2006. I was thirty-nine, about to have my first mammogram. I had absolutely no qualms about it. In fact, my fortysomething friends who'd gone through the procedure told me what it was like and even shared jokes about it. I think that was to mollify the draconian nature of it. After all, there's nothing remotely funny about placing a breast between two metal plates, having those plates pressed together to flatten out sensitive flesh, and then having to hold your breath through the pain as a technician takes an image of the inside of the breast. All this while you're so self-conscious about being half-naked in front of a total stranger and worrying if you're nervous sweat is producing its trademark funk, because preparation literature told you not to wear any deodorant for the procedure. Nonetheless, I thought I was sufficiently prepared for it all... until the technician told me that I would need to come back. She showed me the image of my right breast and said something like, "I think I see something." As my mind tried to catch up with the moment, she told not to freak out... that this was not uncommon. She speculated that I would most likely have to return for a breast sonogram. She was right.

I traded cold metal plates for ice-cold gel and a metal probe, kneading my flesh. Another caring female technician confirmed that there was, indeed, something shadowy on the sonogram. Just as her soothing tone lulled me into thinking that this was not a matter of life and death, the radiologist – your typical insensitive male – appeared in the room to have a look at my bare breast and the sonogram, pronouncing, "You know, if this is what I think it is, about 80% of those tumors tend to be malignant." Not what I wanted to hear, supine and exposed. "You mean benign, right?" I pleaded. As if I was a hardheaded child, he said, "No, I mean malignant." Just to be sure, though, they promptly scheduled me for another sonogram, this one with a needle biopsy.



Actual unretouched photo of my needle biopsy scar

Reality set in at that point. I was terrified at the prospect of suffering painful, debilitating surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. I felt weak... vulnerable... diseased. Plus, I reminded myself, I was single. If I had breast cancer, what man would want me after treatments had disfigured me? Then I imagined the worst. What would the world be like without me in it? I discussed fears with my mother, who, as a retired operating room nurse, was cool and calm. She was even eating while we talked on the phone. "You don't know," she simply said. "Yours could be among the 20% that's benign."

I tried to keep the day of the needle biopsy as normal as possible, booking it early so that I could knock it out and go straight to work afterwards. Typically, they were running behind. I was scared to death, so I wasn't the most mannerly person on the planet... and that was before the lovely young Korean-American doctor proceeded to stick a mammoth needle in my breast. Guided by the sonogram, she would puncture the lump repeatedly and then take several samples with these loud clicks of the needle. No matter how much she numbed me, I acutely felt every moment of the procedure. Nonetheless, after the doctor covered my punctured flesh with a small pressure bandage, I went to work and began the agonizing wait for the results.

Days later, I was in a thick lather before my gynecologist finally gave me the good news. I didn't have breast cancer. The lump was something called a fibroadenoma, a benign tumor comprised of glandular and fibrous breast tissue. They appear in 10% of women in general and in 20% of African-American women in particular.¹ There's no treatment. It'll be a part of me and has become part of my baseline sonogram. Hearing that news... forget R-O-L-A-I-D-S. This was how I spelled *relief!*

My struggle was with the threat of breast cancer, but for others, cancer is very real. Just to give you pause, here are some sobering statistics:

- According to Susan G. Komen for the Cure, "one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime."²
- The National Cancer Institute recently decreed that cancer rates have not declined, but, in fact, have increased. Breast cancer has increased 4%, as has lung cancer by the same percentage. Prostate cancer in white males has increased 12%; in black males, it is up 14%. Melanoma in whites is also up 14%. Lastly, colorectal cancer has increased 3%.³
- The incidences of brain tumors seem to be increasing across the globe.⁴

¹ Source: About.com <http://breastcancer.about.com/od/mammograms/p/fibroadenomas.htm>

² Source: Susan G. Komen www.oneineight.org

³ Source: National Cancer Institute www.checnet.org/HEALTHHOUSE/education/articles-detail.asp?Main_ID=507

⁴ Source: The Food and Drug Administration www.fda.gov/Fdac/features/1997/497_brain.html

I felt like I had to do something. So, I chose to donate a portion of my proceeds from the sale of Triptych, the poignant story of a cancer sufferer's struggle to protect his family, to the fight against cancer for as long as the book stays in print. I have the base to ensure that I achieve my goals of inspiring readers with a story of the triumph of the human spirit, and of contributing substantively to the eradication of a disease that is one of humanity's scourges. I was lucky. I had access to medical care, and my situation turned out for the good. However, there are many out there without access to diagnostic facilities. 365 Pink Foundation of Plantation, Florida⁵ provides such help for the underserved. Many out there, once they have gotten sick, have to leave their families and familiar surroundings to receive treatment. The Cancer Society of the Bahamas helps provides a safe haven for them to reside, rest, and recuperate⁶.

I chose to make a difference in this small way. That's how change starts, as a certain man named Barack Obama recently showed us. And even if I, through my experience and my gift, help just one person, to paraphrase an old saying – to the world, I may be one person, but to one person, I may be the world.

⁵ Source: 365 Pink Foundation www.365pinkfoundation.org

⁶ Source: The Cancer Society of the Bahamas www.cancersocietybahamas.org