

Integrating Job, Jesus' Passion, and Buddhist Metta to Bring Meaning to the Suffering and Recovery from Breast Cancer

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Abstract Coming face-to-face with death was a spiritual crisis. My family and I suffered individually and collectively during my treatment and recovery for locally advanced breast cancer. Like Job, I learned that it takes tremendous energy to ruminate about the causes of suffering and to protest innocence with little gains in wisdom. Wisdom came as I deeply experienced a passion narrative based on the life of Jesus with reference to the psychological benefits as extolled by Wilkes. The grueling experience of treatment for locally *advanced* breast cancer broke my body and forced me to experience Easter Saturday as I retreated to heal in the tomb. My physical and emotional healing of Easter Saturday included the Buddhist meditation of Metta and guided imagery that involved spiritual healing focussed on God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. My reflection on the story of Job, passion journaling and Buddhist meditation enabled me to physically, emotionally, and spiritually heal, even in the midst of chaos.

Keywords Passion journaling · Meditation · Breast cancer · Healing · Spirituality

There once was a woman who lost her way.
Fear and death were shadows creeping up trying to
overcome her.
Then one Good Friday, chemo took her hair; the
scalpel took her breast; radiation burned her flesh;
lack of faith sapped her dignity.
For forty days and forty nights, she was nestled in
the tomb of Easter Saturday.
The light of Easter Sunday beckoned her forth to
repeat the message of Revelation: “Whoever is
thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him
take the free gift of the water of life.” (Revelations 22:17)
(Sealy 2010, 269)

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Cancer seems epidemic, especially when you reach “middle age.” It is rare to meet someone aged 50 or over who has not been affected by cancer, either through a personal struggle or that of a loved one. Perhaps one of the biggest struggles to overcome in the face of a life-threatening illness is the spiritual crisis that begins with anger and frustration over “why me” to the search for meaning from the suffering (Sealy 2010; Sealy, in press). Many people turn to scriptures of suffering for guidance on how to weather the storm of life-threatening illness. This paper reflects on the meaning of the Old Testament story of Job, the New Testament story of Jesus’ passion, and the Buddhist Metta of meditative healing in my journey to survive locally advanced breast cancer.

Job

Job is an Old Testament story of a man who experienced multiple sufferings in the form of severe illness, financial loss, and emotional, psychological, and social loss from the death of his wife and children, as well as accusations of sin and abandonments from his friends as a test of his faith in God (American Bible Society 1995). Knowing this Old Testament story, it is very easy to question whether you have experienced a life-threatening illness as a result of sin or a test from God, even when you believe in a loving rather than a punishing God. Prior to my diagnosis of locally advanced breast cancer, I was well acquainted with suffering from the time I was very young (Sealy 2010). My father abandoned our mother and young family when I was 2 years old, my mother died when I was 5 years old, my grandfather who subsequently raised my four siblings and me died when I was 10 years old. Even though Sunday school was a weekly constant telling me God was present in my life and loved me, all of the adults in my family life still died. Such early losses led to a major psychological and emotional wound. As an adult, I emotionally survived five miscarriages and other losses that further deepened this wound. With each major loss, the story of Job once again ruminated in my psyche leading to questions about the meaning of suffering and “why me”. While Job proclaims his innocence, he complains bitterly never finding out the reason for his suffering nor understanding why God did not set a time for *court* when he could answer to his sin or misdemeanors (American Bible Society 1995, Job 24, verse 1).

I felt like Job with my diagnosis of locally advanced breast cancer. My breast cancer was not diagnosed early because the initial mammogram and breast ultrasound were negative (Sealy 2010). When my breast swelled to the size of a cantaloupe 8 months later, I suffered through 10 months of grueling treatment. First, I suffered with the side effects of 6 months of chemotherapy prior to my double mastectomy. Then, I bled the night of my outpatient double mastectomy. Within a week of surgery, I was hospitalized with sepsis (infection in the blood). My 30 radiation treatments resulted in a severe radiation burn; I experienced sciatica and a muscle contracture from the radiation burn. I lost my job as a nursing researcher educator when the research program in which I worked was closed causing financial hardship and the loss of insurance benefits. I experienced an emotional depression from the acute and chronic illness, as well as the estrogen suppressant medication and the anxiety from being convinced that I would die and abandon my husband and daughters (aged 13 and 9 years). I had to watch my husband and our two daughters be traumatized as they witnessed my suffering, afraid that I would die. All these examples of suffering reaffirmed for me the story of Job, making me feel I was the “damned.” “I am very familiar with being angry at God. I have experienced far too many losses making me wonder if I was a bad person or wondering if I deserved this pain and suffering. Does God really only give you what you can handle? I don’t think so because I have been

overwhelmed far too many times” (Sealy, in press). I questioned whether I deserved the suffering and would I ever have my day in “court” (American Bible Society 1995, Job 24, verse 1) to discover why all these tragedies were happening to me. Even though I knew that the Job story ended with Job becoming “Twice as rich as he had been before” (American Bible Society 1995, Job 42, verse 10) the story brought pain with little relief.

The Jesus Passion Narrative

In contrast to Job, I often looked to the story of Jesus’ passion as the ultimate story of sacrificial suffering (Sealy 2010; Sealy, in press). Jesus *inherently* knew what to do to reduce suffering, something many of us need to learn. I was fortunate that Professor Alastair Weir (a New Testament Professor) shared the book: *The Gift of Courage* (Wilkes 1979) with me at the beginning of my illness. This book explored the meaning of suffering and emotional and psychological maturity with reference to Jesus’ passion. In *Meaning through Symbol*, Wilkes wrote “Gethsemane speaks of the reality of ambiguity and uncertainty in life” (Wilkes 1979, p. 51), and “Calvary speaks the truth that if man lives honestly and in love, he is bound to suffer and experience death” (p. 51).

I thought about Jesus’ passion many times during my 10-month “trial” of intensive and intrusive treatment. For me, a passion journey is

a deeply intimate experience that begins when you imagine what Jesus felt as he traveled through the wilderness, to the Last Supper and Gethsemane; through his burial in the tomb and his resurrection on Easter morning (Sealy 2011, p. 9)

I journaled each stage of my passion journey to find healing and solace by imagining what Jesus experienced.

Gethsemane

Jesus knew that to fulfill the scriptures he needed to experience pain and suffering on the cross. I imagine that being human; he felt tremendous trepidation knowing what was coming. The analogy of Maundy Thursday and Gethsemane fits as a model for our family’s journey in the sense of knowing that something difficult or even terrible is coming and you are powerless to stop it. Many prayers are said hoping to avoid the inevitable, while feeling in your soul the pain and suffering will still come. (Sealy 2010, 19)

Good Friday

Jesus’ passion is something I thought a great deal about during my treatment. He suffered during the trial, carrying the cross and finally on the cross. His body was pierced with nails and a sword. He was humbled publicly. The biggest difference between Jesus and me was that he suffered willingly to save others. Not me! I didn’t want to die. I wanted to live for my children. I travelled through Good Friday never feeling treatment was a choice. Even though many people repeatedly told me how courageous I was, in reality I always knew I was a coward. (Sealy 2010, 41)

A sword pierced Jesus’ side even though he was probably already dead. A scalpel severed off my breasts, but I was anesthetized. (Sealy 2010, 83)

We don’t know if it was sunny on the day that Jesus was crucified. If it was, he would have been burnt in the sun. He said, “I am thirsty.” He was given vinegar. My skin

was burnt with radiation. It became parched and bled and wept; I bathed it with Epsom salts. (Sealy 2010, 103)

Easter Saturday

The disciples were hidden away feeling afraid on Easter Saturday. They were mourning the loss of a loved one and leader and feeling helpless. I also felt emotionally and physically broken and helpless, wanting desperately to hide from the world. When is it really safe to come out? On Easter Saturday, there needs to be a time for lamentations. Maybe you have to go through the tomb to heal; maybe the tears of lamentation water the body to help it heal. The time in the tomb or hidden in the upper room feels like forever. Will the losses and tears ever end? (Sealy 2010, 165)

Easter Sunday

On Easter Sunday, the tomb is empty. Angels tell Mary that Jesus is gone. She thinks that something terrible has happened to her Lord. Mary didn't recognize Jesus when he looked like a gardener. Do you recognize me? (Sealy 2010, 225)

Even though I continued to be fearful, my personal passion narrative comforted me so that I did not feel so *alone*. My major epiphany in writing a passion narrative, however, was that the Job story was very detailed about suffering but sparse on healing. The psychological benefit of writing my personal passion narrative with reference to Wilkes was that I realized I was caught in a pessimistic loop of Maundy Thursday (fear that something terrible is approaching and you are powerless to stop it) and Good Friday (painful death) (Sealy 2010; Sealy, in press). Wilkes helped me understand that the lived experience of suffering toward healing in the tomb of Easter Saturday was the gateway for me to really begin understanding the relationship between healing and spirituality toward the joy of resurrection. This cognitive knowledge alone, however, could not change my emotional default position of fear, anxiety, and suffering. It was Buddhist meditation that helped me begin to rewrite my personal script toward healing.

Mediation and Buddhist Metta

By the end of my grueling treatment, I realized survival meant I needed to redirect the tremendous energy I was using to ruminate about the painful past toward healing in the present. I learned to meditate at Wellspring Cancer Support Centre in London, Ontario. Twice a week, I attended meditation with individuals who were experiencing or survived cancer. At the beginning of meditation, we would silently repeat the *forgiveness* in order to focus on forgiving others, asking others to forgive us, and then forgiving ourselves. I also integrated my Christian beliefs by repeating the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm (The Lord is My Shepherd) to emotionally "ground me" in the process.

The second part of our meditation focused on repeating metta (the Buddhist meditation of loving kindness) to promote feelings of "loving kindness" toward ourselves and others.

May I be safe from inner and outer harm,
 May I be happy just as I am,
 May I be healthy, may my body serve me well,
 May I be peaceful and at ease. (Sealy 2010, 166)

As I learned to meditate, I adapted the metta to reflect my Christian beliefs.

May I be healthy, may the Lord make me strong.
May I feel God's love and learn to love and take care of myself.
May I be open and listen to God's will.
May I be patient, feel God's grace, and drink the living water of life.

These meditations resulted in me no longer having the energy or desire to be angry at anyone (at least on most days). Now when I am upset, I just start saying "metta" for that person who has upset me because it is impossible to say metta and be angry at the same time. I still carry many frustrations, but I am using metta to guide me through them. Metta is also an antidote for fear. I am still afraid, but not as much.

The final part of meditation is guided imagery in which we take a symbolic "healing journey" (Sealy, in press). It is during these "journeys" when I am "one" with God and I feel calmness in my soul and sense the presence of the healing spirit. I learned to reconcile my unresolved grief from the death of my mother and meditated on what I would like her to know about me if she was still alive. Meditation became a "sacred" time for me. By letting go of past wounds, I found the energy to pray for people who are also experiencing suffering and injustice in the world.

Summary

The diagnosis of advanced cancer can result in a deep, spiritual crisis. The Old Testament story of Job made me question whether the cancer was a punishment and whether I was to blame for my misfortunes. Like Job, I learned it takes tremendous energy to ruminate about the causes of suffering and to protest my innocence with little gains in wisdom. Wisdom came as I deeply experienced my own passion narrative and was able to reference it with the psychological benefits extolled by Wilkes. My pattern was to repeatedly travel the emotional journey through Gethsemane and Good Friday and then go to Easter Sunday without experiencing Easter Saturday. This omission led me back to Gethsemane quite quickly, lacking the healing insight and wisdom gained from Easter Saturday. The grueling experience of treatment for locally *advanced* breast cancer broke my body and forced me to experience Easter Saturday as I retreated to heal in my own tomb. Being a nurse, I realized for the first time Jesus had scars on Easter Sunday rather than open wounds. The physical and emotional healing of Easter Saturday included the Buddhist meditation of Metta and guided imagery involving the spiritual healing of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I learned that physical, emotional, and spiritual healing can occur in the midst of chaos. The integration of the Old Testament Job story, the Jesus passion narrative, and Buddhist meditation of forgiveness and Metta (loving kindness) led to my transformation. I am still learning to cope with daily frustrations by being more assertive and to appreciate those moments that are good rather than focusing on what is still left to be done. The past no longer haunts me. My ability to be grateful in the moment and find joy in my day to day existence is improving. I am more accepting of these ideas now than ever before. *For me, resurrection means understanding the tremendous suffering that preceded the "empty cross." Redemption is represented by the "empty bra" on the cross* (Sealy 2010, 279) and being able to write the lyrics to the hymn "In Your Footsteps, Lord" (Sealy and Dyck 2011). Two years after the end of my treatment, I have experienced tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. My career is thriving and my family is healing. I am now beginning to understand with Job becoming "Twice as rich as he had been before" (American Bible Society 1995, Job 42, verse 10).

Picture of the bra on the cross



This picture was taken Easter Sunday, 2010 at the Church of the Hosannas, London, Ontario. It has deep personal meaning to me after experiencing 22 months of grueling treatment and an exhausting period of recovery. For me, resurrection means understanding the tremendous suffering that preceded the “empty cross.” Redemption is represented by the “empty bra” on the cross. (Sealy 2010, p. 279).

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