

Excerpted from *Slapped Awake* by Deborah Lang Hampton,
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Foreword

Twelve years ago, I reluctantly was thrust into beginning an arduous journey, the course of which I couldn't know. What I thought might be a little detour in my busy life became my life. In order to integrate the impact of facing a life threatening disease, I did what I had always done to try to make sense of my life: write. In the early days of breast cancer, I wrote in a frenzy. It was the only foolproof way I knew to try to make some sense of what was happening to me. Over the 12 years that I have dealt with breast cancer, poetry has been my outlet, the place I go to crystallize the experience, the place I go to tell myself the truth.

As the body of poems grew, I began sharing them selectively with other survivors and friends. I was overwhelmed by their positive response and encouragement to "do something" with them. I had seen quite a few fine books on how women coped with the diagnosis and initial treatment of breast cancer, but I did not find much about how we live with having had the disease for the rest of our lives, nor what happens if the cancer recurs. In many types of

cancer, there is a significant and growing population of survivors who are learning how to manage and live with cancer as a chronic disease. This is uncharted territory in everything from medical economics to psychological coping. As this new trend unfolds, the artist's voice will be as important as the analyst's.

Like any other art, poetry is highly individual, and those reading it have a highly individual response. People usually smile over a grimace when you say that you write poetry. I know that I sometimes do. It's such an intimate, personal process and finally, the poet largely defines what poetry is – and who's to say it's not poetry? For my tastes there's an awful lot of mediocre -- even trite and terrible -- stuff out there. I've also had the joy of reading some work of others who have been through breast cancer that made me wonder if they had been reading my journals. Their imagery and tone faithfully reflected my own experience, sometimes giving form to my feelings. I don't know what "makes a poem mean", to paraphrase John Ciardi, but I know when I hear a good one, one that makes my bones ring like chimes.

To me, poetry should hit you in the gut, even if it's something as seemingly mundane as how a bowl of apples looks on top of the piano. It's all about truthfulness. Like humor, a good poem should surprise you and take you to a place of looking that you hadn't found before, or was even dangerous to get to. Maybe it brings you up over a hill and knocks you to your knees by what it reveals on the other side. It doesn't have to be grand or profound or epic in length. A poem should go deep inside the eye, or the heart, or the hope, or the dark places. Sometimes it should give you words for your feelings, even when you had not yet fully felt them. I want my poems to be searing word-songs. I hope that you laugh or gasp or think about them later. Most of all, I hope that they give voice to my own truths and that, together – writer and reader – we find the common verities that connect us as humans.

At the beginning of each chapter, I have included excerpts

from Rumi, a poet from the Middle East who lived 800 years ago. His work has sometimes been my voice, my conscience, and my guide. Across the centuries, he still speaks powerfully. The razor edges of his poems lacerate our hearts, cutting through our defenses, down to the core. I have provided a bibliography and references in the appendix so that you can go to the source and full text of these wonderful renderings created by Coleman Barks. He has taken the stiff, formal, literal translations of Rumi from the original lyrical, expressive Persian and breathed life and emotion into them to astonish us with their freshness and relevance.

As I gathered my poems together I realized that there was a story that went with them, so the poems are the scaffolding for the story. The story is not just about breast cancer. Extreme events change us. This story also encompasses what I learned about myself, how I changed, what choices I made, and who I became because I had to face losing my life. There are parts of this story that affected a wide circle of people. They have their own perspective and their own stories to tell. This is my story and mine alone. I have tried to tell it honestly, even though that wasn't always easy.

I had to embrace it all. Each chapter was part of bringing me to the life that I have now, this precious life I have now.