

A Truly Blessed Life

With "death on her shoulder," Deborah Lang Hampton wakes each day seeking victory over the very ailment that has taught her so much about life and living. *by Michael Ringering*

It's probably happened to most of us at one time or another. An unsettling event or crisis shakes our lives and we unintentionally paint a much worse picture of the problem for ourselves and to those around us, before evaluating the situation for what it really is.

Human nature sometimes pushes us in the direction of thinking the worst initially, especially during times of great fear or duress.

What's interesting is how, in most instances, things aren't always as bad as they seem. Sometimes it takes days, sometimes just minutes, and other times we realize it instantaneously.

It also can be said no matter how bad a circumstance seems to be, we would not have to travel very far to find someone who is dealing with issues that we could not even imagine.

I was reminded of that point late last month when I had the privilege of spending an hour or so with Mrs. Deborah Lang Hampton.

For those of you who do not know Deborah, she's been a patient of Dr. Burns' since around 1980, when he first performed a breast biopsy of what turned out to be a benign lump. In 1987, at the age of 35, she began receiving regular mammograms after her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Unfortunately, like her mother and grandmother before her, Deborah also would be diagnosed with breast cancer, and since 1994, has been battling the disease every minute of every day.

As I mentioned, you don't have to travel very far...

As I was preparing for our interview, I realized I have never been faced with a family member or close personal friend having to fight a daily battle with cancer.

Although my stepfather was diagnosed with prostate cancer within the past couple

Photo by David Humber



Deborah Lang Hampton is pictured displaying her self-authored biography, "Slapped Awake" – an inspirational account of her ongoing battle with breast cancer.

of years, it was caught well enough in time that it's now under control.

The more I thought about the questions I should ask Deborah, the more I realized how disconnected I was from the topic.

I then became somewhat fearful of exactly how to approach the interview. I had no idea where the boundaries might lie. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was ask an inappropriate question, or one that would trigger an emotional response that led to additional pain or suffering. The

woman has dealt with enough already; she didn't need me to make things worse just for a story in a newsletter. I really was not quite sure of my direction.

Deborah arrived in my office and we spent a few moments breaking the ice and getting to know one another. I quickly mentioned the purpose of the story and offered her a little background regarding *The Cutting Edge*.

Almost immediately I could sense this incredible strength and drive in her. So much so, that I became extremely comfortable in where I was hoping to lead the interview.

Although I fumbled a little trying to organize my thoughts and intent for her, I expressed my desire to delve into the psychological aspects of her battle rather than the disease itself.

Her words were simple and kind, "That, to me, is where the story is also."

The story begins in Costa Rica in 1994.

"While on a trip to Costa Rica visiting old family friends with my daughter, Hollin, and the daughter of a friend of mine, I became sick with dysentery," she said.

"I've spent a great deal of time in Third World countries and am always very careful about what I eat and drink, but for whatever reason, I got sick and became extremely dehydrated."

Back at her friends' home in San Isidro, while lying in bed, Deborah rested her hands on her chest and closed her eyes in an attempt to get some much needed rest.

"With my hand over the right side of my breastbone," she said, "I felt something very odd. I looked down where the rib joins the breastbone and saw this lump. I felt it and it was as hard as a walnut. I think it's quite possible that had I not been so dehydrated, I may not have noticed this for months. I had a pretty good feeling this was a bad thing."

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After returning to Tennessee in late July, Deborah scheduled an appointment to meet with Dr. Burns on Aug. 1. As he examined the lump, Deborah recalled noticing his facial features changing subtly and jokingly barbed, "Dr. Burns, you're no poker player."

Dr. Burns expressed the immediate need to remove the lump and scheduled a biopsy for the next day.

"I was numb from head to toe and just hoped Dr. Burns could extract the tumor with clean margins. At that point, we were just hoping for the best from a lumpectomy."

While coming out of anesthesia, Deborah's first husband delivered the bad news - the tumor was indeed cancerous.

"My first thought in hearing those words was, I'm going to die," Deborah said.

"I'm going to die, and I'm not going to be able to raise my daughter. What am I going to do? How am I going to get through this? I can't believe this is happening at 42 years of age. It was awful. It was just absolutely the defining moment in my life."

I asked her if her first emotion was anger. "No," she said, "it was total shock and disbelief. I think that is almost universally one's first reaction. I think you are just absolutely flattened. You can barely draw a breath when you hear those words."

"For me, I was scared ... I was really scared. I think anger comes from feeling threatened and feeling threatened comes out of fear. I just felt pure fear at that moment. I can't begin to describe how terrified I was - not about dying necessarily, but even more about the possibility of not being there to raise my 10-year-old daughter."

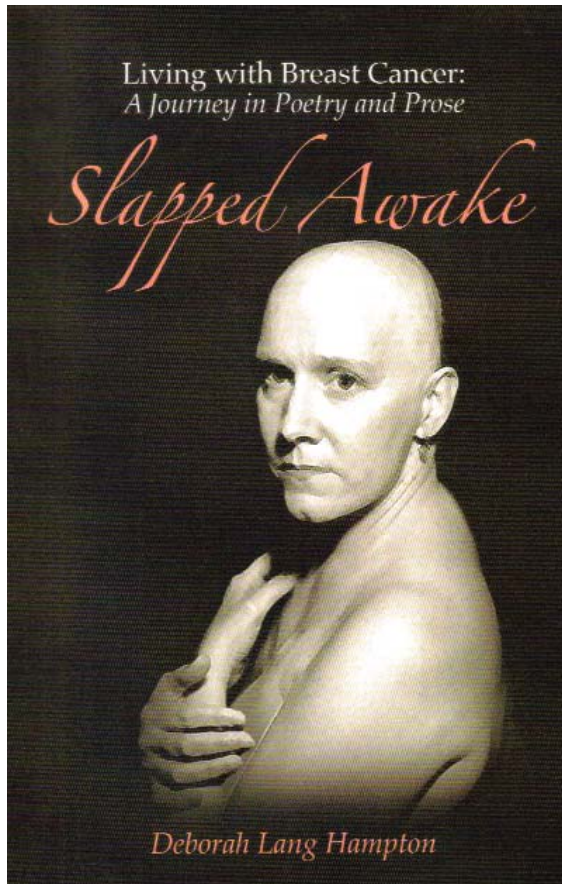
With the pathology report showing that the edges of the tissue where the tumor was removed still cancerous, Dr. Burns and Deborah concluded the next best step for her was to undergo a mastectomy. The procedure was scheduled for Aug. 18.

"I literally did not sleep more than about an hour or two a night during that two-week period between the biopsy and mastectomy," she said.

"Certainly thoughts regarding my daughter dominated most of my thinking, but I also had thoughts of all the things I wanted to do with my life, just wishing for time. Time was everything."

"I also was extremely terrified about the treatment ... terrified of the possible need for chemotherapy," she continued.

"My recollection had been in the 1970s



"I hope the book does a couple of things. I hope it gives practical information on ways to navigate all of this and that it reduces fear that if reoccurrence occurs, it's not an automatic death sentence. I hope that's what people get out of 'Slapped Awake.'"

-Deborah Lang Hampton

were ruthless and relentless. Was the cancer isolated in the one breast? Had the cancer spread to other parts of the body? Could she return to work? Was she strong enough to face what was coming? How sick might she be after treatment? What would she look like following the mastectomy? Would she die?

Questions many of us have never have to ask ourselves.

Following the successful mastectomy performed by Dr. Burns, Deborah recalled feeling

relieved.

"I was just glad to have the cancer out of me," she said.

"I was truly relieved. When I did see myself for the first time without my right breast, it was really not a traumatic event. I was glad the cancer was gone."

Three weeks after her mastectomy, following weeks of research she had begun on cancer beginning prior to her biopsy, Deborah was ready to make a case to Dr. Burns for a preventative mastectomy on her left side. Although he preferred she wait until she had properly healed from her

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and '80s when chemo treatment was a uniformly horrendous and debilitating experience. So there were several things floating around in my head at that time."

The questions flowing through her mind



Dr. Laura Witherspoon and Deborah at the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation's "Race for the Cure" event in 2006.



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first mastectomy, he did refer her to oncologist Dr. B.W. Ruffner.

As the weeks rolled into autumn, Deborah was being forced into an unexpected education because of the disease and soon viewed her nemesis paradoxically as the scariest thing she has ever faced and a blessing that “slapped” her fully awake. It was teaching her valuable lessons about her own life that she previously did not have the courage to face.

Following discussions with Dr. Ruffner, it was decided she would indeed go through with a preventative mastectomy on her left side. Deborah chose the preventative action because the type of cancer she had had a slightly higher chance of occurring as a tumor in the remaining breast.

The procedure took place in late October 1994 and along with a six-month course of chemotherapy by June of 1995, as far as she was concerned the cancer was gone.

“I sure did believe and hope that was true,” she said.

“Chemotherapy in those days was not routinely offered to women who did not have lymph node involvement, and my lymph nodes had been negative. The second mastectomy and the chemo I elected to have represented an aggressive attempt to guarantee as best we could that I had the best chance possible to live a long and healthy life. By all statistical probabilities, it appeared I would be fine.”

Psychologically, following the removal of her second breast, Deborah was most concerned with surviving, not her outward appearance.

“At that point, it did not matter one bit that I had no breasts,” she said. “I just wanted to survive. It was ‘get them off, get it out, and let’s get rid of this risk.’ I don’t think I let myself feel that loss until several years later when I moved toward a decision

and address things in my life that needed attention,” Deborah said.

“This journey I had been on really empowered me with the courage to change

ing this time, trying to figure out what I had just been through for a year, how it had changed me, what I had learned and what I was still dealing with in regard to fear and uncertainty.

“The fear I had in between doctors’ visits was almost unbearable,” she continued.

“It was mentally and emotionally quite



Deborah and her daughter, Hollin

and address things in my life that needed attention,” Deborah said.

“I felt pretty comfortable speaking to my daughter and never really felt scared to do so. My fear, because she was not very forthcoming about what she was feeling, was that she was really sitting on a lot of stuff – which indeed she was. We always had an open relationship, but this was so big and scary for her, she just did not know how to let it out and look at it. But, eventually, it all came out a little at a time and I really felt comfortable that she was learning to understand and accept the situation for what it was.”

The question of what to do with her life continued to loom large over her and was made more difficult inadvertently by friends and family who assumed she was done with her fight and everything was back to normal. But her life was not normal nor would it ever be again. She had changed personally, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, which created internal turmoil.

“There were situations in which those closest to me were so sure that I was going to be alright, that I felt unable to share with them how truly frightened I was,” she said. “I felt very, very alone and vulnerable dur-

taxing waiting for that next visit ... and I have spoken to others who have had that same anxiety over the ‘next visit.’”

During her period of remission, Deborah also enjoyed some important personal successes. She remarried in 1998, had breast reconstruction surgery, and described the time as the happiest, steady and most wonderful time of her life.

In early 2000 Deborah began experiencing some discomfort near the scar on her chest. At that time, due to changes in her insurance, she was handed over to USA’s Dr. Laura Witherspoon.

Dr. Witherspoon began running tests over the next several months, all with reassuring negative results, and finally decided to perform an open biopsy because of the persistence of Deborah’s discomfort.

“We both thought everything was going to be fine,” Deborah said, “but the small tissue sample Dr. Witherspoon extracted from my chest wall showed a recurrence. Of course I was shocked and it not only meant radiation therapy, but that I would also lose one of my breast reconstruction implants.”

The news was crushing for Deborah

For Dr. Burns

With sculptor’s hands you press the clay of me back together seamlessly.

Neither diminished nor disfigured, I feel distilled, pared to my essence, streamlined, smoothed, sleek as a dolphin flashing in the sun.

-Deborah Lang Hampton

to have a breast reconstruction procedure. I’m still glad I made the decision to have the mastectomies, but I eventually did have an emotional meltdown and experienced the full grief for the loss of my breasts and even more, the loss of my old life.”

Deborah would be in remission for the next six years. During that time she was



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because it was like having to go through a third mastectomy. Her reconstruction had not only become emblematic in the sense that it meant wellness and being able to get on with life, but also restored her femininity. Coping with a breast-less chest had taken its toll on her and the reconstruction made her feel fully human again.

"You asked me about being angry before," Deborah said, "and I can tell you that when I got the news from Dr. Witherspoon that the cancer had come back, I was furious. After all I had gone through and the decisions I made to make this disease go away, I was really very angry at everything. I was furious with God, with science, with everyone and everything. And I remained in that state for several months."

But Deborah then realized a simple and powerful truth.

"I realized the only thing I had control of at that point was how I responded to what had happened to me - period. And once I got past feeling angry and focused on that simple truth, life got much easier. The fact is that's a truth for all of us, not just cancer patients. I was able to begin to build acceptance of what had happened to me and the type of life I was going to have to lead, including all the upcoming treatment and days in which I wasn't going to feel well."

Deborah found herself in remission following eight months of chemo and radiation and spent the next couple of years coping with the setback and working to bring fulfillment to her life.

In 2003, she would again be faced with a spectrum of emotions. From the birth of her granddaughter Naomi Elise Bley, to the death of her father who had struggled for years with dementia, to concerns over her own health.

While in Washington, D.C. on business, Deborah found herself "locked down" at her hotel due to the presence of Hurricane Isabel. Alone in her hotel room, she noticed a sense of feeling disquieted.

Following a brief self analysis of mind, body and spirit, she realized something was wrong. She instinctively ran her hands over her chest and could feel a hard knot near her sternum that was tender to the touch. It had returned.

Suffering a recurrence for the third time, the cancer was now located in her chest, liver, lungs, sternum and lymph nodes. The toughest part was telling those she loved and those who loved her that the demon had returned.

"It hurt very much to see the fear in everyone as I told them the bad news," Deborah said. "My daughter was very angry, considering all we had to go through over the years, and my husband, Steve, was angry that I was going to have to endure treatment all over again."

Treatment of choice this time was Xeloda, an oral chemotherapy agent. It appeared to have a positive effect and in early 2004 her doctor discontinued the drug.

"Following that treatment and a new set of scans," she said, "my family and I were relieved to see no evidence of cancer anywhere on the scan results. I wasn't prepared for that news and enjoyed rejoicing with family and friends."

She was in full remission once more. The moment, however, was short-lived.

Deborah discovered another lump on her chest at the end of spring in 2004. Following another battery of tests, the cancer had returned to her chest and lymph nodes.

Despite the setback, Deborah would continue her fight and often found solace in helping others cope with the disease.

In 2005 she set out to recount her journey for others, sharing her story with the world in her first book, "Slapped Awake."

Writing prose and poetry has always been an emotional outlet for her, and the time was right to provide a map for others entering this uncharted territory of learning

these years. I've got some liver, bone and lymph node involvement, but the volume of cancer should still be manageable. I'm strong, in a good place psychologically and have a lot of fight left in me.

"My hopes for the clinical trial are that I can continue to manage what I have. I don't expect anyone to obliterate my cancer because, after 13 years, I have such a mixed bag of tumors with different characteristics that I'm just looking to push this back or keep it where it is."

I struggled mightily getting my final thought into the form of a question and Deborah knew it. The conversation became somewhat emotional, not only because I found her to be one of the most courageous persons I had ever met, but the inspiration I found in her words, thoughts and philosophies. In the end, as she had done the entire interview, she made it easy on me.

"Believe me," she said, "you can be as frank as you need to. I'm extremely comfortable speaking about the future and what lies ahead - including death."

I could not find it in myself to ask her how she had come to terms with the fact that this disease could potentially claim her life. The best I could do was ask,

"What happens if the outcome of the clinical trial is not good?"

"If the clinical trial does not work," she said, "then there are other clinical trials available. I have accepted my cancer as more of a companion now because I think it will always be with me in some form or another."

"For a number of reasons, I have never asked any doctor of mine how long I have to live," she continued. "First of all, I have known too many people who have been given a lousy prognosis yet are still here two, three and four years later, doing well. I also know that if I ask my doctor that question, knowing me, I would probably try to make sure I fulfilled his prediction. I'm awfully suggestible!"

"I just don't want to know. There are many new treatment options out there. My job right now is to stay as strong and healthy as I can, remain open to new treatment options, and continue to build a life that makes all this turmoil worthwhile."

Deborah has never asked the question "why me?" As she said, "Pretty close on the heels of that question is 'why not me?'"

The experience of having to accept the disease, subsequently submitting to the many surgeries and treatments and accepting the care and assistance of others, has left her with a feeling of truly being blessed for the opportunity of personal and spiritual growth.

"This ordeal has been a huge spiritual, emotional and physical lesson, and I'm a much different and better person for it," she said.

Lost Summer

A lost summer, that time compassed by chemotherapy viewed through the watered glass of weariness so bottomless that I cannot invoke any impression of those days.

Cancer in its cunning has run all the roadblocks.

The pockets of my hope are turned inside out.

-Deborah Lang Hampton

to live with cancer as a chronic disease.

"I'm grateful for the awareness and many, many lessons cancer has taught me," she said, "because I don't believe we suffer for nothing. I believe suffering is a matrix for change, for growth, for learning about yourself and the ways you can redeem the experience. Cancer is the best teacher that ever came into my life, and it's exactly the teacher I needed."

"I hope the book does a couple of things. I hope it gives practical information on ways to navigate all of this and reduces fear that if recurrence occurs, it's not an automatic death sentence. I hope that's what people get out of 'Slapped Awake.'"

Deborah is currently beginning a new treatment option in the form of a clinical trial in the hopes she can keep her cancer at bay. She knows what's at stake and has prepared herself accordingly.

"I'm just starting a clinical trial in Nashville," she said, "because I'm dealing with a short list of drug options after all



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“I feel very content and frequently very happy. It’s pretty hard to sustain happiness, but I think contentment is something you can hang onto over a greater period of time. I think it’s fair to say this experience has been the portal for me for change and growth.

“Cancer is a horrible thing and hopefully we will rid the world of it at some point. But for me, this has been a gift. The experience of the cancer, the relationships I have built, the friends I’ve made, the opportunities I’ve had to help others, the acts of kindness and sacrifice I’ve observed with other cancer patients, the acts of kindness, care and service I’ve received from my doctors and my nurses – to me, it’s a gift. I know it may sound crazy, but it’s true.

“I also have been blessed with decent insurance, a wonderful and caring family, a loving husband, a solid support system and a terrific faith community. These are the things that have shored me up. Many cancer patients don’t have those luxuries. Some are alone, poor, beaten down and uninsured with no support system at all. How could I not consider myself blessed?”

When she speaks of those who have provided care for her over the years, she speaks warmly of the staff at USA.

“I’ve had so much support from many on the staff at University Surgical. Sue Glasscock and Carol Kelly have been with me through the long haul – Carol just about from the start – and have been friends as well as skilled caregivers and professionals.

“Dr. (Alvaro) Valle was never directly one of my doctors, but he took an interest and was helpful to me when I worked for Y-ME. He found out that my husband and I were the house band at Los Reyes restaurant in Dalton and, for the couple of years we played there, he would often drive down and be that smiling, familiar face in the audience.”

Deborah offers a smile when speaking of Drs. Burns and Witherspoon.

“Oh ... my goodness,” she said. “Dr. Burns and I have had a long time doctor-patient relationship. He’s such a fine and gifted surgeon and just a good man. It’s been my extreme joy and pleasure to watch him receive the recognition he deserves and accept leadership roles locally, regionally and nationally. I’m so proud of him. I just love him.

“I fell in love with Dr. Witherspoon immediately upon meeting her. She has been there for me through a great deal of my surgeries and tests and at turning points in treatment decisions and has just been a huge part of my life. She’s like family to me.

“Both she and Dr. Burns allowed me to create a personal and collaborative relationship with each of them, and that is what I needed from them while facing this adversity.

“My experience at USA has been is that all the people I’ve encountered have been very warm and caring. They have made a big difference in my life and have lightened the load of carrying cancer for so many years.”

Deborah’s immediate plans include spending as much time as she can with her two-month-old granddaughter, the ninth and newest of the grandchildren that she and her husband share, and the child of that daughter, now grown, that Deborah worried about living long enough to raise.

Her long term goals include authoring a few more books, including a biography of a personal friend, and releasing a collection of essays with a working title of “With Death on My Shoulder.”

Her life goes on, as does her daily battle with a disease that has caused great pain, but delivered undeniable personal growth. Her courage, which is a by-product of seamless alignment between mind, body and spirit, will long serve as an example to us all.

Although she has already faced challenges greater than most of us will ever know, her example of charity and helping others to cope, will long survive any timetable God has in store for her in this life.

“I’m not afraid of death, or what lies ahead regarding death,” Deborah said. “I am more fearful of what happens from here to there – the increasing debility, dependency on others, the financial challenges, the effect on family – just the physical aspects of dying.

“I think that’s what most of us fear. But, with that said, I’m very secure with what lies beyond this mortal life and know our soul is our reality and that’s what will go on from here. I take great comfort in my belief that death is the beginning of our journey and not the end.”

Surrender

My surrender

*is not a weak-kneed act
but a genuflection
a gesture of homage to
all that has happened,*

*The blood and the blessings
each pass of the knife
a cleansing stroke*

*Until my heart lay cleft,
and surrender became deliverance
renunciation.*

*I am unburdened
bird-boned
traveling light
ready to fly.*

–Deborah Lang Hampton

Author’s Note: A must-read, *Slapped Awake* is an inspirational account of one woman’s fight against breast cancer and its residual effects. If you are interested in purchasing a copy of “Slapped Awake” for a family member or friend suffering from cancer, copies are available for sale online or by mail at www.slappedawake.com.

You also may purchase copies locally at Rock Point Books (4th & Broad St.), Amazon, Borders, Barnes and Noble and Books-a-Million also offer “Slapped Awake” online.