THE ROSE QUARTZ WARRIOR
Marsha Forest

What if I were to sit down for a short time each day and discipline myself to write without any outcome expectation. Just write what is in my heart and soul as part of the healing path I am currently on.

What if I simply told the truth about my life and my experiences, especially surviving and living with cancer, that might just help another human being as so many books have helped me.

What if I wrote without judging myself, without fear and let the words and feelings flow out of me for a period of time each day...without judgment.

OVERLOOKING THE GARDEN

I am sitting here at my desk overlooking our Toronto garden on this April day. It is 1999. I have been living with cancer since June 1988 when I had my first lumpectomy for intraductal breast cancer. For years I thought I had "introductory" breast cancer misunderstanding my doctor explaining "intraductal". Whatever it was, I felt it was a warning light and I was fortunate that it was early, tiny, and "introductory."

I bought about $200 worth of books on breast cancer, all of which scared me to death, so I gave them to Jack to read. Then we gave most of them away. For once in my life I didn't want to know too much. That was my choice. Too much knowledge was a scary thing for me. This isn't right or wrong it was how I coped. Some people want to know everything. Fine for them. The more I knew the more terrified I became. I simply needed to know what I needed to know - no more no less.

I was scared at this time, but not terrified (as I was to become later). I felt fortunate that the cancer was small, early and that the doctors were optimistic about the prognosis.

At that time I had no further treatment as they felt the cancer had been contained (1989). Now the treatment is automatic radiation after a lumpectomy. I carried on my life more aware of the fortune I had in good friends, good work and a great marriage.

BAM!
Then came the big cancer. Ovarian cancer. In 1995 I was diagnosed and had major surgery for Ovarian cancer. A radical hysterectomy was followed by 6 treatments of chemotherapy each three weeks apart. My only symptoms, which I moved on faster than the speed of light, was bleeding when I urinated. It was like a period. But my periods had ended a year before. This was a sign of possible trouble and trouble it was. Lesson: If you sense anything is wrong check it out. It could save your life.

After a period of relative calm in Jan. 1997, during a routine check up, my oncologist Michael Crump found a tiny breast lump. Another (lumpectomy) surgery followed. This time it was still a small tumor, but diagnosed as invasive breast cancer and the tumor plus 14 lymph nodes were removed. The lymph nodes were said at that time to be clear. This was followed by radiation which is now done in all cases like the one I had just undergone.

Life went on. We learned without a doubt that any life crisis including cancer hits a family and my dearest friend, partner and husband Jack Pearpoint lived through each episode with me. We weathered each storm. We kept working through it all. We even produced a book

(Dreamcatchers and Dolphins) about the crisis and how we reached out to our friends for support and hope.

HIT ONCE AGAIN

In Oct. 1998 we took an incredible 9 week sabbatical in Asia (Yunnan, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia). When we returned home in Jan. 1999 we got hit again. This time round it just seemed too much for the both of us. I was diagnosed with pneumonia (on New Year's eve 1998) and was again diagnosed with a recurrence of the ovarian or breast cancer (Jan. 1999). They weren't sure. I started chemo for Ovarian cancer and then on the second chemo the doctors decided it was the breast cancer causing the problem. We switched the chemo mix to treat the breast cancer. Everyone was doing their best.

I had started coughing near the end of the Asia trip. We now found that my lungs were flooded with too much water, and I had a funny cancer in the skin on my breast bone. I didn't leave the house for 3 months (Jan. Feb. March 1999 except to go to the hospital, the doctor or blessed shopping). But I managed to work in my little nest office daily and Jack and I kept together at all costs with a lot of support from key people in our life. Jack was near the whole time except for errands and a week-end trip for a workshop in Saskatoon.

This was all beginning to feel too much for me. I felt horrible that I was the cause of so much pain and anguish for Jack. This was a "no no" to say out loud as Jack was simply doing what Jack does - being a great and caring human being. I would have done no less. So I learned to put that feeling on a shelf and not visit it too often.

Jack quite rightly hated the part of me who blamed herself in any way for this illness. I loved him even more for making sure this crazy making feeling stayed hidden and unspoken. After all it was not my fault. I would stay away from anyone who even hinted at the philosophy that I was somehow the cause of my own suffering and had brought it upon myself through wrongful thinking, wrongful diet, wrongful whatever.

With my therapist and long time friend Paul Levy to guide me, I learned to hold those feelings that Paul and I knew would drive Jack away from me. Above all, I needed Jack nearby. The comfort he brought to me by his very being and presence was and is my greatest healer. Paul helped me find the balance of telling Jack my fears but not all the time.

Paul at least once a week, and often in short phone bursts, was the outlet for the sobbing, the fears, the irrational thoughts. Jack remained husband, companion, intimate and treasured friend.

WHO WROTE THIS SCRIPT?

For the longest time I felt I was living someone else's life or at least two lives. I was on one hand a healthy, hearty, creative, lively, enthusiastic liver and lover of life. Then there was this cancer stuff. That sort of belonged to another person. I would put the cancer part somewhere else. Even our book "Dreamcatchers and Dolphins", an amazing collection of all the e-mail we and our circle of friends wrote to us during the ovarian cancer crisis, somehow stood apart from the rest of our books. There was this one Marsha in a life of work, joy, meaning and then this other Marsha with a "cancer" story - which somehow stood apart.

It was like I was not permitted to have cancer, to be sick. Sickness happened to others, not to me. I was split and I really don't think I knew how deeply until I started writing this piece (April 1999.)

The suffering part, the pain, the fear was in a way to be denied. Get it over with and carry on. But the suffering, the pain, the nausea and the fear cannot be denied nor forgotten. They are as much part of me as the trip to China. They are as much part of me as the sunrise and sunset at Ankgor Wat. To deny one is to deny myself and my experiences - not just the good ones but all of them.

These two parts must form a whole. For me to be whole, I need to feel there isn't the sick part and the healthy part but just this person called "Marsha" which includes all of my experiences and which has no path to take except the one she creates with Jack and their life together.

SILENT SCREAM

"This isn't me or my script" I would silently scream with each visit to the hospital. "I hate hospitals. I hate sickness." This was crazy making behavior as it may not have been the script I wanted, but I wasn't in control of everything (how novel an idea!) How arrogant of me to think anyone else really liked cancer, sickness and hospitals. If this wasn't me well then who the hell was it? It sure as hell was my body being cut up, parts taken out and now two rounds of chemo. It was my hair that I lost and my terror that I felt waking up each morning. It was me all right and it was time to notice that.

Yes, this was me. This was Jack living with me through this cancer experience again. It could no longer be the happy, productive me vs. the sick cancer me. It simply had to be me - the whole me - going through life. I had to put humpty dumpty together again - the good, the bad and the ugly.

I could honestly say I wish I didn't have to go through all this. I don't particularly like this part of the script, but to deny that this is me is what I now realize drives both me and Jack crazy. Understanding this will be a big help in my journey of healing.

When I fully believe these words I just wrote, I will probably feel more settled, centered and comfortable. That's what I long for. Feeling comfortable with me, the whole me. Not fighting me and all the sides of me. Just learning to accept ME, at fifty six, a me that has been truly bashed and bruised by cancer. I have been hurt. I work so hard to forget the pain and the fear and not to dwell on it , that I make myself crazy. I need to admit it a bit each day and then get on with life (which I certainly do). The other side is that I have been blessed with an exciting life, a great partner, meaningful work. This is part of what my life is all about and I mean ALL.

I need to not deny the word and feelings of real "suffering" in my life. When Paul recently said he thought I had "really endured a lot of suffering in the last several years," I began to weep. Indeed I had. Having someone I respect validate the suffering part really helped.

NOT A GIFT - IT IS WHAT IT IS

I am not of the "cancer is a gift" school of thought. I didn't need cancer to bring meaning to my life. I didn't need cancer to remind me to slow down and enjoy life. I didn't need cancer to tell me how precious each day and how precious my relationship with Jack is.

I didn't need it but I got it. So what do I do with it? "Live with it" is my only answer and one day die as all the rest of us will do.When nobody knows. I am not a fortune teller. Living with this mortality thread hanging over me is something else I don't like. But once again I can dislike it as much as I like, but I still have to deal with it. Denying that it has been a big part of my life is to basically deny myself, my experience and my life.

So I am re-inventing myself as the Rose Quartz Warrior. My mentor, friend and guide in New Zealand - Uncle Whitu - says I am a warrior. He wrote to me in Feb. 1999 and said, "You Marsha, must do what you must do. You are a warrior. Those who truly love you and those you have touched (including me) must be trusted and included to put down the little skirmishes (little outbursts of fire) around you. Those can dissipate your energies for the main battle. Jack and your team is the "strike force". Beware of the takers. They are the ones to deflect. Take care of Jack and his energy. You have my blessing to do what it takes to get well so you can carry on your work and your life."

LOOKING CLOSELY AT A PIECE OF ROSE QUARTZ

All over our home are pieces of Rose Quartz. We have friends who used to own a Rose Quartz Quarry in Quadeville, Ontario. Fran and Don have given us large and small pieces of Rose Quartz over the years. I have learned that Rose Quartz is a healing stone and I simply love the color and feel of the stone.

The piece on my desk is a metaphor of how I feel at the moment. It is a beautiful piece of stone full of cracks and crevices. It is not smooth or even but has a lovely pink and white quality to it. There are lines and ridges and you can stand it in many positions which change the way it looks. From one angle I see the face of an animal, from another a beautiful mountain, yet another is a small hill. Each time I switch the angle another facet of the Rose Quartz comes into view. One side has a spot that is shiny and pink. It is changeable but at all times beautiful.

If only I could feel that way about myself these days. That I am changeable but always beautiful. That I am acceptable whatever I am and whatever I have. It is still hard for me to say "I am living with cancer." It is like saying "something is wrong with me." And that is true. I still think that I should be the perfect student, daughter, wife, friend. " The "shoulds" are killing me. But, I am not nor do I aspire toward being perfect.

I feel that till I believe this I shouldn't go near helping other people. As a teacher, workshop leader, writer, counselor - I am so accepting of other people being human and at all times being beautiful. It is time I myself really believed it. I will be humble with this knowledge of myself. I will use it well. I will forgive myself at long last for just being human and in doing so I will liberate my health, my spirit and my soul.

I keep telling others, particularly those who work with people labeled disabled, that until the worker feels beautiful he can't make the person seen by society's eyes as imperfect and disabled feel beautiful. One of my gifts is that I make others feel good and strong about themselves. I make them feel beautiful and accepted. I just need to feel that way about myself right now. I am getting there. Admitting the problem is the first step. Acting on it is beginning to happen.

In a sense I am experiencing what it is like to be a person with a disability.
Humbling to say the least.