

# Confronting Breast Cancer, A Believer's Journey

By Alfreda Edelen

## Book Excerpt

### The Diagnosis

Dr. Teal sat down in front of me as I looked in her eyes, her voice began to fade. She debriefed me on the test results. She then crossed her legs and removed the pathologist's report from the red folder. I could not take my eye's off the paper she held in her hand. I could hear the voice of God saying, "do not fear for I am with you." She began the conversation sharing that she and other professors had met the night before to discuss my case and the best method of surgery. Dr. Teal apologized for the many tests, but further explained that multiple screenings were necessary because of the dense scar tissue that is prevalent in the x-rays. Dense tissue can make it very difficult to discern tumor images. Dr. Teal informed me that the MRI and the other scans did not reveal evidence of a tumor in my right breast. She continued to say that my diagnosis was "*infiltrating ductal carcinoma*" of the left breast. The tumor was 2.5 centimeters in size and considered to be in the early stages at least for now. The next step was surgery of course. She mentioned that because the cancer was in the early stages, I was a perfect candidate for Breast Conservation Therapy. This procedure is referred to as a partial mastectomy or lumpectomy. During the procedure, the tumor is removed along with surrounding tissues. Dr. Teal added that during surgery she would make a small incision just above the lymph nodes and remove 2-3 nodes so that they could be tested by the pathologists. I was told that this is pretty much the standard for determining if the cancer has left the tumor bed and attempted to spread in other parts of the body. This test would determine my treatment plan and could change my diagnosis.

All of this language was new to me. What was she saying? The words carcinoma, mastectomy, lumpectomy did not mean anything to me. You don't understand, I've only known a handful of people with cancer and the natural effects I had witnessed were devastating. Immediately, visuals of people I had known with cancer came before me. I began to see their appearance in the midst of their suffering. They all appeared to be very fragile, sunken eyes and appeared to have passed away in pain. Let me share something with you, it's

amazing how the brain responds to trauma. At one point during her conversation, I wondered if she had the right patient. Was she really talking to me? No one on my father's or mother's side had been diagnosed with breast cancer and I only had one relative on my mother's side who had colon cancer. As I began to ask why with my inner voice, Dr. Teal continued with her conversation. I did not hear much after she gave me the diagnosis, because I tuned her out so her voice began to fade. Suddenly, her voice became clear when I heard her say, "you'll be fine, it's in the early stages and based on the results I know you could live a long healthy life." I believe that Dr. Teal felt as though my response should have been more emotional as she excused herself and asked the social worker to come and meet with me to find out how I felt about what she just shared. The social worker said some key words, "this is curable you know." I needed to hear that, the words she spoke were words of life. Dr. Teal probably mentioned the same. However, once I heard the word "cancer" that was it. Every other word was blocked from my mental acuity. Dr. Teal's secretary would call me with a date for surgery. I left the Breast Care Center with the intention of returning back to work. I got off the subway train at L'Enfant Plaza in Washington, D.C., to transfer onto another train that could take me back to work.

There was a 15 minute wait for the next train. I stood on the platform just staring. In a vision I can recall that I saw myself in an invisible compartment and the compartment was just wide and tall enough for my body, I couldn't move nor was I uncomfortable, but just sort of scared. There were hundreds of people around me, coming and going in different directions, they were in a hurry. In the vision, the people could not see me they were too focused on where they were going. It appeared that either they were unconcerned or unaware of where I was. Perhaps this vision was reflective of the issues we face today in our nation and in the church. We are far too busy doing stuff that will have no eternal rewards. We are so unconcerned and out of touch with what is happening around us. Somehow I knew the cares and concerns I had previously to this diagnosis did not matter anymore. A train came and I allowed it to pass me by. I wasn't sure where I wanted to go.

By the time the next train came along, I hopped on it without looking at the destination indicator. It was the train I would normally take to go home, so that's where I went. At home, I sat on my couch to gather my thoughts and to pray for strength to share with my family the test results. My husband James, and my son Lonnell strongly believed that by the time I went in for surgery that the surgeons would not find cancer. Their encouragement was appreciative but I wondered, if they were wrong, how would they cope? How would they process the reality of this journey ahead? I had already heard the trumpet! My daughter without hesitation prayed for me and told me how much she loved me and in her second breath she immediately asked, "mommy are you going to die?" Before I could answer her question, she continued to chat as if she had quickly processed in her mind how she would adjust without me. Her final statement was to assure me not to worry about her because her dad could take care of her and that her grandma could do her hair. I didn't know what to say. Janel was 9 years old when I was diagnosed and is a very intellectual, dominant and expressive person. I was so choked by her innocent response that I could not readily answer. Her response was so pure. It took all I could to keep the tears from my heart from overflowing...

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