

# HERE WE GROW

Mindfulness Through  
Cancer and Beyond

Paige Davis



SHE WRITES PRESS

Part 1:  
MIND

*“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.”*

—Maya Angelou

# Prologue

EARLY ON A CRISP MORNING in February I arrived at our company headquarters, a cozy wood-frame house converted into office space, in Austin, Texas. The quaint vibe was idyllic for BlueAvocado, the start-up company I had co-founded with my sister and a good friend five years prior. Our company offers products like reusable shopping bags and storage solutions for people to live a greener, simpler life.

As I stepped onto the porch, I spied a beautiful yellow, blue, and red butterfly. It sat still on the railing, so peaceful. I craved that kind of ease in my busy, full life.

I watched the butterfly for a few moments. It was barely moving. *This can't be good*, I thought.

My co-worker Felix arrived. "What are we looking at?" he asked.

"A butterfly," I told him. "I think it's dead."

Felix peered closer. "It's not dead, Paige. It just emerged from the chrysalis. Its life is only beginning."

I once read that a butterfly "pops" its chrysalis by taking a deep breath. As I imagined the tiny creature before me breathing its way to life, I craved a deep breath of my own—*in and out*, followed by the wave of calm and peacefulness deep breathing brought.

Nine months earlier I had been on the verge of burnout, desperate for some peace. I manically googled retreats, spas, meditation, peace,

burnout until I landed on a meditation retreat with Deepak Chopra, M.D, at the Chopra Center in Southern California. Prior to attending the retreat, I was what would best be described as a “crisis meditator,” tapping into the practice in desperation when I felt stressed or overwhelmed. My decision to attend the retreat seemed poorly timed given all of my other commitments, but I felt guided there, like I simply had to go. It didn’t make sense logically or financially, but I’d never felt more at peace with a decision.

The first day of the retreat we were given a personalized mantra, a series of Sanskrit words, and told to meditate for twenty minutes by repeating the mantra. I needed more information. I needed to be guided. I needed someone to do it for me. But as I quickly learned, meditation and mindfulness isn’t about creating moments of serenity, although that can happen. It’s about meeting the moment at hand *exactly as it is*, with gentleness and non-judgment, despite how uncomfortable it feels.

That first twenty minutes, I must have peeked at the clock ten times to see how much time I had left. A million thoughts ran through my head: *I wonder what’s for dinner. Am I doing it right? I suck at this. I can’t do anything right. That’s not a nice way to talk to myself.* I would catch myself and come back to the mantra, repeating it over and over in my mind. It felt like the longest twenty minutes of my life.

Over the remainder of the week sometimes the twenty minutes passed quickly and I’d feel peaceful. Other times I was restless, my mind dancing between my thoughts and the mantra. I learned that as we meditate we change the landscape of our brain so we become less reactive and more responsive, more connected to ourselves and others, and better able to trust our intuition.

In one of the question-and-answer sessions with Deepak, a cancer survivor expressed her frustration over not feeling peaceful and enlightened during meditation. What was she doing wrong? What could she do to improve her practice?

Deepak responded that all she had to do was recognize her thoughts of *doing* and *be* with them. *Do* and then *be*. “In other words, you *DO BE DO BE DO*,” he said with a smirk. The modern day guru in his iconic glasses erupted into giggles.

Felix placed the butterfly on a leaf, out of harm’s way. Like the mother of a newborn, I went outside every hour and checked on the creature. When I stepped out around lunchtime, it was gone. I felt bereft, and more than a little envious. I had all the makings of a fulfilled life—a successful business, an amazing family, a new boyfriend—yet I was miserable and feeling stuck in my life. I longed for something more, some deeper sense of meaning or connection. I’d been experiencing some tangible benefits of my meditation practice—I was sleeping better, feeling calmer in high-demand situations, and feeling more present in my life since the meditation retreat. Yet no amount of “do be doing” could deny it: I was jealous of the butterfly.

I wanted a new beginning, too.

## Chapter 1:

# The Lump

DAYS AFTER DISCOVERING THE BUTTERFLY, I have an appointment for my annual physical exam. I've been putting it off for months because of my work schedule. Meetings with investors, strategizing with vendors, and reviewing product development milestones take all my time, energy, and attention. I finally scheduled the appointment and am determined to keep it.

At the doctor's office I sit in a waiting room full of expecting moms and fill out the required paperwork. I've had three sinus infections in the last three months, and repeated cases of pink eye that took a month to finally heal. I attribute the illnesses to stress. I've also lost some weight. I assume this is a by-product of being in a new relationship.

The nurse leads me back and takes my vitals. When I step onto the scale, the number shocks me. I haven't seen those digits since high school. A jolt of pleasure shoots through me. I'm skinny. When my doctor comes into the exam room, we chat briefly about my life since I last saw her a year ago.

"Anything going on, or changes you've noticed with your body lately?" she asks as she begins the exam.

I hesitate for just a moment and then say, "I've had this pain in my left breast . . . it feels like there might be a lump there. And sometimes I can't catch my breath." A wave of panic floods me at this admission.

I've been keeping these symptoms at bay, refusing to acknowledge them even to myself.

The doctor presses her fingertips into my breast tissue. I wince as she probes the area I told her about. "How long has this been here?"

"I noticed the pain four months ago when I was getting a massage." I can't bring myself to tell her I felt it a year ago. A master at magical thinking, I had convinced myself it was nothing. My good friend and college roommate Courtney had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. Surely the odds that we would both have it were next to impossible.

The doctor frowns. "It wasn't here at your last exam. See this dimpling," she points at the area around my nipple, "that's something we want to pay attention to. We should get you scheduled for a mammogram."

I can't get my head around her concern. I'm only thirty-eight years old. I try to recall the statistics on breast cancer. I'm pretty sure I've read one in eight women gets the disease.

I leave the doctor's office around 10:00 a.m. with an order for a mammogram. I freeze, unsure what to do next. I have a busy day planned but instead of driving to the office I head toward Whole Foods Market. I am suddenly craving a green juice, as if ingesting something healthy might somehow change my physical well-being in an instant. As I drive, I call to schedule my mammogram. The first available appointment is a week away.

I park the car, hang up the phone, and enter the appointment in my calendar. I move to open the car door but burst into tears instead. I cry the ugly kind of crying, the sort that verges on hysteria. I don't consider who might see me, or what they might think about a grown woman sobbing in the grocery store parking lot. I am too busy fighting off the fear.

I am the healthiest person I know. I'm dairy free. I haven't eaten red meat in over twenty years. I meditate thirty minutes a day, *every*

day. I'm somewhat manic about it, which probably defeats the point, but whatever. I do yoga. Sure, I'm watching the clock most of the time and waiting for corpse pose at the end. And yes, I enjoy a drink a couple of nights a week and an occasional smoke with Herb Green, but all in all, I live a healthy lifestyle.

As we say in Texas, though, this isn't my first rodeo when it comes to the Big C. My rather stereotypical Jewish family speaks only in code and in whispers about life-threatening diseases. Saying the word aloud makes it real, and I'm not ready to do that yet. I've lost two of my aunts and three of my four grandparents to different forms of the Big C. My dad's cousin, who was like an uncle to me, died from it just six weeks ago. My heart pounds as I recall all of those funerals, all of those people who were so dear to me, all *gone*.

I need some perspective. I call my middle sister Missy. She and our eldest sister Megan are always the ones I call when I need a confidence boost. As the baby of the family, I avoid the pitfalls of competition or envy that define many sister relationships. They both adore me, and I look up to them. I'd moved to Austin to be closer to Missy and her husband Mark over ten years ago. She is my emergency contact in every sense of the word.

"Hi, want to meet for an early lunch?" Despite my growing fear I adopt a nonchalant tone.

"What's wrong?" Missy always knows when something is going on with me. I start crying again. Between sobs I explain that I have to get a mammogram.

"I'm coming with you," she says immediately. "It's gonna be OK."

In a small voice I hardly recognize as my own I say, "It's in a week. On Valentine's Day."

## Chapter 2:

# The Mammogram

I SPEND THE NIGHT BEFORE my appointment with my boyfriend, whom I've been seeing for about six months. I pick up Thai food from my favorite local spot and plan a cozy night at home. It's the day before Valentine's Day, and he arrives with a beautiful bouquet of flowers. I've told only my sisters and parents about my mammogram and wasn't planning to tell him, but I'm horrible at keeping a secret. As we enjoy our pad thai and a bottle of wine, I end up telling him about the lump, and that I'm having a mammogram tomorrow.

I'm not upset when I share the news. I am profoundly calm. I sense his fear but don't have the capacity to meet it. Our relationship is still very new. Dealing with the possibility of a life-threatening illness seems like an impossible reality. I assure him I'll be OK, and we enjoy our evening together with heightened tenderness, all too aware that tomorrow everything could change.



When the nurse calls my name for my mammogram the next morning, I hug Missy and walk back into the imaging room. The room is brightly lit, with pictures of cheery bright flowers on the white walls.

I change into a gown and head up to the mammogram platform.

The technician asks me which breast has the lump. We will start with that one.

She flattens my left DD breast into a pancake. It isn't pleasant, but I have a high tolerance for pain. She repeats the same process with the right breast.

"OK great, I think we got it," she says. "Stay here . . . I'll be right back."

I wait, literally twiddling my thumbs, for about fifteen minutes.

When she finally returns, the technician says, "I'm so sorry hon, we need another image of the left side."

After the second pancake flattening, she takes me to an internal waiting room. I watch as the technician consults with the doctor. Several other women who arrived about the same time I did are told they can get dressed and leave. I'm determined not to make much of it. I force myself to become engrossed in *General Hospital*, playing on the TV. It's been almost twenty years since I've seen the soap opera but Luke and Laura are still characters. They're having a reunion, and I quickly get caught up in their drama as if I've been watching daily.

Another nurse comes in. They'd like to take an ultrasound. I follow her into a dimly lit room that feels like my very own chrysalis, especially after she places a cozy blanket over me. Recalling the butterfly from a couple of weeks ago, I wonder if it felt a similar wave of uncertainty as it patiently waited to emerge.

The technician comes in, explains the ultrasound process, and performs the exam. I probably should be worried, but I'm too fascinated by the technician's ambidextrous skill as she manages the ultrasound wand with one hand and types on the keyboard with the other, all the while capturing various images of my breast. *Click, click, click.* She seems ultra focused.

The tech finishes and tells me to sit tight. "Can I get you anything?" she asks. *Wow, I think, they are really considerate here.* It feels as if I'm getting the VIP treatment.

When the tech returns, the doctor is with her. I know immediately that it's serious. I watch the grave expression on the doctor's face as she repeats the ultrasound.

"Is this cancer?" I blurt before I consider whether I really want to know.

"Due to the size and nature of the tumor, I do think this is cancer." Her eyes shine with empathy. "I'd like to perform a biopsy."

I can tell she feels horrible. In any other situation, she would likely just review the scans and call in the results without having to interact in this emotionally intimate way. But I've confronted her, and she's forced to answer. She shows me the healthy cells on the screen, and then areas of gray that are likely cancer.

A manic rush of thoughts floods my mind:

*My cousin is getting married in six weeks. I bought a fabulous new dress. Will I get to wear it?*

*Will I have both boobs?*

*Will I have my hair?*

A sharp needle prick brings me back into the moment as the nurse gives me a shot of lidocaine to numb my breast tissue. Tears well up and I'm sobbing again, the same way I did in the car in the Whole Foods Market parking lot. I lie on the exam table, sobbing into the deafening silence. The doctor lets my sister come in while we wait for the numbing agent to kick in.

Missy grabs my hand. "Oh sweetheart, you're going to be OK," she assures me. The blank look on her face tells me she is confused and shocked, too. I am not comfortable being the one in need of support. I want to comfort her. That is what I know how to do.

When it's time for the biopsy to begin, my sister leaves and my sobs subside. As the needle enters my breast, I close my eyes and focus on my breath, tracking it as it moves, *in and out, in and out*.

I flash on the meditation retreat. One of the facilitators had said that the true benefits of meditation like focus, connection, and

presence start to show up beyond the seated meditations, in the times we don't even know we need them. I've meditated every day since that retreat. *Thank God for my practice*, I think as I continue to breathe.

A sense of peacefulness moves through me. So much of life is outside of my control. Given my Type-A tendencies, this is difficult to grasp. Yet because of my meditation practice, I am able to be in the moment, to stay present without getting caught up in fears about the future.

When the biopsy is over, I continue to follow my breath with my attention as I head back to the internal waiting room. I'm so glad to find my sister waiting for me. She has befriended a few of the women in the waiting room, and they all seem to understand what's going on. All of them look at me with compassion.

While I know the biopsy results need to confirm it, that's when it hits me: I have cancer.

My sister and I leave the office and walk out to the car. I feel a little wobbly, like I've had too much to drink. I'm about to open the car door when I stop dead in my tracks. I hear a faint yet clear whisper in my mind: *You've been in training for this your entire life. This is your moment.*

All of the personal growth and spiritual exploration I've undertaken in the previous twenty years swirls in my mind. I flash on snippets of memories: reading Bernie Siegel's *Love, Medicine and Miracles* at age thirteen, my psychic acupuncturist Nubby teaching me about chakras, Pilates training, the meditation retreat.

That still, small voice is right. As if I am being shown the door out of the spiritual closet, I know cancer is going to be my most profound growth experience yet. It is time to open my transformation toolkit and get to work.

I feel giddy, inspired, excited, and relieved. This lightheartedness in the midst of such a dark hour is confusing. But I can't deny it; I am going to take on cancer through a spiritual lens that I have been

crafting my entire life. It is as if all my curiosity around God, humanity, and the universe is being crystallized into a force far greater than I can imagine. I feel enveloped in a vast universal love, what some people call grace.

Yes, I think, *this is who I am.*

Somehow I know that I will be guided each step of the way. I can't make sense of it, but it feels more real than anything I've ever known.

Then I get a text from my boyfriend. *How'd it go?*

*Not good. It's cancer.* Just like that, the lightheartedness disappears. I've said the word.

Now I've done it.

Now it is real.