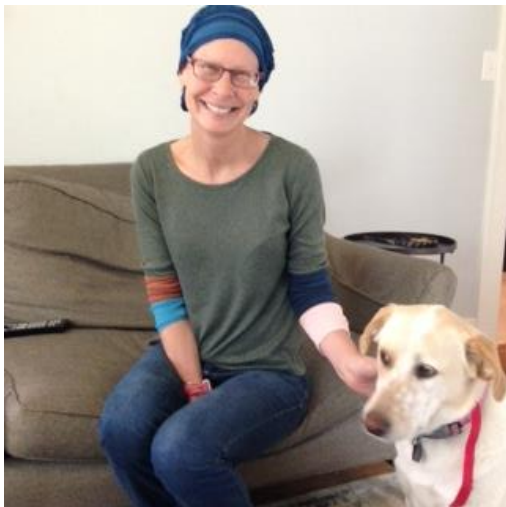




Lessons in Wellness from Unlikely Sources

Happy fall! It's one of my favorite times of year. I'm savoring the spectacular fall colors, the quality of sunlight that only occurs at this time of year, and cozy warm sweaters. To me, this time of year just begs for some quiet reflection time. What I've come to realize, both by reflecting on my own life and that of others around me, is that sometimes those who appear the most sick or broken down, are actually the very people that can teach us the most about wellness.

This month, I'm departing from my usual newsletter format to bring you one woman's story. Some may read this and think, "How can you possibly consider her healthy?" But from my perspective, she is abundantly well and a testament to the power of spirit and mindset in defining wellness. May her story inspire you...



Riley with her running buddy, Kate.

Riley is a 45 year old mother of two whom I met a couple years ago when she started coming to my yoga classes to build strength and flexibility. She is one of those yoga students whom you always hope comes to class because she carries such a positive, sweet energy about her and is an eager learner. Riley embraces all yoga had to offer for mind, body, and spirit.

This past spring, I was devastated to hear that Riley had been diagnosed with Triple Negative Invasive Ductal Carcinoma – an aggressive form of breast cancer. She was still attending yoga classes in between chemotherapy infusions and had a great attitude about it all. When she first told me about the cancer she light heartedly said, "Well, at least I get a boob job out of it."

As Riley's attendance at yoga became more sporadic I followed up with her to see how she was doing. Her response was a lesson in not making assumptions about people with cancer or any other disease for that matter. Turns out Riley wasn't coming to yoga as much not because she was ailing, but because she was busy training for a half marathon! Here's a woman going through 8 rounds of intensive chemotherapy and she was still running multiple times a week despite neuropathy (numbness and painful tingling in the extremities) and chemo affecting the functioning of her heart and lungs. I think most people at that point would have thrown in the towel. I know I was inspired. Makes feeling sleepy in the morning kind of a pathetic excuse for me not getting up and exercising.

When I asked Riley, "Why train for a half marathon when you're going through chemo?" her response was ..."because I wanted to cultivate strength and needed to focus on something besides my body feeling broken."

This illustrates a point that I strongly want to communicate: focus too narrowly on one aspect of wellness and you can quickly become disheartened and defeated. Pull back the lens and take a more panoramic view and you discover your strengths and an abundance of wellness within you.

Which lens would you rather live through? Riley chose the wider one and I'm betting on the fact that it will have a positive effect on her response to treatment, recovery time, and long term health prognosis.

Riley is trying to stay true to who she really is instead of defining her wellness in reference to the status of her cancer. She says being stubborn in this circumstance is a strength. She believes in the human spirit and engages in practices like yoga, swimming, running, breath work and quilting to help her stay grounded. In Riley's own words, she's going to "stay busy living"; cherishing, appreciating, living with a bigger purpose in mind while staying in the present moment.

Does she have her moments of anxiety, anger, vulnerability, and uncertainty? Of course. Her strategy for dealing with them besides engaging in a mindfulness practice is to allow herself a set amount of time to dwell in those feelings, and then she makes herself shift gears. She breaks what seems insurmountable into small steps that she can accomplish. Some days it's standing long enough to make dinner for her family and that's it. **She appreciates what she can do rather than focusing on what she can't.**

Riley wishes people would see those with cancer for who they truly are and not just their diagnosis. By looking a cancer patient in the eye rather than looking away quickly, you acknowledge their wholeness as a person.

Isn't that a lesson we can all learn for humanity in general? No matter who we're looking at (even ourselves!), can we look past any apparent weakness and instead see the strength of the whole?

Riley's story continues to unfold. She successfully completed the half marathon just days before her double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. Riley is healing at home and can look upon her running medal as an affirmation that she is capable of thriving amidst adversity.

I will say that Riley truly embodies living yoga off her mat as much as she does on her mat. She has strength of spirit. She has flexibility of mind. She knows she is more than just her body. She appreciates and cherishes the present moment. That's wellness to me.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shelly". The signature is written in a dark grey or black ink on a light-colored background.

Live with Intention, Love Yourself, Create Balance, Fulfill Your Purpose & Thrive!