THE FULL CIRCLE OF COMMUNICATING HOLISTIC HEALING:
SOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH A BREAST CANCER JOURNEY

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those of us whom have been affected by breast cancer; in hopes of continued healing in mind, body, and spirit.
To understand the nature of healing is to understand the greatest wisdom about how to live.

– Dr. Michael Lerner

Choices in Healing
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

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Individuals with breast cancer face unique psychological, physiological, social, emotional, and spiritual transformations. By viewing health holistically we move to address these multi-layered dimensions of a breast cancer journey. As a breast cancer survivor and activist, I know the relevance of this issues first-hand. With this thesis I uncover how healing through a cancer journey is a multi-layered process with several intertwining dimensions; each of which ultimately serve to connect the mind, body, and spirit. I look at the roles of the self and of others in a healing journey; and further, I examine how a particular nonprofit organization, The Keep A Breast Foundation (KAB) creates a social community that communicates, educates, and supports individuals through healing journeys. Through the revelations of my own breast cancer stories, and through an ethnographic study of KAB, I uncover three multifaceted communicative interactions that construct social support: self expression, authenticity, acceptance and encouragement. I discover that the co-construction of social support facilitates and sustains holistic healing. Additionally, with this thesis, I lay the groundwork for the creation of a nonprofit organization, The Rack Pack, that will address the distinct and important holistic needs of breast cancer survivors and will further support an impending movement towards a full circle of holistic healing.
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CHAPTER 1
IDENTIFYING THE CIRCLE OF HEALING:
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the fall of 2005 I found a lump in my left breast. I was not at all scared. This was the second time I had felt a lump. I had gone through the fear the first time around, and I had the biopsy, and it had been benign. I was told that benign lumps are very common in young women. So, when I felt this second lump, I assumed I once again had nothing to worry about. I went in for an exam and discussed it with my doctor. She, too, did not seem concerned. After all, I was only 26, perfectly healthy, and had no family history of breast cancer. It wasn’t until I felt a new lump under my left arm that I decided to schedule a biopsy -- “just to be safe.”

On November 29, 2005 I went in for my biopsy. To be honest, on this day my only “major” concern was the fact that I was going to have a new scar. It was scars - not cancer - that I discussed with my doctor with tears in my eyes just before the surgery began.

Then, on the morning of November 30, I woke up to a phone call from my doctor’s assistant requesting that I come in early for the results of my biopsy. I thought this odd, knowing that this particular doctor is typically booked months in advance. How and why was I to be seen early?

My doctor did not hesitate with her words when she came into the exam room. She simply shut the door, turned, looked at me and said, “Allison, we got the results from your biopsy back, and we found a little bit of cancer in there.” I stared at her blankly, confused. I felt the hot tears instantly spill down my cheeks, but I could not make sense of her words. Cancer was a foreign concept to me at that point. I knew it only as something bad that happened to “other people;” I had no experience with it in my own life. I had no framework with which to understand my diagnosis. I went through the motions of listening to the medical talk to follow, but all I understood was the fear pulsating through my body.
I floated through those first few days, supported by the energy and love from my family and friends. I had a full week’s worth of appointments to go to: tests to be done and specialists to be met. My doctor had given me a schedule as I left her office: My new life, handed to me on a piece of paper. It all seemed surreal, incomprehensible. On December 9, 2005 – less than a week after my diagnosis - I began aggressive chemotherapy. On Christmas Day I lost my hair. On February 16, 2006 I had my last chemotherapy session, and on March 14th I had a complete bi-lateral mastectomy. Those are the dates that stick out to me. The ones I have no choice but to remember. The rest of the days are a blur. My once jammed packed, full of life days had become a continuum of doctors’ appointments. This was a time in my life when most of my friends were planning their futures and preparing for marriage and children. Instead, I was coming to terms with loss: my hair, my breasts, and the girl I had been.

 Somehow during those months following my diagnosis, in the midst of all the fear and uncertainty that surrounded me, I saw a light in the distance. The light was dim and flickering, but it was there. I knew that if I could focus on this light – this hope – that eventually, one day the light would grow brighter and I would grow stronger. I began to focus on turning that light into a flame – I vowed to make it strong enough and bright enough to one day share with others.

I embarked on a journey of activism: speaking with local groups, engaging in fundraising, and sharing my story anywhere I could. So far, I have been featured on a local news segment, a television commercial, in several newspaper articles, a published book (Karr, 2007), and a national magazine (Webber, 2006). I wish to expose the unique, rarely-voiced circumstances of young women who are diagnosed with breast cancer. I have been blessed with many opportunities to do so. I am constantly encouraged by the feedback I receive and the many women who reach out to me and thank me for providing inspiration. I have found that this unexpected road is bringing me to a place of purpose.

While my experience with breast cancer has shaped me in innumerable ways, I was especially affected by the degree to which the communication process influenced my healing. During treatment I began to recognize the profound effect of the support of my family, friends, and doctors on my state of mind, and hence my ability to heal. I also began to notice
a common disconnect in conventional medicine between the mind and the body that I was now longing to address.

My cancer journey has undoubtedly delivered me many burdens, yet I still feel blessed. The opportunities I have been afforded since my diagnosis, the incredible generosity of others, and my renewed passion for life are proof enough to me that difficult experiences can and do have a silver lining. At times, I do mourn the loss of my naiveté, and I miss the beauty of simply never feeling vulnerable to disease, but I am learning to embrace the new woman that cancer has led me to become. Now, I see my scars and I laugh thinking about how concerned I was to have such a small one when this all began. The scars run once along each of my breasts, once under my left arm, and once across my 26th year. But, I do not view these scars with shame or regret or even sadness because I am so proud of what they symbolize to me. They are my strength, my courage, and my power. They are the love, the support, and the bravery of my family and friends and of the many, many other lives that have been impacted by cancer. They symbolize the sacrifices we have made, the journeys that we have traveled, and the future of change that, together, we will create.

**Research Design**

This thesis researches how healing through a cancer journey is a multi-layered process with several intertwining dimensions; each of which ultimately serve to connect the mind, body, and spirit. I look at the role that the self and that others play in a healing journey, and further, I examine how nonprofit organizations communicate, educate, and support women through the healing process. I am particularly interested in the ways in which a person’s social community may serve to bridge the gap between the traditional biomedical system and a more holistic process of healing.

In order to gain an up close look at the healing benefits of social communities created by nonprofit organizations, I look at the efforts of The Keep A Breast Foundation (KAB). KAB is an organization that advocates breast health awareness and preventive care to young people. KAB has been a big part of my own healing journey, and thus, I would like to use their messages, campaigns, and communication as exemplars of the valuable role that nonprofits can play in the healing process.
It is my intention to use the knowledge gained from my study of KAB to lay the groundwork for the development of a nonprofit organization with the mission of providing resources and financial assistance for holistic care to women in breast cancer treatment. With this nonprofit, I plan to create and implement messages and programs that reach the distinct and important needs of breast cancer survivors.

I begin by providing a review of literature that elaborates the importance of understanding women’s health holistically. First, I present the realities of breast cancer for women in the United States. Then, I define holistic healing, as it is approached throughout this research. I next discuss the pending integration of holistic healing into healthcare, lifestyle practice, and emotional well-being. This leads me to the value of social support as foundational to holistic healing. Finally, I discuss the role of nonprofit organizations in facilitating holistic healing and social support to women with breast cancer.

It is without doubt that passion derives from experience. It is my personal experience with breast cancer that has led me to my passion: to help women recognize their bodies’ innate healing abilities and to open their minds and hearts to assist in making the best possible choices regarding health and well-being. Thus, I use the lens of my experience with breast cancer to understand a universally applicable process of holistic healing. As breast cancer is becoming increasingly prevalent in the lives of women of all ages, the importance of this understanding is ever increasing.

I Am 1 in 8: Confronting the Realities of Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most frequently diagnosed cancer among American women. The risk of having breast cancer in a women’s lifetime is estimated at one in eight (American Cancer Society, 2009). One in every three women that are diagnosed with breast cancer will die from it; making breast cancer the second-leading cause of cancer deaths in women (American Cancer Society). In fact, every 75 seconds a woman dies from breast cancer (American Cancer Society). Further, at any given time in the United States, between two and three million women are living with the personal experience of breast cancer in their lives (American Cancer Society).
As my experience indicates, these statistics do not exclude young women. Young women can and do get breast cancer, and these diagnoses are being made at an ever alarming rate. There are more than 250,000 women living in the United States who were diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 40 or under (Young Survival Coalition, 2010), and in the next year approximately 10,000 more young women will be diagnosed (American Cancer Society, 2009).

It is clear that breast cancer is affecting many lives, but the question remains as to how these women are coping with the experience of cancer. Breast cancer survivors face a myriad of psychological and social challenges including such things as disruption of work and/or school, social activities, and daily lifestyle. In addition, they may have to cope with issues such as dating and relationships, reproduction, body image, financial strain, and isolation. Each of these issues alone is burdensome, but breast cancer survivors must tackle them all at once while simultaneously coming to terms with their own mortality. A cancer diagnosis is accompanied by countless thoughts and feelings including fear, balancing hope with reality, guilt, and managing everyday life concerns; further, women face “uncertainty about the illness, symptoms, treatment, [reoccurrence], themselves, their relationships, and the future” (Thompson & O’Haire, 2008, p. 340).

Also of importance is the understanding that the cancer experience does not end at the culmination of treatment. Cancer treatment can have potentially devastating effects on a person’s physical health, cognitive and emotional well-being, social adaptation, and economic status both during and well after treatment (Pollack et al., 2005). After cancer treatment has ended, survivors must integrate their experience into their daily lives (Anderson & Geist-Martin, 2003). Unfortunately, these effects and integration processes are not widely studied or understood. Pollack et al. explain that, “While basic scientists and clinical investigators understandably have concentrated on, and made significant progress toward, finding effective cancer treatments, they have made less progress toward understanding the chronic and delayed effects of treatment” (p. 51). Thus, nonprofits organizations, such as Keep A Breast, are increasingly working to fill this void. In February 2010 I attended the Young Survival Coalition’s 10th Annual Conference in which one of the speakers recommended that patients create a “recovery plan” before the culmination of their treatment. This recovery plan should be expected to last at least the same number of days.
that the individual was in treatment. Additionally, women are recommended to not only entail a plan for personal healing, but also to share their plan and enlist the support and collaboration of doctors, family, and friends.

While a “recovery plan” is a noteworthy suggestion, I also recognize the ambiguity of this recommendation and realize the potential difficulty of such a task. Thus, in order to distinguish the unique components a healing plan might entail and to gain understanding of this important process, I first looked a little more closely at the origins and meanings of healing.

**UNDERSTANDING HOLISTIC HEALING**

When I think about healing, I recognize that there is a largely influential paradigm of thinking that suggests healing is something that exists outside of us. Research finds that the current scientific views of health and healing are limited as contributions of the body and mind as a whole are often neglected (Geist-Martin, Sharf, & Jeha, 2008). This disconnect of mind and body are reinforced from both our socialization as well as from our medical experiences.

Early on in life we learn to develop a dependency on others to make our illnesses and injuries “better.” From injuries that are kissed and “made better” with Mom’s healing touch to our faith in “all-knowing” doctors, we develop reliance upon sources outside of ourselves to be responsible for our healing. For example, when we visit a doctor we expect to receive a tangible solution to our health concern. Ruusuvuori (2005) illuminates this notion by comparing doctor-patient interaction to that of a professional with a client. He states, “what is primarily expected from the professional is a task-related response: a solution to the client’s problem” (p. 1). In this manner, we see that “the human situation is invariably bypassed by the reductive process of diagnosis and treatment” (Barbour, 1995, p. 23). It is important to recognize that illness is much more than a localized symptom of a body part; it is an attribute of a compilation of factors associated with the body as it functions as a whole: in mind, body, and spirit. Thus, we should investigate and re-evaluate the definition of healing.

The word *heal* originates from the German root *hale*, meaning “to make whole” (Targ & Levine, 2002, p. 345). This conception of restoring wholeness inherently includes recognition of mind, body, and spirit in the meaning of healing. Accordingly, healing is a
practice of coming to wellness in all dimensions of one’s existence, and embracing the
process as an individualized, on-going, journey of self discovery. As Lerner (2002) writes,

Healing . . . is not an end, not a static state, not something to be achieved, after
which we move on. Healing is a continuous evolutionary process within us, never
ending, never complete. Healing is the journey itself. Healing is the purpose of
life, the development of awareness, the deepening of wisdom and compassion, the
use of will to ground insight in the acts of our lives. Healing literally means
‘movement toward wholeness.’ Wholeness encompasses both life and death, both
losing and finding, both knowing and mystery. (p. 41)

Healing is an enduring process of finding wholeness between mind, body, and spirit. Thus,
healing is by definition holistic.

Holistic healing holds that “there is no separation between mind, body, spirit, and
consciousness or anything seemingly outside you in the universe” (Horner, 2005, p. 26). This
frame of understanding is at once extraordinarily complex and entirely simple. Holistic
healing extends the theories of quantum physics to the realm of health. Quantum physics tells
us that at the subatomic level, matter and energy are one in the same, or are interchangeable
(Wolf, 1986). Hence, as humans are made out of energy and simultaneously sustained by
energy it is understood that everything (both inside and outside of our bodies) is intimately
connected, even “at the most finite level” (Horner, p. 26). As Geist-Martin et al. (2008) set
forth, the energy of mind, body, and spirit are so intimately interconnected that “one cannot
be separated or distinguished from the other” (p. 97). Hence, our bodies are not static
structures, but rather are ever-changing dynamic fields of energy. From this we see that
everything influences and affects everything else.

With this understanding, it is clear that our thoughts and emotions influence our
bodily reactions to healing. Further, it is what we communicate to ourselves, within our own
bodies, as well as what we communicate with others around us and with the outside world
that influences our healing. Thus, our bodily reactions are not only comprised of physical
effects, but also of mental, emotional, social, spiritual, and environmental persuasions. It is
maintaining the full circle of balance within this delicate system that keeps our bodies
thriving and healthy.
MANIFESTING THE FULL CIRCLE OF HEALING: INTEGRATING HOLISTIC HEALING

Many women affected by breast cancer choose to cope with the experience by utilizing holistic healing practices. The National Health Institute has coined these practices with the umbrella term Complementary and Alternative Medicine, or CAM. CAM is defined as “a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered to be part of conventional medicine” (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine [NCCAM], 2009). While the term CAM is widely recognized by the medical community, there are also several other terms which encompass similar meanings. These include terms such as, mind-body medicine, integrative medicine, and energy medicine (NCCAM). While popular media and some medical literature use these terms interchangeably (Geist-Martin et al., 2008), for the purposes of this paper, all of these terms will be recognized and addressed as “holistic healing.” Holistic healing herein refers to health practices that recognize the holism of mind, body, and spirit. I do not reference these practices as alternatives to biomedicine, but instead as supplements to overall healing.

It is estimated that 80% of women diagnosed with breast cancer use some form of CAM, making this population one of the leading groups in the trend towards holistic healing (Boon, Olatunde, & Zick, 2007). Additionally, women with breast cancer most commonly use holistic healing practices as a supplement to conventional therapy as opposed to an alternative (Adler, 1999). Holistic healing techniques embrace a diverse array of treatments such as movement therapies (e.g., yoga, tai chi, and qigong), massage, meditation, energy work, aromatherapy, herbal support, nutritional support, music therapy, visualization, prayer, breathing techniques, reflexology and detoxification. At the most fundamental level these techniques all share a common thread: the emphasis on finding balance; balance of mind, body, spirit, and lifestyle. It is of equal importance for women to be aware of what brings them into balance, as well as what throws them off balance. Additionally, it is imperative that women seek methods of holistic healing that resonate with their own beliefs and bodies.

Making sense of holistic healing choices can be difficult, “especially when a person is ill and in emotional and spiritual turmoil” (Tagliaferri, Cohen, & Tripathy, 2002). However, it is imperative the women with breast cancer that are interested in holistic healing try to
make sense of their own journey and try to find their own balance in holistic healing. As Love (2007) explains,

In order to reclaim the process you have to take control of your treatment and control of how you are treated. You need to find ways that work for you to heal yourself as well as treat this disease. You need to find your own way through the maze of breast cancer, its practitioners, its standard therapies, and its complementary treatments and form your own unique path to healing. (p. 2)

Thus, finding balance is achieved only through willingness and commitment of the individual, which in turn will serve to assist the body in repairing and preventing disease (Horner, 2005).

The importance of finding balance is illuminated as we consider that the instance of disease may be indicative of pre-existing imbalances within the body that are in need of care. It is also important to note that while finding balance is vital, balance is not a static state to be achieved. Instead balance is a process, one that requires maintenance and nurturance. Hence, the process of finding balance is experienced through on-going practices of holistic healing.

Integrating holistic healing practices into a breast cancer journey can lead women “toward greater self-awareness and fuller self-expression;” additionally, women may “contact their pain, longing, confusion, and strengths with their full attention and full being. The result of this is a richer and more relaxed life experience” (Targ & Levine, 2002, p. 339). In order to sustain the deeply personal experiences and constructions of holistic healing, it also calls for an awareness and integration of holistic healing into our conventional medical system. Next, I address integrating holistic healing into medical care; then I move to understanding ways that holistic healing can be integrated as lifestyle adjustments. Then I consider the emotional connections to holistic healing, and finally I address the role of social support in maintaining holistic healing.

**Building Bridges: A Paradigmic Shift Toward Holistic Healthcare**

Undoubtedly, the scientific paradigm of thinking about of the human body and health is due for a radical shift. Scientific method sets forth that unless something is measurable it ceases to exist. Further, “pure science is blind to language or cultural distinction” (Tripathy, 2002). While, these requirements certainly uphold credible science, it is noteworthy to consider the implications of science in medical practice. As Tripathy explains, “the actual
practice of medicine is no more immune to cultural mixing than is food, music, art, or religion” (p.14). Nor is the practice of medicine immune to the role of the mind, emotions, the spirit, or the soul (Pert, 1997). Thus, it is imperative for medical practice, collectively, to recognize and account for the holistic nature of healing.

As research on the benefits of CAM for cancer treatment is gradually surfacing in medical journals, an integrated, holistic, system of healthcare is certainly on the horizon. For example, a growing number of physicians are found to be making recommendations for holistic healing (e.g., Gordon, Sobel, & Tarazona, 1998; Tagliaferri et al., 2002). A survey of Northern California physicians found that 16% are using or recommending guided imagery, 48% are prescribing meditation, and 27% are prescribing movement therapies such as yoga, qigong, or tai chi (Gordon et al.). There has also been an increase in retreat centers and programs that offer mind-body approaches to health and healing (Targ & Levine, 2002). For example, St. Vincent de Paul Society, a nonprofit that provides direct assistance to anyone suffering or in need, now offers a program that “takes a holistic approach to helping the homeless with classes that include yoga, tai chi, nutrition, and hiking” (Fry, 2010, p. C1). “Anecdotal reports from these programs suggest that in addition to offering some patients a respite from anxiety and depression, they may also provide an introduction to a deeper and more fulfilling life experience” (Targ & Levine, p. 338). It is also found that women who incorporate holistic healing into their cancer experience are significantly more likely to state that they have “had a personal transformative experience” and that they “believe their medical treatment should involve mind, body, and spirit” (Astin, 1998). However, it is clear that involving holism in medical care is a mutually inclusive responsibility, that is, it falls on both the physician/practitioner as well as the patient to invoke holistic healing techniques into care and into lifestyle practices.

**Being Healthy: Lifestyle Practices of Holistic Healing**

Hundreds of holistic healing techniques are currently taught and used in the United States; “each one is based in some way on the premise that important aspects of healing lie within the patient herself” (Targ & Levine, 2002, p. 344). Holistic healing techniques include lifestyle adjustments which range from diet and nutrition, to exercise, to spiritual practice, among other things. As each mode of lifestyle adjustments offers unique benefits in healing,
the diverse array shares “an emphasis on prevention and maintaining health” (Geist-Martin et al., 2008, p. 87). For the purposes of this paper, the diversity of holistic healing modalities is acknowledged, but I do not attempt to address all such modalities. Instead, two particular umbrella terms are used to highlight practices as they lay a foundation for integrating a holistic healing lifestyle: creative practices and finding purpose.

**CREATIVE PRACTICES**

Addressing healing holistically is found to be closely linked to physiological, psychological, and spiritual levels of understanding. Recognizing the blending of these perspectives requires creativity. As Lerner (2002) describes, “the healing process can be seen in part as the search for reconnection with the creative healing force within us” (p. 33). Many people, especially adults, have lost touch with creativity in their lives as the stress of everyday life becomes increasingly unavoidable (Lerner). Thus, it important to find outlets that allow for reconnecting with creativity and enhancing healing.

Creative writing, such as poetry, journaling and storytelling, is one such outlet. It has been found that putting “essential dimensions of the experience of the encounter with breast cancer” into words can be powerfully healing (Lerner, 2002, p. 36). Pennebaker (1989; 1993; 1997; 2000) has contributed much research to the value of writing as a tool for healing. He explains that “once a complex event is put into a story format, it is simplified. The mind doesn’t need to work as hard to bring structure and meaning to it” (Pennebaker, 2000, p. 8). Abma (2001) also explains writing as a process of emotional healing as it “is grounded in the assumption that people learn and change through reflection on personal experiences” (p. 273).

Other creative outlets, such as music and dance therapy, are also increasingly being used as tools to integrate holistic healing for cancer survivors. For example, the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) is devoted to “the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual” (ADTA, n.d.). Through music and dance participants relax, listen to body, and express the mind (Horowitz, 1999). It is found that creative lifestyle practices seek to “integrate mind, body, and spirit; verbal and nonverbal communication; and the conscious
and subconscious minds” (Horowitz, 1999). Within each of these creative practices lays intention and purpose.

**PURPOSEFUL PRACTICES**

There is something to be said for finding purpose and meaning in experiences. Frankl (1964) describes the essence of the relationship between healing and meaning through his experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz during World War II. He discovered that the prisoners who survived were not those that were physically strongest, but rather those that found purpose and meaning that made living worthwhile. Similarly, LeShan (1990) reported that the people with cancer who do best physically and psychologically are those who were able to use cancer as a turning point.

Understanding cancer as a turning point illuminates the power of the mind in the healing journey. Thus, mindfulness is a fundamentally purposeful practice of holistic healing. Mindfulness is an action of living with intention (Hamilton, 2008). Mindfulness is about remaining present throughout all practices of life, including specific holistic healing practices, but also including the mundane moments of everyday living.

Thus, it is important to recognize everyday life practices that can be purposefully altered and/or introduced to enhance holistic healing. For example, eating healthfully and mindfully is found to lower risks of breast cancer and improve survival (e.g., American Cancer Society, 2010; Hart, 2006); incorporating exercise and yoga into everyday practices indicates improved health and relaxation for people with cancer (e.g., American Cancer Society; Coulter, 1998); seeking psychotherapy has been shown to reduce distress, promote emotional expression, increase coping skills, and improve physical and mental well-being (e.g., Cameron, Booth, Schlatter, Ziginskas, & Harmen, 2007; Sark, 2005; Smith, Glass, & Miller, 1980). Further, being aware of the environment and our bodily responses to its conditions provides endless possibilities as science is increasingly becoming aware of environmental toxins that influence breast cancer (e.g., Gray, Evans, Taylor, Rizzo, & Walker, 2008). It is also important to actively set intentions to find humor in life, even through cancer, as humor and laughter are found to positively influence health and immune function (e.g., Bennett & Lengacher, 2009; Martin, 2001).
These are only a few examples of the lifestyle changes available in consideration of holistic healing. What these examples have in common is an intentional, proactive approach to life, which generates purpose and a will to heal. Ultimately, finding purpose and being mindful of that purpose throughout everyday interactions, facilitates a creative release of emotions. Understanding emotions is essential to understanding and integrating holistic healing.

**Feeling Healthy: Emotional Aspects of Holistic Healing**

The connection between mind and body is deeply intimate. The presence of disease in the body is a mental, emotional, and physical experience. Pert (1997) explains this connection from a scientific perspective. She reveals that every thought we think and every emotion we have triggers the release of neurotransmitter molecules that spread throughout our bodies. These molecules then have the potential to enhance, strengthen, and stimulate health, or to obstruct, weaken, and depress health. Thus, there is constant two-way communication between an individual’s emotional state and immune system. For example, anger, rage, and fear have been found to produce neuro-chemicals that strain the immune system (e.g., Kendall-Tackett, 2009; Segerstrom, 1999) while laughter has been found to stimulate the immune system (e.g., Bennett & Lengacher, 2009; Martin, 2001). Thus, holistic healing for breast cancer patients takes into account specific emotional challenges.

As I previously mentioned, breast cancer patients may face innumerable changes and challenges that include lifestyle adjustments, personal and relational challenges, and mental modifications. The emotions accompanying these changes move and vary from fear to rage. It is not surprising then that psychological issues ensue. A 2006 study of breast cancer patients found that nearly half of the 236 participants experienced emotional symptoms and distress that were clinically significant (Hengel et al., 2006). This means that these patients met “established screening criteria for severe emotional distress or psychiatric disorders” (Tremblay, 2009). Emotional distress is found to cause “amplification of physical symptoms, increased functional impairment and poor treatment adherence” (Fann et al., 2008).

Emotional issues are found to be under-recognized and under-treated (Fann et al., 2008). Thus, many cancer patients feel that the conventional biomedical system has failed to
meet their critical emotional needs (Hart, 2007). In 2005, the Lance Armstrong Foundation conducted a poll of 1000 cancer survivors and found that nearly half felt that their nonmedical needs were not met (Wolff et al., 2005). These included issues of depression, pain, sexuality, fear, relationship difficulties, and financial strain. More than half of the participants found that their medical doctors did not do an adequate job of addressing these needs (Wolff et al.).

Management of psychosocial, or emotional, needs is undoubtedly at the forefront of issues for breast cancer patients. Increasingly, studies are identifying the importance of paying attention to psychosocial adjustment (Hobbie et al., 2000). For example, it is found that women who participate in group psychotherapy survive three times longer than women who do not attend group psychotherapy (Speigel, Bloom, Kraemer, & Gottheil, 1989). Thus, in order for breast cancer patients to heal holistically, it is imperative for these women to understand, develop, and utilize techniques that meet their specific emotional needs.

For instance, utilizing positive thinking and positively re-framing perspectives of a cancer experience inherently begins to influence overall well-being. Positive thinking is an extraordinarily powerful healing tool. Choo and Bauer (2005) show that positive thinking plays a protective role against disease. They establish that people who express higher levels of hope are associated with a decreased likelihood of disease, explaining that “there appears to be something uniquely protective about positive emotion [in that] positive emotion was associated with health outcomes beyond the effects of negative emotion” (p. 427).

With an understanding of the power of emotion in health outcomes, I next look to suppression versus expression of emotions to make sense and clarify the profound relationship between emotions and healing.

Understanding how emotions are processed and managed is fundamentally important to holistic healing. Many individuals are found to suppress emotions, particularly those that generate negative responses. Studies show that this emotional suppression elevates physiological reactions in the body and brings on an array of complex physiological, cognitive, and health-related responses (Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998; Goldin, McRae, Ramel, & Gross, 2008; Gross, 1998). While theories differ as to specifically why and how suppressed emotion affects the body, common among them is the principle that suppression of emotion strains physical and psychological resources, opening possibility to a variety of
health outcomes. Thus, there is a developing area of research linking the effects of active emotional suppression to negative health outcomes and increased illness susceptibility (e.g., Schwartz, 1990). Theories suggest that suppressed emotion will inevitably find other outlets for expression within the body and may manifest as illness (e.g., Marshall, 1972).

Several studies have looked specifically at what happens when emotions are consciously suppressed. Studies on the suppression of negative emotions, such as disgust, sadness, and embarrassment, do not reveal any substantial decreases in the participants’ experiences of the emotions (Gross & Levenson, 1997; Harris, 2001). Therefore, even though the emotion is suppressed, it is still believed to be experienced by the body. Furthermore, several studies link emotional suppression to altered immune function (e.g., Petrie et al., 1998; Richards & Gross, 1999). Horner (2005) explains that, “depression and suppression of strong emotions can generate such a blow to your immune system that it nearly stops functioning” (p. 203). Subsequently, some research finds a link between emotional suppression and the onset and progression of cancer (Fawzy, Fawzy, & Hyun, 1993; Gross, 1989; Horner; Temoshok, 1987). In fact, Horner found that “depressed women are nearly four times more likely to get breast cancer than those who have never been depressed” (p. 204).

Emotional suppression is largely the result of individual personality type, or coping style. For instance, some individuals are more prone to employ emotional suppression as a tool for coping through difficult or stressful situations. There is a growing body of research that indicates that coping styles that suppress negative emotions may lead to increased risks of cancer (Gross, 1989; Kune, Kune, Watson, & Bahnson, 1991). A study done by Greer, Morris, and Pettingale (1979) followed breast cancer patients over a ten year period and examined the relationship between “coping styles” and disease outcome. It was found that women who exhibited a positive attitude had better outcomes than women who had fatalistic attitudes toward their diagnosis. Finally, emotional suppression as a method of coping decreases likelihood of social interaction; and consequently, the erosion of social support increases risk of illness (Leventhal, Weinman, Leventhal, & Phillips, 2008).

Conversely, research also suggests the benefits of emotional expression. Cousins (1976) introduced research on the positive effects of emotion. He suggested that emotions facilitated through love, hope, faith, confidence, and laughter may have therapeutic value.
Research continues to support this notion that emotional expression enhances one’s ability to cope with stressful life events (Graf, 2004). In fact, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that communicating about emotional experiences, as opposed to suppressing them, promotes physical and psychological health (e.g., Pennebaker, 1989, 1997; Ragan, Mindt, & Wittenberg-Lyles, 2005; Smyth, 1998).

Emotional expression enhances personal well-being and promotes long-term health benefits (Pennebaker, 1989, 1997). For example, emotional expression is associated with decreases in autonomic system stress (Pennebaker, 1993), elevations in natural killer (NK) cell activity (Futterman, Kemeny, Shapiro, Polonsky, & Fahey, 1992), and reduced cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and inflammatory activity (Horowitz, 2009). Emotional expression also improves overall enhanced immune function (Esterling, Kiecolt-Glaser, Bodnar, & Glaser, 1994).

It is apparent that expression of emotion holds therapeutic effects. Further, it is known that emotion plays a key role in interaction patterns (Planalp, 2003). Thus, there is an obvious connection between emotional expression and social support. As Cohen (2004) found, social support is strongly associated with improved health outcomes. That is to say, if emotion is effectively communicated, it is shown to increase social support; and if social support is present, it is likely to facilitate disclosure and emotional healing. Anderson and Geist-Martin (2003) elucidate this point as they explain the powerful role of communication in transformation, compassion for others, and crossing uncharted personal boundaries. Positive social communication and support can also serve as a valuable tool for healing.

**Communicating Health: The Value of Social Support**

Supportive relationships are undeniably fundamental to the healing process. Social support may have healing effects, while lack thereof may facilitate negative health outcomes. This statement is illuminated as Kennedy, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser (1988) found that lower levels of social and spousal support after stressful life events is associated with poor immunological functioning. This connection is likely the result of decreased opportunities to talk about the experience (Petrie et al., 1998). The necessity for communication of major life events is further elucidated through studies of rape and sexual abuse victims that show greater risk of poor health due to lack of disclosure (e.g., Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). It is
understood that people experience intrusive thoughts following stressful life events, and commonly feel the need to talk about these thoughts with others (Rimé, 1995).

It is evident that quality relationships and a sense of community enhance quality of life (Foster, 2007). Connection with others and forming relationships creates the feeling of belonging. This feeling of belonging has strong effects on both emotional processes and cognitive functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Mason (1994) affirms, “The need for connection with others is as basic and important as the need for surgery or chemotherapy or any other medical treatment” (p. 138). Furthermore, friendship is shown to be a powerful resource that helps people to “fight illness and depression, speed recovery, slow aging, and prolong life” (Parker-Pope, 2009). Thus, relationships, through processes of self-disclosure and increased intimacy, have the potential to have therapeutic and healing effects.

Supportive relationships can help survivors to find acceptance and positively reframe their experiences through the sharing of healing journeys. In a study of women with breast cancer, it was found that acceptance and positive reframing were among the best methods of coping, and women who utilized these methods of coping were found to have lower levels of distress (Carver et al., 1993). Hence, sharing stories with supportive others is a valuable resource for finding acceptance and nurturing one’s healing process. As Targ and Levine (2002) state, “In the context of cancer, acceptance does not mean giving up. Acceptance has to do with finding meaning, trust, hope, peacefulness, happiness, improved quality of life, and fighting spirit” (p. 349).

However, it is equally essential to recognize that the stigma of having cancer is difficult for some to accept. While well-intentioned friends and family may want to be there for a survivor, they may also struggle in their ability or willingness to relate. As Foster (2007) concurs, people often feel uncomfortable with illness, while they may want to ask questions or to talk about feelings, they tend to feel as though it is “against the rules” to discuss the illness with the patient (p. 99). Furthermore, some people are so afraid of the mere notion of illness that they become paralyzed by their own incapacity to know what to do or say, and they eventually fall away.

Networking among other survivors becomes a valuable resource for social support. When surrounded by others who have undergone similar experiences, survivors are given the opportunity to have open dialogue about the ever-changing issues, thoughts, feelings, fears,
and hopes that cancer survivorship brings about, and they can find common ground on which to bond (Hart, 2006). Supportive networking is one of the most important things a survivor can do because it provides a place to openly share stories and find mutual grounds on which to stand.

In the context of support it is important to consider all realms in which relationships are formed. Clearly, friends and family play a crucial role in social support. However, there are also systems in place that provide a space for cancer survivors to turn to. These systems come in the form of support groups, social services, and nonprofit organizations. Each of which provide unique and valuable tools for survivors to connect with one another. One thing these systems have in common is their ability to connect survivors and provide a space for the sharing of cancer journeys, and further working to nurture and sustain holistic healing.

Concerns about the long-term physical, psychosocial, and economic effects of cancer treatments are increasingly being recognized and addressed by public, private, and nonprofit organizations (Pollack et al., 2005). However, there is currently not a clear understanding of how and what these organizations communicate to women with breast cancer in regards to holistic healing; furthermore, there is no research to suggest the relationship of social support to holistic healing that is constructed within these frameworks.

With this study I lay the groundwork for establishing an innovative and integrative nonprofit organization with a mission of enhancing women’s health holistically. I look at the grassroots efforts of an existing nonprofit, Keep A Breast (KAB), as an exemplar for establishing an organization which guides and nurtures an individualized path to holistic healing for women with breast cancer. As I recognize the profound connections between relationships, communication, holistic healing, and quality of life, I rely upon insights from of my own cancer journey. By juxtaposing my stories with my findings from KAB, I am able to draw upon my own reflexivity as a breast cancer survivor to enhance the significance of my findings. The overarching research questions below were designed to uncover the intricate communicative relationships of social support and holistic healing.

**RQ1:** How does Keep A Breast communicate to promote holistic health?

**RQ2:** How is social support interactively constructed as holistic healing?
CHAPTER 2

NUPTURING HOLISTIC HEALING THROUGH SOCIAL SUPPORT: METHODOLOGY

Soon after my diagnosis I recognized my desire to improve my health holistically. The question was how? I delved into internet research and was overwhelmed by the tremendous amount of information available. I began looking at organizations specific to breast cancer in hopes of finding some guidance.

What I found was that there are hundreds of organizations and websites specific to breast cancer, many of which have considerable amounts of information and resources. They offered breast cancer statistics, answer medical questions, provide information on support groups, or suggest books to help women navigate through breast cancer. However, most of these organizations did not touch on holistic health care at all; and if they did, it was brief and generalized. I wanted to know what it was I should do specifically. What changes could I make in my life today, and what changes could I work towards?

The information that was available was mostly confusing, misleading, and rarely from reliable sources. Typing in words such as, “alternative care for breast cancer” into the Google search bar brings up 1,410,000 websites each with its own list of claims and ideas. There are acupuncturists, chiropractors, herbalists, and other types of practitioners offering their services. There are also several lay people boasting that they have “cured themselves” of cancer. Many of the messages are fear based and contradictory to my medical treatment. Bogus claims are made such as, “Take this pill and your cancer will be cured.” I was overloaded and overwhelmed, but I refused to be defeated. For some reason, I knew, almost innately, that there was more I could do to aid my healing process than what my medical doctors could offer me. In an effort to learn as much as I could, I decided to take on the endless task of reading and sorting through this information little by little.

This was an on-going process in which I continually visited and re-visited websites, books, speaking events, conferences, and retreats. I also made appointments with holistic
health practitioners such as, acupuncturists, nutritionists, energy healers, naturopaths, and any other integrative specialists that I could find. My goal was to compare the services of these specialists and to find the ones that resonated with my own beliefs. Again, it was an overwhelming process. But, when I expressed my frustrations to my friend Susan, she said, “Allison, you have to take the good and leave the rest.” This statement grounded me and has stayed with me throughout my exploration for holistic healing.

It has been over four years since my diagnosis day. I have continued my research on holistic healing, and in many ways it feels as though I have only just begun. However, over these years I have acquired several healers that I trust (e.g., Leslie, my acupuncturist; Diana, my nutritionist; and Prue, my energy healer). I also now know of organizations and websites that I can turn to and trust for information. I am grateful to the organizations and individuals that provide messages that are open-minded, and do not preach, or impose judgments, contradictions, or fear. These are the places I return to, and these are the places I recommend to others.

One such organization is Keep A Breast (KAB). KAB was integrated into my breast cancer journey very early on in the process when a fellow breast cancer survivor and friend introduced me to the founder of the organization, Shaney Jo Darden. KAB has remained a pillar of guidance and inspiration. Throughout my work at KAB over the last five months I have been afforded the opportunity to understand the inner workings of their organization and get to know the hearts of the amazing women who hold KAB together. In my mission to understand KAB’s messages of holistic healing, I have uncovered so much more depth than I had anticipated. Additionally, my experiences at KAB have led me to reflect back on my own journey through cancer and recovery and make connections and understandings I may not otherwise have seen.

**THE KEEP A BREAST FOUNDATION**

The Keep A Breast Foundation (KAB) is a nonprofit organization with a mission “to help eradicate breast cancer by exposing young people to methods of prevention, early detection, and support. Through art events, educational programs, and fundraising efforts, [KAB] seeks to increase breast cancer awareness among young people so they are better
equipped to make choices and develop habits that will benefit their long-term health and well-being” (KAB). As their website explains:

In 2000, Shaney Jo Darden and Mona Mukherjea-Gehrig founded The Keep A Breast Foundation in response to the growing need for breast cancer awareness programs to educate young people. With their expertise in fashion design, photography and event production, Darden and Gehrig created an awareness campaign like none other by harnessing the power of art to communicate complex feelings and thoughts about health, the female form and ultimately about breast cancer. Combining sculpture, philanthropy, and symbolic artistry, the pair launched a series of art benefits exhibiting one-of-a-kind plaster forms of the female torso, customized by artists and auctioned to raise funds for breast cancer programs all over the world. A 501c3 nonprofit organization, Keep A Breast has produced fundraising events across the US, Canada, Australia and Europe on behalf of charities such as The Young Survival Coalition, Europa Donna and The Breast Cancer Fund.

The success of these art benefits put breast cancer awareness on the map for a younger generation, and in 2004 Keep A Breast realized that was only half the battle. To further its mission to prevent breast cancer, KAB launched a series of education and awareness programs. These unique campaigns use art and artistic expression to inform young people about methods of prevention, early detection, coping and support. Through these programs Keep A Breast strives to eradicate breast cancer by inspiring young people to adopt lifestyle choices that have long-term health benefits. Some of today’s most progressive artists, athletes and celebrities have participated in Keep A Breast events, including Shepard Fairey, Dita Von Tesse, pro surfers Lisa Anderson and Layne Beachley, musicians Tom Delonge of Angels and Airwaves, Katy Perry, Pink, Maya Ford of the Donnas, The Foo Fighters and many more. Relying on support from partners and dedicated volunteers, Keep A Breast continues to spread its inspiring message through music and other channels in hopes of making a positive impact on the lives of future generations. “We are often struck by the absolute and overwhelming feeling that the work Keep A Breast is doing is important. We can make the difference by raising awareness, raising people’s spirits and helping to save lives,” says Shaney Jo. (KAB)

KAB uses unique approaches to capture the attention of youth and communicate breast cancer awareness and health. The original idea of breast casting has remained a key element of the organization. Breast cast exhibitions feature plaster casts of women’s torsos that have been painted by leading artists and are auctioned off to raise money. However since the conception of casting, KAB has developed several other programs that also utilize creative, engaging methods to draw in their audience, encourage them to ask questions, and become their own advocates. These programs include: KAB’s Community Outreach,
Nontoxic Revolution, High School Art Jam and Clubs, This is My Story Campaign, Grassroots Traveling Education Booth, Music For Awareness, and most recently, The Treasured Chest Program. All of these programs and campaigns are designed to involve the interests and activities of young people in order to reach them in fun, informative, and interactive ways. These programs and campaigns provide valuable tools for reaching young people about the importance of breast cancer awareness, prevention, and overall health.

Throughout the collection of my data I have used the programs and campaigns of KAB as an exemplar for understanding and developing my own campaigns to improve women’s breast health. Through my research, I uncover the communication techniques that both directly and indirectly serve to enhance and sustain holistic health for women affected by breast cancer. To do so I employ an autoethnographic approach and draw on three main tools of data collection: reflexivity, participant observation and interviews.

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Autoethnography is considered a holistic process of inquiry in that it expands the research process to include diverse perspectives and views of the researcher as well as the participants, moving away from constraints and integrating perceptions gained from reflexivity, fieldnotes, and in-depth interviews (Fetterman, 1989; Neuman, 1997; Stewart, 1998). Thus, autoethnography is an ideal method to uncover the holistic process of healing. Throughout my study I use my personal experiences as a breast cancer survivor to generate new insights about holistic healing based upon my experiences of working at KAB. As I juxtapose these experiences I utilize an autoethnographic approach to writing. Autoethnography “synthesizes disparate observations to create a holistic construct” (Stewart, p. 6). Thus, as I construct my findings by way of an autoethnographic approach, I am able to offer rich insight into the complex creation of experience and understanding. As Ellis (2004) defines, autoethnography is “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix).

**Reflexivity**

Throughout this study I have employed reflexivity. I have reflected on my own cancer journey and I have reflected on the stories and experiences I acquired from KAB. Reflexivity
holds a valuable lens for this research in that it has provided a “process of personally and academically reflecting on the lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and her or his subject” (Goodall, 2000, p. 137). Reflexivity has helped me to connect with my participants, to make sense of their stories, and to understand my own stories as a breast cancer survivor. Reflexivity has enabled me to present a holistic understanding of the healing, cancer journeys, and the role of nonprofit organizations.

Reflexivity is a powerful tool to uncover findings; yet, I must note that it also complicates my findings in that I am sharing my perceptions through the lens of my own experience; specifically, as a white, heterosexual, middle class, American woman. I must recognize that my findings indeed correlate to my lens and might be drastically different through the perceptions of another. However, I hold that while the reflexive nature of my findings may be narrowed by my lens the emotional themes and understandings of my journey are likely applicable across many genres of people and experiences.

In order to address my research questions I also needed to know what was happening within KAB to promote holistic healing and to interactively construct social support. To uncover understanding of these processes I also made observations and collected detailed fieldnotes.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation entails experiencing and recording events in a social setting (Gans, 1999). It requires being in the presence of others on an on-going basis and integrating oneself into this setting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This activity also requires a mindful presence in which observations are made and interpreted based upon the researcher’s own cognitive, cultural, and emotional frameworks (Lindlof & Taylor; Weick, 1985).

Over the course of six months (November 2009 – April 2010) I have spent most Tuesdays and/or Wednesdays at the KAB offices in Carlsbad, CA. I have also volunteered my time for several KAB events. In total I have spent 783 hours involved with KAB activities. In addition, I spent 4 days at a Young Survival Coalition conference in Atlanta, GA, in which I spent the majority of my time with KAB employees, Shaney Jo and Amanda.

During this time I was immersed in my research and data collection as I positioned myself both as participant and as observer of KAB. Ellingson (2009) explains, “Such
positioning has the potential to strengthen our accounts significantly because doing so provides another layer to our analyses, enriching the account by grounding it clearly in our particular perspective” (p. 159). Throughout this autoethnographic narrative I pay careful attention to both myself as well as to my participants, integrating my personal experiences with those of others creating and participating in KAB’s programs and campaigns (Ellingson).

I would like to make note here that all participants represented in my autoethnographic research have been informed of their role in my research and have given me permission to use their voices and experiences as part of my research. This includes not only the employees of KAB, but also my friends, family, and healers who are represented in my stories. The voices heard in these stories are derived from a compilation of memories, journal entries, and fieldnotes (see Appendix A).

Throughout my participant observation I took fieldnotes. Fieldnotes are “gnomic, shorthand reconstructions of events, observations, and conversations that took place in the field” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 123). The importance of fieldnotes for this research cannot be overstated. They were written so that my thoughts, conversations, and events could be remembered and later analyzed, incorporated, and composed into my findings and stories. My fieldnotes include “inventories of specific behaviors, activities, events, and forms of language use” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Thus, writing fieldnotes has been an on-going process during my days at KAB. In addition to the value fieldnotes have for memory, they are also an optimal opportunity for reflexivity. The messages of KAB are both important to my personal experience with breast cancer as well as to this research. By recording descriptive accounts of happenings, experiences, thoughts, ideas, and personal reactions I provide a reflexivity that contributes to the holistic nature of this research. Furthermore, by employing careful and thorough interpretations of communication processes within KAB, I shed light on the complexity of these interactions.

In addition to my participant observations and fieldnotes I also needed to gain insight and understanding of KAB as it relates to holistic healing and social support from the perspectives of the employees. In recognizing the powerful role these women play in shaping the foundation of KAB, I conducted in-depth interviews to further my understanding.
Interviews

Interviewing provides an optimal method of entering another’s world through communication (Tedlock, 1991). Interviews are particularly well suited to understand another’s experience and perspective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Within this study of KAB, in-depth interviews have allowed me to further make sense of the complex conceptualizations of communication processes surrounding holistic healing. Further, the flexible nature and adaptability of interviewing provided me the opportunity to ask questions that helped me to uncover the communicative constructions of holistic healing that lie within the beliefs of the organization and its employees. I sought information as to how the employees at KAB communicate to construct holistic healing for the community they serve, and how they communicate and construct holistic healing within their own lives (see Appendix B). During these interviews the KAB employees shared their own stories with me, which served to further enrich the holistic layering of my findings.

Today, KAB has four full-time employees. Shaney Jo Darden is the executive director; Erica Leite is the Youth Outreach Director; Kimmy McAtee is the Public Relations, Marketing and Sales Manager; and Amanda Nixon, recently came on board with KAB as the Young Survivor Advocate (Mona Mukherjea-Gehrig has left KAB to focus on her family). Of the four employees at KAB, Kimmy and Amanda are the only two that have a close personal connection to breast cancer. Both Kimmy’s grandmother and grandfather were diagnosed with breast cancer, and Amanda is a young survivor, like me, who was diagnosed at 27 years old.

I interviewed Amanda first at a Starbucks in Carlsbad. Our interview lasted approximately 2 hours, from which I transcribed 25 pages. I then interviewed Kimmy and Erica at the same Starbucks and each of our interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours. I transcribed 15 pages from my interview with Kimmy and 17 pages from my interview with Erica. Finally, I interviewed Shaney Jo. Our interview took place on a plane ride on our way back to San Diego from a Young Survival Coalition conference in Atlanta. Our interview lasted approximately 2 hours, from which I transcribed 23 pages.

Through an autoethnographic methodology that included reflexivity, participant observation, and interviewing, I discovered a rich data set that to be analyzed. In doing so, I
addressed how one particular nonprofit communicates to promote holistic healing, and how social support is interactively constructed as holistic healing.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTATION**

With this research I was able to reaffirm the notion that holistic healing does not have a beginning and it does not have an end: it is an on-going, evolving process. It breaks boundaries and makes connections while simultaneously constructing something greater. Thus, I have decided to present my findings as such. My data will not be reported in a chronological fashion. That is, the insights gained through the three methods of data collection will not be sequenced in the order in which they occurred, but rather in a pattern that I find to express the all-encompassing, revolving circle of holistic health, represented best through narratives.

By incorporating narratives into my research, I offer a lens into the contextual pieces of a cancer journey that often go missing in research that only looks at message-response data. Just as with the constraints found in the reductionist process of diagnosis and treatment, research must also be cautious of rigid categorization. As Frank (1995) explains,

> A published narrative of an illness is not the illness itself, but it can become the experience of illness. The social scientific notion of reliability – getting the same answer to the same question at different times – does not fit here. (p. 22)

Rather, in using narratives in my research I offer insight into the complexities of holistic healing that are at once subjective and applicable to a collective whole. Just as the mind, body, and spirit “cannot be separated or distinguished” (Geist-Martin, et al., 2008, p. 96), nor can I as the researcher separate myself from the process of discovery.

With the telling of my stories I capture the ever-transitional development of holistic healing; recognizing that just as stories change with life, our healing journey continues to change, such that each facilitates the evolution of the other. As Frank (1995) describes, “life moves on, stories change with that movement, and experience changes. Stories are true to the flux of experience, and the story affects the direction of that flux” (p. 22). Accordingly, in my process of research and the writing of my stories concepts, themes, insights, and ideas have continually emerged. This has necessitated an on-going re-evaluation of literature, shifting and re-ordering of ideas, and addition of concepts and deletion of others. I found that “the truth of stories is not only what was experienced, but equally what becomes experience in the
telling and its reception” (Frank, p. 22). In this way, my writing has served both as a method of data collection and as a process of inquiry (Richardson, 1994).

As I wrote stories of my cancer journey, I started to notice an alignment of themes between my stories and the data I collected from KAB. I noticed that within these themes emerged communicative interactions that worked to construct the notion of social support. I realized that from social support I was finding holistic healing. With this in mind, I continued to write my stories and I continued to order and re-order my data to understand the connections of communicative interactions I was seeing. At first, I was tempted to present my stories in the chronological order that they occurred, as in before, during, and after cancer; and to introduce my findings within this structure. However, I realized that such ordering would not serve the purposes of this research. Rather, my stories were written as they emerged from and with my data collection; and thus, I found that my stories belonged within a framework that supported what I was finding: the notion of social support as holistic healing.

My stories will take the reader through both present-day and past interactions to once again emphasize the on-going, evolutionary processes of this research. I will weave together stories and research, uncovering patterns that resemble my own self-evolution. Each story will guide the reader through my cancer journey while igniting understandings that are applicable and universal to others. The understanding generated from my stories and research which will be repeatedly overlapped, intertwined, and re-introduced. Insights of KAB coupled with my own cancer journey reveal the role of social support as a communicative construct that will hold as the thread tying this intricate journey together.

Throughout this process I will uncover the mind-body duality that is inherent throughout my reference to holistic health. Through the weaving back and forth of stories of my cancer journey with the stories and insights from KAB I realized a complex web of relationships between holistic healing, cancer journeys, nonprofit organizations, and ultimately of social support.

In order to makes sense of these relationships I draw on Ellingson’s (2009) conception of crystallization:

Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text. . . .building a rich and openly partial account
of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlight’s researchers’ vulnerability and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the interdeterminancy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (p. 4)

Thus, crystallization calls for complexity and its calls for relationships and connections to be made between seemingly distinct processes. Further, it advocates the identification of the missing links.

Within this study, I present a number of overlapping and multifaceted communicative interactions that construct an understanding of social support as it relates to holistic healing. Each of the communicative interactions I indentify is representative of a crystallized component of social support. Thus, I introduce an inductive theory generated from this research. I set forth that social support lies at the very foundation of holistic healing. That is to say, that multifaceted communicative interactions of social support initiate and sustain holistic healing. Further, I set forth that nonprofit organizations, such as KAB, serve to facilitate social support, which in turn facilitates holistic healing.

In order to structure my research, I thought about how holistic healing ties into KAB. Although, the words “holistic healing” are not used in KAB’s promotional materials, I found that the meaning of these words resides within all contexts of what they do. On all of their materials, KAB’s tagline reads “Art. Education. Awareness. Action.” These are the main concepts that fuel the organizational belief system and communicative processes of KAB. I found that within each of these concepts are components of healing, and that within that healing potential is the construction of social support. As I organized my findings I also discovered the stories that were waiting to be told within this conceptual structure: the stories weave in and out - simultaneously constructing, maintaining, and defining their purpose.

I resolved to use the conceptual framework of KAB as the basis to introducing my findings. I decided to crystallize their meanings by introducing these concepts as healing art, healing education, healing awareness, and healing action. I found that each of these concepts builds upon the other to introduce the construction of something greater. Each of these concepts introduces multifaceted communicative interactions of social support that ultimately serve to enrich holistic healing. Thus, through my process of data structuring I found that the resources of this nonprofit organization communicate an appreciation for holistic healing.
Additionally, I base the structure of my research on KAB’s ‘This is My Story’ campaign. This campaign provides an outlet for young people to tell their own personal stories about breast cancer and how it has affected their lives. The campaign reaches out to youth, band members, and celebrities alike allowing a blending of stories which makes apparent the unbiased nature of the disease. Typically, a video camera is available at the KAB booth that appears at youth-oriented events all over the globe. However, the campaign is also available on-line: people can write in and tell their stories, or they can record their stories and share them via YouTube. I noticed that through the sharing of stories people are able to connect with one another - erasing boundaries of time, distance, and culture. Additionally, KAB makes available the option to include Facebook, Myspace, or email accounts with stories so that people are able to connect with one another beyond the ‘This is My Story’ forum.

With this premise in mind, I chose to write my own stories throughout the collection of my data. As my own thoughts, feelings, and insights about my cancer journey emerged, I wrote them down in the form of stories. Throughout my findings I will offer my stories as they came into and from my research. These stories will be interjected throughout my findings and will be indicated with four stars (****), followed by the subheading “This is my story.” I will also provide the chronological placement of my story and indicate where it falls, as in before, during or after cancer, and the title I have given the story. Additionally, I have transcribed many of the ‘This Is My Story’ videos from KAB’s website. I will also include some of these quotes as they correlate with my research.

Next, I would like to introduce the role of my reflexive voice in the presentation of my data. With my reflexive voice I expand and appreciate new understandings of my own healing journey by reflecting on my experiences at KAB and on my own stories. My reflexive voice further crystallizes the complexity of the multifaceted communicative interactions that I set forth. Further, with my reflexive voice my reader is able to follow a journey of holistic healing which is generated from and with this research. Thus, I find that my holistic healing journey interweaves with the social support gained from KAB.

Finally, I would like to note that because music and poetry have played a very strong role in my own self development, emotional processing, and understanding, I will integrate song lyrics and poetry throughout my findings. This creative representation of reflexivity is
intended to connect my readers contextually as we move along my journey. Further it illuminates the transposability of data, stories, emotions, and research. Thus, this blending allows for the synchronized expression of “bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30), and further crystallizes the holistic nature of my research.

In the following chapter I will elaborate my findings. I will integrate the overlapping multifaceted communicative interactions of social support in four sections. First, I will introduce art as a facilitator of the communicative interactions of self expression. I will discuss the boundaries which are broken by artistic self expression, as well as the open-ended nature of self expression. The stories I introduce in this section will lay the foundation for this chapter. These stories not only lay a framework for understanding KAB and my own healing journey, but they also set the stage for the sequence of stories to follow. As each story unfolds the multilayered facets of social support are demonstrated; thus, crystallizing the complexity of holistic healing. Next, I will discuss education as a tool for the communicative interactions of authenticity. Within this section I will propose five facets of KAB’s messages and campaigns that communicate authenticity. These include messages that are: (a) non-fear based, (b) engaging, (c) proactive, (d) relatable, and (e) loving. Again, I will move to a story of my own healing journey as it links to the stories of my participants. Then, I will establish the value of awareness as a communicative interaction of acceptance. Within which I will uncover the facets of finding opportunity and finding forgiveness. I will introduce two of my healing journey stories here to illuminate these facets. Last, I will conclude with the concept of action as it applies to the communicative interactions encouragement. In order to introduce the complexity of this interchange I set forth two facets of encouragement: constructing empowerment, within which I discuss the value of empowering the inner self as well as empowering an open heart; and constructing gratitude, within which I find that the co-construction of gratitude inspires the re-construction of stories.
CHAPTER 3

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL SUPPORT:
NARRATIVES OF HOLISTIC HEALING

I parked my car at the KAB office in Carlsbad, CA. A large industrial warehouse building shared with several other businesses – all in the music, art, and fashion industries. When I sat down at my new temporary desk I was taken by the vibrant energy that filled the warehouse. Bright colors filled the room from art on the walls to the chic furniture placed in the in center of the room. Music filled the warehouse creating a perfect rhythm for the environment. The employees of KAB, as well as of the other companies, were dressed comfortably, yet fashionably and hip. It was obvious that I was surrounded by creativity.

I wondered what I was going to find during my research at KAB? Would I learn something more about the value of holistic healing? Would I gain new knowledge to develop my idea for a nonprofit organization? How would my relationships change with the employees at KAB? What would I learn from them? What insights would I gain? Would they gain anything from me?

I begin this chapter with these questions to introduce my readers to the complexity of the research I faced when this thesis process began. As my findings unfold below I will weave together my process of discovery as I introduce KAB as an organization that offers social support and fosters healing. I will discuss the multifaceted communicative interactions of social support that emerge from the contextual framework of healing through art, education, awareness, and action. My stories transpire from and within my findings to reveal the intricacies of constructing and sustaining a full circle of holistic healing.

HEALING ART: COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS OF SELF EXPRESSION

“The captain has turned off the fasten-seatbelt-sign. It is now safe to move about the cabin.” The airline attendant’s voice sounded through the plane.
Shaney Jo opened her eyes and looked at me. “Ok, I got a little bit of sleep in. Let’s do that interview now.”

Shaney Jo and I were on a plane on our way back to San Diego. We had spent the last four days at the Young Survival Coalition’s Annual Conference in Atlanta, GA. It was Shaney Jo’s first time attending the conference and my second. We had both been curious to learn new information about breast cancer; specifically that which is applicable to the underserved “young” population of breast cancer survivors (generally categorized as under 40 years old).

Having spent a long weekend immersed in breast cancer-related information, it was a perfect time to talk about KAB, and for Shaney Jo to offer me her own insights into the organization.

“So, Shaney,” I began, “KAB’s main project is the breast casts. Can you tell me about how this idea was born?”

“[It was] the year 2000. Me and a friend of mine, her name is Mona, we had a company . . . [and] did these big art and fashion exhibitions. Both of our backgrounds [are] in the actions sports industry. So, I was a clothing designer for many years and Mona worked for [a] snowboarding magazine. We had this idea . . . of kind of celebrating the art within our industry . . . And, Mona’s mom had breast cancer. So, we wanted to do something.”

I find it to be at once extraordinary and understandable that Shaney Jo and Mona would choose to communicate to the breast cancer cause by using the artistic industry they were surrounded by on a daily basis.

“And we were a little bit frustrated because we couldn’t find anything that we personally wanted to do to support this cause. You know, for us it wasn’t like doing the walks, or doing the things like that, just wasn’t our style.”

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, my friends and family came together and formed a team for the Susan G. Komen 3-Day Walk. There were fourteen of us and we called ourselves The Rack Pack. It’s funny, because I too, did not feel that the walk served my specific needs. However, doing it is what led me to my desire to create a nonprofit that would meet needs like my own. I see that each of us used a creative process to uncover a greater purpose.
“It seemed like everything else out there was really targeted towards older women and we thought, ok, well I don’t want to do that, I don’t want to do that, but what do we want to do? So, we just figured, well, shoot let’s just do our own thing. We might as well. Let’s do what we know how to do and raise money that way and donate it to some cool organizations - organizations that we felt, you know, were making a difference. So, we said, okay let’s do an art show – that’s what we do.”

I too have felt that many of the organizations available are targeted towards older women. It’s frustrating as a young women looking for an organization that resonates with me and my needs. I like that Shaney Jo decided to focus on what she was good at, and on what she knew, as a way to raise money and communicate to a universal cause. This is a creative and proactive approach which I admire.

“So, we came up with the concept of making the [breast] casts. . . . We got the material and we just did lots of practicing. . . . [Mona] even has the very original cast we ever made . . . the first ever KAB cast. . . . And, so we figured it out, you know, as best we thought we could. And looking back now, you know, it’s like those cast are so bad. The first one, the quality, it was just like so thin and so bendy and just crappy. But, you know, whatever. They’re still good.”

They’re still good because they were the foundation of KAB’s efforts. By making the first KAB casts Shaney Jo was able to build upon that, learn from her mistakes, and improve. This goes to show the importance of just trying; of just starting somewhere.

“And, so we came up with this idea. We’re like, let’s do an art show and make breast casts and we’re gonna have the artists paint them and it’ll be really cool because the artists will all be volunteering and there won’t be any like sort of artist ego or anything involved. All the artists are going to have the same canvas. . . . So, we called up all the artists to see if they were into it and they were like, ‘Of course. Like, oh my god, this sounds amazing.’ . . . And, um, we had our first show! And it was fantastic. We had no idea what to expect, we had no idea what the artists would do and it was just a great, great experience. So, we probably raised like $3,500 and we donated it to the Breast Cancer Fund in San Francisco.”

Again, I see that just by trying she was able to succeed. It didn’t require a lot of planning or new knowledge; all she had to use was the knowledge and passion she already had.
“And so that was the first time we did KAB and it was just sort this successful thing and it was our good deed – ‘okay, we did it.’ We raised the money, we feel better. . . . We helped people; inspired a lot of other people and through that process we realized how much breast cancer affects so many people; you know, not just the person who has cancer. It affected, all the artists, you know, all of those artists of course had personal stories and, um, it was just this impactful accident, you know, in a way.”

I like Shaney Jo’s use of the term “impactful accident.” In reality, it was not an accident at all; the event was the result of their efforts and dedication to the cause. However, she sees it as such because her intentions at the time may not have been set to be as impactful as the event, and subsequently KAB as a nonprofit organization, turned out to be.

“[Then] artists started calling and asking if we were going to do it again, and we’re like, ‘Well, gosh, we weren’t thinking about it, like, should we?’ And they’re like, ‘yeah, it was awesome!’ And like some of the artists were, like, amazing artists that . . . we couldn’t get the year before; like, we didn’t have contacts for them or we didn’t feel like we should ask them. And they were calling us. And we’re like, ‘Ok, wow. So, let’s do it again.’ So we did it again and we got sponsors, you know, from all the companies in action sports . . . and we had all these great artists and we had a fantastic show in New York. . . . And it really helped [KAB] start just really grassroots, you know.”

Grassroots effort can be a creative way to communicate a cause. Further, I think that grassroots efforts are the best way to make real changes. By getting the community involved in a campaign, people are able to find real passion that helps to fuel the cause and move it to the next level.

“Mona had this tiny one bedroom studio in San Francisco and it was just filled with casts and boxes, and packing peanuts. . . . It was just really exciting and, you know, we were stoked again to raise money for The Breast Cancer Fund. And . . . it just started growing, like, little by little, year after year, it was like, ‘Ok, this is what we’re doing’ and it all started with the art, you know, and the breast casts as just a unique way to do something different for young people. And [it was a way] to support a cause that’s not traditionally . . . thought of as a disease for young women.”

This comment made me think about how important KAB’s work as a nonprofit is. They’re communicating their message to young people, and without a doubt young people
are the most important population to direct messages towards if we want to see lasting, sustainable changes. Not only do young people need to be aware that they can get breast cancer, but they also need to be aware of the actions they can take, holistically, to prevent it.

Further, I was struck by Shaney Jo’s comment that “it all started with the art.” It reminds me: start with what you know.

“And, yeah, ever since . . . it just kept growing and growing. And in 2005 we decided to make it its own nonprofit organization. . . . I quit working full-time probably like 2 years ago . . . I saved a lot of money so I could just quit my job and focus on KAB full-time. Because KAB didn’t have enough money to pay me and I had to pay myself, so I’m like, ‘okay save all your money and just do this; just that’s what you want to do, you know . . . and then was able to focus on KAB, you know, full-time which made it grow in order to be able to afford to, like, actually get paid. You know, I don’t get paid anywhere near what I used to make. But, it doesn’t matter . . . I don’t know, it wasn’t even a decision really. It was something that just had to be.”

It is clear that KAB is her life’s calling. I respect that she chose to follow her heart, not a paycheck, in order to make her dreams happen.

“And then, we started, you know, adding programs and really saying ‘Ok, this is its own thing, let’s honor that . . . and start to grow.’ And . . . today, um, here we are on a plane coming home from Atlanta.” Shaney Jo concluded with a giggle.

Her comment about honoring KAB got me thinking. Isn’t honoring ourselves, and honoring our bodies one of the most important things we can do to heal? I think about my own journey with breast cancer and the many steps it took me to realize the importance of honoring myself. As I relive the memories in mind, I realize that many of them involve my relationship with John. I know it is time to introduce him, and to tell the story of the part he played in my journey. My heart begins to race as I ponder where to start in the telling of our exceptionally complex relationship. I settle on starting at the beginning, knowing that the telling of the rest of the stories of our relationship will inevitably unfold through my research.

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This is my story (four years before cancer): Promises. I first met John when I was waiting tables at the Cantina in Pacific Beach. It was the fall of 2001, I was finishing the last semester of college to receive my bachelor’s degree, and I had recently broken up with my
boyfriend. John came into the restaurant and took a table by the coffee bar. I noticed him and his friend watching me and talking quietly to each other as I approached the table. “Good morning” I said, “What would you like to drink?” John looked up at me and with an ear to ear grin, he replied “Lemonade, please.”

When I returned with their drinks and took their breakfast order the flirtatious behavior continued. John grinned at me and winked when I looked at him. I chose to ignore it because I was busy working. Later, when I collected the check from their table I noticed a napkin tucked in with the receipt with a note scribbled on it. “BBQ on the beach today. Call me if you’d like to join us” it read above a phone number. I smiled and stuck the receipt with the others into my apron. It was nice to receive, even though I knew that I would not respond.

Several months passed and I had long since forgotten about the boys from the Cantina and the note. It was now January and I was out at a local sports bar with a group of my friends. As I was standing by the bar waiting to order a drink, I looked to the back of the room by the pool tables and noticed a familiar face. That boy is very handsome, I thought, but, where do I know him from? Suddenly, he was walking towards me. As he approached the bar, we locked eyes and then he turned to catch the attention of the bartender. I looked at him again, and without thought or hesitation I reached over and tapped his shoulder. I must say that this move was very unlike me. I have never been one to approach boys in bars, nor to try to attract attention to myself. But, this time something just compelled me to make an effort.

He turned and looked at me. He was stunning. He stood well over six feet tall. His face chiseled to perfection, with piercing blue eyes, and a full friendly smile. His hair was sandy blonde and carelessly tossed to precision atop his head. Miraculously, I wasn’t too intimidated to speak. “I know you” I said, “You’re the napkin guy from the Cantina.”

“The waitress!” he replied with a grin, “What ever happened to you?”

For the next fifteen minutes or so we stood locked in conversation. I could feel my friends’ eyes on me - uncertain whether or not to interject, but I ignored them. I was too drawn to this boy to care. He told me that he liked to surf on the weekends and that the Cantina was his favorite spot to stop for breakfast on the way back home. “I like the lemonade there” he said “And I used to see a really cute waitress there sometimes.” I told him that I had quit working there since our first encounter and that I was now working full-
time in real estate. “Well, I’d been hoping I’d see you again. I guess it was meant to be that we ran into each other here tonight.”

Just then his friend approached us. “John, we’re headin’ out of here. You coming?” He looked at me. “Look,” he said, “I know you probably don’t like being approached in bars, and I’m sure you are tired of guys hitting on you. But, I would really like to continue our conversation, and if you’d be up for it I think it would be fun to take you surfing sometime.” I looked at him tentatively, unsure of what to say. “I’m going to give you my number. If you feel comfortable, you call me.” He jotted his name and number down on a bar napkin and disappeared into the crowd headed for the door.

I glanced down at his napkin note. Same name, same number, same handwriting in my hands for a second time. Shoving the napkin into my purse, I turned back to my friends, unable to hide the smile creeping to my face.

“Who was that?” Michelle asked.

“Leave it to you to find the one guy in the bar that looks like Brad Pitt” Doug growled under his breath.

“I know him from the Cantina” I replied trying to suppress a smirk, “Come on, let’s go dance.”

Two weeks went by before I pulled the napkin out of my purse and looked at it again. I’m not sure why I waited so long. I think he just seemed too good to be true, but when I finally did look at his name and number on the napkin, I couldn’t help but pick up the phone and call. Once again, this was out of character for me, yet I was compelled to do it anyways. When he answered the phone I said, “Hi. John. It’s Allison. From the Tavern…and The Cantina. I’m calling for my surf lesson.” I held a hint of sarcasm in my voice afraid he would recognize that I was already smitten.

“You called!” he said.

Sensing the delighted surprise in his voice I continued, “Yeah, sorry it took me so long.”

We chatted casually for the next hour and half. He told me that he lived in Pacific Beach, and that he was originally from Virginia; he had moved out here a few years ago so he could surf more frequently. The conversation was natural. He instantly felt like someone I
had known all my life and we laughed casually and comfortably together as we shared stories about our lives. We set up a date for the following night.

After our first date, John and I were pretty much inseparable. When we weren’t together we were talking or texting from our cell phones. After work I’d ride my bike to his house. We’d walk on the beach together, talking until the sun went down and it was too cold to stay outside anymore. John met my friends and fell right into place. There was never a dull moment when we were together. He was always thinking of new ways to be silly and make me laugh. “Smile!” He’d say as he’d playfully tackle me, or make a goofy face. Often, he would show up at my house with gifts. “This made me think of you” he’d say as he handed over a cute t-shirt, hat, stuffed animal, or flowers. I’d smile and melt into his arms.

He seemed to know everyone in town. Everywhere we went he’d stop to say “hello” to someone he knew: The cashier at the corner store, the man selling hotdogs on the side of the road, fellow surfers walking with their boards. John just had this way about him: friendly, outgoing, funny, charming. Once, when we pulled up to a busy stop sign flooded with people on the sidewalks, we noticed an elderly women gingerly attempting to step down from the curb into the street to cross. Without a word he put the car in park. He hopped out into the street and jogged over to the women’s side. “Let me help you” he said to her. Together they crossed the street. Then, he jogged back to the car where I waited. I looked at him adoringly. “I just don’t get what’s wrong with people” he said “why am I the only person on the street that noticed she needed help?” This was I why I loved him. This is why he was absolutely magnetic. He was a man that glowed from the inside and out. I couldn’t resist myself around him. I couldn’t get enough of him. And I couldn’t believe that he was mine.

Sometimes when we walked on the street together hand-in-hand, smiling and laughing, it seemed like the world was watching us with envious eyes. We had the thing that everyone wishes for - we had true love, and we radiated with that love. When we’d sleep side by side in bed I’d wake up early in the morning and find myself looking at him as he slept. I was in awe of his beauty, but I also felt a sense of déjà vu. This man, this face, was exactly what I had always pictured. It was as if I had always known he would be my side. I felt such a strong since of certainty that we had been destined to be in each other’s lives, and I knew that John was my soul mate. I was so positively confident that my future was John. He would be my husband someday. He was my everything and he always would be.
One afternoon, after dating for about a year, John and I walked into his bedroom so that I could grab a sweatshirt. “Hey,” he said, “Could you help me find my watch?” I know I put it in here somewhere.

“Ok, sure” I said. I looked around, digging through the bedside drawers. I looked on the bookshelf and on the dresser. “I don’t know where it is,” I said.

“Try looking in that box,” he replied, glancing over his shoulder and then continuing on in his own search.

I opened up the box that sat on the table by the bed. It was one of those intricate hand-carved boxes, obviously a treasure from traveling to foreign lands. As I delicately slid the top off, I was shocked to find two diamond earrings lying inside. “John.” I said. “There’s diamond earrings in here.” I dropped the diamonds into the palm of my hand and looked a little closer. “And they’re real.”

Just as I was starting to get upset at the thought of an ex-girlfriend leaving these behind at his house I realized what was going on. I turned around to look at him. He was lying on his bed, eyes brimmed with tears, locked deeply into mine. “I love you” he said.

In that moment I knew what he meant. This was not the first time he had said those words, but this time was different. John was eight years older than me - when we started dating I was only 23. He always told me that I was too young. “I want you to grow-up on your own first” he’d say, “I don’t want to hold you back.” But it was never a question for me. There was no choice, but to be with him. He said he would marry me tomorrow, but he didn’t want to take my twenties from me. I said I didn’t care. I was ready. Today, he was making his commitment to me. These diamond earrings were his promise of forever.

Another year passed, and while John held true to his word that I would maintain the independence of my youth, we couldn’t help but to talk about our future. He told me how we would travel the world together. He would buy us a house at the beach, but winters would be spent in the snow. I’d wriggle my nose at the thought of the cold and he’d reassure me. “I’ll teach you to snowboard and you’ll love it. You’ll see.” He always had grand ideas. I wasn’t concerned with whether or not they’d come true. I was just happy we’d be together.

One afternoon I came home from work and my phone rang. I looked at the screen and saw it was John. “Hey you” I answered. The voice on the other end of the phone was low. It cracked as the words came out, “My dad had a heart attack.”
“Oh, John” I said, my own heart racing as I leaned my back against the wall and slowly slid down it to sit on the floor. “Is he…is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s okay” the unfamiliar voice replied.

“Well, I’m coming over” I said. “I’ll be right there.”

“No, don’t come over. I need to be alone”

“Ok, well, I’m here. I’m here for you. Please call me if you need me.”

“Okay, bye” replied the empty, vacant voice.

I later learned that his father had been rushed into surgery, following chest pains. He’d received a bypass and was now recovering and expected to be just fine. But John wasn’t fine. He was distant, distracted, moody. He seemed pained in a way that I had never seen in my happy-go-lucky boyfriend. I tried to cheer him up, I tried to talk to him, but it was useless. He seemed to be slipping into a place of darkness and I couldn’t help him out. I knew John’s relationship with his father had always been strained. I assumed this behavior was spurred by a fear of losing his father before their relationship was mended. John had always wanted to prove himself to his father - to show him that he could be a success in life. It seemed that the realization of potentially losing his father before this happened was devastating to him. I resolved to keep our lives as normal as possible. I would make sure we kept having fun and one of these days he would snap out of it. He had too.

In my efforts to keep things fun, I bought us two tickets to see Jimmy Buffett in concert. I figured being surrounded by partying “Parrot Heads” was a surefire way to bring back his childish spirit. On the evening of the concert I drove over to John’s apartment to pick him up. I called him from outside to let him know I was there. When he didn’t pick up his phone I put the car in park and went upstairs. His front door was open so I walked in. I found John sitting in his desk chair with his head in his hands. His cell phone lay next to him on the table. He was shaking. “John, sweetheart. What is it? What’s wrong?” I urgently whispered, trying to disguise the fear in my voice.

“I just can’t…” he said trailing off “I just can’t do this.” His voice was raspy and hollow. “Baby, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please, help me understand” I begged.
John began talking to me, but he was rather incoherent. He told me how his business partner had wronged him and their business was now falling apart. I tried to reassure him. I tried to offer him advice, but it was as if I wasn’t there. He didn’t hear me.

After a few minutes of this ranting he stood up. “Look,” he said, an air of resolve entering his voice and demeanor, “I’m going to be fine, but first there’s something I need to show you.” He stood up and walked into the bathroom. I followed him in. The two of us stood there looking at each other through the reflection in the mirror.

“What is it?” I asked anxiously.

Then, he lifted his shirt. Across his chest were four or five long, deep scratches. “John! What happened to you?!” I could no longer hide the fear in my voice.

“I did it” he said matter-of-factly. “Sometimes it’s all just too much for me and I need a release.” He shrugged. “I didn’t want you to have to see this, but I knew you would eventually. So, I’d rather just show you now so you don’t freak out later.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve done this, is it?” I ventured as suddenly a distant memory flooded back to my thoughts: *Scars – they’re faint, they’re on his arms. I’d asked where they came from. He said it was nothing, it happened in high school. I’d let it go. How could I have been so naïve? It was all so obvious now.*

My mind was racing. My heart was racing. But now it was my turn to be calm. I grabbed his hand. I led him back into the kitchen. I sat him down in a chair and I put myself on his lap, arms wrapped around his back. I looked into his eyes, “John,” I said. “You need help. But, don’t worry. I am going to help you. I will help you through this. Whatever it takes. I promise.”

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John was a constant in my journey of healing: Both before, during, and after breast cancer. As I think about this, I think about how KAB came into my life a few months after my diagnosis, and how this organization has also played a consistent role in my healing journey. I wonder how each of these distinct relationships are interrelated? What role has KAB played in helping me to uncover my own repressed emotions, and hence perpetuated my healing?

As I sit at my desk thinking about this, I look at my first breast cast sitting atop my corner bookshelf. I smile realizing that this piece of art brings it all together. Just as writing
my stories is a therapeutic mode of self expression, I realize that KAB’s artistic breast casts also provide therapeutic benefits. Yet, I’m still not quite sure as to how to articulate the value of the healing effects of KAB’s art. As I consider the complexity of this interaction, I decide to take a break and check my Facebook account. Generally, Facebook is a distraction, but today it served as a serendipitous stepping stone to writing.

I scrolled down my homepage and noticed a link posted by Shaney Jo. It was a clip of a local news segment featuring KAB’s Treasured Chest Program. “Healing Art” it read. I clicked on the link which took me to the CW San Diego Local Channel 6 News. After watching the segment, I transcribed it:

**Newscaster:** It’s a unique way to memorialize the breast cancer journey. Today the KAB Foundation casted 5 local women who have recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. It’s part of the Treasured Chest Program which gives women the opportunity to document their body and their feelings at a specific time in their treatment. The casts are decorated by artists and then given back to the woman. It allows those facing mastectomies the opportunity to preserve their casted torso as art.

**Kimmy:** These casts are an amazing artistic symbol of what the female form is, how beautiful it can be [before and after surgery], and it really translates into kind of health, beauty, and ultimately about breast cancer.

**Newscaster:** The KAB Foundation casts women every month at a different salon in San Diego County. The foundation’s goal is to encourage breast cancer prevention and, of course, early detection. (CW, 2010)

I watched this news segment twelve times. Then, I pulled out my journal and flipped to the page I wrote in after I went to KAB’s first Treasured Chest Casting Day. In looking over my fieldnotes I was inspired to write the following story which I feel, indeed, articulates the healing effects of KAB’s breast casts.

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This is my story (present-day reflections): Exposed. Almost four years ago to the day my sister and I got in my car and drove from La Jolla up to Oceanside. We were on our way to meet Shaney Jo Darden, the founder of an organization called Keep A Breast (KAB). I was scheduled to have my mastectomy in just two short weeks. In the midst of the panic leading up to surgery day, my neighbor and fellow breast cancer survivor, Annie, had told me about KAB. She explained to me that they had made a plaster cast of her breasts pre-surgery and she now kept the mold tucked away in her garage. She said that it was too painful for her
to look at, but she found a great deal of comfort in just knowing that it was there. I immediately looked up KAB online and sent an email of inquiry to the founder, Shaney Jo. She promptly responded and invited me to her home that weekend for a casting.

As we drove to her house that day I didn’t know what to think. I was enveloped in a mixture of fear and uncertainty. I was fearful to drive to a stranger’s home where I knew I would be shirtless, but more so I was uncertain about my decision to have a mastectomy. At this point I wasn’t even sure if it was my decision. Had I made this decision or was I coerced into it by my doctors? My sister and I talked nonchalantly in the car as we coasted along the freeway. “Do you want to stop somewhere in Encinitas for lunch on the way home?” she asked as I observed the exit signs for the charming beach town passing by along the freeway. “I know you love it there.” I think she had a lot of reservations too, but chose to keep these to herself and support “my decision.” My sister has always been very protective of me and I can only imagine how difficult it was for her to stand by my side through all of my ups and downs. I was grateful to have her with me for my casting day: the first step to confronting the reality that I would soon be losing both my breasts.

When Shaney Jo opened the door I was immediately at ease. She was young, vibrant, and exceptionally warm and friendly. “Hi! Come on in!” she said cheerfully as we stood at the doorstep. Her home was decorated with breast casts: some sat on shelves and book cases, others were on the coffee table or floor. Each was hand painted into a unique piece of art. “This is what the casts look like when they’re finished” she explained. Then she led me into the kitchen.

I remember taking my shirt off in the kitchen where all the plaster was laid out, and then slipping into my trash-bag skirt. I don’t recall having any discomfort as I stood there topless in front of this woman I had just met; however, I do recall feeling uncomfortable when I removed my hat. There I was bald, frail, and exposed. The loss of my hair forced me to recognize that I was sick. I still had a hard time confronting my baldness even though my hair would soon grow back. How would I ever come to terms with the permanent loss of my breasts?

That afternoon I took the casting home, and my best friend Chrissy came over to paint it. We sat together on the floor of my living room. In a matter of hours the white mould of my pre-surgery body became a beautiful piece of art. Her paintbrush turned the front of my
breasts into brightly colored wings, I could not only see, but I could also feel, the graceful strength her artwork exuded. The sides of my cast became an ocean with a setting sun. As I acknowledged the serenity in this image I noticed the words “I love you” brushed delicately along the cast’s edge. In the words I saw the truth. Chrissy had not only given me a powerful piece of art she had created it from me. The strength, grace, serenity, and love were Chrissy’s representations of me. In that moment, I realized that although I was losing my breasts, no one could take those things away from me.

My cast symbolizes a transformation of my body and soul. Unlike Annie, I keep my cast on display in my home and I view it with pride and gratitude. Although I am still coming to terms with the loss of breasts, my cast is a powerful symbol of this transformation. It reminds me to focus on the positives of my experience and to feel love for myself, my body, and my family and friends.

Now, four years later, I’m standing here again topless, ready to be cast: exposed. Today, KAB is hosting their first Treasured Chest Spa Day, and I’ve come down to help out and observe. Treasured Chest is a program dedicated to helping women document their breast cancer experience and embrace their bodies. I was the first young women that KAB ever cast pre-mastectomy, and today for the first time women like myself are being given that same opportunity.

As part of my volunteer work Shaney Jo has asked me to learn to do castings. Within minutes of my arrival at the spa today Erica asks me, “Would you be willing to be my castee training guinea pig?” Her green eyes light up as she grins.

“Of course” I reply, gladly accepting the opportunity.

“Perfect. Amanda is going to watch and I have a mirror for you. This way you both can learn.”

This will be the fifth time I’ve been casted by KAB. I’ve made a point to stay involved with KAB over the years, and always jump on the opportunity to be cast. This was a difficult thing for me to do at first. I had only shown my close female friends and family my reconstructed breasts. However, somehow the casting experience always brought an added layer of comfort to my transformation. The love and the energy of the people involved with KAB, coupled with my attachment to my original cast, has made casting a fundamental part
of my process of acceptance for my body. Today, I am no longer afraid. As I stand there topless, Shaney Jo pokes her head in the door. I smile and wave to her. Exposed and proud.

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I see that art not only becomes an outlet for emotional expression, but also a representation of our inner most thoughts and feelings. In my experience, art helped me to transform feelings of fear and uncertainty into feelings of courage and empowerment. As feelings are transient, the art serves as a solid consistent piece which communicates and enables me to remember to come back to my own inner strength.

I wondered how KAB’s Treasured Chest Program has facilitated self expression for others. I looked at the KAB website and found this quote:

When I used to think of someone getting breast cancer or any cancer for that matter, I thought of sick people in hospitals. I thought of tiring battles and not living life. Keep A Breast makes the fight against breast cancer and the awareness for it cool and edgy. The treasured chest program is evidence of the edginess that the Keep A Breast organization promotes. Keep A Breast confronts the battles that women face with their cancer and their changing bodies head-on! I have a scar and no hair from chemo, but I’m not a sick person! I still have a sense of humor and can laugh at myself as I always have. I’m not ashamed. Why should I be? I’m proud of the battle I am fighting. Danielle, age 31. (KAB, n.d.)

I see that there is a common theme among women to have their inner voices and emotions communicated during a cancer journey, and that KAB serves to facilitate that need.

Amanda, an employee at KAB and also a breast cancer survivor, told me “After my mastectomy I really wanted to be photographed with just one breast. These were photographs that I wasn’t planning on showing anybody else; it was just kind of for me. I met with a few photographers and I got really horrible vibes from them, and I didn’t want anybody taking pictures of me [that] I didn’t trust. So, I was looking online and I ran across KAB on the internet; and so I sent Shaney an email and she said, ‘Oh my god, come over and be casted.’ And so I was casted. [And we became] instant friends, you know Shaney,” Amanda concluded with a smile.

I am very familiar with Amanda’s breast cast. It is a beautiful piece that I have looked at many times. It is dramatic and moving; it never leaves me short for inspiration. The left side of the cast is large and full, and the right side is completely flat: an empty space where her breast once was. It is painted black with white large, bold images of roses. A thick ribbon
runs from the base of her missing right breast to the center of the cast. It reads, “NO GAIN, NO LOSS. ONLY CHANGE.”

“I often find myself looking at your cast at the KAB office.” I tell her, “It is a very powerful piece. I’m surprised it was never auctioned.

“Oh, it was auctioned,” Amanda explains, “but the Burlesque Hall of Fame bought it and then they donated it back to KAB to use as an educational tool.”

“Wow!” I respond. “That’s really great.”

“I know, it’s so sweet. It really is. It’s turned into this amazing education piece. It’s on all of our promotional fliers and everything.” She goes on, “So I’m constantly looking at my cast . . . and I just know [that] this is what I’m supposed to be doing . . . all this happened, and [now] I’m helping the next generation.”

This reminds me of what Shaney Jo mentioned in our interview – knowing that this is what she is supposed to be doing.

Further, I see that the healing benefits of art are endless. The healing effects of KAB’s casts are multidimensional and eternal as the casting experience can benefit the castee, and it can benefit generations to come as a lasting, educational tool. I see that art as a means of self expression is boundary-less.

**Self Expression is Boundary-Less**

KAB’s art crosses boundaries and helps all types of people: survivors, co-survivors, and people of all different ages. During my interview with Kimmy, the PR, Sales and Marketing Manager of KAB, she told me a story which exemplifies this point.

“We actually cast my grandma and she was scared to death to be casted. She was super embarrassed of her body, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, um, in the 90s. She had been married to the same person her whole life; the only [people] that had seen her naked was her doctors and her husband, and her husband had passed away - my grandfather passed away like a year before. And she had lost a lot of weight and she was just really really self conscious; and we casted her. And she wrote me this letter that was so sweet and it was basically like, ‘I’ve never felt prettier, I’ve never felt more in tune with my body and [I am] less ashamed of it.’ And . . . for me to be able to, like, make her feel good about something that she’s been dealing with for, you know, . . . 14 years where [even with] all
these other things that she’d gone through, [she] wasn’t able to deal with that specific part. . .
. [It] really made me feel really awesome about what we do.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I know for me, I was casted with Shaney before I had
my mastectomy and then [again] after my mastectomy – I think by Erica” I said.

“Yes it was at Mona’s house” Erica (KAB’s Youth Outreach Director) interjected.

“Yeah, that’s right. And, oh my gosh, I was so insecure about my [reconstructed]
breasts at that time because they were still really new. And to be there with other women that
had also had mastectomies . . . they were all so different and all unique. And it made me feel
better about my own [breasts]. And, everybody at KAB is so nonjudgmental and so accepting
and it was just like, a place where I finally didn’t care so much.”

Kimmy and Erica smile and nodded at me as I explained my story.

I continued, “Yeah, I’m much better now, but for a while it was really hard and that
was like one of the breaking points - being able to just be free with you guys.”

I didn’t realize it at the time, but being cast by KAB was a way for me to creatively
release my emotions. I was harboring a lot of insecurity and fear about my body post-breast
cancer, and KAB provided me with a comfortable environment where I could let down my
guard and allow those emotions to dissolve into the moment.

Similarly, Erica told me about the ways in which KAB helps men find ways to
express themselves. “There’s so many young boys and dads that don’t know how to, like,
communicate the feelings that they’re going through because they don’t want to wear a pink
ribbon; they don’t want to wear a pink shirt. And how do they show support of the women in
their lives? And how do they even express themselves or engage in a conversation with
someone? And I think that our ‘I love boobies!’ campaign, or just our young kinds of
campaigns….it’s this way for them to be able to get out these feelings. [Because] what they
really know inside is that they’re supporting this woman in their lives. They really get to feel
connected to something that maybe they weren’t able to feel ‘cause they don’t have breasts
or they don’t wear pink.”

I see that art not only serves as a tool for self expression and healing, but it can also
be a catalyst for helping others. I next think about what other kinds of art, beyond breast
casts, are useful tools to communicate self expression during a breast cancer journey.
Self Expression is Open-Ended

I decided to look at KAB’s ‘This is My Story’ campaign for insight into the use of other forms of art for self expression. I found an entry from a young man from France, Baptiste Duseaux. He posted the following comment:

Hello there, I am neither known, nor talented, I mean I'm like everybody else on earth. I have experienced breast cancer in my family. My mother had it few years ago. That hasn't been very fun - you guys know... That's why the Keep A Breast Foundation touched me - in their activities, their original idea of art, and in the way they are thinking of the others. Keep A Breast is so special to me. I really want to thank Shaney jo for being so friendly during all the time I corresponded with her. I encourage all the women to be examined to avoid the worst. Prevention is really important in the fight against breast cancer, and once again Keep A Breast is clear on that. And, as Tom Delonge said, Keep A Breast is a foundation with a real impact, where we meet such sympathetic and pleasant people. That's why Keep A Breast rules and has to stay as it is, never weakening, and, with that, breast cancer will be part of the past. (as cited in KAB, n.d.)

He then posted a link to a video of himself singing a song about KAB that he recorded from his bedroom (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqjlyK2XAvs&feature=related).

Listening to Baptiste’s song reminded me of my own decision to use creative expression as a tool to manage emotion during my cancer journey. I chose to document my journey through photography. This idea was born to me very early on, and at the time I did not yet realize the multitude of implications the photographs would carry. Now, I am able to reflect on this and gain perspective.

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This is my story (during cancer): Smile. It was the first night of my diagnosis. It was late, around 2:00am, and I couldn’t sleep. My stomach was turning from the pain medication I had taken after the biopsy. “John, I can’t sleep.” I said nudging him awake.

“What do you need, baby?” he asked me.

“Will you go get me something to help me sleep?”

“Sure, I’ll go right now.”

He got up out of bed and went to the 24-hour pharmacy. While I waited for him to return I noticed my camera sitting on my bedside table. I suddenly had an overwhelming urge to take pictures. I started snapping self-portraits, and when John got back, he took some more. I was feeling such a swirl of emotions: fear, love, confusion, and so many others that I
couldn’t even articulate. I wanted a way to capture it all; a way to remember this mix of emotion I was feeling.

The photography kind of became our thing. John always had his camera with him. He came to every appointment and snapped photos of me, of the doctors, the nurses, my family and friends. When I was in a bad mood, he’d force me to smile for the camera – always coming up with some new silly pose or something to stand in front of that would inevitably get me laughing.

We took photos on my first day of chemotherapy. “Stand over there and show me what you’re made of” John said as I came down the stairs in front of my house. I put my arms up the air, showing off my muscles to look strong. I was wearing my “power suit” – a jogging outfit adorned with a purple wing pattern that John had bought for me. “It makes you look tough” he’d said laughing with a wink. Later, he snapped photos as the nurse inserted my first injection into the portocath that protruded from my chest.

We took photos of the morning I lost my hair. I woke up early and went to use the bathroom. When I didn’t return for several minutes, John came in to check on me. I was standing over the trash can pulling out my hair. “It won’t stop” I told him. “It just keeps coming out.” “Ok, it’s time” he said. He grabbed his camera, his clippers, and a chair. It was before sunrise and the two of us sat in my bathroom laughing together, snapping photos, as my blond hair fell to floor and I watched the image of myself in the mirror becoming bald.

We took photos on the day I had my mastectomy. The nurse gave me a hospital gown, slipper socks, and thick tight stockings that I was told I needed to wear to help my circulation during surgery. The small room we waited in was crowded with people: my sister, my mom, my dad, Chrissy, and John. They all left the room so I could change. Then, I called my mom in. “Can you help me put these stockings on?” I asked her. “They’re so tight I can’t get them on.” When John heard us laughing he popped his head in. “Get in here and take a picture of this” I told him. “These things are hilarious. How can anyone put them on?” He snapped away as the three of us struggled and laughed. Together, we cut through the tension of the day and found humor it.

We found humor in much of my journey, and the camera, always managed to help us. It wasn’t until many months later that John admitted to me his fear. “The camera helped me hide from it” he confessed “When I was behind the lens I didn’t have to face what was really
going on.” Now, we each have a set of the photos. While they are difficult to look at, I also think they help us to process the emotions we weren’t able to confront at the time. “I know it was hard for you too, John” I told him, “But, go back and look at those photos. Look at my smile. I was glowing despite everything. I was glowing. And it was because of you. You always reminded me to stay strong and smile.”

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After writing this story I am able to acknowledge the ways that John and I used a camera to communicate and express our innermost emotions. This is a profound recognition that illuminates the value of artistic expression. I see that KAB’s foundations of art lay a very important groundwork to the elaborate process of communicating social support.

In looking as the communicative interactions of self expression I found many overlapping contributing facets: I found that art communicates a creative and proactive form of self-expression; I found that any form of art has the capacity to help any kind of person to release emotions and initiate changes, and that it is simply about making the effort; and most interestingly, I found that creative forms of self expression tell stories through artistic mediums. Thus, I see that art is healing as well as educational. Next, I look at the concept of education to uncover how the authenticity of messages plays into the communicative interactions of social support, and further works to sustain healing.

**HEALING EDUCATION: COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY**

In thinking about the value of education, I recall my second research question: “What messages regarding holistic health resonate with women and why?” I reviewed the transcript from my interview with Shaney Jo. “We communicate [with young people] in their own language and in their own environment and it’s authentic” she explained.

I thought about her words, and reviewed my notes. I began to recognize consistent patterns of authenticity in KAB’s messages. I outlined five main facets of KAB’s messages that I feel reach their population and communicate with them in their own terms. KAB uses messages that are non-fear based, engaging, proactive, relatable, and ultimately all of their messages come from a place of love.
“It’s a Scary Disease”: Non-Fear Based Messages

I asked Erica how she feels KAB best communicates with young people. She told me, “I work with teenagers all the time, and so, you know, to have our mission of educating people early, at a young age, and really having them get it . . . and not be scared of it . . . that makes me feel really good because I find so often that young people are scared of their bodies, and scared of their doctor, and scared, scared, scared, scared, scared and like, ‘oh I found something and I’m not gonna tell anyone about it.’ And so that’s like, I feel, our biggest accomplishment is when we get through to these people and we get an email back saying, you know, ‘I saw you at the Warp Tour . . . and like a month or two later . . . I found a lump in my breast and I got it checked out.’ . . . You know, they really took our information in and acted on it, and they weren’t scared. I mean, I’m sure they were scared, but they came forward to us, and went to their doctor, and did something about it.”

I think about my own fears and recall how debilitating fear can be. It was scary to talk to people about cancer, especially when there was so much I didn’t understand. Often, I just didn’t know what to say or what to ask. I also didn’t always know who to trust. While I wanted to believe in my doctors I also felt a certain level of pressure to comply with their medical orders. It was important for me to find genuine, authentic, people with which I could communicate my fears and concerns.

Shaney Jo expressed similar sentiments, “Yeah, I mean, who wants to be scared? It sucks. And it’s a scary disease and it’s scary for every member of the family, and you want people to actually be able to embrace it . . . and to have the message resonate with them. We try to stay away from a lot of scary statistics because statistics are hard to process, it can be hard to understand percentages, [and] we know that stuff’s often skewed.”

I certainly had a hard time with statistics. When my doctors would use them as rationale for my treatment, all I could think was, “I am not a statistic.” I like that KAB finds other appeals to reach young people. Instead of using fear, they create an engaging and fun environment in which young adults can feel comfortable and trusting.

“IT Has to be Cool”: Engaging Messages

KAB is all about fun. Their use of bright colors, interesting graphics, and bold expressions, such as “I love boobies!” are sure to capture anyone’s attention, especially
youth. Additionally, they utilize role models as a way to relate to kids and get their message across.

I asked Shaney Jo to explain this approach to me in more detail. “At the events we go to, like the Warp Tour, like the music tours, like the surf and skate things we do, and with the ambassadors that we’ve worked with. You know, working with professional surfers and musicians and athletes; those are people that those kids live up to and if their favorite band member is supporting a cause they’re gonna support it, and they’re gonna look into to it, and they’re gonna find more information.”

She went out to explain the overall “look” of KAB. “And KAB looks fun. You know, it’s not all pink. I mean, sure we have pink, but it looks different and it looks like a cool brand. It looks like ‘Wow! That’s cool. I want that.’ And then they learn about it; they’ll want to read something that’s educational if it looks interesting. If it looks boring it’s not giving their brains that constant ‘buzz’ [they crave]. And you have to be able to communicate that buzz graphically. So, it has to be cool and that’s just how it just seems work.”

This is one of the things I appreciate most about KAB. I was often put-off by pink ribbons and pink products, simply because I felt that they spoke to an older population. I wanted messages that communicated to me and my distinct needs as a young woman with breast cancer.

It’s clear to me that KAB knows their audience and works to serve their audiences’ needs. In thinking about this I recognize KAB’s use of technology. “I’ve noticed that you guys use a lot of Youtube videos and different media effects to communicate instead of just plain text” I say.

Shaney Jo replies, “Yeah . . . videos are super important, videos with the bands in them, videos with other kids in them that look like them. . . . We’re launching an iPhone app. We’re super stoked on that, and [we have] a website that’s super fun, and [we use] retail companies that the kids are already [shopping at].”

KAB has a line of bracelets that they sell to encourage breast cancer awareness. They’re brightly colored and have phrases such as “I love boobies!” imprinted on them. I ask Shaney Jo to tell me more about these bracelets. “The employees [at these companies] are . . . ambassadors for KAB; they’re so amazing. They come up to us and they’re like, ‘Shaney, I just want you to know, every time I sell a bracelet - I make a goal to sell one with each sale -
And I tell them about the [KAB] Foundation. I never just sell it.’ So . . . it’s not because it’s ‘I love boobies!’ and it’s not because it’s cool. It’s because it’s a disease that affected their life. And finally there’s an organization that speaks to them. And they’re like, cool. It’s okay to talk about these things. . . . And just making things fun and making it cool. [Because] it’s not cool to talk about breast cancer. It’s not fun . . . [for young people] it’s weird to talk about that stuff so you have to make it cool, and make it a trend, and then it’s okay.”

I was really worried as a young person with breast cancer that my friends would be afraid to talk to me about certain things, or afraid to ask questions. I chose to be very open from the beginning about my experience in hopes that they would learn from me. I hoped that my willingness to be open about cancer would help to reduce the stigma I might face as a young adult with cancer. I see that KAB also encourages people to share and open up by communicating in fun and relatable ways.

Erica further explains KAB’s ability to reach young people as she describes her efforts to go directly to the source. “I try to gain opinions of young people all the time because it’s super important. . . . You know, and as we get older we have to keep referring back to them.”

KAB communicates with young people in an open and fun-loving way. This facilitates openness from young people and sets them up to understand breast cancer as it applies to their own lives; hence, motivating them to want to make lifestyle changes that may ultimately prevent breast cancer.

“It’s About Lowering Your Risk”: Proactive Messages

KAB does not only tell young people to be aware of breast cancer, they help to understand ways to be proactive against breast cancer. As I pondered this thought I picked up one of KAB’s promotional fliers, “Prevention is The Cure” it reads. This triggers a memory from my interview with Amanda. She explained, “the core objective, and mission, and vision of KAB is all about prevention . . . and teaching young people – teens and tweens – about things that they can do to lead a healthy lifestyle and lower their chances of getting cancer.”

“My true hearts belief [is] that this disease can be prevented in so many cases” Shaney Jo told me.

I agree, I thought to myself.
Shaney Jo continued, “And early detection is also obviously a huge key to that. But, [it’s] just overall health. It’s not that I’m just so passionate about breast cancer; I’m just so passionate about health.”

This is the authentic voice of KAB, and this is why I am here learning from them. I too am passionate about overall health, not just breast cancer.

“Like people staying healthy, preventing obesity, preventing disease, you know, preventing all these things that ultimately will prevent cancers” she said.

These are my exact beliefs. Any way a person can stay healthy will help them to lower their risks of having cancer; and further, perhaps a diagnosis of breast cancer can actually be seen as a proactive opportunity to prevent other diseases and to live a healthier more enriching life.

Shaney Jo went on, “And, like, what you do with your brain, how you treat yourself, how you act, you know, the positive vibes that you put into your body, and just all of those things. And just really getting the next generation of kids to grow up to make these behaviors natural to them.”

“Exactly” I say, unable to disguise my delight in hearing her words.

“So, I’m really looking forward to being able to change people’s perspectives. Not only on just on, like, what they put on and in their bodies, but mentally. You know, really changing people’s thoughts.”

The authenticity of her words acknowledges the proactive behaviors that create real sustainable changes in peoples’ lives. Her words align with my understanding of changing thoughts and feelings as an important step in healing.

“Like that breast cancer is a disease that only happens to older women, or that it is a disease that only happens to you if someone in your family has breast cancer. You know, really getting people knowing that it’s something that can happen to anyone. You know, at a young age.”

Yes, there are a lot of misconceptions about breast cancer. That is why it is important to not only raise awareness, but also change perceptions.

“It’s the world we live in.” I tell her, “And that, to me, is the most valuable aspect to KAB. I mean there’s so many awesome components, but the thing that really really touches me is that you’re doing all of this preventative stuff. And educating people not to be afraid of
cancer, but instead - here’s some things you can do to be proactive, change your lifestyle and lessen your risk.”

“Yeah, it’s the world WE live in - is what you just said. It’s like, okay, we have to change the world we live in. We changed it to what it is; now we have to change it to a better way. And we can do it, collectively.”

Once again, I agree. Taking a proactive approach to breast cancer requires taking a collectively proactive approach to health and wellbeing. And this requires improving the world we live in.

Kimmy also discussed KAB’s proactive messages, “It’s about lowering your risk and knowing your body enough to be able to catch it at an early stage. If you lower your risk, and you’re checking yourself regularly, your chances of survival are so much higher; and in that instant you’re saving yourself, and we’re saving lives.”

KAB does not force messages about lifestyle changes onto people; they present their information in a way that makes it available, without being pushy. “We want it to be their choice…like, ‘this is why I want to do it.’” Kimmy explained.

Shaney Jo addressed this point as well as she recognized that “KAB isn’t for everybody.” She went on to say, “There’s thousands of breast cancer organizations out there; there’s thousands of environmental organizations out there. You know, [and we tell people] pick the one that speaks to you. We’re not trying to shove our message down anyone’s throat - we’re just giving this information, and hoping it will make a difference. And we’re doing our best to do it in a different way.”

I think this is really important as I often feel like people become overwhelmed at the thought of making lifestyle changes. It is important for individuals to make their own choices and to consider what will work for them.

Further, KAB does not simply tell people what not to do; they make an effort to tell them what they can do. Kimmy explains, “It’s like a crash diet . . . if you take everything out of your life [at once] you’re gonna [end up] gorging on food. If you say, you can’t do this, you can’t do that, you can’t do this, you’re gonna end up doing it again because who wants to live their life like that? But, changing habits is so much different than stopping doing something. So, I think that’s what we want to teach young people, or anyone. Like, you don’t have to stop; you have to change your habits.”
In my own experience, I conducted a lot of research upfront on ways to improve my health. I ended up with so much information that I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of changes I was facing. I would end up making “mistakes,” or slipping off the path of my lifestyle changes, and I would often feel guilty or discouraged because I wasn’t able to do it all at once. After talking to the employees at KAB, it is nice to see that they can relate to my feelings. The ability to relate is yet another facet of social support that KAB communicates with their messages.

“They See That You’re Doing Okay”: Relatable Messages

The employees of KAB spend a lot of time figuring out how they can relate with their audience. I recall my interview with Amanda. She told me, “You know, with . . . other organizations that I work with we do a lot of support of the heavy emotional aspects, and I feel like [with] KAB I get to do the flip side which is the education and prevention and outreach to young people. . . . I’m working with Erica [and] we’re developing this high school program and [we’re] thinking about what we’re going to say, and how we’re going to get our message across, and how we’re gonna relate to the kids; that part of the job is really exciting.”

“That’s great.” I responded.

“Yeah. It’s amazing. And it’s fulfilling. You get kids that are like, ‘whoa you had breast cancer?’ And it’s just, the cool things that they say that are so complimentary, and even if they do say the hard things like, ‘Oh, my aunt died, [or] my mom died’, but then they meet you, and they see that you’re doing ok.”

I tell her I can relate. “Remember when I spoke to high school students [about breast cancer] as part of the Y-Me Organization’s community outreach?”

“Yeah” she replied.

“I spoke and all the kids were silent; they didn’t say a word. Finally, a couple of kids raised their hands asked questions, but I think it was only to please their teacher. I mean, they’re high school kids and they were uncomfortable; and so I left and I was like, well, you know, maybe I touched one person, that’s all I can hope for. But then, the teacher had them write thank you cards to me. And when I got the thank you cards in the mail it was just loads
of heartfelt cards. It was just exactly like what you were saying, like, ‘My aunt died of breast cancer, I’m scared my mom’s gonna have it, I’m scared I’m gonna have it, and this prompted me to go home and talk to my mom about my fears.’ You know, just all of these different stories. They said, ‘I wasn’t able to talk about these things, and thank you for answering questions that I had that I was too scared to ask.’”

I think about how Amanda and I have both spoken to audiences of young people and shared our stories. I recognize that just as we made ourselves accessible, and often vulnerable, by sharing our stories, all of the employees at KAB do the same. While they do not all have personal breast cancer stories to share, they do make themselves available by listening. They open themselves up at events, tours, and spend hours on-line communicating with others that need to be heard. Through their own openness, they provide young people a place to open up and share their stories. Through their efforts to relate to young people KAB communicates a loving environment of support.

“It’s Important to Come From a Place of Love”: Loving Messages

I see that the love extends from and beyond the messages of KAB. During the time I spent at KAB, I often heard the employees say the phrase, “Remember to come from a place of love.” I asked Erica about how love infiltrates and influences KAB’s messages. She explained, “With our message . . . if anything’s a negative that we are saying, [or] you know, you shouldn’t do this, we always make sure that we’re putting a positive or loving spin on it. Saying, [for example] ‘don’t use this product because it has these bad things in it, but you can use this one because it’s better for you.”

Shaney Jo and I further discussed this point. She told me, “It is important to come from a place of love and [to] let them know this is about loving your boobies and loving your body and educating yourself and empowering yourself with information, so you can make your own decisions, so someone’s not making those decisions for you.”

I see that KAB’s messages of love are certainly holistic. It’s not simply about breast cancer awareness, it’s about being a healthier you, making lifestyle adjustments, and improving overall health outcomes.
As Erica explained, “We are a breast cancer organization, but really we just generally care about overall health and wellbeing.” She went on to say, “And once you have a general health that’s positive and healthier, then you’re less likely to get breast cancer.”

One afternoon, as I was driving home from KAB, I was thinking about KAB’s messages of love. I flipped through the radio stations, half listening to the sound bites of songs. Suddenly, I heard a chorus line that caught my ear, “I love you, but you’re crazy.” I caught the tail-end of the song and the DJ announced it is an artist called Mission Hill. I grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled the name down. The lyrics are a perfect segue to my next story about John. This is a story that I know I need to write, but I’ve been struggling with starting. I’m not sure where to I begin. How do I articulate the pain and sorrow of those experiences? Am I prepared to relive these memories through my writing? When I got home I decided to give it a try.

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This is my story (one year before cancer): I Love You - But you’re Crazy. After I recognized John’s illness, I embarked on a mission to help him. When I’d get home from work in the evenings I would spend hours holed up in my room on my computer looking for answers. I didn’t know much about psychiatric illness, only the basic knowledge I had from my psychology 101 course in college. I typed his symptoms into the Google search bar, WebMD, or any other informative sights I could find. I took notes on what I was finding and made lists of all the possible diagnoses and potential treatments. It was clear he needed therapy, but I thought I could offer him better support if I more clearly understood what he was going through.

John’s behavior was really up and down. One week he would be in a deep depression, barely able to communicate with me, and then the next he would be back to his happy-go-lucky self. His inconsistency made me question the seriousness of his condition. “Maybe I am imagining this” I would think. “Maybe it’s not that bad. He’s going to be okay. We’re going to be fine.” Then I would come over to his house and find him in a mess of his own destruction - holes punched in the walls, fists bleeding - and I would once again vow to help him out of this mess. I would clean up his house, make him something to eat, and try to talk to him until he calmed down.
John was becoming frail; his crystal blues were foggy and hazed. He was frequently agitated, incoherent; he would go days without sleeping. Sometime I would stay the night, hoping it would help him to relax. He’d climb into bed with and stay there until I fell asleep, only to rise and spend the night pacing his small living room floor. I’d wake to find him in an exasperated state of inspiration: his hopes and plans to make his life better spilling from his lips faster than I could understand. Other times when I woke, he’d be angry. He had spent the night pondering his own misery and placing blame. Sometimes this blame was directed at others and he’d tell me how so and so had wronged him and that this person was the reason for his demise; but usually, the blame was directed at himself and his self-loathing would trigger a reaction of destructive behavior. Sometimes he would hurt his possessions, other times he would hurt himself.

One morning, just as I was opening my eyes and stretching to get out of bed, I heard John moving around in the other room. I waited, listening. I heard him typing on his computer. I heard him growl under his breath, “Mother fucker…” Then I heard a snarl of rage followed by a loud crash and shattering sound. I pulled the comforter tightly up to my neck, laying there motionless, stiff as a board, trying to disappear, waiting for the moment to pass. When the noises calmed down, I took a deep breath, not realizing I had been holding it. Quietly, I slid out of bed, grabbed my things, and tip-toed past him out the front door.

“Baby, wait.” He called after me.

I stood in the doorway looking back at him, tears ran down his cheeks.


John would tell me he was on board to get help, but he struggled with following through on his commitments. He’d go to see a doctor for a few sessions, and then find a reason that he couldn’t go anymore. “I don’t trust that doctor” he’d say, or “she didn’t make me feel comfortable.” I went with him to his appointments on several occasions. I was hoping to offer the doctor my own insights so we could get a proper diagnosis and begin to move forward. On one such occasion, his family practitioner (the only doctor he was repeatedly willing to visit, and also the only doctor who was not a specialist), diagnosed him with bipolar disorder. “You’ll need to see a psychiatrist” the doctor had said, “He or she will be able to give you a proper assessment and diagnosis.” He gave us a referral and John went to the appointment. Later that afternoon he called me and I said I’d come over so we could
talk about how it went. “She hardly even talked to me” he said “she just looked at my chart and then wrote a prescription.”

“I know that’s frustrating, baby, but maybe we can just use her to get the medication you need and then you can find a therapist that you like talking to. Can I see the medication she gave you?”

He handed me the bottle. Taped over the pharmacist’s label was a tiny picture of a house with a sales advertisement listed below. “Oceanfront Dream Home” it read, “$2.6 million.”

“I don’t want to take pills…” he said looking down at the ground. Then looking up at me he went on, “I’m only taking this for you. I’m hoping it will save our future together.” He opened the bottle and popped the first pill smiling at me weakly, tears brimming in his eyes.

John took the pills for about three weeks. Then one day I called him and I could hear the distress in his voice. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“I just can’t do it anymore.”

“What, John?”

“Those pills. I just don’t feel like myself.”

This pattern of compliance and willingness to get help followed by retreat went on for several months. I continued to search for ways to help him: research, doctors, and more research; always hoping for the one method that would work. I also explored holistic healing. “I think this guy might be able to help you” I’d tell John, sending him links to local healers - acupuncturists, nutritionist, chiropractors - any one that advertised having experience with mental disorders.

I started seeing a therapist of my own during this time. I still hadn’t opened up to my friends or family about the truth of what was happening to John. The therapist told me that people generally don’t recover from bipolar disorder; that it is a life long struggle. I cried hearing these words, and I cried all the way home. She was advising me to walk away from him. She had told me there was basically nothing more that I could do and I should focus on my own life and wellbeing. How can I do that? I had thought. How can I focus on me when the man that I love - my future - is sick? I never went back to see her after that. I was angry that she was so quick to tell me what to do. She didn’t know the strength of our love and my commitment to John. Or, maybe, I knew she was right, but I wasn’t ready to face that reality.
John was my soul mate and I had to stand by his side. Sometimes I wished we were married, so I could somehow justify my actions. Then maybe she would understand my commitment.

John and I started spending less and less time together. He was distancing himself from me; knowing that he didn’t want to expose me to the monster he was becoming. This only made things harder on me. I’d call him every day on my way in to work, never knowing which version of John would answer the phone. Would he be his happy-go-lucky self, or would I hear his voice of anger and rage penetrating through the phone, or worse, would I hear his sadness? I remember being so afraid for his life during that time. Each new incident left me fearing the next would be his last. How long could he go on like this?

I didn’t tell a soul that this was happening. Everyone I knew adored John, the last thing I wanted to do was to discredit his character. I thought it would make it that much harder on him if our friends were to pass judgment. So, I kept my fear to myself. I’d hold onto it deep inside throughout the day. I’d go to my job as a new homes sales agent looking polished and professional. I’d smile and laugh with my colleagues and customers, never letting onto the horror I was experiencing in my personal life. I’d only let it out when I was alone, usually driving in my car, or late at night after the lights were out; crying into darkness, begging for an answer, begging for help.

One morning when I called John as I was driving to work. He answered sounding winded and full of fury.

“What happened?” I asked, the fear bubbling up from inside and down my cheeks in the form of tears.

“I just shattered my car window” he replied, “I think I need stitches in my hand. I’m bleeding a lot.”

“John, where are you?”

“I’m in the parking lot at the mall. I came here to get my computer fixed at the Apple store, but they can’t get me in until 3pm. They said I should have made an appointment. Fuck that,” he continued, “I need my computer now!”

These were the kinds of reasons John would become enraged, simple everyday life annoyances would send him into an uncontrollable fit of destruction. I never knew what was going to set him off. I walked on eggshells when he was around, always cautious with my words and actions, always trying to keep him happy. It was exhausting; I was so tired.
“John.” I said into the phone. My voice came out firm, and loud. Now I was filled with rage. “I’m going to hang up now and call 911. The police are going to take you in and hold you there for 24hrs.”

His breathing slowed down. “What?!”

“John, I’m afraid for your life. And you shouldn’t be in public. And you certainly shouldn’t be driving. Wait where you are and the cops will be there in a few minutes. They can help you find the help you need.”

“No… I don’t want to go. No!” he cried.

“John, listen to my voice.” I was crying too, but I continued. “It’s me, Allison. Listen to me.”

“I’m listening. I hear you. I promise I’ll get help. But, please don’t have me arrested. Please. Alli, I love you. Please don’t do this to me.” His voice was back to normal. This was my John. My heart pounded, filling me with love.

“Ok.” I said. “Ok. I love you too.” And, once again, I wiped away the tears as I parked my car and walked into my office, swallowing my fear.

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In retrospect, I see so clearly the destiny I was manifesting through my emotional suppression. I can’t help but wonder if things would have turned out differently if I had communicated with others about John’s illness during this time. While I have always known there is a value to open and honest relationships, my research with KAB has permitted me to uncover the important facets of trust, non-judgment, and comfort that lie at the core of authentic communication. I wonder where I would be now had I been more aware of these connections sooner. Where would I be today had I accepted my own inability to cure John’s illness and allowed myself to move on? As I write this, the words to a song ring through my head. I click on Internet Explorer and type “I must accept and move on + Brett Dennen” into the Google search bar. Brett Dennen, a little-known musician with a folksy, soulful sound, has been a constant source of comfort and inspiration throughout my cancer journey. I read the lyrics to the song and am thankful for the message they communicate: no regrets.

And in the morning, when I rise
one question, that feels like the sun in my eyes.
Am I making the most of this life?
So much trouble and so much strife.
And in my guilty hour,
through all of my shame,
when all my love is run sour
I have no one else to blame.

Cause it finds me through the mask I wear,
and I see it through it my eyes closed,
but still I cannot bare to stare into my worries and my woes.
There’s comfort in self loathing and it’s easy to slip into it,
but still I must learn to lead my life with no regrets.
All the time it all moves in the same direction,
so don't let it pass you by.
Because it moves so fast, there’s no time for perfection,
so make the most of this life.
Make the most of this life.
Make the most of this life.
Make the most of this life.

And when I fall I fall hard,
and I dwell too often in my falls.
I must accept it and move on.
There’s just no shame in having to crawl.

Cause it finds me through the mask I wear,
and I see it through it my eyes closed,
but still I cannot bare to stare into my worries and my woes.
There’s comfort in self loathing and it’s easy to slip into it,
but still I must learn to lead my life with no regrets.
All the time it all moves in the same direction,
so don't let it pass you by.
Because it moves so fast, there’s no time for perfection
so make the most of this life.
Make the most of this life.
Make the most of this life.
Make the most of this life.
(Dennen, 2005a)

I read through the lyrics four times and I realized that in my own journey in order to “accept and move on” I had to become aware of my mind and my body, and their intimate connection. I see that allowing for this awareness has allowed me to “make the most of this life.”
Next, I look at the concept of awareness to establish how KAB enables young people to make the most of their lives by promoting awareness, and hence, communicating opportunities for acceptance. Once again, I incorporate my own stories within my findings to juxtapose the communicative interactions and facets of acceptance.

HEALING AWARENESS: COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS OF ACCEPTANCE

Awareness of our own control of our minds and bodies is one of the most important aspects of holistic healing. KAB does an excellent job of getting this message across to young people. Their messages remind us to be aware of our bodies, on the inside and out.

As I was reflecting on the role of awareness in KAB’s messages and campaigns I recalled my interview with Amanda. She mentioned that when she speaks to young adults about her cancer experience, they often realize that “this could happen to me.”

With this in mind I looked at the transcription of Megan Abudo’s ‘This is My Story’ video. Megan is a professional surfer and ambassador of KAB who lives in Hawaii. She told a story about her older sister who was diagnosed with breast cancer at 28 years old, “I didn’t really think that she could be affected by it because, you know, she was so young and cancer really wasn’t in our family” (as cited in KAB)

I, too, never thought it could happen to me -- before it did. I was young and healthy, with no family history of breast cancer. I think about my recent interview with Amanda and one comment in particular that she made surfaces to my attention. Amanda referred to her getting cancer as the result of a “perfect storm” within her body. This statement resonated with me because I hold the same belief. As I think about this statement I think about the many contributing factors of my “perfect storm.”

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This is my story (present-day reflections): The Perfect Storm. I think back to my life before cancer. I think of my early twenties and I grimace remembering all the “good times” where I may have pushed my body to the limits. I was always a good kid: followed the rules, paid attention to safety precautions, stayed away from drugs, but I did like to push my limits. I could have gotten more sleep, eaten more nutritious foods, drank less alcohol. Maybe I had
pushed my limits one too many times? It was frightening the day I realized that research indeed shows that there is a direct link between alcohol consumption and breast cancer.

I think about the birth control pills I took on and off from the age of 18 to the day of my diagnosis at 26. Was it the synthetic hormones in my body that caused cancer to manifest? Research shows that hormone replacement therapy is linked to breast cancer. Is it possible that birth control pills also play a role? Research is vague on this topic, but what if this is a push from the drug companies? Perhaps I had been too careless in my decision to take the pills. If only I had done more research.

What about the food I ate? Sure, I always considered myself to be a healthy eater. I've been thin all my life, and I gave up red meat years ago, but what about the chicken and turkey I ate. Was it the hormones in the meat? The antibiotics? Maybe I should have eaten less pizza and more vegetables?

Then, I think about stress -- and inevitably I think about John. It always comes back to John. He holds permanent residence in my mind. His presence in my mind, in my heart, in my body is as if his soul collided into mine; merging into a tangled web that I am incapable of unraveling. My feelings for John are a constant dichotomy: he is my love and he is my fear; he is my angel and he is my devil. And as much as I don’t want to confront this thought I know that while he may have saved my life, he also almost killed me. This is not a story I am proud to tell because the story does not have a happy ending. Aren’t love stories, even the most tragic, supposed to end happily? Instead, our story is a muddled mess of pain, heartache, fear, and illness. I don’t want to blame John for the cancer in my body. I don’t. But, I can’t deny the extremity of the emotional distress I was under when I was diagnosed. Was John, or John’s illness to blame for my own illness?

In the months following my diagnosis, I went over and over and over these “reasons” in my head. I needed somewhere to put the blame, yet I couldn’t seem to pin down just one unfortunate event. So, I came to understand my diagnosis as a series of unfortunate events, or as Amanda articulated, “the perfect storm.” There simply wasn’t just one thing that I could blame. This realization is both comforting and unsettling. It’s comforting to recognize that there was not one major mistake I made that propelled my life into the world of breast cancer; however, it’s equally unsettling to know that I do not have one thing to wholeheartedly blame; and therefore, not one specific thing that can be changed. There is no
certainty. No precise method to avoid a reoccurrence. All I can change is my awareness. I hope that my own self awareness will now help to ease the tidings of a future storm. I know that I cannot live in constant perfect harmony; however, I also know that the lifestyle changes I have made will help me to sustain wellness.

I recall a quote from about Harrington (2008): “she had repressed her conflicted feelings as long as she could, but in due course her unconscious had orchestrated an accident designed to expose the true conflict in all its details” (p. 83).

Perhaps my perfect storm was orchestrated as an opportunity for me to come to my own awareness. Perhaps the meticulous sequence of events that led me to cancer was destined to open my life to a different perception, and to new opportunities. Instead of choosing to blame myself, to blame my choices, or to blame others for my illness, I choose to accept my illness as my own path. I choose to accept my illness as an opportunity for changes that I can make in my lifestyle to honor my mind, body, and spirit. I choose to accept these changes with excitement and passion rather than shame or regret.

**Finding Opportunity**

In thinking about accepting illness as an opportunity I decided to look into how KAB helps young people become aware of their own opportunities to make lifestyle changes. I asked Kimmy about this during our interview. “Our messaging . . . actually tells them why. And I think that is a huge thing.”

This is really important. I think people are much more prone to accept changes if they understand, specifically, why they are being advised to make them.

“Like, how many people know, ‘eating an apple a day makes the doctor go away,’ [but] who knows why? But, with KAB we’re really trying to explain. Like, [for example] 30 minutes of exercise every day: the reason that is awesome is because it lowers your blood pressure, and your fat body content, and it flushes out your lymphatic system. And we actually try to explain, in like simple human terms, why these things do make a difference. You know, [for example] if you’re eating a lot of factory farmed meat and you’re at a higher risk [for breast cancer]. Why? Because they put estrogen in the chicken to make their breasts grow thicker. So it’s a lot of those little small explanations . . . it’s nice to just be able to
explain it in the simple terms that I think young people, or just people in general, can understand.

Erica also told me about KAB’s awareness promotions. “We promote, you know, eating organic, and using products that are natural, and being careful reading [labels] . . . and making sure that is really is a good thing to put on your body, or in your body, or around your body. That’s really what our whole Nontoxic Revolution campaign is all about.”

I realize that the communicative interaction of acceptance extends both into how we choose to treat our bodies, and into what we choose put into and onto our bodies. This includes how we communicate internally; that is, how we process, or accept, our thoughts and emotions. I also recognize that a fundamental part of acceptance is forgiveness.

**Finding Forgiveness**

I have chosen to make a conscious decision to forgive myself, and to forgive others, for the influences we may have had on my illness. With this in mind, I know that it is time in my own healing journey to accept and process old emotions. Accordingly, I prepared to write my next story about John. I closed my eyes and took a breath; I consciously chose to accept what is and what was. When I opened my eyes, Taylor Swift’s song “Breathe” echoed through my mind:

I see your face in my mind as I drive away
’Cause none of us thought it was gonna end that way
People are people
And sometimes we change our minds
But it's killing me to see you go after all this time

Music starts playing like the end of a sad movie
It's the kind you don't really want to see
’Cause it's tragedy and it'll only bring you down
Now I don't know what to be without you around

And we know it's never simple, never easy
Never a clean break, no one here to save me
You're the only thing I know like the back of my hand

And I can't breathe without you,
But I have to
Breathe
Without you, but I have to

Never wanted this, never want to see you hurt
Every little bump in the road I tried to swerve
People are people and sometimes it doesn't work out
Nothing we say is gonna save us from the fall out

And we know it's never simple, never easy
Never a clean break, no one here to save me
You're the only thing I know like the back of my hand

And I can't breathe without you,
But I have to
Breathe
Without you, but I have to

It's 2AM
Feel like I just lost a friend
Hope you know it's not easy, easy for me
It's 2AM
Feel like I just lost a friend
Hope you know this ain't easy, easy for me

And we know it's never simple, never easy
Never a clean break, no one here to save me

I can't breathe without you,
But I have to
Breathe
Without you, but I have to
Breathe without you, but I have to

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...
(Swift, 2009)

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This is my story (six months before cancer): I Can’t Breathe Without You - But I Have To. John never got help. His promises to me were constantly broken. Despite my undying commitment to him, I knew I also had to keep my commitments to myself. I finally began to tell my friends and family was happening. And, after listening to my own voice describe my pain; I realized that I was being abused. Let me be clear, John never laid a hand on me. He never came close to inflicting any of his pain or rage on me physically, but he was inflicting
It on me internally. I was carrying all of his problems around in my own heart, and I was emotionally falling apart. When I began to open up about what was happening I could hardly get the words out through all of the tears. I would sob so strongly that I would lose my breath, unable to express the magnitude of conflicting emotions that I had internalized.

Finally, in June of 2005, I gathered up the courage to leave him. It was a Thursday, my day off from work. I spent the morning lying in the sun on the balcony off my bedroom. The La Jolla townhouse I had just moved into with Michelle sat just a few blocks back from the beach, and I could see the ocean from my room. I sat there all morning looking at the tranquil water. It was an unexpectedly clear day given the typical “June gloom” we experience in San Diego. I had pulled out a book on healing your home and body that I had picked up recently on a whim. I’d flipped to a page that offered a guide for a meditation practice. After reading over it, I lay down on a blanket, and feeling the warm sun penetrate my skin, I concentrated on my breath. I breathed in my strength and exhaled my sorrow. I’m not sure how many hours passed as I practiced this meditative exercise. I think this was probably the deepest meditation I’ve been able to achieve to this day. But, eventually I opened my eyes, sat up, and picked up my phone. The sun was starting to set and as I dialed I could see the orange and purple layers developing in my peripheral vision.

He answered on the third ring. “Hey baby” he said, voice sounding normal and calm, “I’m in the middle of repotting a plant and my hands are covered in dirt. Can I call you right back?”

“No.” I replied.

“Huh? Why what’s up?”

“John, I need to talk to you now.” I said. “I’m not letting you put this off; put me off any longer. I’ll wait while you wash your hands.” The tears were already beginning to spill down my cheeks. I knew I had to keep my courage while I had it.

A few moments passed and he came back to the phone. “Ok, what’s going on?”

“I’m done, John.” I paused, took a breath, and continued, “I can’t do this anymore. You’re hurting me too much.”

“But, I’m doing better. I’m doing a lot better. Everything is going to be fine.”

“John, you may be doing better now, but I know it is only temporary. Another downfall is inevitable. I witnessed the patterns of your behavior for too long now.”
“But, my business is doing better, and I’m really positive that I’m on the road out of all this. Alli, don’t worry. I’m okay now...” his voice trailed off.

“John, you can’t handle stress, and stress is an inevitable part of life. What will happen the next time something stressful happens? Will you break another possession? Will you hurt yourself? Will you take your own life? It’s just too much for me to bear. Please, John, consider the harm your inflicting upon me with your inconsistent behavior.” I was openly sobbing now. “John, I can’t live like this anymore. I love you, but I have to move on.”

He was silent. I waited; moments passed. Then his voice came into the phone; it sounded flat and distant. “Fine, ok. I understand. But, know that I love you. I will always love you.”

My voice came out broken, mimicking the feelings in my heart and soul, as I forced the words out. “I will always love you too, John. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” he said. The phone clicked, and that was it. I crawled from my balcony onto my bed and buried my head in my pillow. My chest was heaving as I filled my pillow with tears.

Eventually, I picked myself up off my bed, and retrieved my phone from my balcony. I don’t know what time it was, but the day had turned to darkness and stars filled the night’s sky. I called my sister knowing it was late on the east coast, and hoping she would still answer.

“I did it.” I said into the phone when she picked up.

“You did the right thing, Alli.”

“But, Kim, I don’t know what I’m going to do now. What do I do next? How can I be me without him?”

“I don’t know, Alli. But, I know how strong you are, and I know you need to try. Just take a deep breath. You can do this - one day at a time. You need to take care of yourself now.”

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After I finally broke up with John, I knew it was time to make some changes. It was finally time for me to listen to my own inner voice and to take care of my own needs. In retrospect, I see that at this time I had to learn to forgive myself for not being able to help John, and I had to forgive John for not being able to accept my help. As fate would have it, I
thought at this time that I was making the necessary changes I needed to move on and to heal; yet, unbeknownst to me, my body had already begun to take action to be heard. In six short months I would find out I had breast cancer.

In the following, final, section I introduce the concept of action as a form of healing. Within this concept I consider the facets of empowerment and gratitude as they relate to the overarching communicative interaction of encouragement.

**HEALING ACTION: COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS OF ENCOURAGEMENT**

Through there many programs, campaigns, and messages KAB encourages people to take action in their own lives as well as in their community. Through these actions KAB encourages change. I talked to Erica about how she feels that KAB encourages change. She told me, “[KAB] will never be just like a scene think. Like, ‘I’m cool ‘cause I wear this I heart boobies shirt.” She explained that initially, people just see a bunch of “punk kids” wearing these shirts they think it’s some kind of fad. “But,” she explains, “when they learn what we’re all about [they see that] it’s not a fad, it’s a movement.” Kimmy agreed, “There’s a huge movement with young people.” She went on to explain that KAB encourages people to get together, and to start making changes.

In looking at KAB’s encouragement for change, I noticed the layered facets that construct these changes. In this section I will look at how KAB encourages the construction of empowerment and how KAB encourages the construction of Gratitude.

**Constructing Empowerment**

I find it pretty incredible that KAB has been able to touch the lives of so many young people and get them so involved with their campaigns. Working at the KAB office, I encountered new and returning volunteers on a weekly basis, all eager to offer their time and support for the organization.

I asked Erica to share her perspectives on this topic with me. “I’m just really stoked on younger people today because they’re really active and they want to make a difference. I notice it all the time that young people really identify with who they want to support, they have their organization, their cause, their clothing line, their brand, like whatever they really identify with . . . that makes them who they are, who they support. And when I was young I
wasn’t like that... so, I really respect young people a lot these days. It’s really inspiring. I mean I work with young kids all the time with our ‘Music For Awareness’ program and 14 year olds... are, you know, raising thousands of dollars by putting on a benefit show.”

Young people are able to construct empowerment in their own lives by finding a cause to support. Further, through the action of empowering themselves they are also simultaneously contributing to a greater good as well as inspiring others.

Kimmy also shared a touching story on this topic with me. “We had a volunteer the other day... in Colorado Springs who emailed us, he heard about us on the radio, [that] we’re doing an event. [He asked] how can he volunteer. . . . And he gets [to the event], and this event is at a retirement home - and he’s this tattooed guy - but he didn’t care. He said, ‘I want to work anywhere that you guys are gonna be.’ We found out it was his 21st birthday that night. I was like, ‘You’re working an event at a retirement home on you’re the eve of your 21st birthday?’ And he was like, ‘I will do anything for you guys, like, this is the best present in the world for myself to be able to give back.’”

Kimmy was in tears as she finished the story. “You look at someone who looks like that and you’re like, ‘oh you’re just a little 21 year old kid with tattoos who probably doesn’t give a crap about anything,’ but underneath all that they care so much and they’re such activists. And being able to empower that in people is so amazing.”

I see that KAB inspires people to support one another. Perhaps KAB’s messages of self empowerment spur young people to empower others. As I ponder this idea, I reflect on the people that supported me in my time of need.

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This is my story (day of diagnosis): We are in this Together. I don’t know how long I was in Dr. Wilde’s office. She was thorough, but careful not to overwhelm me with too much information. She told me that her office manager, Tracy, had made several appointments for me and that I would be getting more tests and meeting more doctors over the next few days. I’m not sure if she explained to me what kinds of tests I would be having, or what they would be looking for. If she did, I did not yet understand.

We discussed my support system. I told her that all of my family was back east in Atlanta, and that I lived with two roommates in La Jolla. She offered to call my parents for me. In retrospect, I am so thankful for that call. How could I have ever said the words to
them? My voice would be gone when they answered the phone. I wouldn’t have been able to utter such a foreign and frightening phrase, “I have cancer.” No, it would have come out in tears - heaping and heaving tears. I know how I am with my parents, forever reverting back into a child when I need them, no matter my age. It would have terrified them to hear me like that. I am so thankful she called for me.

My dad answered the phone. Dr. Wilde calmly introduced herself and told him the news. I don’t remember how long they spoke for or what she said. All I could think about was the pain I was causing them and the fear we now all shared. Then, Dr. Wilde put my father on-hold. She told me that I should talk to him now and that she would give us some privacy. She left the room. I have no recollection of what my father said to me. All I remember was the calm, soothing nature of his voice. My father: always so strong. There wasn’t an ounce of fear in his voice. All I heard was simple determination. He was there for me. We were going to get through this together. All I remember saying was, “I need to be with you guys. I need to be with my family.” And next, “Should I come to Atlanta?”

When Dr. Wilde came back in she asked who I’d be going home to that night. I told her I lived with my best friend, Michelle. She wanted to call her as well. I gave her Michelle’s number and she dialed, but Michelle did not answer. “Is there anyone else I should call?” she asked. “No,” I replied. “Michelle will be home soon. She’s at the gym now.”

I don’t remember leaving Dr. Wilde’s office. I don’t remember walking to my car. Were people looking at me curiously as I openly cried riding the elevator down the six flights to the lobby? Was it dark as I walked to the parking structure?

What I do remember is sliding into the driver’s seat of my car and shutting the door; crying, shaking, and then, dialing. He answered after one ring. “I need you.” The words came out broken, torn apart by my tears. “Where are you?!” the urgency of his voice filled my ear. “Are you okay?! Alli, tell me where you are!” I closed my eyes and whispered the words, “John….I….I have cancer.”

I drove straight to his house. He wanted to pick me up, but I wanted to drive. I needed a few moments alone to process it all. It had been months since we’d seen or even spoken to each other. But, I knew he was the one I needed by side. When I arrived he was waiting for me at the door. He held me in his arms and we cried. “Alli,” he had said “I will be by your
side every step of the way, ok?” Pulling me away he looked into my eyes, “Do you hear me?”

“Well, then I’ll move too.” He replied without a moment’s hesitation.

My cell phone rang. It was Michelle. I told her the news. In hearing her reaction I knew I had to get home immediately. Michelle is always the caretaker. I’ve nicknamed her “Mama Meeshell” for her nurturing ways. I knew she couldn’t bear the thought of me sick. She needed to see that I was okay. I said goodbye to John and he promised he would come by later and stay the night with me so that I wouldn’t be alone.

When I walked in the door to my townhouse Michelle was there waiting, her face covered in sorrow and fear. Together we cried and cried and cried. The moment was far beyond words. Soon after Dawn, Katey, and Sarah showed up. Michelle, always thinking, had called them with the news. We all hugged and cried some more.

Then, my roommate Giacomo came home. He had only recently moved to La Jolla from Italy on a research grant and had rented out the spare room in our house. There we all were, a hugging, crying, mess of bodies huddled in front of the door. I hadn’t moved an inch since I’d stepped in the door. I told Giacomo the news. He grabbed me by my shoulders and pulled me in. He held me long and tight. “You are going to be fine” he said firmly into my ear, “We are in this together.”

My sister called. She was sobbing, but I could hear the strength and determination in her voice. I cried as I listened to her cry, knowing the pain she was in after hearing this news about her baby sister.

“Alli?” she asked, “Do you know where you will get treatment?”

“I don’t know yet” I said. “Dr. Wilde is going to do some research for me tonight. I guess it will depend on whether Atlanta or San Diego can offer me better treatment.”

“Well, if you stay in San Diego then I’m moving.” She announced.

“But, Kim…” my voice trailed off, surprise and concern flooding my mind.

“What about grad school? What about Daniel?”

“I’m in finals next week” she replied. “I’ll skip my graduation ceremony and I’ll be there. I’ll just find a job in San Diego.”

“But…you live with your boyfriend. You can’t just walk away from that.”
“You know what Alli, you’re more important. We’ll work it out. I’m not worried about him. I’m worried about you. I’m coming there whether he likes it or not.”

Soon my neighbors, Lyn and Valdia arrived at our house. They brought snacks and ice cream. We moved our huddle to the couch and sat together in tears for a while. But it wasn’t long until we were all laughing together, just like we always did. I don’t know how we came to that point or when the transition to humor occurred, but I remember the love that elevated the energy around us. And I remember the joy of having my friends by my side in the midst of all of my fear and confusion. I was clueless as to what would unfold for my future, but knew I would be held up by the support of my friends and family.

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I see that the construction of empowerment is communicated explicitly, as we’ve seen through the actions of KAB’s volunteers, as well as my from sister’s willingness to move; and also implicitly, as it comes from the feeling of knowing your loved ones are there for you, independent of what they say to you with their words. Thus, empowerment must be constructed internally as we must learn to love ourselves in order to heal.

**EMPOWERING THE INNER SELF**

With this in mind, I prepared to write my next story about John. This is a story of finding my own inner empowerment. There was a song by Coldplay that came out around the time that this next story takes place. My friend, Michelle, introduced it to me. “This song always makes me think of you and John” she said one day when it came on the radio. I listened carefully to the lyrics and cried. Today, this song still makes me cry, but I instead of sorrow I now feel renewed.

When you try your best but you don't succeed
When you get what you want but not what you need
When you feel so tired but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse.

And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you can't replace
When you love someone but it goes to waste
Could it be worse?

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

And high up above earth or down below
When you're too in love to let it go
But if you never try you'll never know
Just what you're worth

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

Tears stream, down your face
When you lose something you cannot replace
Tears stream down your face and I…

Tears stream, down your face
I promise you I will learn from my mistakes
Tears stream down your face and I…

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you.
(Coldplay, 2005)

****

This is my story (one year after diagnosis): Saying Goodbye. John was there for me every day that I needed him. I think my sickness gave him something to focus on so that he didn’t have to focus on his own illness. He was an angel for one full year. He brought joy into my world in a way that no one else could. He was my buddy, my confidant, and my protector.

In December of 2006 I had completed treatment and was planning to go back to work. I decided to move out of my La Jolla townhouse and gain a fresh start. John helped me pack up all of my belongings and move up to Cardiff by the Sea. Michelle, Chrissy, and I had rented a beautiful townhouse in this beach city that was about 30 minutes from my previous home. I was excited about the change, but I could tell John was not.

“Are we still going to see each other?” he asked as we carried in the final load of my things.
“John, I want you in my life. You know that. But, now, it’s time for you to focus on you again. You need to heal to, remember? It’s time for you to get help. If you show me that you’re willing to do that we can see each other as often as you’d like.”

“Oh” he replied. “I love you. I’m going to get better. I’ll do it for you.”

“No. I need you to do it for yourself.”

He looked at me, and then down at the ground. “I love you,” he said “always.”

We talked frequently for the next month, but only saw each other occasionally. I stood by my conviction that he needed to show me he was getting help before I could spend time with him. I knew our relationship was edging on unhealthy again, but I still couldn’t seem to let him go. He still made me smile every time I heard his voice.

On February 14, 2007 I waited for my daily John phone call. When I had not heard from him by the evening I picked up the phone and dialed his number.

His voice was hollow when he answered, “Hello.”

“Oh, no. John, what is it?”

“I’ve gotta call you back. I’m in the hospital. I have to get stitches.”

“John, what did you do?”

“I was holding onto my chair. I was trying not to hit anything, so I was holding the plastic armrests as tight as I could, but I ended up breaking the chair, and the plastic sliced my arm.”

“Oh.” I took a breath “I hope you’ll be okay, but I’m hanging up now. I can’t listen to this.” I clicked my phone shut. I was standing in the kitchen. Michelle had come into the room. I turned around and looked at her; I was shaking as I began to cry.

“You’ve got to stop this, Al” she said. “You can’t go through this with him again. Look how far you’ve come.”

“I know, you’re right.” I said wiping my tears.

That night I thought long and hard about my decision. When John called the next day he tried to sound peaceful and upbeat.

“I’m sorry, John. I don’t want to hear it. I told you I’d cut you out of my life if you had another episode, and here we are. Please don’t call me again until you get help. It’s time for you to focus on yourself - I can’t fix you. And it’s time for me to focus on me. We both
need to heal now John, but we have to do it on our own. Please respect my decision. Please, for me.”

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As I wrote the above story I realized that with the encouragement of Michelle, together, we were able to co-construct my empowerment. As I think about the other people that have helped me to construct empowerment, I recall the words of a speaker from the Young Survival Coalition conference in Atlanta, GA. I pulled out my notes from the lecture and then wrote the following story.

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This is my story (present-day reflections): A Beautiful Woman. The Young Survival Coalition’s (YSC) annual conference includes a wide variety of speakers covering topics specific to young women affected by breast cancer; they discuss things like fertility, dating, nutrition, and life after cancer. While all of these topics are important to me, in my past experience at the conference I felt like the need to communicate to such a wide range of women, left the speakers skimming the surface of topics worthy of much more in-depth discussions. I had resolved to do my own research on the topics that mattered to me and skip these broad general overviews. However, when I learned that this year’s conference was in Atlanta, GA my interest peaked. My mom and sister live in Atlanta and it seemed like a great excuse for a visit. Then, I learned that both Shaney Jo and Amanda would be attending, and there were still scholarships available. I couldn’t pass up a free trip and an opportunity to spend quality time with these women.

I arrived in Atlanta on Tuesday and spent the next two days enjoying the company of my mom and sister. My mom’s house is about an hour outside of Atlanta, so on Friday morning she drove me into the city so I could spend my remaining two days at the conference. Shaney Jo and Amanda had arrived the night before. On our drive in I received a phone call from Amanda, “Are you and your mom in the car?” she asked. I told her that we were and she tentatively responded, “would you mind picking us up?”

It turns out Shaney Jo and Amanda had ambitiously left the hotel that morning on a shopping expedition, only to discover that the frigid Atlanta air was a little bit more than their California skin could bear. Laughing together, my mom and I said we would gladly retrieve them from the street corner where they waited.
As soon as we arrived at the hotel, I took my luggage up to the room so that I could settle in. Then, we all decided to head downstairs to the first speaker session. I chose to keep my mouth closed regarding my preconceptions about the conference speakers. There were four sessions to chose from; the topics covered nutrition, exercise, yoga, and meditation.

“This is great” I said laughing, “Everything that I’m interested in is happening at the same time.” Amanda mentioned that she would like to attend the talk on nutrition. While this sounded appealing to me in theory, I decided to avoid this one as I assumed it would likely be broad and perhaps even contradictory to my own dietary beliefs. I settled on the discussion on yoga. I’ve been practicing yoga for about 5 years, and while I have a deeply great appreciation for the practice and beliefs, I also know that I have a great deal to learn.

Shaney Jo decided to join me. When we sat down to wait for the lecture to begin I immediately began to doubt the ability of the speaker. Not that she had done or said anything yet, but I just became worried that she too would gloss over the surface of yoga and turn this talk into an over-simplified “yoga 101” lesson. I whispered to Shaney Jo, “I hope we actually get to practice yoga today, otherwise I might fall asleep.”

However, when the speaker approached the audience I was immediately taken by the overt peacefulness of her energy. It was as though she carried a sense of warmth that subtly radiated from her being. While she spoke from a PowerPoint and did address the philosophy of yoga from a beginner’s perspective, her words carried a certain depth that I was instantaneously drawn to. She held up a manila envelope. “This,” she said, “carries significant meaning for the person I am today. First, let me first tell you a little bit more about my own journey, and then I will come back to this manila envelope.” I was now taken with both interest and curiosity.

She told the story of being a three time breast cancer survivor. Like me, she was 26 when she was diagnosed. And, like me, she was in a successful career at the time – wearing a suit to work every day, making good money, and very driven to “succeed.” She said that it took her being diagnosed with breast cancer three separate times to realize that she needed to change herself and her lifestyle if she was going to survive. It was finding yoga that ultimately led her to finding herself, but this was not the journey that she told us of.

Instead, she told us of her journey post-immersion into yoga and the transformations that ensued. Again, like me, she had assumed that her altered yogic lifestyle constituted true
self change. And while it had in many ways, she explained that the yogic path does not have a tangible destination, it is one of constant reflection and transformation. The story she shared began at YSC conference 10 years prior. There she had met a young woman, Kristin, who was working on a school project. Kristin asked Pasha to participate in the project and without hesitation, or much thought, Pasha agreed.

What Kristin wanted were photographs – raw, natural photographs of women post-mastectomy. Pasha explained that she thought she would be fine with this given the acceptance that yoga had helped her to find for her post-surgery breast. At the photography studio, Pasha removed her shirt and stood in front of the camera. Although it was only her, Kristin, and the photographer that were present, she still struggled to get comfortable in front of the camera. In an effort to ease her nerves, the photographer invited her to look behind the lens. It was then that Pasha began to cry. “These tears were unexpected” Pasha passionately explained, “for the tears were not for the visual acknowledgment of the breast that I had lost. These tears were for the internal judgments I immediately began making of my healthy breast.” The room was quiet and she continued, “I just cried and cried and cried” she said. “How could I be so cruel to myself? For it wasn’t my mastectomy that revolted my inner critic it was the rest of my body: my arms, my stomach, my healthy breast. How could I be so judgmental of me? And to whose or what standards is it exactly that I feel so compelled to hold myself to?”

I sat there in disbelief. Not that I was shocked by her confession, but because I was certain that I, too, would have the same reaction to my own body.

Pasha then held up the manila envelope again. “This,” she began, “is the envelope that those photos arrived in by mail after they had been printed. I sat with this sealed envelope for several hours before I allowed myself to open it” she went on “I had to be sure, I had to be positive, that I would not judge – that I would silence my inner critic and simply accept whatever I saw with love and compassion.” We waited. “I did it.” she declared, “and today I am going to invite you to do the same. I have manila envelopes for all of you. As you leave I would like you take one. When you are ready put something in the envelope that is only for you to see. It might be photos, or maybe a letter to yourself. Put it away, and then when ample time has passed I encourage you to open the envelope and graciously accept whatever is inside.”
“One more thing she said as clapping slowed down and the room began to quiet down. Please, also pick up a copy of the poem I have printed for each of you. I hope you will find as much inspiration from it as I did.”

I picked up the manila envelope and the poem on my way out the door. The poem was printed on a pink sheet of paper and titled, “Imagine a Woman in Love with Herself.” This is what it said:

Imagine a woman who believes it is right and good she is a woman.  
A woman who honors her experience and tells her stories.  
Who refuses to carry the sins of others within her body and life.

Imagine a woman who has acknowledged the past’s influence on the present.  
A woman who has walked through her past.  
Who has healed into present.

Imagine a woman in love with her own body.  
A woman who believes her body is enough, just as it is.  
Who celebrates her body’s rhythms and cycles as an exquisite resource.

Imagine a woman who honors the body of the Goddess in her changing body.  
A woman who celebrates the accumulation of her years and her wisdom.  
Who refuses to use her precious life-energy disguising the changes in her body and life.

Imagine a woman who is interested in her own life.  
A woman who embraces her life as teacher, healer, and challenge.  
Who is grateful for the ordinary moments of beauty and grace.

Imagine a woman who authors her own life.  
A woman who trusts her inner sense of what is right to her.  
Who refuses to twist her life out of shape to meet the expectations of others.

Imagine a woman who values the women in her life.  
A woman who sits in circles of women.  
Who is reminded of the truth about herself when she forgets.

Imagine yourself as this woman.  
(Reilly, 1999)

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I am thankful for Pasha’s words and her passion. When I returned home from Atlanta I spent a lot of time contemplating her message. I realized that what she had said was empowering me to open my mind, and my heart, to a new perspective.

**EMPOWERING AN OPEN HEART**

One afternoon at the KAB office I told Kimmy and Erica a little bit about how I was planning to structure my thesis. I told them that I would be incorporating my stories, as well as theirs, into the presentation of my findings. We all agreed that hearing people’s stories is powerful: both challenging and therapeutic. Kimmy said she often acknowledges this dichotomy when working with KAB, “You have to understand that every time you’re at a KAB booth, you have to be spot on, you have to really open your heart and understand like people are gonna talk to you about really heavy stuff and you have to be there for them and it really takes a particular person.”

Erica nodded in agreement and continued, “On my first tour I was just like, ‘This going to be awesome, I’m going on tour!’ And then we had our ‘This is My Story’ campaign – we launched it there. And I would go and I’d read the notebook every night in my bunk, and I would just cry myself to sleep every night. And it took like a good year to find a good balance of taking in all of this really scary, hard information from people - it’s like their deepest darkest secrets. And . . . I’m just so thankful for people being so open and sharing their stories because people will just like open their hearts up to you and, um, it’s hard to take it and not let it affect your entire being. As it being the core of KAB, you really have to let it go a little bit and not let it affect your whole everything or else you are going to be like, taken down!” She concluded with a laugh.

I see that opening your own heart can be simultaneously challenging and healing. It seems that by sharing their stories, the participants of the ‘This is My Story’ campaign are actually empowering the employees of KAB to open their own hearts, and simultaneously the campaign by its very nature encourages participants to open their hearts by sharing their stories.

I realize that empowerment is encouraged and co-constructed through the sharing of stories. I think about my own story and wonder what opportunities I have had that were
actually encouraged through communicative interactions. I recall something that Shaney Jo told me during our interview.

“I’m a firm believer in just keeping your eyes very open to opportunities and you have to make choices and jump on opportunities. So, if something comes up and it resonates with you, you know, follow that. You know like, ‘Go!’ Don’t be afraid just go. You know, you have to see; because if you’re open and you’re following your heart these things are gonna come in front of you – opportunities - every day, every day, every day. So many people don’t see them. . . . You really have to keep your eyes open.”

Reading Shaney Jo’s words make me think of one of my favorite Brett Dennen songs, “Follow Your Heart.”

I am a dreamer
And I'm a lover
I've been let down, and I've loved and lost
I've been alone, I've been far from home

Follow your heart
Follow your heart
Follow your heart and you won't get lost

I've been a poor man
I've been a rich man
I made a fortune, and I've paid the cost
I've had some good friends, they come and go

Follow your heart
Follow your heart
Follow your heart and you won't get lost

I've been cheated
I've been defeated
I played the game, and I've been double crossed
Every friend of mine has been in hard times

Follow your heart
Follow your heart
Follow your heart and you won't get lost

(Dennen, 2008)

These lyrics remind me of a time in my life when I was lost, scared and confused. It was about two years after I had finished treatment for breast cancer, and while my heart was
urging me to do more with my life, I felt stagnant and unfulfilled: I was single, and I was not dating; and I was still working in real estate, although I spent all of my free time reading about health and wellness. My cancer journey had taught me so many valuable lessons, and I knew I needed take actions to fulfill my heart.

“Follow your heart and you won’t get lost” became my mantra. I wanted to change my career in the direction of health, but the question was “how?” One day as I sat in my big fancy office at the real estate firm I was working for, I recalled a class I had taken as an undergraduate at SDSU: Health Communication; and I remembered the inspirational words of the professor who had taught the class, “don’t tell that story” she had said. She was referencing the stories we tell that are not from the heart, the stories we tell mindlessly without realizing the rippling effects our words have on our minds and our bodies, and the minds and bodies of others. I was never sure why those words had stuck with me for all those years, but on that day it became clear. I went on-line, looked up Dr. Geist-Martin, and sent her an email:

Hello Dr. Geist-Martin

My name is Allison Briggs and I was a Health Communication student of yours quite a few years ago (2001, I think). I was truly impacted by your passion for this topic and still remember many of your lectures.

A few years after graduating from SDSU with a BA in Communication I was diagnosed with breast cancer. While this experience has changed me in more ways than I will mention, I have been quite moved by the power and the effect of the communication process on my healing.

I am now extremely interested in learning more about this process and want to shift my career into a position where I can educate and assist others through the healing process, particularly in regards to bridging the gap between traditional medicine and a more holistic approach.

I would like to further study health communication and am hoping you could point me in the right direction. Any guidance you could give me would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Allison Briggs (personal communication, August, 12 2008)

A few days later I was in her office and I briefly told her my story and my ideas for the future; and a few days after that I was applying for graduate school at SDSU.

“Follow your heart and you won’t get lost”
A few months after I started graduate school I quit my real estate job so I could focus on my studies full-time. Although I do not know how the future will unfold, I trust that through this process of educating myself and uncovering the depths of my passions, a fulfilling career path will unfold.

“Follow your heart and you won’t get lost”

The following story is about finding love again. It is a story about the encouragement I received from Michelle to open my heart again after finally leaving John, and it is a story about the empowerment I constructed for myself as I learned to trust and follow my heart.

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This is my story (two years after cancer): Finding my Fisherman. After I started graduate school I finally felt like I was on the right path for my career life. I knew my next step was to open my heart to love. One Sunday morning in early September 2008, Michelle and I sat in my apartment drinking coffee and chatting. We were both single, and we shared our frustrations about our dating lives.

“I’m just too busy” I told her.

“I know, me too!” she agreed, “I am always at work, and then I spend whatever free time I have at the gym, or with my girlfriends. I don’t have time to meet someone.”

“Have you ever thought about on-line dating?” I asked her tentatively.

“We should do it!” she said, “Alli, you need to move on. And, I’m ready to start dating too.”

Within a few minutes we had devised a plan: We would both open accounts on Match.com. We agreed to put ourselves “out there” into the world of on-line dating, and we would “just see what happened.” We figured that if we both joined Match at the same time, then, if nothing else we could share stories about our experiences.

For the first few weeks that is exactly what we did. “Look at this guy!!!!” she would exclaim forwarding me a photo of an overweight, balding forty-something.

“Can you believe he said this??!!!” I would say as I forwarded her one of the ridiculously cheesy emails received. We laughed and fun with it, but we did not go on any dates.

Even though I did not meet anyone on Match right away I soon found that by “putting myself out there” I was opening my heart to meeting someone through other venues as well.
It was about a month after joining Match, and I received a friend request on Facebook from an old classmate from high school, Ryan. I looked at Ryan’s Facebook page and realized that he also lived in San Diego. I sent him an email and we soon discovered that we were living just a few streets from each other. Ryan and I began to talk regularly, and we found that we had a lot in common. He, too, was in the midst of a spiritual/self transformation. He had taken on a vegan lifestyle and he was in the process of getting his yoga teacher training certification. He was also applying to attend medical school the following year. I was intrigued by his ability to reconcile his holistic beliefs with science. He told me it was an on-going process, and that he planned to pursue integrative medicine in order to balance his belief system. He was tall, dark, handsome and healthy: a stark contrast from every man I had ever dated, especially John. And he appeared to be exactly what I was looking for.

Yet, as time went on, I realized my heart wasn’t completely in it. Although, Ryan seemed perfect in that we shared similar belief systems, he was handsome, successful, kind, and compassionate. There was still something missing, something deeper that I was craving.

“Follow your heart and you won’t get lost.” I thought to myself as I told him that I needed to move on, and that I hoped we could remain friends.

Michelle was surprised when I told her I had broken it off. “I can’t believe you let that one go,” she said.

“I know, he is really really great, but he’s not great for me” I replied, “I’m looking for someone who not only wants to live a healthy lifestyle, but that also shares my passion for life. There’s a reason why I was drawn to someone like John. He was fun and spontaneous. Now I need to find that balance. I’m looking for someone who can be responsible and spontaneous” I continued, “I want to date someone who loves to travel and loves the water and loves to be outdoors.” Then with a laugh I said, “I don’t know, I want to date a fisherman, or something” I went on, “You know, someone with a free spirit who appreciates the glamorous and the rugged life. Someone who will not only buy me flowers on special occasions but, someone who will pick me flowers just because they were thinking about me.”

Soon after we had this conversation I opened my email inbox to find the following message: “Match.com alert: inganeer has winked at you!” What the heck, I thought as I clicked to open it. I read through his profile and liked what I saw: He was an engineer, he
was cute, and he seemed to have a good sense of humor. Without much thought I typed him a short message and hit “send.”

Soon we were chatting regularly. Our conversations were comfortable and playful, like we had known each other for a long time. Then one afternoon I received a message that said, “Hey Alli, just wanted to let you know I’ll be out of town for the next week. I’m going fishing with my dad in Mexico, so I’ll be out of touch from the internet. I’ll contact you when I return. – Louis”

I smiled to myself as I thought, *ask and you shall receive.*

I called Michelle, “So, I found my fisherman” I told her, “Now let’s see if he’s true to his word. He said he’d contact me in a week. This will be a good judge of character.”

Exactly one week past, and I received the following message:

**Hey Alli, I'm back.**
The last few days were a blast. I only wish that it could have been longer. I really liked not having any technology for a few days. Coming home to some rain was a treat. The rain is a nice transition to the real world. I like it. So, I think that we should actually talk. While the internet and e-mail is great, we should probably see who we actually are in real life. Translation, “I want to make sure that you're not a 50 something man just messing with me.” :) Here's my number in case you don't feel comfortable giving your number out. If you give me your number, I'll call.

Louis (personal communication, January 23, 2009).

I gave him my number and he called the next day as promised. We talked on the phone comfortably for over an hour and then arranged to meet for dinner a few nights later. He suggested a Mexican restaurant near my house, one of my favorites.

I was a little apprehensive about meeting him, in fact, when I parked my car in the lot in front of the restaurant I considered driving away and calling him with an excuse for not being there. It wasn’t that I was afraid of meeting him; I was just nervous to open heart to dating again. Somehow, I gathered my wits, and walked towards the restaurant. He was two steps in front of me as I approached the door, right on time. I stayed silent and let him go in. Then, I walked in the door behind him, said “hello,” and introduced myself.

It was a Monday night and the restaurant was pretty empty. The hostess took us to our table and soon after the server approached to offer us drinks. “I’ll have a margarita” I said smiling at Louis and hoping he wouldn’t mind my order.
“The same for me” he said to the waiter grinning back at me.

The conversation was easy and fun for the rest of the night. I have food allergies that I discovered after cancer on my quest towards holistic healing. Louis was not judgmental or irritated when I asked the waiter for several alterations to my meal. Instead, he was inquisitive and asked, “So what exactly is gluten?”

“It’s the protein in wheat.” I told him, “So, I can’t have anything with flour in it: no bread, no fried food, not even beer. That’s why I asked the waiter to make sure my fish was prepared grilled with no bread crumbs” I explained.

When my food came out, Louis pointed out that my fish looked like it was breaded. He called the waiter over to the table, and without hesitation asked to have my meal re-done. Ordering food can be awkward for me sometimes as I don’t like to be an inconvenience. I was glad he was both understanding and helpful.

We talked throughout our meal. He told me about where he grew up and his family and I told him about mine. We talked about traveling and our favorite places. “I love to travel” I said, “but sometimes the best places are the hidden treasures close to home.” I went on to tell him about a recent road trip I had taken to Ojai, CA with a few friends. “It was so beautiful,” I said, “It’s nice to go somewhere that’s so close that feels so different. I loved how peaceful and laid back it was there.”

“Have you been to San Juan Capistrano?” he asked.

I told him I hadn’t.

“Well, I think you’d like it. It’s a lot like what you just described. My mom used to take me there every year to see the swallows arrive for the season. They have a big festival there, and it falls right on my birthday.”

After we finished our food Louis looked at me and said, “Well, I’m kind of bummed because I don’t want to end our conversation yet” he paused, “would you like to go get a cup of coffee with me somewhere?”

“I don’t like drinking coffee at night” I said. Then I laughed, “It’ll keep me up. How would you feel about getting another drink instead?”

We went to a bar just down the street and ordered two drinks. The conversation continued effortlessly. “So, I can tell your really health conscious” he mentioned casually, “have you always been that way?”
I hadn’t told him about cancer yet. It is always difficult for me to choose the right moment to tell new people about my past. I decided to just open up then and there. Maybe it was liquid courage from the two drinks I’d had, or maybe he just made me feel comfortable. “Actually, I had cancer” I said, and then waited for him to respond.  

“Really? Wow, you’re so young.”  

“Yeah, I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 26. I finished treatment about three years ago.”  

“So, you’re okay now?”  

“Yeah, I’m good now. It was a rough time in my life, but a lot of good ended up coming out of it, and, well, I’m better for it.”  

“So, what kinds of treatments did you have to have?”  

*Oh, no. Not this conversation,* I thought to myself. I swallowed and decided to continue. “I had chemotherapy and surgery” I paused, “I had a bilateral mastectomy.”  

“Alli, I don’t really know what to say. I want to know more about this, but I can tell it’s hard for you to talk about. Don’t worry though, it’s okay with me” he said “I just don’t fully understand it all yet.”  

“Look,” I said, “I want to be open with you, but it is hard for me to talk about. I’d like you to ask me anything you want to know or that you’re curious about. Please. I’ll be totally open with you, but it is hard for me to bring it up on my own sometimes.”  

“That sounds like a great plan” he said.  

It was getting late, so we said good night and promised to talk soon. Two days later we made plans to go to a tapas restaurant in Pacific Beach. I was excited to see him again. There was something about his energy that was soothing and natural. He was easy to be with, and I could tell he was honest – a good person to the core.  

When we were at the restaurant a band started to set up their equipment and warm up for the night. “Do you like salsa dancing?” he asked.  

“Yes. But, I have to admit I don’t actually know how.”  

“Would you like to try and learn?”  

“Tonight?”  

“Sure, why not? I think I know a place we can go.”  

“Okay. I’m always ready for an adventure!”
We hoped in his car and drove to Mission Valley. The club was packed with people and the dance floor was jamming with dancers, all in perfect rhythm.

“Um, I don’t think I can go out there” I told him, “It looks pretty intimidating.”

“Don’t worry about them” he said grabbing my hand. “It’s just you and me. Follow my lead.”

We danced all night, well, I should say I attempted to dance all night. But, I had fun doing it, and while I laughed at myself he stayed supportive and encouraged me to keep trying. Giving me pointers in my ear as our cheeks brushed lightly together.

It was four o’clock in the morning when the lights came on. Exhausted, but still laughing, and elated from the energy of the night we drove home. When we reached my house he pulled into my driveway and put the car in park, leaving the engine running.

“Did you have that planned?” I asked him suspiciously.

“No, I just thought of it when we were at the tapas restaurant and I thought it would be fun. I swear.”

“Well, then, I like your spontaneity” I said, smiling at him.

He leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. “Goodnight. I had fun to. I hope to see you again soon.”

The next weekend was Valentine’s Day. Louis called and asked if I had plans.

“Nope” I replied.

“Well, you do now” he said.

“What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise. Just be at my house on Saturday by 11:15am.” He gave me his address.

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

Saturday came and I was excited and anxious to see what was in store for the day. I showed up at his house promptly at 11:15. He grabbed a backpack as we headed out the door.

“It’s really important we’re on time” he said.

A few minutes later we parked at the train station. “Where are we going?” I asked excitedly.

“I told you, it’s a surprise. Come on.”
We boarded the train and Louis opened his backpack. “I brought some snacks and a bottle of wine” he said as he reached in. It was a gorgeous day, and I happily watched the coastal communities and long stretches of ocean as we coasted along the tracks sipping our wine.

“Next stop San Juan Capistrano” said the conductor’s voice over the intercom.

“I brought some snacks and a bottle of wine” he said as he reached in. It was a gorgeous day, and I happily watched the coastal communities and long stretches of ocean as we coasted along the tracks sipping our wine.

“Next stop San Juan Capistrano” said the conductor’s voice over the intercom.

“Is that where we’re going?” I asked with a grin.

“Yep,” he said, “I really think you’re going to like it.”

When we got off the train he led me to a mission in the center of town. “This is where the swallows arrive” he explained. “They’re said to find solace in the walls of this mission.” We went inside and found a place to sit. “I made a picnic” he said smiling at me shyly.

“Don’t worry; I’m pretty sure it’s all gluten-free. Oh, and these are for you.” He pulled out a bouquet of freshly handpicked flowers.

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With support and encouragement I learned to open my heart to new possibilities. I also learned to trust my heart as my guide. By empowering myself, I was able to move on from my heartache with John, and I was able to find love.

Louis and I have been dating for over a year now and we recently moved in together. I found a new kind of love with Louis that I had never felt before. It is true, honest, and sustaining. I love him for the person he is and for the relationship that we have constructed together. I do not have to look towards the future to find our happiness, I hold it in my heart here and now, and I am grateful for it with every present moment.

It’s been three years since John and I had our final conversation. John has reached out to me repeatedly over the years, but I’ve chosen to keep my distance. I know with certainty that John and I are not meant to be together anymore, yet I am still challenged to make sense of the profound connection that we shared.

One day when I was a KAB, Amanda mentioned to me that Shaney Jo had introduced her to an energy healer. “You have to meet her” she said. “Her name is Prue. She’s an ex-pro surfer that now devotes her time to her healing practice. She’s kind of clairvoyant, too, which is really cool. Oh, and she works on breast cancer survivors for free.”
I got Prue’s contact information from Amanda and set up an appointment to see her. I went there with no expectations. I left feeling invigorated and empowered. Prue opened my mind to a new understanding.

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This is my story (present-day reflections): Soul Mates Doesn’t Mean Forever. I went into Prue’s spare bedroom and laid down on the makeshift bed she uses for her healing work. I told her about my thesis and the work I’ve been doing with KAB. We instantly connected over our passion to help others and she was excited by my ideas.

As she did her work we talked about relationships. I told her briefly about John, “he was a big part of my life” I said, “I know he was brought to me for a reason, but I can’t exactly articulate what it was. He has been such a mix of pain, sorrow, and joy in my life, and no matter how hard I try I can’t seem to let him go. I mean, I know now that we’re not meant to be together, yet, we’re still connected. No matter what happens I can’t seem to break our connection.”

“You’re soul mates” she said matter of factly.

“But, he’s not right for me. He’s not healthy, and I doubt that he ever will be. And I’m so much happier with my boyfriend now. Our relationship is so real and so valuable in my life.”

“Yes, you’re boyfriend now is a good one” she said smiling.

“John is connected to your soul, but that does mean he’s meant to be your forever partner. The two of you have a contract from a past life that was carried out in this one. He was here for you and you were here for him just as you promised each other. Don’t worry; it’s okay to move on now.”

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I am grateful for the many opportunities I have been given and doors that have been opened on my cancer journey of healing. Meeting Prue illuminated my faith and understanding that people come into your life when you need them. She encouraged and empowered me to let go of longstanding emotions. As I consider my enlightened change in perspective, gratitude that fills my heart.
Constructing Gratitude

I contemplate the complexity of constructing gratitude, and my mind is overwhelmed by the magnitude of this facet. There is so much that I want to say, but I don’t know where to begin. As I often do, I decide to take a break from Microsoft Word and check my email. I open Yahoo! and see an email from my friend Rebecca. The subject reads, “I love my ladies so much!” I open the email and it reads “thank you all for coming out and making me feel so special” followed by a link to the photos of her recent birthday celebration.

I click on the link and receive an error screen. Since it appears that the link is broken I decide to go directly to the Kodak Gallery website and look in my account for the photo album. Unfortunately, this doesn’t solve the problem – I still can’t find the photos. Frustrated, I am about to close the webpage and reply to her email; but then I notice a list of several older albums that friends have sent to me over the years. Each album is titled below a thumbnail image, inviting me to click through and magnify the memories of times past.

I scroll down the list of albums. I see birthday parties, weddings, and baby showers. I laugh to myself as I scroll over the thumbnail image of Brooke’s bachelorette party in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. As I near the bottom of the list I come to an album titled “Allison.” The thumbnail is an image of the back of my head. My hair is long and blond. I am in front of a Christmas tree, hanging an ornament. Suddenly, the memories are flooded back to my mind.

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This is my story (Two days after cancer diagnosis): Blessed is this Life. It’s Friday, December 2, 2005. I have spent the last two days of my life walking the campus of Scripps Memorial Hospital. I have come to know many of the different buildings all too well – each offering special, distinct, services. I have walked the sidewalks lined with grass and glanced mindlessly at the strategically placed artistic sculptures.

I know where the breast care center is. I’ve seen the soft delicately colored upholstered chairs that sit in the waiting area. There is coffee and tea with ceramic mugs, and quiet soothing music emanates from the walls. The chairs are surrounded by shelves of books, the color pink embedded in each title.

I know where the imaging center is. I have seen the MRI machine, tucked back behind a shielded wall of glass. I’ve heard its rhythmic humming and thumping sounds as it slowly scans the body.
I know where the blood draws and specimens are taken: a small laboratory with a too-crowded waiting area; people of all ages and of all wakes of life sitting together on cold hard plastic chairs, each waiting for an excretion from his or her body to determine a personal fate.

I know where the nuclear medicine department is. It lies deep in the basement of the main hospital. The corridors are designed into a complex maze, as if to intentionally distract from the dim realities taking place behind the closed doors. The repellant smell of cafeteria food penetrates every turn down every hall, a constant reminder of my own fear and aversion towards the thought of what “nuclear medicine” might mean. The hallways are painted bright white and the floors are lined with white linoleum. Florescent lights shine against the stark whiteness and seem to illuminate the lonely feeling of this hospital floor.

But I was not alone as I drank the tall glass of thick white potion that would allow technician running the bone scan machine to see into my bones.

And I was not alone as I stepped into my oncologist’s office for the first time and breathed in the potent smell of medicine as several pairs of elderly eyes looked at me curiously from beneath their bald heads masked by wigs and scarves.

And I was not alone as I sat in a simple, chicly designed doctor’s office discussing my options for surgical reconstruction following the removal of my breasts.

My family was with me every step of the way. Although my blood family (my mom, dad, and sister) had not yet arrived from Atlanta (my parents would arrive on Saturday), my San Diego family was by my side. My friends were there for me. My closest girlfriends had rushed to my house the evening of my diagnosis after Michelle called them all with the news. Michelle, John, and Susan (my close friend and self-proclaimed “stand-in mother”) had accompanied me to every appointment for two full days straight, sometimes taking shifts, sometimes all four of us together. They had each cancelled appointments in their own lives at a moment’s notice to stand by my side. Suddenly, the only important thing in our lives was the feeling and showing of love and compassion.

By late Friday afternoon I was spent. I was overwhelmed and exhausted. John offered to take me to his house so I could rest. “Get some sleep” he’d said “I have to run a few errands and I’ll be back in an hour.” When he returned I’d felt rejuvenated and he offered to take me home so we could make dinner. I arrived at my house and as I approached the door I could hear the buzz of voices coming from inside. Confused, I pushed the door open; inside
stood every one of my friends - my San Diego family. I could feel the love emanating from the energy of the room. As I walked in and began the rounds of long heartfelt hugs I noticed groups of friends from circles long past, and I saw friends that had been in arguments in the recent past talking together, forgiveness in their eyes. I looked in the kitchen and saw the table and counters covered with food. Then, I looked in the living room and saw a large, full green Christmas tree standing proudly in the corner. “Michelle,” I said, “How did you get the tree?!” “John just brought it over” she said. “You know how comforting I find the smell of Christmas trees.”

Then, Brooke handed me small gift covered in Christmas wrapping. “Open it” she urged. I removed the paper and opened the box, inside was a delicately carved wooden angel. A thin gold string was affixed to her back. I hugged Brooke as I let the tears fall from my eyes without reservation. Then, with arms still entwined, together we hung the ornament on the tree.

One by one my friends approached me and handed me their own gift wrapped ornaments, and one by one we hung them on the tree together. Each one was unique and seemed to be a perfect expression of the person it was coming from. Keri and Chase gave me a tiny painted Christmas tree with a dove perched atop. Each detail of the ornament was perfectly attended to and the paint was covered with an elegant, glossy finish – a graceful gift from a graceful couple. Jason handed me an unwrapped gold Christmas tree ball that had words scribbled on it with a black permanent marker. “To Olsen from Jolson with love!” it read – an inside joke between the two of us; Jason is always good for a laugh. Michelle gave me a beautiful bright red hand-beaded heart – a symbol from the girl with the biggest, warmest, heart of anyone I know. I opened Dawn’s neatly wrapped gift to find a shiny silver star inside – a glowing bright piece to parallel her smile and matching personality. Antony gave me a Christmas tree made of green foil affixed to a small white plastic stand. I giggled when I opened it.

“Antony,” I’d said “this isn’t an ornament.”

“It’s not?” he’d replied in his thick Kenyan accent.

“Nope.” I placed the tree on the fireplace mantel – a perfect reminder of the humorous stories Antony frequently shares about his struggles of integration into U.S. culture.
As the gifts continued to appear in my hands and the unexpected guests continued to arrive through the door, I was elated by the love that filled the room. And, I couldn’t help but to feel grateful. After all, we weren’t there to be sad. We were together to celebrate life.

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Today, as I sit at my computer scrolling through the 87 photos from the ornament party, I am thankful for Christine who showed up armed with her camera as always. I am thankful for Michelle for having the desire to organize this in the midst of her own sadness, fears, and exhaustion. I am thankful for John, who dropped his life to be by my side and took it on himself to pick up a Christmas tree after an emotionally taxing day at the hospital. And I am thankful for all of my friends who showed up and filled my home with love. It was their energy, the energy they gave me that night, which carried me through that next week. The next week I would start chemotherapy, and they made sure that I wouldn’t be afraid. They showed up and showed me their support and their love. Their presence showed me that I would never be alone.

I smile thinking back to how much all of our lives have changed since then. It seems that that night was a catalyst for change in so many lives. After that night, friends were reunited, long overdue apologies were made, and as the months continued, all of our lives took a more peaceful course. In retrospect, I can see the impacts my diagnosis had on all of us. My friends not only came together for me, but they also began to realize the value of their own lives. In the months following the ornament party two of my friends quit smoking, another left her abusive boyfriend, and one of my male friends finally made a long overdue proposal to his girlfriend. Serendipitously, as I sit here writing this, my friend Narin called. I briefly described to her what I was working on. “Allison, you’re diagnosis changed me so much” she said. “I’m so much more aware of my own body now -- and my diet! I’ve changed my eating habits so much. You’re diagnosis affected all of us.”

I’m looking forward to planning my annual ornament party this year. Since that first party that Michelle organized in 2005, I’ve made it a point to host a party on the day of my diagnosis each year. I call it my “Celebration of Life Party” named in inspiration of Brett Dennen’s song, “Blessed.” This is a big year because it will mark my 5th year free of cancer. Some people question why I celebrate the day of my diagnosis and not the day of completing
my treatment. “The day I was diagnosed was the day my life changed for the better” I tell them, “It reminded me that I am blessed to be alive.”

I welcome the sun,
the clouds and rain,
the wind that sweeps the sky clean
and lets the sun shine again.
This is the most magnificent life has ever been.
Here is heaven and earth
and the brilliant sky in between.

Blessed is this life
and I'm gonna celebrate being alive.
Blessed is this life
and I'm gonna celebrate being alive.

I dwell in the darkness
I let in the light
I sleep in the afternoon
and become the noise in the night
I trespass in temptation
suffer in sacrifice,
but I awake each day with the new sunrise.

Blessed is this life
and I'm gonna celebrate being alive
blessed is this life
and I'm gonna celebrate being alive
(Dennen, 2005b)

As I think about gratitude and the many people that I am grateful for, I wonder how this important facet of social support ties into KAB.

I recalled a story that Shaney Jo told about a recent event involving KAB. “We went to the Zumeiz 100k event, and it was . . . a big turning point for me. . . . It’s this huge event . . . there’s like 1,200 kids and it’s a celebration for all the kids that have sold over $100,000 of merchandise. So they get invited to this special event, and like, Snoop Dogg was there, and it’s like crazy, you know? There’s all these performances and there’s one point of the night where all of the founders from all of the companies are on stage. So, it’s like me, and like Tony Hawk, and like, you know, everyone from the skate and surf industry who founded all those companies. And you’re supposed to go down and say your name and what company you’re from and thank the kids for supporting your brand. And I was, like, kind of in the
middle and, you know, the microphone finally got to me . . . and I have like a girl, quiet voice . . . not quiet, but kind of a squeaky girly voice. And the rest of the dudes were all, you know, [screaming into the mic] ‘I’m TONY!!!!!’ And so, I waited a minute for it to get quiet so I could say, you know, who I was. And I was like [quietly], ‘Hi everybody, my name’s Shaney Jo and I’m from the Keep A Breast Foundation.’ And automatically it was like this ROAR: the heaviest, loudest roar. Like, louder than any other company. And, like, we’re a nonprofit. And the kids were screaming, roaring and it was so loud. And I was just like, ‘Oh my gosh, I just really want to thank you guys for supporting KAB this year. . . . We’re a nonprofit organization and you’re helping us reach people . . . you know, you guys are doing the work.’ You know, ‘Thank you all. From the bottom of my heart.’ And all the kids just started chanting, ‘BOOBIES! BOOBIES! BOOBIES!’ It was crazy.”

I see that it is the often the unexpected events for which we are the most grateful.

“Kimmy was in the audience, she was filming, and she looked around and all the kids were crying and she was crying. It was . . . it was so crazy. And then after that . . . I was able to meet a bunch of the kids throughout the night and it was just like this storm of like kids coming up to me and just hugging me and, ‘Oh my gosh, Shaney, I’m so glad you’re here, like thank you so much for starting this foundation. It means so much to me.’ Like, every kid: ‘My aunt had breast cancer, my girlfriend has breast cancer, my mom has breast cancer, my girlfriend’s mom has breast cancer.’ Like over and over and over again . . . like, just that whole experience in itself I was just like, ‘Oh my gosh. I’m so meant to be doing what I’m doing. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.’ It was such a moment of gratitude and just like gratefulness and just knowing that I’m doing the right thing. It was amazing.”

Shaney Jo was grateful to be thanked by the people that are grateful for her work. I see that gratitude is a reciprocal process, such that gratitude is communicated both from the employees at KAB and from the people who believe in the organization.

**Gratitude is Co-constructed**

During our interview, Erica told me, “I find that people want to be activists and do part of a better good . . . and a lot of people just don’t know how to do it, or where to go, and so we get a lot of like thank you, thank you, thank you for letting me do this kind of thing
because we’re giving them an easy outlet that really is making difference and changing people’s lives.”

This reminds me of KAB’s proactive messages that tell people “how” to do things. I see that this form of authentic communication constructs gratitude. Further, as KAB constructs a supportive environment, the people involved in the organization construct gratitude.

Similarly Kimmy said, “It’s so meaningful and it’s just really beautiful when volunteers thank you instead of you thanking them.” She went on to tell a story about one such incident. “I remember being at . . . this huge motorcycle rally and a lot of people are a little bit older and full of leather, and tattoos, and generally scary looking - in a good way. And these people came up to us, there was three: two dudes and a girl. And, um, the lady was talking to me for a little bit and there was this guy who was with them, but he wouldn’t come up to the booth. He was standing like maybe five feet away and he kept like staring into me, I swear. And I was just like, that guy is making me a little . . . not uncomfortable, but sad. And the lady started talking to me about how his wife just passed away [of breast cancer] and she was only like 31. And I could not handle it. I was just crying. . . . I’m gonna cry again.”

She took a moment to wipe the tears.

“And, um, like an hour later that guy just came up and gave me a hug. . . .He just came up and he was like, ‘Thank you.’ And I was just crying.”

As Kimmy and this man both cried together, they shared in the co-construction of gratitude.

Erica told a related story. “There was a woman that came up to me . . . and she was like, ‘I have terminal breast cancer, I’m here with my kids.’ And, um, she just thanked me and I couldn’t even speak to her. I just cried and just hugged her and I couldn’t say anything else. She just said thank you.”

Erica wiped away her own tears.

Indeed, gratitude extends in both directions. It seems that, ultimately, people are grateful for the opportunity to communicate with people that understand; people are grateful for the opportunity to share their stories. Simultaneously, the employees of KAB are grateful to be in a position to receive these stories.
The gratitude of the KAB employees also extends into their appreciation of the life KAB has afforded them. Kimmy went on to say, “It’s usually those moments that you realize how great of an opportunity you’ve been given to work here, for KAB, cause it matters and it doesn’t just matter to you, it matters to other people.”

In hearing Kimmy’s words I think about how KAB motivates people to change. I realize that gratitude inspires re-construction. I decided to further pursue this idea. I’m curious as to how the mission, vision, and values of KAB encourage the employees to makes changes, or to re-construct, their own lives and stories.

**Gratitude Encourages Re-construction**

I asked the employees of KAB to tell me about how working there has influenced their lives. Erica told me, “[KAB] has just changed my life. It embodies everything that I love - within art and music and traveling and, you know, working with new people and meeting new people and essentially helping people live healthier lifestyles. . . . I’ve donated my life to KAB.”

Erica went on to tell me specific ways that working at KAB has changed her life for the better. “Everything that I’ve done in the past, you know, five six years, whatever it’s been now that I’ve been volunteering and working with KAB, it’s changed my personality, it’s changed the food that I eat, it’s changed what I put on my skin, it’s changed the people around me, it’s changed my party habits. You know, I’ve been inspired and influenced by so many great people and I’m constantly learning.”

“That’s amazing.” I said.

Essentially, with KAB’s support, Erica has re-constructed her entire way of living and being.

She continued, “I’m really blessed to be able to do what I do . . . I have to sometimes put myself in check and remind myself that like, yeah it’s a job, but it’s the best job that I could ever have. Cause it includes like everything that I’ve ever dreamt of doing and more, and with really good positive positive people. And I get to teach other people, and I like that, and I’m constantly striving to be better with everything I do.”

Kimmy told me, “Working for KAB has changed me in a lot of ways. I think one of the most noticeable is just thinking that you’re healthy but taking pharmaceutical drugs. I
was on Zanex and I took a hormone shot every 3 months ‘cause of cysts on my ovaries; and I
did a lot of things that were harmful to my body, but, you know, I thought, ‘Oh, well I’m a
vegetarian . . . and I don’t smoke.’ And then you come to KAB and you realize that there’s so
much more to it, and I decided to do more holistic ways of managing anxiety and I had a
minor surgery instead of having to take hormones every three months and these different
ways of really changing my body to be more healthy to prepare myself for the long-term.
Because I think as a young person, I’m 27 . . . I think you don’t think about these long term
consequences you think about right now and I really learned how to change that.”

Kimmy’s outlook is similar to my own: she feels that by re-constructing her lifestyle
she is not only making her life better in the now; she is also preparing herself for a healthier
future.

Kimmy went on to say, “And then also just being more positive. I am a very, I don’t
want to say negative person, because that’s not who I am, but . . . I’m scrutinizing and I like
to, you know, from and editing and PR standpoint, I think of what I can change and what can
we do different and instead. I have to look at it in a more loving way. Like, how can this be
changed in a positive manner rather than just knit-picking the bad parts. And you can change
it to be what you want in a positive and I’d never thought that before. To think in terms of
love and positivity weren’t really in my vocab in the beginning and it took a long time to
really transition into that.”

I recognize that re-construction is an individual process and that we each have our
own steps we must take in order to better ourselves. I also see that while re-construction is a
necessary part of the healing process, having a supportive environment lays the foundation
for our re-construction.

Kimmy continued, “But, I’m super thankful to be working for KAB. I get to do
everything I want to do and be around the people that I want to be around in a totally
absolutely different manner than I ever expected. Like, you think, ‘I want to do design work
for a clothing line,’ or ‘I want to work in the skateboard industry,’ or . . . ‘I want to start a
magazine,’ [or] . . . ‘I want to work with artists or musicians, or celebrities - and you gotta go
into celebrity PR.’ But, here, at KAB, you get to do all of those things, but you get to do it in
such a way that it’s effecting people’s lives and so much more of a beautiful way and in such
a morning meaningful way than I could have ever imagined my life taking me.”
I smiled in agreement.

This reminds me of the empowering action of opening your heart. By surrendering to the support of KAB, Kimmy has been blessed with opportunities that fulfill her beyond her expectations.

She continued, “So it’s been a journey. A hard one sometimes, but I always have to check myself and be like, this is the hardest job I’ve ever had why is it so hard? Because I care so much about it, and so . . . your job is always in your mind because you love it so much, and it’s become a part of you, and I can’t ever imagine not doing it.”

Not only has KAB re-constructed Kimmy’s perspectives and lifestyle, it also stimulates an evolutionary process of re-construction. That is, by examining and re-evaluating her gratitude, Kimmy’s re-construction continues to evolve.

Amanda also expressed gratitude for her job at KAB. “For me . . . it is just so amazing to be around other women and learning to really embrace my femininity . . . these things that I just kind of forgot when I was working in corporate America. And having fun! Geez, having fun again.”

Amanda’s gratitude reminds me of KAB’s engaging style of communication. I see that this communicative interaction of social support reaches KAB’s audience of young people as well as the employee’s within the organization. Further, from Amanda’s expressions of gratitude I see that she has been able to re-construct the woman that she has always been.

As the women at KAB express their gratitude for the positions, they are simultaneously re-constructing their own stories. Feeling inspired by their stories, I decided it was time to re-construct of story of my own.

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This is my story (Present-day): Re-constructing My Relationship with John. Today, I am happy to say that I can finally call John a friend. After my conversation with Prue I felt as though the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. I opened my mind to a different story of our relationship. A story where we came together to save one another and then moved on – all part of the healing process. Not surprisingly, John contacted me soon after I met with Prue. As I’ve mentioned, our connection is real and strong, regardless of where our relationship stands. It seems that when I think about him, he thinks about me and
vice versa. So, I was not surprised when I opened my email to find a message waiting there for me:

Hey.

I am hoping that one day we can speak again.

I miss your voice. I know you’re doing your thing. I am too. I still miss you as a friend and WILL respect you more than you know if you’d give me a chance to be a small friend to you again.

If you’d ever give me a chance, maybe you and your man and I could meet and do dinner. (insert shoulder shrug here)...

Just a thought. Better to plant the thought than to not.

Later skater. (SMILES). I am good for lots of those....

Hope your well.

John (personal communication, December 4, 2009)

That night Louis and I went out for sushi. I told him that I wanted to talk to him about John. I’ve told Louis the history of my relationship with John, and Louis knows that I have been actively avoiding interaction with John for several years now. I told Louis that I was ready to forgive John; that I wanted to try and be his friend. “I think I am spending more energy avoiding him than I would if I just replied and said ‘hello’ every once in awhile.” I showed Louis the email from John.

“I don’t know about dinner,” Louis said “but I’m okay with you talking to him if that’s what you want. I’m glad you were able to come to me about this.”

“I am too” I replied “and thank you for being willing to listen.”

The next day I called John. It was the first week of December 2009, a few weeks after the four year anniversary of my diagnosis. I told him I was sorry for any pain that I had caused him and that I forgave him for all of the pain he had caused me. “I’m ready to move forward” I said. “let’s try to forget the past and just be friends, okay?” John cried into the phone. He thanked me and said he was sorry too.

We don’t talk much now, just an email every once and awhile, but the energy between us feels better – resolved. I am so thankful that John has been a part of my life. And it is true, I will always love him. Just as with all things in life, my love for him has evolved. It was once filled with urgency and devotion, now it complete – grateful and forgiving.

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The process of telling stories about my cancer journey has led me to make so many connections and realizations that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. I am grateful for this process. I also wonder if the emotional release I found through writing this thesis will open doors for new opportunities I have yet to dream of. Perhaps this research is allowing me to re-construct my own future.

In thinking about this I recall my interview with Shaney Jo. It was on the plane ride back from Atlanta and we were talking about how she came to founding KAB. I said to her, “It’s really cool that you were able to create something that you didn’t even realize you were creating. It reminds me of the yoga speaker, Pasha, and what she was talking about. You know, just surrendering to it and then it just happens.”

Shaney Jo replied, “Yeah, and that was a big part of KAB being a success. For so long it was just like, I’m just a clothing designer, this is just like my little side good deed. You know, and then finally one day it just clicked where it was like no, this is more than that. You know, I really feel like it’s God’s work. You know, because it’s not me. It wasn’t something I did. It’s something that just, like, comes through me. And for some reason I’m the person doing this. You know, I don’t have any one in my family with breast cancer, I don’t have a best friend that has breast cancer, I don’t have an aunt, I don’t have a mom . . . it’s not something inside of me that is like I have to do this because of this. It was never that.”

I understand what she is saying. It is as if all the facets of social support that I have outlined are falling into rhythm with her words. The comment “I really feel like I’m doing God’s work” crystallizes the complex interrelations of social support. Shaney Jo opened her heart to possibilities, from this she was able to use what she knows, which is art, to open and empower others to creative self expression. In choosing to accept her path and surrender to the unknown she is filled with love, and of course, social support.

I nod in agreement, and she goes on, “It was just always this, like . . . destiny, in a way. Like, you’re just meant to be doing this. And everyday just rise to the occasion and just do it. And it’s just coming through me. It’s just that.”

I wonder if all things are destined to happen. Was I destined to get cancer? Was I destined to write this thesis? Perhaps destiny, too, is a complex interrelationship of interactions. Perhaps our destinies are constructed through the intricate communication
between our minds, our bodies, our spirits, and our relationships. I wonder if the map of our lives is already written, or are we constantly re-writing it, and re-constructing our futures?

I heard the engine of the plane begin to grumble and felt the sensation of shifting altitudes. I peered out the window and saw that it was another beautiful day in San Diego as we prepared for our descent. Shaney Jo and I were wrapping up our conversation. We had come full circle back to her decision to found Keep A Breast as a nonprofit organization, and how she was able to take the leap of faith to start it.

“I just think that ultimately, overall . . . you just use what you’re good at. Luckily, we, [the employees of KAB], were all good at our previous careers. I was a great clothing designer, you know, I was an expert at, like, making trends. That’s what I did, you know, so I just took the same exact thing and did it in a whole other venue. Put a different logo on it, a different brand message, and it’s the same.”

“Your old career prepared you for this.” I told her.

I thought to myself about trusting my own journey.

“Yeah” she paused. “You know, exactly! I never even thought of it like that” she said with a smile. “Maybe the whole time this is what I was supposed to be doing!”

“Exactly” I say, “Because you wouldn’t have been able to just do this right away.”

I think back on that year of my life I spent in cancer treatment, and I remember how aligned everything seemed to be. Just like it was exactly where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to be doing; like it was preparing me for something greater.

“No!” Shaney exclaims realizing the connection.

I continue, “Because you needed to have that experience [as a clothing designer] to do this.”

“Oh, my God, Alli!” Shaney Jo says with a smile, “You’re opening my eyes!”

I am once again struck by the profound power of social support. Together, through conversation and mutual sharing, we have been able to make and communicate our own personal discoveries.

Shaney Jo continues, “It’s true though - people, you know, like when I met the girl, Leigh, from Feel Your Boobies. You know, I was talking with her . . . and I was telling her about Nontoxic Revolution and you know that Shepard Fairey was designing it. She’s all, ‘Oh, my God! How did you get Shepard Fairey?!’ And I was like, ‘Well, we’ve been friends
for, like, 10 years. Like, no big deal.”” Shaney Jo is laughing, and I can see her wheels turning.

“Right.” I say with a smile, encouraging her to continue.

“And so it’s true. It’s all of my – everything else that I did before starting KAB – it’s all still a part of KAB. It’s my same friends, it’s the same artists, it’s the same contacts. It’s like – yeah, you’re right. Wow! I guess I’ve been meaning to do this forever.”

“Yep. For sure.”

“Because people like always ask, like, ‘Wow! Where’d you get that idea, or how do you make that happen, or how do you know how to do that?’ And [now I can say] it’s just what I’ve always done.”

I found that with my encouragement to share, Shaney Jo was able to see her story more clearly, or perhaps, to re-construct her own story. Ultimately, that is what KAB does through their support: they open people’s hearts and minds to new perspectives.

This chapter brings up many interesting and evocative accounts that outline the evolving process of discovering, defining, and maintaining holistic healing. As discoveries emerged, we have seen that they overlap and intertwine. By using the conceptual framework of The Keep A Breast Foundation I was able to reveal multifaceted communicative interactions of social support categorized under the subheadings of art, education, action, and awareness.

In this chapter I have juxtaposed my own stories with my experience at KAB to uncover the multifaceted communicative interactions that construct and sustain social support, and hence, foster holistic healing. In the following chapter, I will interpret and discuss my findings. I will include theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research. Within this framework I will contemplate questions such as, what did I gain from this research on a personal level? What gains did I uncover on a scholarly level? And, what do I know now that I didn’t know before?
CHAPTER 4
COMMUNICATING CONNECTIONS OF THE MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT

This journey began well before I started graduate school. It started before I was diagnosed with cancer. It started when John became ill. At that time an idea was born to me. The idea was likely there all along, but John’s illness brought it into my view. I wanted to learn about holistic healing. I saw that holistic healing was more than a diagnosis. I saw that holistic healing was more than medicine. Holistic healing was something inside. Holistic healing was something that had been buried by experiences and emotions, and something that was begging to be resurfaced. Thus, I saw that holistic healing was manifesting its desire to be known through illness.

How would I uncover this complex notion of holistic healing though? How would I go about making these connections, and even further, articulating them? It was my journey with cancer that led me to make these connections and it was my journey in graduate school that led me to articulate them.

Writing this thesis has allowed me the opportunity to start at the beginning. I have told my stories and I have done my research. I have examined an existing nonprofit organization that communicates some of the messages I had hoped to investigate. I have de-constructed these messages and I have contributed insights and re-constructions. With this thesis I have finally been able to draw a thread of continuity through my journey of understanding holistic healing and shed light into this intricate communicative process.

I set out to understand how nonprofits communicate to promote holistic health, and how social support is interactively constructed as holistic healing. In the next four sections of this chapter I will reveal the findings from this thesis. I discuss, first, the conclusions and interpretations that can be drawn from my results; second, I move to the theoretical implications of this research; third, I discuss some of the practical implications of this
project; fourth, I discuss some of the limitations and directions for future research; and finally, I leave my reader with my closing thoughts and reflections.

**Making Sense Between the Lines of Holistic Healing and Social Support: Interpretations**

Within this study, a number of overlapping and multifaceted communicative interactions are presented in the construction of understanding holistic healing as social support. These communicative interactions are explored further in the sections below as I interpret my findings. With my interpretations I reveal knowledge and understanding that is found in between the lines of my findings. First, I discuss the multifaceted, evolving nature of communicative interactions of social support. Next, I look at potential detriments of social support; and finally, I address the unmet needs of social support.

**Assessing the Evolution of Multifaceted Communicative Interactions of Social Support**

For the purposes of my research in understanding holistic healing as it relates to my breast cancer journey, I have introduced an inductive theoretical representation of social support that is composed of the communicative interactions of self expression, authenticity, acceptance, and encouragement. Within this representation I have uncovered several facets of these communicative interactions that crystallize my conception of social support. These include: communication that crosses boundaries and limits; communication that is non-fear based, engaging, proactive, relatable, and loving; communication that offers opportunity and forgiveness, and communication that constructs empowerment and gratitude.

I found that healing requires social support and that social support is inherently holistic. Thus, each of the communicative interactions that I present in this study interrelates and plays upon one another in the construction of social support. However, when I look back upon my stories, interviews, observations, and fieldnotes; and when I look back on the representation that I have constructed here, I cannot help but to find a whole other set of intertwining multifaceted communicative interactions. I see interactions that communicate and construct surrenderance, eliminate fear, produce love, and the list goes on.

For example, when I was talking with Shaney Jo about starting a nonprofit I opened up to her about fears of my ability to make it happen. She said, “That’s the thing, you can’t
make anything happen. It just happens. And that’s the whole, like, surrendering. You know, you just surrender and let it happen.”

As I assess the endless number of ways I could have organized this data, the holistic nature of social support is further illuminated. It becomes clear that social support moves beyond the realms of a specific set of interactions, it moves through and with these interactions - adjusting, collecting, and addressing other facets along the way. I have found that social support establishes an intimate interplay between mind, body, spirit, and matter.

**Shackles of Social Support**

It is without doubt both admirable and important to be passionate about the work we do. I have been overwhelmed with passion as I’ve comprised this thesis. In support of my own healing journey I have been pouring my heart and soul into its creation. I have enjoyed this process immensely and I am proud of what it has become. However, I also must note that I have been pouring my energy and time into this project, and I must mention the emotionally and physically taxing components of this thesis as well. In uncovering deeply buried feelings and opening myself to vulnerability as I share my stories I have cried, lost sleep, fought with Louis, and felt depleted. I recognize that on the borderline of passion lies detriment.

Similarly, it is apparent that the employees of KAB are passionate about their work. However, this passion also borders on being a detriment to their health. For example, when Kimmy told me about her encounters with survivors and co-survivors she was in tears remembering the emotions of listening to their stories. Further, Erica talked about the emotionally taxing experience of launching KAB’s ‘This is My Story’ campaign. Kimmy and Erica, as well as Shaney Jo and Amanda hold the mission of KAB very dear to their own hearts. While this is nothing short of admirable, it is also indicative of the potentially addictive nature of social support. Thus, I bring to attention the shackles of social support that we construct as our passion borders on addiction.

The conception of the shackles of social support is illuminated through my own stories of my relationship with John. My passion to help him through his illness was locked to my love and my promises to him. I became addicted to supporting him, despite my own powerlessness. The conflicting nature of our relationship is illuminated by the phenomenon of *inconsistent nurturing*, which suggests that couples might unintentionally encourage the
very behaviors they are trying to stop through inconsistent demonstrations of reinforcement and punishment (Duggan & Le Poire, 2006; Duggan, Le Poire, & Addis, 2006). John, indeed, expressed similar contradictions in his behaviors.

Interestingly, when the tables turned, and I fell ill, John then became shackled to me. His own complex weave of emotions of guilt, love, fear, and reciprocity bound him to my cancer journey. He stood by my side through the best and the worst moments that I faced. He masked his own sadness, fears, and pain in order to support me. When he delivered the hard drive with the hundreds of photographs he had taken of my journey I caught a glimpse of what he was feeling beneath the mask he wore. In those photographs I found images of John when he had turned the camera on himself, privately without my knowing. The images were of his face: there were tears, there was rage, and there was horror.

Those images of John during my illness mirrored my own feelings as I supported him through his illness. These photos revealed the emotions that lie between the lines of social support. The photos revealed the shackles we construct as we mask our own emotions with the passion of supporting of one another. Further, they become a gauze to conceal deep emotional wounds.

**Gauze That Covers the Wounds: The Unmet Needs of Social Support**

It is clear from this research that there is an abundance of social support for and within KAB, and there was and still is an abundance of social support for me during my cancer journey. However, there will always be pieces of social support that are left unmet. Let me make it clear, that this is not a criticism of KAB, this is not a criticism of my own family and friends, and this is not a criticism of me. I am simply proposing that we must always look between the lines. For there is always more to understand and there is always more to work towards. Thus, by presenting the unmet needs hidden between the lines I am proposing a more holistic approach to social support.

My stories reveal many communicative interactions and facets that intertwine to create the notion of social support. However, they also reveal an enlightened understanding of the holes in my support system. For example, in the story ‘Smile’ I uncovered John’s ability to use his camera as a barrier to facing his emotions. Further, from John’s unwavering
willingness to give and to support me, I recognize that often when people are giving everything they have to another, they may be compensating for something they are not getting from their own self. Perhaps I, too, was compensating when I gave all of myself to John. Perhaps cancer helped me to recognize my own needs, and perhaps there is still more to this story, hiding between the lines – waiting to be recognized. Thus, I find that social support can be a guise, or more appropriately a gauze, that is covering up a wound that is so deep and so painful that we do not (or choose not) to see it.

In the middle of an illness journey we may be so immersed in the experience that we cannot see the wounds we need to heal. For example, in the midst of John’s illness I saw his wounds as superficial, or fixable. I did not see their true magnitude and depth as I was blinded by my promises and love for him. Thus, in the process of my efforts to heal John’s wounds, I lost sight of my own needs. Soon, I had deep wounds of my own to heal.

I recall a conversation with John not long after I was diagnosed with cancer. It was late at night and we were lying in my bed talking. I had just started chemotherapy.

“Are you scared?” John had asked.

“No, not really. I’m just glad I’m doing something.”

John looked at me and I could tell he was holding back his tears. I could tell he was scared.

“Don’t be scared” I had said, “What I’m doing – chemotherapy, surgery, and all these lifestyle changes I’m making - I’m actually taking real actions to save my life” I paused and looked into his eyes, “Imagine how I felt when you were sick and you did nothing. Imagine if I was like you and chose to do nothing. Instead of watching me go through chemo you’d have to watch me die - piece by piece. Maybe now you can understand a little of what I felt.”

It was not until I had to heal my own wounds, that I realized the magnitude and complexity of social support. What I discovered was that in order to get the support I needed, I first had to honor myself, and actually look at my wounds to determine what I needed. Then, I had to ask for this help and I had to be specific. Thus, social support cannot stand on its own; as it requires communicative interactions and reciprocity in order to sustain healing.

Had John been willing to look at and address his own wounds perhaps he could have communicated the support he needed. It is apparent that support goes both ways in that we are each responsible for our own health first, and then we can appreciate support from others.
For example, as shown through the volunteers at KAB, and from the stories of my own support system of family and friends, people genuinely want to help; but, they don’t always know how. Consequently, it becomes the responsibility of the ill person to tell others how. Interestingly, this action of telling others how often provides more support for the “supporters” than it does for the “supportee.” That is to say, people want to feel like they are helping because this gives them a sense of worth during a difficult time. For example, I actually remember being frustrated at times by the amount of support I had. Sometimes I felt like there were too many people offering too many things, and sometimes I would rather have just had a little time alone. So, I had to learn to say that. I had to learn to ask for my space and for my privacy. Low and behold, people were just as appreciative of this request as they were if I asked them to make me dinner or to drive me to an appointment. Thus, receiving social support requires negotiation through communicative interactions. Furthermore, the opportunities of an illness can be extended upon when an ill person is able to learn to teach others how to support.

Finally, while my involvement with KAB has provided me with multilayered components of social support and ultimately enhanced my healing journey. I still must look between the lines of this organization’s system of social support. KAB’s main objective is to reach out to young people with messages that promote breast cancer awareness, promote overall health and wellbeing, and ultimately lower risks of breast cancer occurrence. However, women, like myself, who have had breast cancer fall into the margins. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer I sought support from an organization that could provide powerful and engaging messages that met my specific needs as a young woman interested in a holistic approach to health. KAB indeed provides youth-oriented support; however, their support is not typically directed towards women who have or have had cancer. What I sought was a support network with KAB’s flair, but with resources that could also meet my needs, as a young woman experiencing cancer.

Since my diagnosis over four years ago, KAB has made efforts to reach the population of young women with breast cancer. They have developed ‘The Treasured Chest’ program, which allows for women to have their breasts cast both pre- and post-mastectomy, and they have hired Amanda as the Young Survivor Advocate. While, it is clear that they are making steps in the direction of supporting women with cancer, it is also clear that their main
focus will always be constructing proactive behaviors in young people. This is their strength and their purpose, and I am in no way proposing that they waiver from this objective. What I set forth here is that there remains a set of unmet needs for communicating with a population of women that have been personally affected by breast cancer and seek support in holistic healing.

**A Lens Into Holistic Healing: Enhancing Quality of Life**

With this research I have uncovered a multilayered approach to understanding holistic healing. I have set forth that holistic healing is comprised of and sustained by social support. I have outlined the multifaceted communicative interactions that integrate and work to sustain this representative system. However, holistic healing is much more than social support. Holistic healing is a complex construction of improving quality of life, within which social support is negotiated.

It is important to note that the notion of holistic healing does have the potential to lead people astray. Beyond the complexity of understanding holistic healing lays a complexity of incorporating this understanding into everyday living. For example, when I was in the midst of my breast cancer journey I became overly engaged in finding an ambiguous ideal of holistic healing. In turn, I attempted to incorporate virtually every component of healing I could find into my process. However, the results of my actions were problematic. For one, I was overwhelmed by the amount of “healing” information available. I took it upon myself to make sense of this information, and I was often persuade or misled due to my own vulnerability. I spent thousands of dollars attempting to find “holism” in my cancer journey before I had an appropriate grasp on the varying levels of legitimacy I was encountering. Further, I created pressure and guilt within my own self as I attempted to reconstruct a “holistic lifestyle.” What I now understand is that there is not a certain set of practices that comprise the notion of holistic healing in our lives. It is simply our own internal understandings and personal lifestyle changes that construct a holistic healing experience.

I make this distinction within this research so that we may better understand how holistic healing is communicated within our own minds and with others. I want to make clear
that holistic healing is not prevention, and holistic healing is not a cure. Rather, holistic healing is an improvement of quality of life; and I use that understanding to interpret these findings. Further, I recognize that holistic healing is quite individualized. Thus, with this research I propose that in order to incorporate holism into a healing journey we must be our own advocates. We must consciously seek out the sustenance of holistic healing that resonates within our own beings. We must recognize the individuality of this process and honor our own holistic healing journeys.

Finally, I will acknowledge the idealism within the statements. I recognize that my own beliefs and ideals have undoubtedly influenced my research as I approached my study as a participant-observer. I see that my experience as a cancer survivor and my experience within my own framework of social support have opened a lens for me to see holistic healing and social support within my findings. However, I maintain that through this approach I add insight and perspective to a unique interrelationship that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. By using the lens of my experience I have realized the connections of holistic healing in everyday life and illuminated the value of recognizing the fundamental component of social support that lies within.

**EMOTIONAL HEALING, DIALOGIC HEALING, AND COLLECTIVE HEALING: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This study’s interpretations provide important theoretical implications for the communicative interactions of social support as holistic healing. In the following section I discuss the theories that support the complexity of this intertwining relationship. Here, I connect theories to my findings. I discuss the theoretical components of emotional healing, dialogic healing, and collective healing. Within each of these components I draw direct links between theory and my research; I also extend upon theory in order to elaborate my findings.

**Emotional Healing**

The communicative interactions of social support presented in this study tie to emotional experiences. Most notably, my relationship with John tied an important thread throughout my healing journey. In the spring of 2009 I finally sought psychotherapy as a resource to release my emotions. My intentions were to use the therapy as a resource to move through the emotions of my cancer journey and to help me move on. I was surprised that
what came out in my therapy sessions was suppressed anger. I had never considered anger as one of the emotions I had felt towards John, which so clearly illuminates my own subconscious ability to suppress it.

Given that research suggests that a “personal coping style that suppresses negative emotion may increase risk of cancer” (Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998). My research supports the theoretical implications of emotional suppression. I draw upon Buck’s (1984) internalizer-externalizer phenomenon. He sets forth that individuals differ as to whether they are generally emotionally expressive (externalizers) or emotionally unexpressive (internalizers). Buck explains that emotional expression facilitates coping; that is, by externalizing emotional behavior, strain is removed from the internal body. He suggests that “if individuals do not show emotion spontaneously, they in effect ‘take it out’ on their own physiological system, showing evidence of high autonomic arousal which could become a source of bodily stress and contribute to disease” (p. 229). Thus, my research acknowledges emotional suppression and raises the value of emotional expression.

I would also like to extend upon Buck’s internalizers-externalizer phenomenon by suggesting a third type of individual that I will call a crystallizer. I once again, draw on Ellingson’s (2009) conception of the crystallization process to articulate the blending of my emotional landscape. Perhaps I could at one time be categorized as an internalizer, but I know that I have since evolved. However, I am not prepared to call myself an externalizer as I know the power of my subconscious mind. Through my cancer journey and my research I have found ways to recognize the complexity of my emotions, and thus, prepare tools of expression.

Within the framework of understanding emotions, I must also introduce the theoretical implication of healing through writing. Writing has served as an invaluable tool with which I have crystallized my emotional experiences.

In the 1800s Lord Byron wrote, “If I don’t write to empty my mind, I go mad” (as cited in Lawrence 2010). His words speak a universal truth in that writing not only provides mental clarity, but it also offers physical health benefits. Pennebaker (1997, 2000) has been at the forefront of research regarding the benefits of writing. He found that “when individuals write about emotional experiences significant physical and health improvements follow”
Pennebaker’s research has impelled the medical community to begin looking at writing as a non-medicinal approach to healing (Lawrence).

With this thesis I have written about deeply personal experiences. Through my writing process I have acknowledged suppressed emotions, and I have constructed an outlet to express them. This thesis, in and of itself, is a working implication of Pennebaker’s (1997, 2000) findings about the significance of writing.

I also find that the use of narrative theory in this research should be extended upon. Frank (1993, 1995) popularized the term illness narratives. Much research has since further extended upon the benefits of telling illness narratives; the findings have indicated improved understanding, improved coping, and multiple improved health outcomes (e.g., Anderson & Geist-Martin, 2003; Bosticco & Thompson, 2008; Pennebaker, 2000; Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). It is apparent that the telling of narratives provides healing benefits. Frank (1995) explains that, “the truth of stories is not only what was experienced, but equally what becomes experience in the telling and its reception” (p. 22). I have found that through my use of narratives as a method of research, I have transcended understanding of my experiences and propelled my own healing journey. Thus, I propose adding another term regarding illness narratives. I propose that in a wide range of circumstances, it is essential to let go of the word “illness” entirely and that such narratives be described rather, as healing narratives. Although these narratives, indeed, are initiated by illness they are produced to initiate healing. And although not all illnesses are “healed,” through the telling of narratives we are able to move beyond illness and communicatively construct a place of healing.

**Dialogic Healing**

Several times in this research I brought up destiny. I raise the question as to whether my cancer journey was a pre-determined life path, and I set forth that destiny is not pre-determined, but rather it is co-constructed through our relationships and communicative interactions. Bakhtin (1981) confirms this theory as he believes that the world is neither pre-determined nor chaotic, but instead is a collective production, created in the processes of interactions. He proposes that we influence the future by moving with the world and help to construct its complexity. Thus, each individual holds a certain degree of responsibility for our collective futures. This collective responsibility requires constant effort and engagement.
Bakhtin proposes that it is the obligation of communicators to co-construct everyday life. Further, Bakhtin sets forth that everyday utterances of discourse hold value to something much larger. He states,

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (p. 28)

Bakhtin represents dialogue as a live and active thread of interactions. He explains that these threads weave together a contextualized evolution of matter that simultaneously contributes to the constant re-construction of the participants in the dialogue and the world at large.

I extend on Bakhtin’s theory by offering the notion that thoughts, along with and independent of, dialogue constantly re-define and re-construct our lives and our world. Not only do our thoughts contribute to our perceptions, but they also contribute to our actions. But further, and even more importantly, our thoughts contribute to the collective consciousness of the world. That is to say that every thought, feeling, and intention we have, has a ripple effect in our world (Hamilton, 2008). Hamilton demonstrates this co-creational process:

Each person has what may be called a ‘mental and emotional climate’ representing their general mental and emotional state, we all share a collective mental an emotional climate. And just as our personal climates influence what happens to us in our personal lives, so our collective climate influences what happens to us on a world scale. What goes on all over the world is merely a projection of how we collectively, feel and think. (p. 3)

I recall my conversation with Shaney Jo when she said “it’s the world WE live in - is what you just said. It’s like, okay, we have to change the world we live in. We changed it to what it is; now we have to change it to a better way. And we can do it, collectively.”

By extending Bakhtin’s (1981) theory, I increase the complexity of my findings regarding communicative interactions of co-creation. In addition I raise the value of collectivity as a tool for change.

**Collective Healing**

I mentioned in Chapter 1 that there is a paradigmic shift occurring in health perspectives. Gradually, medicine is becoming more integrative and holistic. This movement
is seen through KAB’s commitment to not only raising “awareness,” but to changing perspectives and creating sustainable lifestyle changes.

However, the truth is, there has always been an underlying movement towards holistic healing. Harrington (2008) makes this clear as she outlines the history of mind-body medicine. She proposes that an integration of scientific understanding of illness, with stories of illness, holds value for the truths of illness that lie between. Harrington states,

There is more to physical illness than can be seen in just the body; there is more to healing than can be found in just pills and shots. Mind matters too: how one thinks, how one feels, what kind of personality or character one has or cultivates. For stories . . . questions like ‘Why me? Why now? What next?’ are not meaningless after all, but exactly the right questions – and for medical and scientific reasons, not just moral and existential ones. And this being so, it follows that there may be other ways than those of physicalist medicine by which to heal the body of the real disorders that ail it. (p. 18)

Harrington’s words speak to the heart of this research. Through sharing stories and communicatively creating understanding I have found very real healing. Harrington further explains that, “stories of mind-body medicine do not merely describe experience and behaviors that are given in the world; they also help create behaviors and experiences that had not previously been there” (p. 255). Harrington extends her beliefs as she projects a movement for the future. “It seems clear to me that the future of mind-body medicine should lie in seeking, not finally to escape from its stories, but to embrace as . . . inextricably part of, and fundamental to, what it is all about” (p. 255).

Just as Erica stated, KAB “is not a fad, it’s a movement,” I find that the collectively of community perpetuates change. Further, Harrington (2008) suggests the value of social support in this movement as it relates to healing. She states, “A return to community, an embrace of something people call ‘social support’ is what we need to heal” (p. 29).

Drawing on Harrington’s (2008) research I find that, indeed, healing is by definition holistic. Thus, holistic healing continues to be the tie that connects this research together. Holistic healing is comprised of a complex, multifaceted crystallization of stories, social support, conventional medicine, complementary and alternative medicine, and the many communicative interactions that lie within.
**SUSTAINING HEALING: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

I have learned about the ways that social support is a communicative interaction, and that these findings have direct implications for practice. I now know that in order to sustain a collective movement towards healing it is imperative to look at the ways that these results can be applied. Additionally, I would like to draw upon Ayala, Herrera, Jiménez, and Lara (2006) in their commitment to “integrate ways of knowing and teaching from in and out of academia” (p. 16). That is, I would like to apply the results of this research to the greater scholarly conversations surrounding communication, social support, and holistic healing; and I would like to apply these results to the ways of knowing and being a breast cancer survivor in constructing a community of social support. Through an integrative process of research and application, “we can maintain a sense of connection and wholeness for our well-being and that of our communities” (Ayala et al., 2006). Below, I outline the duality of social support and holistic healing and propose a model for incorporating social support into a healing journey. Then, I introduce a model for the creation of a nonprofit organization that addresses the unmet communicative needs of women experiencing breast cancer. Through each of these models I promote connectivity between experience and practice and imply consequences for collective change.

**The Duality of Social Support and Holistic Healing**

Social support is a complex communicative expression comprised of self expression, authenticity, acceptance, and encouragement all of which are interwoven with several facets including communication that crosses boundaries and limits; communication that is non-fear based, engaging, proactive, relatable, and loving; communication that allows opportunity and forgiveness, and communication that constructs empowerment and gratitude. These facets crystallize social support, thus promoting holistic healing.

From this representation of social support, and from my findings, I have outlined four ordered steps that must be communicated by an ill person in order to incorporate the full circle of social support into his or her holistic healing journey. These steps are:

1. Honoring the self, listening to the self, and determining the needs of the self: When we are at the center of an illness, it can be hard to recognize our own needs. However, as my research has shown it is important to take time for the self and really listen to our inner voice. In doing so, we often find that our bodies are speaking to us
through illness. By honoring this voice, and by communicating this voice, we are taking the first step to meeting our holistic healing needs.

2. Asking for others to help support specific needs: Once we have addressed our inner needs, it is imperative to request and enlist the support of others. From my findings we have seen that social support is fundamental to nurturing holistic healing. Thus, learning to ask others for specific needs to be met is a proactive approach to sustaining healing.

3. Understanding how to receive the delivery of support from others: Next, we must open our hearts and minds to accepting the support of others. I have found that often the support is there, but the ill person has difficulty receiving it, as was the case of John. In order for social support to function as holistic healing, we must acknowledge and appreciate its profound importance, and we must be willing to integrate this support with our healing journeys.

4. Giving back support to others: Within this fourth step there lie two important additional possibilities. The first is to take this knowledge and teach others how to support. Once we have come to a place of understanding within our own healing journey, it is important to consider the possibility of helping others to understand and integrate these steps of social support into their healing journeys. Further, we can teach support systems how to listen and understand the needs of an ill person. With this in mind, a second possibility within this step is to donate this knowledge to a cause or an organization that maintains social support. Thus, within this step we are constructing a movement toward collective change.

**The Rack Pack: Addressing Unmet Needs Through Collective Change**

Within my interpretations I addressed the unmet needs of social support and the unmet needs of KAB. Then, in my theoretical implications I addressed the value of collective change as a means for social support and holistic healing. Next, I propose a solution as to how these needs might be met and how that collective change might be fueled. I propose an outline for a nonprofit organization, The Rack Pack (TRP), dedicated to assisting women holistically through their cancer journeys. The name of the organization comes from the name of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer 3-Day walk team that my friends organized during my own cancer experience as a show of their support for me.

The mission, vision, values, and goals of TRP propose solutions to fill withstanding unmet needs of breast cancer survivors in regards to social support and holistic healing. TRP will do this in two ways: First, while the benefits of holistic healing are clear, the process of navigating this system can be quite onerous. Making sense of the myriad choices of holistic
healing can be especially overwhelming in the midst of “emotional and spiritual turmoil” following a breast cancer diagnosis (Tagliaferrri, Cohen, & Tripathy, 2002, p. xiv). On the surface, it may appear to be a muddled mix of hundreds of different health practices, each with seemingly little certainty (Horner, 2005). Thus, TRP will attempt to provide guidance to women and assist them in constructing their own individualized combinations of techniques and approaches to healing that will most effectively meet their specific needs. Second, many healing practices and services require assistance and training from certified practitioners. Often such services are only available from exclusive teachers or for high fees. Such expenses are typically not covered by insurance. Therefore, TRP will assist women in both navigating holistic healing as well as covering costs associated with the healing process.

MISSION

TRP is an organization dedicated to assisting women undergoing breast cancer treatment to achieve and sustain holistic healing. TRP intends to communicate, promote, and assist women seeking wellness by providing educational resources, financial assistance, and by supplying resources and access for holistic healing care, both during and after cancer treatment.

VISION

TRP will create an interactive website that will make available the following resources:

1. Educational Resources: the website will make available books, articles, and websites that direct women to the knowledge they are seeking regarding holistic care. This information can be overwhelming and difficult to sort through and interpret in the midst of a breast cancer journey. Thus, TRP will make available resources that are legitimate, trusted, and useful.

2. Financial Assistance: TRP recognizes that a cancer journey can be expensive and that many holistic healing services are direct out-of-pocket expenses. Thus, the website will provide an application to receive grants for holistic healing care. These grants will be received by women with breast cancer to be used directly for holistic health care services.

3. Holistic Health Care Services: Holistic health care services will include complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices that are intended to make women with breast cancer feel good about themselves and their bodies. These services will go beyond convention in order to meet women’s specific needs. The
services are not intended to replace medical care; they are intended to enhance quality of life during the healing journey.

VALUES

TRP intends to provide a supportive environment for women during their breast cancer journeys. TRP recognizes the profound impact of emotions on the healing process and hopes to provide women with services that nurture emotional expression and release, hence enhancing quality of life. The services offered by TRP are simply intended to make women feel good. This intention comes from the belief that feeling good creates a healthier and happier life, and thus better outcomes for a cancer journey.

TRP’s holistic services embrace personalized methods of healing tailored to women’s specific needs. These include practitioner-based CAM services, such as acupuncture, energy healing, reflexology, psychotherapy, and massage, as well as “feel good” services. The “feel good” services lie beyond conventions of CAM and are intended to boost and sustain good feelings in a woman’s life. These services include personalized shopping and make-overs to aid in the process of adjusting to a new body and/or look due to the effects of treatment such as weight gain/loss and hair loss. Additionally, TRP will provide resources for retreats that nurture the healing journey.

GOALS

The goal of TRP is to aid women in integrating their minds, bodies, and spirits into their healing journeys. TRP believes that by supporting women going through breast cancer, we will empower women to educate themselves holistically and to make lasting changes that will enhance overall healing and wellbeing beyond the experience of cancer. Collectively, TRP hopes to inspire a community of holistic healers coupled with breast cancer survivors who together co-create a community of social support that will sustain our healing journeys.

COMMUNICATING COLLECTIVE CHANGE

While TRP is still a work in progress, I have made several steps to move this organization into action. I have created a temporary website and I have submitted paperwork to the government in order to file this organization for nonprofit status. I am also looking into grants and funding to aid in this process. I have met many supportive people who have
believed in this idea and have encouraged me to move forward with it. I have encountered healers and breast cancer survivors who are eager to be involved. I look forward to the changes on the road ahead for both the progress of TRP, and for the collective changes in the communication of social support and holistic healing that TRP will create and sustain.

**EXPANDING THE CIRCLE: LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There are several limitations to this study that will serve as important opportunities for future research on holistic healing, social support, cancer journeys and narratives, and nonprofit organizations. In this study, we see one person’s journey through breast cancer, one person’s narratives of healing, and one nonprofit’s organization of support. There is no doubt that this study would be enriched by interviewing and understanding other people who also fall into the intricate circle of social support as holistic healing that I have established here. These people include my support team, other people who have been supported by KAB, and other nonprofit organizations or providers of holistic health. Furthermore, this study is also limited by the inherent complexity of human nature, and the need for progressive research regarding emotion as it relates to illness. Next, I will discuss these limitations in detail.

Primarily, it would be enhancing to interview my co-survivors, or the people that supported me throughout my cancer journey. I would want to know what these people have to say in regards to their roles in communicating support. I would want to know what they gained from my experience and what was missing for them. I wonder what stories would be constructed from our interviews. What stories would we co-create? What stories would we re-construct?

Additionally, this research could be built upon by interviewing others who have been supported by KAB. While it was enlightening to review the ‘This is My Story’ campaign, I cannot help but wonder what I would gain from interviewing the people who have participated in this campaign. What did they gain from participating? What are their unmet needs? Certainly, they would present additional communicative interactions and facets of social support.

Furthermore, this research only looked at the KAB organization as an exemplar of a nonprofit organization offering holistic support. However, there are certainly other nonprofit
organizations that offer support to women affected by breast cancer, and support for holistic healing. For example, The Young Survival Coalition (Young Survival Coalition, n.d.) offers support to young women affected by breast cancer, First Descents (First Descents, n.d.) offers holistic support to cancer survivors by incorporating outdoor adventures into the healing journey, and Shakti Rising (Shakti Rising, n.d.) is a social change organization that assists and empowers women’s health and leadership. There are also other outlets women can utilize to receive holistic support, such as holistic health practitioners and wellness centers. For example, A Women’s Wellness Center (A Women’s Wellness Center, n.d.) which addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of women experiencing cancer. Therefore, interviewing these organizations, practitioners, and centers would enrich this study. I would want to know how they communicate holistically; how their messages are received; and how these messages provide social support.

It is apparent that a more complex representation of social support exists when we look at the relational experiences of receiving and giving. With future research we could expand our understanding of social support and holistic healing by understanding the perspectives of all participants within the circle of healing.

Finally, and most fundamentally, this research is limited by the complexity of human nature. Much of this research has looked at the role of emotions and the intricate relationship between the suppression of emotions and the creation of illness. I have demonstrated that our minds, bodies, and spirits are intimately connected to each other such that every thought and feeling we have sends messages to our bodies and to our world. However, to accurately articulate the complexity of this relationship is beyond the realms of this research. This relationship is beyond science, it is beyond intuition, and it is beyond the capacity of our current knowledge as human beings. With this research I have attempted to draw connections between emotions, healing, and the contextual understanding of my experiences. Yet, it would require an on-going evolution of research to uncover an accurate portrayal of the sophistication of the mind, body, and spirit.

In addition, I make a suggestion for further research that investigates, evaluates, and attempts to understand emotion as it relates to illness. This complex interaction of human nature certainly falls between the lines of communicative interactions, scientific understanding, and scholarly research. As Andersen (2008) states, “the primary source of our
emotional state is our interactions with others” (p. 162). It would be interesting and worthy, then, to look beyond and address how interactions influence illness. From my own cancer journey and from this research I know that this relationship indeed exists, and that it, too, is a complexity of human nature that is beyond the sophistication of our current knowledge. However, the profoundness of this relationship remains undoubtedly worthy of examination. I propose for a crossing of boundaries between disciplines, between scientific and narrative research, in an effort to further understand the relationship between emotion and illness. This knowledge holds value for scholars, lay persons, doctors, holistic healers, and the collective future of our world.

**BE THE CHANGE: REFLECTIONS AND CLOSING THOUGHTS**

One afternoon in early February my sister, Kim, emailed me a link to an article written about Roger Ebert (Jones, 2010). I learned that Ebert has undergone several surgeries due to cancer; he has lost his lower jaw and his ability to speak. I read the article and I was nothing short of inspired by Ebert’s cancer journey. Then, I noticed one of the images that the author of the article had included. It was the image of a post-it note with Ebert’s handwriting scribbled across it (since Ebert had lost his ability to speak, these notes are often a quick and easy method for him to make a point). The note said, “There is no need to pity me. Look how happy I am. This has led to an exploring of writing.” Immediately, I right-clicked on the image of the post-it note and copied it onto the desktop background of my laptop computer.

Today, as I conclude my thesis, I am sitting at my desk typing on my laptop. To my right is a second computer monitor that Louis loaned me. It has been helpful in organizing and sequencing my paper as I drag and drop text to the second screen, allowing me to see two open documents at once. However, at the moment, I am not using the second screen for a document – and all I see is the bright blue post-it note scribbled with words that speak to my own heart.

The truth is I cannot imagine having not gone through breast cancer. As trying as the experience was, I know with absolute certainty that it has delivered me to a better place. I am so overcome with gratitude for the woman that I have become and that I am becoming, and
for the many people who I have known and met along the way. I know that cancer is part of the course I had to take to get to where I am today. My cancer journey does not define me, but it is a part of me.

It is the part of me that is passionate about life. It is the part of me that is passionate about health. It is the part me that inspires my desire to instill these passions in others. It is the part of me that remembers to take a moment each day to be grateful – to be grateful for the love and support of my family and friends, to be grateful for the relationships that have shaped who I am, to be grateful for the contributions I have made in shaping others, and to be grateful for this day. My cancer journey is the part of me that knows that no matter where this life takes me I will never be alone because I will always have my own inner strength and compassion for myself to rely upon.

I cannot help but to recall the similarity of Ebert’s expressions of gratitude for his journey that I read in his words many months ago:

I believe that if, at the end of it all, according to our abilities, we have done something to make others a little happier, and something to make ourselves a little happier, that is about the best we can do. To make others less happy is a crime. To make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts. We must try to contribute joy to the world. That is true no matter what our problems, our health, our circumstances. We must try. I didn't always know this, and am happy I lived long enough to find it out. (as cited in Jones, 2010)

I smile as I read this again. I know that by writing this thesis I have done something to make myself a little happier. I have opened my mind and my heart to the endless possibilities that my cancer journey has presented me with. Through my writing I have gained new insight and understanding into my emotions and into my ability to express myself, into the magnitude of others’ abilities and desire to support, and into the magnitude of my own desire to support others.

I hope that this thesis will do something to make others a little happier. With this research I hope to enrich knowledge, enlighten change, inspire additional research, and ultimately to create a supportive and holistic nonprofit organization. I am a firm believer in the power of thoughts, and I am certain that every thought directly affects and shapes our world. Thus, I will persist in positive thinking and trying to contribute joy to this world.
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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM
San Diego State University

Consent to Act as a Research Participant

The Circle of Healing: Communicating Holistic Healing to Breast Cancer Survivors

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators: Research will be conducted by Allison L. Briggs, under the direction of Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin, San Diego State University, School of Communication.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to examine the communication from and within the Keep-A-Breast Foundation (KAB), specifically of messages pertaining to holistic healing. Participant’s workdays will be observed by the researcher, interviews will be conducted, and existing KAB documents and literature will be analyzed. Eligibility criteria includes: Employee at the KAB. This research will not be funded.

Description of the Study: Screening Procedures: To determine if you are eligible to participate, you will be asked your role within KAB. If your response indicates that you are eligible, you will be asked to participate in interviews and observations. If you are not eligible to participate, the information obtained from you during screening will be omitted from this study.

If you choose to participate in this study you will be observed at the KAB offices in Carlsbad, CA, at KAB-sponsored events. I will be observing day-to-day interactions at the office noting moments of communication pertaining to KAB’s messages regarding breast cancer prevention and holistic health. These observations will take place everyday Tuesdays for approximately 2 months. You will also be asked to participate in an interview. The interview location will be arranged by researcher and you. Interviews will take approximately 30 minutes and may include one additional follow-up interview. Upon your approval, interviews will be audio taped. Interview questions will include (but are not limited to):

- Describe your role at KAB.
- Describe KAB’s mission, values, and goals.
- How does KAB communicate messages regarding breast cancer awareness?
- How does KAB communicate messages regarding the value of holistic healing?
- What do you gain from your involvement with KAB?
- What do you see as the unmet need of the breast cancer community?
Risks or Discomforts: Minimal risks are associated with this study. Because of the nature of the questions asked, you may reflect on personal experiences/memories while responding to an interview question. You do not have to answer any question you don’t feel comfortable answering. If you begin to feel uncomfortable, you may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently.

Benefits of the Study: By participating in this study, you may be aiding the communication field and its scholars in the expansion of knowledge about breast cancer community awareness. Additionally, you may be providing valuable insight into improved communication surrounding holistic healing and breast cancer in the non-profit arena. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. Research files will be stored at the residence of Allison L. Briggs for the duration of research for three years following the completion of research. Subjects will be identified in the publication per the choice of the subject and pseudo-names will be used when requested. Participants have the right to review all interview transcripts and audio recordings prior to submission to professor, conferences, or publication. Allison L. Briggs, Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin, and participants are the only people allowed to access research (participants only able to access their information, not other participants’).

Incentives to Participate: Participant will not be paid to participate in this study.

Costs and/or Compensation for Participation: There will be no costs or compensation for participant.

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher, San Diego State University, or the Keep-a-Breast Foundation. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact Allison L. Briggs (telephone: 858-336-7496; email: allibriggs@yahoo.com).

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Division of Research Affairs San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

Consent to Participate: The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form, as signified by the Board's stamp. The consent form must be reviewed annually and expires on the date indicated on the stamp. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature
also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this consent form. You have been told that by signing this consent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

____________________________________
Name of Participant (please print)

____________________________________    ____________________
Signature of Participant    Date

____________________________________    ____________________
Signature of Investigator     Date
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Describe your role at KAB.
2. How is your role integrated into the daily functioning of the organization?
3. Describe the mission, values, and goals of KAB.
4. How are these goals accomplished?
5. How did you come to be involved in KAB?
6. What do you gain from your involvement in KAB?
7. Tell me about KAB’s messages regarding breast cancer prevention?
8. Tell me about the KAB’s messages regarding the value of holistic healing?
9. What goals does KAB hope to accomplish through breast cancer awareness messages?
10. What methods does KAB use to communicate these messages?
11. Which methods do you think are the most effective? Why?
12. Are there any needs you feel KAB does not meet?
13. What do you foresee for the future of KAB?
14. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about KAB’s breast cancer awareness messages?
15. Would you like me to give you a pseudo-name in my research paper? If so, what name?