

# MY LEFT BREAST

Rosie O'Hara celebrates life after cancer

By Caitlin Collins



In January of this year Rosie O'Hara was diagnosed with cancer in the left breast.

Her story of what happened next is a testimony to extraordinary courage, resilience and ability to reframe crisis as opportunity.

NLP Trainer Rosie is a busy woman. 'I started this year with other things in mind,' she says. 'I'd had a mammogram before Christmas and then went on holiday. I came back to a letter recalling me for another mammogram. I knew there was a lump, but my mum had had a cyst, and I thought that's all it was.'

## Taking charge

Right away Rosie took charge of what was going on. 'The first appointment I was offered was on my daughter's birthday. So I said "No" to that appointment and went in two days later. My daughter came with me - I always took someone with me to all my appointments.'

Doctors gave Rosie the choice between either a lumpectomy and radiotherapy, or a total mastectomy. 'I dislike any form of conventional medicine and I really wanted to avoid radiotherapy, so I opted for the mastectomy; this was my informed and considered choice,' she explains.

Rosie met with a challenge in reassuring her partner, Jim. 'When he got upset I had to

understand that it was about him - both his former wives had died from cancer. I had to tell him that I'm Rosie and I'm going to live. This wasn't easy. I was upset, angry, annoyed. My goals for 2009 had been seriously sideswiped! Through my tears, I pulled myself up (literally - I was leaning on the kitchen table!) and presented my new plan for the immediate future, enlisting Jim's support by telling him in a way that he would understand that I had a plan to live.'

## Positive thinking

Rosie was determined to avoid all negative language about the cancer. 'I removed words like "struggle", "battle", and "difficult" from my vocabulary and from the vocabularies of everyone else around me; and, sadly, where that wasn't possible, I temporarily removed myself from those people.'

With the operation scheduled for February 26th, Rosie set about creating a compelling purpose for her future. 'I intended, first, to be out of hospital on March 2nd; second, to attend a choir practice on March 12th; and third, to give a presentation on "Creating a Compelling Purpose" at a dinner in Aberdeen on March 19th to which I had agreed before the diagnosis. I created my

own compelling purposes properly, seeing what I wanted in glorious technicolour, hearing it in surround sound, and feeling it in every cell of my body. And I did it. I got out of hospital on March 1st, largely because I had no pain relief after the op. How did I deal with the pain instead? I lay on the bed, breathed into the surgical site (I hadn't seen it then, but the surgeon had told me the scar was a smiley face), and slowly relaxed bit by bit from the toes to the head while telling myself that the cancer had gone. I think another part of the reason why I was sent home early was because I was so disgustingly cheerful - such behaviour doesn't fit in a hospital!' Having demonstrated flexibility over her second purpose, the choir practice - 'I was offered the chance to see the comedian Rhona Cameron instead, and chose laughing over singing!' - Rosie made her presentation to 70 people. 'I wore my new red jacket, with a new hairdo, and was supported by my chauffeur - my partner Jim, who was driving! It was all exactly as I had created in my mind.'

Looking back over the entire period following the diagnosis, Rosie can identify several other ways in which she brought her NLP skills to her aid.



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Andrew Gransden Photography, Buckie

### Creative visualisation

Rosie describes a visualisation she created. 'During the run up to the op, I spent part of each day lying down, relaxing, visualising a white light with gold edges encircling my breast and keeping it safe. And I imagined a little bee called Brenda busily wrapping up the cancer and keeping it away from the rest of my body. I still visualise the white light with gold edges, knowing that white light is keeping me safe.'

Changing her perspective was also helpful, distancing herself by taking the '3rd position' of an observer. 'Rapport was sometimes not so good in the hospital. One nurse leaned so far into my space that, as my daughter remarked, had she sneezed my head would have gone through the back of my chair! So I distanced myself, imagining I was a fly on the wall, and thinking, well, that's how they understand the world, and it's not about me.

Taking 3rd position also helped me to deal with conversations in a way that wasn't either "transmit or receive" (as an ex-RAF student of mine puts it), which freed me from my emotions.'

### Presuppositions

Many of the NLP presuppositions came into play. 'In addition to remembering that "we all have our own maps of the world", so the doctors and nurses didn't necessarily see things in the same way I did, I reminded myself that "all behaviour has a positive intention underlying it" and "people are doing the best they can at the time", which helped me to understand not only where the medical staff were coming from but also the responses of friends and family. The one that says "we already have all the resources we need, or are able to create them" helped me to be in a

good state for the operation and for medical procedures I would tend to dislike, such as having needles inserted. Then reminding myself that "the mind and body are one system" encouraged me to take care of what was going in my mind in order to promote healing in my body.'

Rosie also created her own circle of excellence. 'This is a great way to create a good state that you can take anywhere. I put one on the bed as I was wheeled into theatre, wrapped around me like a blanket.'

### Changing personal history

Among the most powerful NLP processes for Rosie during this time was the 'change personal history' process. 'I had come across the work of an American cancer doctor called W Douglas Brodie, who had identified particular

personality traits in people with cancer; he had also noticed how particular types of unresolved trauma and emotional shocks correlated with specific sites of cancer. What he was saying seemed relevant to me. A family crisis that occurred several years ago jumped out at me as being not fully resolved: I had found it enormously stressful at the time and was still carrying a lot of guilt about it as well as the persistent need to know what had happened; in fact I had not been able to sleep through the night since then. About a week after I was diagnosed with cancer, I woke up knowing I had to address this. So I did a change personal history process there and then - since which I've been able to sleep properly again!

### Rosie's Change Personal History Process

- Deciding to do the process with the help of a timeline, I imagined my past as a line going out behind me.
- I recalled the feelings associated with the incident, and anchored them by touching my shoulder.
- Holding my shoulder, I went back along the timeline to the time of the incident.
- Stepping off the timeline to an observer position, I took my hand off my shoulder and gathered the resources that were available to me now, in the present, such as my daughter, friends, and my NLP skills, and I reminded myself of the ways I help others and facilitate others in doing wonderful things.
- Holding on to those resources, I stepped back on the timeline on the day before the incident occurred, when things were still OK.
- Still holding my resources, I walked along the timeline, through the incident and on up to the present moment.
- Standing at the present moment, I looked to the future, happy and cancer-free. I felt in my solar plexus area all the resources I had brought with me along the timeline, and noticed them radiating around me and out into my future.
- I floated back over the timeline to look down dispassionately at that period in my life. I don't know what happened and I no longer feel the need to know. I no longer feel that it was my fault, and no longer have any remorse or panic or anger about it. I'm happy to move forward.

### Future planning

So what does the future look like now for Rosie? 'Well, once I was out of hospital I immediately started setting more goals. I booked a holiday to Egypt in April. I started on my new book, "My Left Breast". I intend to be 1½ stones lighter by August 18th. And I intend to honour all this year's work commitments while remaining open to work coming in for



First Photographic, Kintore

exciting new untapped areas.'

Rosie has met with her surgeon for the histology report. 'The lymph glands are clear, as I knew they would be. Brenda the bee has been helping here. Curiously, my surgeon said that on removal the cancer was smaller than expected. I wonder slightly, if I had continued with the visualisation, would it have shrunk and disappeared completely? I will never know that; I'm just happy with the result I was given. After all, I can now say that I had cancer. I'm not having any further treatment. As we were discussing the possibility of my taking medication, I noticed that my surgeon and I weren't listening to each other. I don't want medication: the only thing he could offer me had only a 2% provable success rate in preventing further cancer, so why would I want to take it? I'm going to continue visualising, positive thinking, and also eating well: no red meat, very little wheat, no sugar, and no processed foods. I'll just have some regular check ups, first at six months and then annually. And now I'm busy resting and thinking positively about my future. I want to be there for my grandsons and their mum, and for my partner, and also for the people I can inspire and enable with NLP.'

Rosie chose not to have reconstructive surgery - but she did have a model breast made, of a different kind. 'I wanted to keep some memory

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of my left breast, and it occurred to me that it's possible to make plaster casts of parts of the body, which can then be cast in bronze. So I found someone on the internet who could tell me how to do it, and then, with the help of a friend, we did it. Seeing it lying on the kitchen table I found it easier to separate myself and say goodbye to it. And then Jim surprised me by saying we should hang the finished bronze on the wall - so that's where it is now!

And the book, "My Left Breast." 'Well, what we usually hear about with cancer is all the negative stuff. People don't often talk about the positive aspects. And young women tend to think it won't happen to them. While I was in hospital I was writing about my experience on Facebook; it prompted lots of responses. Reframing what some might perceive as a catastrophe is something I've always been able to do. And knowing that a solution for me affects others gives me something larger to live for; it's about more than just me. So the book is about sharing what I've learned with others.'

She ends with a typically irrepressible remark: 'I love the etymology of the word Amazon - it means "without a breast". So now I'm a warrior woman without a breast!' ●

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