Love Yourself Through Your Healing Journey Transcript

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Introduction and Holly's Background

Welcome, everybody, to another amazing episode of our Breast Cancer Breakthroughs Summit. Dr. Véronique Desaulniers your co-host, is better known as Dr.

V, and today we have a breast cancer conquer slash survivor. Holly Bertone. Holly is a certified natural health coach, a certified a six phase meditation facilitator, a number one Amazon bestselling author, keynote speaker and host of the Gratitude Builds Fortitude podcast.

So, Holly, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us. Thank you so much, Dr. V, for having me on this summit. And this is such a great resource for all the fellow warriors and survivors out there.

I know we're really excited to share this information and to really give hope to women that are dealing with a cancer diagnosis. And you're living example of that.

So tell us about your story and how you were diagnosed and what your journey was like for you. Yeah, absolute. And I always like to start the day before because that's really where everything began was I was the quintessential overachiever.

And I had what I thought was the perfect life. I was the chief of staff for one of those three letter federal government agencies they make TV shows about.

And I raced in triathlons. I was in Xterra, Off-Road Triathlon and Mountain Bike Racer. I drank margaritas with my girlfriends and traveled everywhere.

And I thought that that was the perfect life. And I had already felt the lump.

Diagnosis and Initial Treatment

I found it on my end by accident, which I know is pretty rare and all of the testing and everything like that. So it was on my 39th birthday that I got the phone call from my doctor and it was from a doctor that wasn't that I had never seen before.

He was a different doctor. And so my 39th birthday picked up the phone and he said, I'm calling to let you know that the test results came back and you have breast cancer.

But don't worry, it's the good kind. Your next step is to get a surgeon and good luck with everything. And that was it. It was my birthday. Let's just take a minute and say how completely unacceptable it is for any doctor to say that any kind of cancer is the good kind of cancer.

Let's just start there. But yeah, that was 13 years ago. So I just actually just celebrated my 13 Survivor bursary. But because I am that person who is sarcastic and snarky and sassy and use humor as a coping mechanism, I kept saying that, Oh, some girls get flowers or earrings for their birthday.

My gift was breast cancer, and I said it over and over again. But I said it sarcastically because that was how I coped with that diagnosis. But I said it over and over and over again.

And then at some point I actually felt this piece about this whole situation, this whole diagnosis. I felt this wave of peace, that breast cancer was my gift.

And I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I ended up going through surgery. lumpectomy and then chemo

and then radiation. So I did the the traditional treatment.

And it wasn't until years later that I actually started to unpack what it meant for breast cancer to actually be my gift. And that's what I'm excited to talk about today.

All right. So let's let's take a minute or two and let's talk about some of those feelings and emotions that you were going through as you went through the surgery, the chemo, the radiation.

Was there any moment where there was fear or did you keep that sense of humor and you kind of took everything lightly? How did you deal with that part of your journey?

So as an overachiever, I decided to keep going. I decided that I and I don't recommend this. First of all, I decided that I'm just going to pretend that cancer is just this thing that I have to do, just like, you know, go to treatment, check, right? something, you know, about my day.

Like, I get to brush my teeth. So I didn't stop my life, and I just wanted to keep going. I just wanted everything to be as normal as possible for me.

That was what helped me to cope with the diagnosis, with something so big. But in doing so, what happened was that I didn't slow down. And, you know, they they say that, you know, your your body gives you a whisper and then your body talks to you.

And then it's not until your body is screaming at you and forces you to stop. Well, breast cancer was my body screaming at me, but I didn't stop. And I didn't realize that this was the time that you are supposed to stop.

You are supposed to take care of yourself.

Stress, Lifestyle, and the Gift of Cancer

You are supposed to let people in, to let people help you and you know, to treat yourself to nourishing foods, even healthier foods that you had been eating.

I didn't know any of that. Dr. V, I wish you would have been around 13 years ago and I was going through it. I wish I would have known you because when I was going through chemo, the only two foods that I had that I ate almost that entire time were Dairy Queen blizzards and a right of French fries, you know, a horrible, horrible diet.

I had no idea about taking care of your body, about taking care of your spirit, about resting about any of this. So I kept going and that was my big thing, was that I just I think part of it was just putting my head in the sand saying, I'm 39 years old, I'm too young for this, I'm too healthy for this.

And yeah, so that was that was, I think, the biggest emotion for me was more just denial of it actually happening. And I see that quite a bit, a lot of denial.

And you know, women with breast cancer typically, you know, overachievers type of personality, we can do this nose to the grindstone. But the key lesson I know for me was to learn to really pull back and reduce my stress level, manage it better to nurture that little girl inside of myself.

So at what point did you realize that there was more to healing the cancer than just killing it with the conventional treatments? It actually wasn't until years later.

But if you have time, I just really, really quick story. So I was I was on my way home from radiation and I had to pick up my stepson from school. So I had worked all day, gone to radiation and picking my stepson up from school.

I'm literally running out of the hospital and I almost ran over an elderly woman who was coming into to treatment. And I'm like, this is not how life is supposed to be.

You know, it's like, I don't have time for cancer, but it was that lifestyle that, you know, I mean, all the million different factors. But that type of lifestyle was one of the factors that led up to the to the disease state.

My my doctor, when we first met, she put her hand on my knee and she said, lightning struck and I accepted that at the moment because I needed to I needed to know that, you know, why did this even happen?

It wasn't even a why me? It wasn't a victim state. It was just like from a logical perspective, like, you know, I race mountain bikes. I have a six pack of abs.

Like, how could this ever happen to someone like me? I'm 39 years old and I'm, quote unquote, healthy. Well, no, baby, I got this, you know, stress crazy stress lifestyle, this overachieving lifestyle, you know, a sugar holic.

I drank probably six cans of Coca-Cola a day, you know, big bag of family size Eminem's were lunch. So even though I was quote unquote, you know, I thought I was healthy because I could finish a mountain bike race, be covered in mud, stand on a podium and get a medal around my neck.

No, that's not healthy. That's just being a really good mountain bike racer. And it wasn't until actually years later that I, you know, started to realize there's people like you out there to educate us on our health and to make that cross over from being that person who was so focused on just the drive and the drive to drive to way I need to take a step back and I need to actually take care of myself.

Very good. Very good. And it's it's a that's an important lesson that most women who look at their cancer as a gift will eventually come to learn. So let's talk about that.

You're recently diagnosed. Somebody tells you, oh, don't worry, breast cancer is the best gift of your life. You know, how does that make sense? But as we go through the journey and we ask ourselves, what is the gift, what?

You know, what? What can I learn from this experience? So tell us why you said that breast cancer was a gift for you. Yeah, absolutely. Dr. V And again, it was just me being sarcastic at the time.

But afterwards, when I really started to think about it, realizing that it was a time that I could change my priorities in life. And again, this wasn't until years later that I actually started to put all the pieces together.

But realizing that I had this, you know, what I thought was this perfect life and this perfect lifestyle was actually slowly killing me, you know, just all of the stress and this sugar and, you know, the alcohol and just everything was just slowly killing me and I didn't realize it.

Gratitude, Purpose, and the Five Steps Framework

And the gift was really to be able to take a step back, to focus on what my priorities are in life, to focus on really my true purpose in life, and realizing that my true purpose is not climbing the corporate ladder and, you know, chasing after all of the accolades at work and, you know, standing on a podium and getting a medal around my neck.

My purpose in life was really fulfilling what I truly desire and this entire diagnosis. And then a year later, I was diagnosed with Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, which I know there's a lot of women in our community that that have both and being able to really just reevaluate what is my Northstar.

I always like to say the northstar your your number one focus in life, your number one purpose and to make that shift to be able to say you know, at the time I was a wife and a stepmother, you know, I was able I was actually forced to resign from my job, but I was able to stay at home and to raise my stepson in his pivotal teenage years, to be there every single morning and every single afternoon after school, to be there for him to be the stable person in his life, and then to really create a voice of gratitude and fortitude and mental resilience for those who are on this journey to say that we can stop, we can reframe the way that we think about this.

And it's hard. I fully acknowledge when you're in the middle of that diagnosis and, you know, people are saying, oh,

it's such a gift. And you're like, no, that is baloney pants.

Do you know what I'm going through? Do you know how devastating this is? And I know what it's like to not want to hear those things. But if you actually stop and think, okay, you know, it's easy.

And that's the thing, too, about gratitude. You jump into gratitude for a second. Absolutely. That's the thing about gratitude is that everyone it's so easy to be grateful.

It's so easy to be happy. It's so easy to have joy in your life when everything is perfect. When I was when I had that quote unquote perfect life, you know, it was easy to be happy, but I was also stressed to the max.

But what what happens is that when the tough times happen, that's when it's really difficult to find the joy, to find the happiness, to find the gratitude.

And when you can find that, when you can shift your brain's chemistry, when you can make that reframe in your brain, in your body, your cells actually believe in that gift.

They believe in that happiness. They believe in that gratitude. And it really changes how you show up for life, how you show up for yourself, and how you show up for everyone else in your life.

So yeah, I know that it's hard to hear those words. Oh, just be grateful when they're thrown around so flippantly and you're like, Wait, I've got this diagnosis.

I can't be grateful for this. Well, look around and see what is out there. And look at gratitude from not just what you do, but who you can become from this experience, from this diagnosis.

What is your true purpose out there? What is what? What kind of person can you become because of this? I love that because it's it's a it's a turning point in our life, right?

Because it presents us with our our mortality. And it makes us ask some very deep questions about our life. And I know with my second healing journey, I really learned a big take away from me was managing my stress, but also to really connect with that little girl and learn to nurture and and love myself and do good things for myself.

So I know you you have five steps to love ourselves unconditionally. So let's talk about those steps. Yeah, absolutely. And we can just go through them pretty quickly.

But it's the five steps that I teach in my framework with my students and also with my clients. And really, that first step is finding your inner star and finding your your purpose.

What is your why? I have one of my students is stage four and her why is her families, her kids and her grandkids and, you know, being able to get on the floor and play with them, you know, that is her why every single day and you know, whether it's something big or it's something small to make sure that, you know, every single day what you're waking up for and the ease, the empathy that what I think is the hardest one.

And that's usually the one that takes the longest because especially when we're dealing with breast cancer and depending on whether we go through more, you know, natural treatment or more medical treatment or, you know, a combination of of the two, our bodies are going through changes.

It's it's first of all, what did you know? Why did my body betray me? Why do I have this disease in the first place? But then, you know, especially if you are going through the more medical treatments and losing your hair or losing your precious or losing your fertility, you know, all of the pieces that are what society calls making us women, and then we lose the surreal like, well, who am I really?

And that causes kind of back into that that greater purpose, right? For me, it took 12 years to actually be able to look at my scars and accept my scars.

12 years. That's a long time. That's a long time. And I think that really being able to find that empathy and find that love for ourself is 100% critical to to the end.

Our healing the A is action and really it's you know, you can learn everything and and, you know, listen to all this summits and, you know, listen to the podcast and read the books.

But until you actually take action, until you actually take that personal responsibility for your growth, for that inner healing, for the physical healing, for the emotional healing, it's that action and that responsibility.

That's what's going to propel you forward. Ah is resilience. That's my favorite one because my mother's life, my chart growing up every single day, I heard her say it builds fortitude.

And it wasn't until I went through my health challenges did I really know what that fortitude meant. And then I always thought it was like, Oh, I'm staying strong.

And that's one definition. But what I like to say is that fortitude, that resilience is when you're a second away from quitting and you make a decision that you are stronger than your circumstances, and then you do something about it.

That's where the action comes in to. But resilience and fortitude is more than that. It's more than just staying strong. It's more than just putting on a brave face and fighting through it.

It's actually building that mental resilience so that the next time something happens, the next, you know, this is life, right? We all have the stuff that goes on.

It doesn't stop after cancer. It's like there's always going to be this stuff that happens. So that mental resilience is building that strength, building that mental strength so that when the next time something happens, there's the emotional freak outs don't happen.

This stress doesn't happen, the fear doesn't happen, the anxiety doesn't happen. And you actually feel centered and you're like, okay, I got this.

Meditation, Healing, and the New Normal

I can get through this. And then the tears, the testimony, which also one of my favorites, and that one is really just finding your soul's purpose and finding that next step for you, seeing this opportunity as a gift, as a chance to lean into your purpose, to maybe do something new, maybe it's, you know, find a new job or start your own business or, you know, maybe it's a different relationship or maybe you want to go back to school.

There's something that is inside of you that's like, I want to do this and this is your chance to do this. This is your testimony to be able to share that light with others, whether it's your friends or your family.

I remember my very first time in chemo and I went in and there was a young lady younger than me and she had the bucket and that was my introduction to chemo.

And in between her getting sick, she was focused on me and making sure that I was okay in my first time in chemo. And that's testimony. Yeah, that's very, very precious.

Something you never forget, right? Yeah. So you mentioned action. And sometimes we think of action as having to do something very rigorous. But I know that you are a six days meditation facilitator, so sometimes action means really learning to get into that relaxation mode and doing something that will bring your body into the parasympathetic mode so that healing can take place.

We cannot heal if we feel like we're being chased by saber tooth, tiger or bear, right? When you have. So we've got to bring that energy down. So tell us a little bit about the meditation and why that's so important.

Yeah, absolutely. And I always like to say the healing is in this space. And to find that space, it's to find the quiet. And so many of us, especially as overachievers, we go and we go and we go and there is no stop and meditation for someone who's never done it before is really hard because you've got the monkeys running the laps and you're in your mind and it's hard to find that quiet.

That's why I love the 6 Phase, because it's an active meditation and it's perfect for people who have not been able to quiet their mind because it's a it's a it's a just a different type of meditation that puts your brain still in the alpha state to help you to quiet everything down, to get into the parish sympathetic, to get into that healing state.

It's just a different way to to do it for those who can't just stop and be quiet. Yeah, yeah, I was that person. But yeah, the healing is really in this space.

The healing is in the quiet. You know, I it's is someone who is an only child and now living on my own. I actually of last week was on a on a half vacation half work conference and I spent several days at the pool in the quiet.

And even though I'm, you know, an only child and by myself, like, I just like carving out that quiet time. And that quiet time is so important to quiet the brain and to find that space of expansiveness so that you can let in the healing, that you can let in the love, that you can let in the joy you can let in the gratitude and to, like you said, put your body into that parasympathetic state so that it can have a fighting chance to heal.

When we go and we go and we go and we don't stop. We're never gonna stop. And it's just going to get worse. Yeah, very good. Very good. So the summit is called the Breast Cancer Breakthroughs Summit.

So in your parting words of encouragement or what would you tell our listeners and our audience about the breakthrough that really was life changing for you?

You know, when when I was going through my cancer treatment, I heard over and over again they said cancer shouldn't define you. And I bought into it for a minute.

But then I realized that I actually disagreed with that statement, and I think cancer should define you. I don't think you should let cancer become who you are.

And I think that's probably what they meant with that statement. But I think this is a time to really evaluate your life, to evaluate what you're letting into your life, what are the thoughts you're letting and what are the people you're letting and what are the foods you're letting in?

Right. And is are these things are they healing or are they toxic? And, you know, to be able to evaluate your life and your life's purpose in that way.

And the other thing that I absolutely hated was when anyone said, oh, this is your new normal, and I just could not stand that. But when I looked at it really, this is a new old new normal, right?

So they say new normal, like you have to adjust to this cancer thing. Well, you kind of do. But guess what? You get a chance not to get your old life back.

You get a chance to create a better life, to create one that is better than your new normal. And it's up to you to decide, do I want to take the steps to make it happen?

Holly, I always appreciate your words of wisdom spoken very well from a conquerors slash survivor, and I really appreciate how you've taken that diagnosis, turned it into a gift, turned your life around, and now you're very busy helping other women in the similar situation.

So thank you for joining us and thank you for all you do. Thank you so much, Dr. V, for having me.