INTRODUCTION

In August 2020, my name was on the roster for orientation at the Mizzou School of Social Work PhD program. I was ready to blaze a new career path, but that excitement came to a screeching halt during my very first mammogram. I'd felt a lump earlier that summer and wanted it checked out before starting the program, just in case it needed to be removed.

After the mammogram, instead of being sent on my way, I was escorted to a small dressing room, a space that felt more like a closet with a bench, and told to wait. They eventually called me back for a repeat scan, then escorted me back to that same closet. Because this was the beginning of the pandemic, the hospital already felt eerie, but the atmosphere shifted into something heavier. It was the way they looked at me, how overly nice they were, the hushed side conversations... I knew something was wrong. I sat in that dressing room, sweating and breathing anxious hot air into my mask, before being moved to another room for an ultrasound.

Lying in the quiet dark room I could see it on the screen, a large black mass that had already grown to the size of a peach. The technician asked me to wait, returning a while later to tell me the phone attached to the wall was going to ring. A physician had reviewed the images and wanted to speak with me, but because of COVID protocols, they couldn't do it in person. In that dark room, the phone I stood staring at, rang. I still remember the voice vividly, "I am *very* concerned by what I see."

That evening, I downloaded the report from my health portal. The clinical impression at the end read: BI-RADS 5. Google informed me that BI-RADS (Breast Imaging Reporting and Data System) is a scale used to measure the risk of mammogram findings, ranging from Category 1 (not cancer) to Category 6 (confirmed cancer). Category 5 means the findings are highly suggestive of malignancy. According to the American Cancer Society, a Category 5 finding has a 95% chance or higher of being cancerous; only a biopsy moves that score to a Category 6.

That was the moment I knew I had cancer.

A disorienting two weeks later, after a blur of daily appointments to determine the type and the plan, I settled into an infusion chair for my first dose of chemo for what they kept referring to as "aggressive" breast cancer. What followed was five months of chemo, a bilateral mastectomy, 20 rounds of radiation through a clinical trial, 12 months of targeted infusion therapy, reconstruction, and a third surgery to remove scar tissue.

In August 2021, I ended treatment and rang the bell.

Being diagnosed knocked me off the path I was excited to explore and forced me down a road I feared. I'd held this false belief that after treatment, I'd feel like a Disney character, joyfully skipping through the woods and singing to birds with a newfound appreciation for life. In reality, my first year in remission was the opposite. I experienced anxiety and depression on a level I'd never known. I felt like a stranger in my own body. It was as if someone had scooped me up, beat me physically, emotionally, and spiritually, then slammed me back down and expected me to be oriented. I had to learn to navigate the bumpy road back to my center and get to know this new version of myself, a version I now love and appreciate more than ever.

I want that for you, too.

I'm not going to write some inspirational garbage about cancer being a gift. However, cancer did present me with a path toward recentering, and that process is what I want to share.

I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Certified Grief Counselor with over a decade of experience. I have two degrees, a wall of certifications, thousands of hours of training, and countless client stories that showed me something new about my profession, and its broken parts, every single day.

While I am a licensed therapist, this workbook does not replace therapy. It is a reflective tool. Parts of you may surface here that surprise you. Whatever comes up is information. What you do with that information is your choice, but I strongly encourage you to process those thoughts and feelings with a professional. I am also a big advocate for support groups. The Breast Cancer Support Group through

Gilda’s KC was invaluable to me. Gilda’s Club, now merged with Cancer Support Community, has locations nationwide.

My personal story is woven throughout this workbook. It is rooted in breast cancer and remission. But this workbook belongs to anyone navigating a cancer diagnosis, regardless of gender or cancer type. The grief, the identity shifts, the relationship with your body and yourself. It's for everyone.

As you go through this workbook the main thing I want you to keep in mind is this… *take what resonates*, *leave what doesn*'*t*. This is largely based on my own cancer journey and clinical experience. The skills and tools are evidence based, but that doesn’t mean you should force what doesn’t fit. There is a world of things I don’t yet understand. Because the purpose of this workbook is to strengthen the relationship with self, it is important to recognize that I am not the expert of you, *you are*.