

2011 Novice Diarist – Christina Sestan



I wasn't interested in dragon boating. It was never something I watched and thought, "Boy, I would just love to try that!" And not because I wasn't sporty or into athletics. I just didn't think it looked very fun. I even remember riding my bike around False Creek one summer day many years ago, and running smack into the middle of Rio Tinto. And as I tried to navigate through all the chaos and confusion, all I could think was "will you bloody paddlers get out of my way!"

Much has changed and I wonder who I might have growled at that day all those years ago, that I now feel great solidarity with. Situations like that can be kind of entertaining when you look in your rear view mirror.

They say life never throws anything at you that you can't handle and I suppose that's true. What doesn't kill us, and all that. Even so, I think its safe to say most of us probably spend a lot of time doubting our ability when we're dealt the hand of cards that include the words, "it's cancer." I think being dealt those cards give one full-on license to run around shrieking, "the sky is falling, the sky is falling," and just about anyone in the vicinity would understand no matter how much hysteria was involved. But running around shrieking wasn't my reaction exactly. I was doing more of a 'deer in the headlights' thing, quietly reeling through the unending aftershocks. But after a few weeks lost at sea, my shell-shocked mind gradually began to try to make sense of this massive 'curve ball' I'd been thrown and I guess that's when practicality began to step in. After all, there's only so many tears you can cry before your eyes just dry up and hurt, and there's only so much time you can sit staring into space before your spirit becomes restless.

That's probably about the time my doctor's words strayed into my consciousness. "Get involved in a team of survivors. Surround yourself with survivors. This increases your chances of survival," he said. "Really?!" I asked incredulously. "Yes. Join a dragon boating team."

It was a cool and rainy Saturday morning in late September as I stepped into a dragon boat for the first time. I was ridiculously under-dressed (its dang cold out there on the water) but someone found me an extra pair of rain pants, which made a surprising difference. I was a few months into chemo, but on a 'holiday' week so my energy was good. I remember hoping my wig would stay on. There was a real mixed bag of women out for the orientation paddle and I remember feeling an oddly comforting sense of camaraderie as I noted the short hair and almost bald heads. I think up to that point, I was starting to get pretty used to being the only one in the room with cancer, which brings a very strange sort of status with it. But with this group, cancer didn't bring with it a 'special' or 'different' distinction. We were all hanging out under the 'breast cancer' banner and I remember feeling a sigh of relief that I could just be myself.

Being the competitive person that I am, I immediately lasered in on the strongest paddler in our boat and did my best to emulate their technique. The air was cold as we began moving through the water. My legs were cramped and my arms felt like over-cooked

spaghetti noodles. I couldn't believe how difficult it was and I remember feeling a sense of frustration that I couldn't keep paddling for more than a minute or two. But the experienced paddlers showed such patience. They offered a boat load of encouragement and support.

I went to an orientation / sign-up evening a month or so later and as I perched on my chair eating yet another of those terrifyingly caloric little round brownies (oh, they look so innocent, don't they), I had the sense that I was sitting on an edge. And like so many other significant times in my life where I'd found myself on an edge, I knew that I was going jump.

And I landed in the Deas Slough, 5 minutes from my house, twice a week from March through July practicing with the Divas. I built stamina and crafted technique. I learned race pieces and bought a really great pair of gloves from Mountain Equipment Coop. I drew flowers on my paddle and lived for the distribution of licorice allsorts half-way through our practice. I froze to death at our first regatta in Deep Cove. We endured freezing rain, and paddled directly into high winds. My fingers were frozen and as we marshaled on the docks for our final race, I couldn't imagine I had anything more to give. I think that's when it actually started to snow! Ahhh . . . Spring on the North Shore!

As we paddled out to the start line, I was pretty certain I didn't have any more in the tanks. In fact, just paddling out there had exhausted me, and by the looks of my seat mates, everyone else as well. But something happens inside you when you have your paddle buried deep and still, big breaths filling your lungs, waiting for the gun. When it goes off, all the doubts are silenced because you're concentrating so hard on pulling the boat through the water. And even as I was almost entirely focused on the physical act of paddling, in a tiny sliver of my mind, I realized that I did actually have more in the tanks. I was reaching and straining and groaning and breathing like a crazy person. Even if my technique had gone to hell, I was still trying. And trust me, it wasn't like I made any kind of stunning comeback. I was still exhausted and dripping wet and freezing cold when we crossed the finish line, and I think we even came last. But I completed the final race along with my team mates and together we trudged up the hill for the final debrief of the day, and I do believe the sun came out. And later on driving home, or a few days later, I began to glimpse the similarities between paddling and getting through breast cancer treatment. A quote comes to mind – "You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have." I suppose I could have pulled my paddle out or even sat out the last race, but when you're part of a team, being strong was the only choice I gave myself.

Now at the end of my first season of paddling, I have to be honest here. While the paddling was fun and rewarding and I'm proud of my growth – the stamina I built and the technique I developed, paddling was never the main event for me at AIAB. It was the doorway to something so much bigger that I could never have conceived of before I joined. It was my fellow survivors.

Just their very presence besides me in the boat or afterwards in the pub stilled my fears like a peaceful drug, calming my anxiety and reminding me hundreds of times over that there IS life after breast cancer. Their laughter, love and light gently coaxed me forward, edging me into that big pair of boots called "MY LIFE AFTER CANCER." We smiled and

laughed and worked sooo hard together. We shared our lives, our hopes, fears and dreams. We embodied aliveness. Each one of us, in our own way, had looked into the face of death and said "Sorry. Not done yet."

These days, when I'm down around False Creek on my usual Saturday morning trips to Granville Island, I pause when I see a dragon boat. I hone in on the timing, I look for the reach, and I sympathize with their aching muscles because I know how hard it is. But mostly when I see a dragon boat, I think of the women who taught me that there is life after cancer.