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A Visit with Guanyin

*Carol Collins**

The journey of a breast cancer patient is brutal. Although society can rightfully celebrate the medical community's successes in prolonging lives, breast cancer treatments' weaknesses and failings are horrific. We must not ignore the negative impact of breast cancer treatments on a woman's quality of life, femininity, and humanity. While some "chemotherapy" is benign, some anti-cancer or cytotoxic infusions and pills not only cause a myriad of well-publicized short-term side effects such as vomiting and hair loss, but also long-term or late side-effects such as impaired cognitive function, musculoskeletal symptoms, heart damage, endocrine system damage, blood clots, and additional cancers. Radiation treatments may introduce new cancers as well. Typically, women under the age of 40 with breast cancer experience more significant quality of life losses than older women due to chemically induced infertility and instant early menopause from breast cancer and its treatments. The premature and sudden loss of youth is distressing beyond words. The 1998 Women's Health and Cancer Rights Act ("WHCRA") that requires most group insurance plans that cover mastectomies to additionally cover breast reconstruction was a good start in addressing the devastation breast cancer treatments cause to one's womanhood. However, policy makers need to recognize the many other side-effects that breast cancer patients experience that are potentially just as devastating as losing a breast, which are often not discussed due to their most personal nature. Some cures are so painful and damaging that they permanently crush the spirits of women. Other women simply decline treatment and die. Curing cancer is not enough: We need more reliable and easier breast cancer preventive measures and less barbaric treatments.

*Carol Collins is an artist whose eclectic education includes a B.S. in Chemistry, an MBA, a 25-year kung fu discipleship to Sifu Wing Lam, multiple trips through Europe on the back of a motorcycle, completion of all but one requirement for a B.A. in Studio Art, completion of approximately 90% of a B.A. in Art History, a high-tech management career in Silicon Valley, and a current battle with an aggressive breast cancer. She put her formal art education on hold while she seriously contemplated getting a law degree. You can view more of her artwork at www.ccollinsfineart.com.

A Visit with Guanyin expresses a breast cancer patient's wish for compassion and comfort from both the transient and permanent damage caused by the cancer treatments. I created A Visit with Guanyin after completing a photo series called Dreams in the Midst of a Nightmare while under chemotherapy and radiation treatment after a modified radical mastectomy for breast cancer. The cancer treatments damage the body, mind, and soul. I was barely able to hold the paper lantern due to fatigue and peripheral neuropathy when I posed for the camera. Nausea, vomiting, night terrors, neutropenic fever, metallic taste, severe acid reflux, pain from the surgery, and severe burns from the radiation made hair loss seem like a trivial event. "Chemo brain" added much distress and contributed in making this project a challenge. The emotional turmoil from loss of a body part and one's youthful vigor is difficult to fathom unless one has experienced it themselves. I chose to create even while I was sick so the year would not solely be about suffering and loss.



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