



Image of the author by Sydney Shuman Photography

My Body is a Changing Landscape

WORDS BY
Anna Wassman-Cox

My body is a changing landscape. It has taken me all around the world through my ballet career and supported me when I needed it most during my cancer treatment. Yet, for many years, I turned my back on my body. I fought back hard when it “failed me.” I first remember this when I was dancing full time. My first big injury was a stress fracture, which also happened to be my first experience in an MRI machine. Oh, if I only knew that this would not be the last time in the big, loud machine. But after this injury, I pushed through so I could get back to my dancing life – my real life – instead of letting myself mourn what was really happening to me.

I turned my back on my body once again when I thought it failed me by ending my ballet career. A torn labrum in my hip was the last straw after years of sprained ankles, more stress fractures, and countless other ailments. So instead of resting and healing and finding ways to love this changing landscape, I ignored it. Ignored the pain. I drowned myself in vodka martinis to numb the physical and emotional pain my body so deeply wanted me to feel. I walked away from my ballet career without so much as a goodbye.

Seven years after my ballet career ended. I had turned to binge drinking and partying to cope with pressures of living a “normal” life, going to school and getting a job. However, I was suppressing the part of the body that yearned for me to move and get back to who I was at my core – a dancer. My body was begging me to rethink how I was living and it showed up as a lump in my right breast.

It turns out that lump was breast cancer – the biggest wake up call of all. I was 25 and breast cancer was about to take me on a journey I never could have imagined. Breast cancer was that hard stop that forced me to slow down instead of continuing to push it to its limits to try and make myself “normal” or “perfect.”

I didn’t want to let my body change with breast cancer. I pushed and pushed and thought I was learning my lessons by rushing through my treatment. To the outside world, I beat cancer, and graduated summa cum laude while doing it. I even started a new job six weeks after my final surgery because I wasn’t going to let cancer get me down.

I avoided thinking about cancer and how it had changed my body and my life. I fought so hard to try to get back to that normal again, that I ignored the residual side

effects of weight gain, neuropathy, joint aches, and still not looking like myself. It was just like when I was injured during my ballet career and I was always trying to do what was expected of me and “get back to normal” as soon as possible. But what if I am not meant to be “normal”?

As soon as I was done with treatment and the cancer was gone, how easy it was to slip back into that old routine of numbing my body. How easy it was to fall back into distracting myself with drinking to avoid sitting with my thoughts or working through the pain of the loss in my body. How dependent I had become on just pushing through and ignoring what was happening. I had lost such a big part of myself, barely even acknowledging my bilateral mastectomy that stripped me of a part so synonymous with womanhood, and yet I walked away from that year of treatment like nothing had ever happened.

The best thing about our human body is our ability to change, heal and feel.

Four and a half years after my breast cancer diagnosis, I was pushing my body again. Pushing it hard in my high intensity workouts, forcing my mind to work crazy long hours to get a promotion, pushing it to continue drinking even with the joint pain and neuropathy still present in my day to day.

On May 19, 2022, my body changed again when I was re-diagnosed with breast cancer just months before my 30th birthday. I asked myself, *how could this be happening again?* I was numb, I still feel somewhat numb almost a year later. I was so close to that celebratory five year mark that everyone who has gone through breast cancer yearns for. That moment we all hold our breath waiting for since the last day of active treatment. I thought I had “moved on” from my cancer, but the truth was, my body was still holding on. Holding on to the pain, the loss, and mourning of who I was before cancer and to who I had become after the first time around.

Two times now my body has fought off this malicious sack of cells. And yet, I am now finally finding a softness in this diagnosis. I am grateful that I still have this body with all my scars, injuries, and imperfections, because that is what makes me, me. Since my second diagnosis, I have gotten back in touch with my body. With the parts that I turned my back on for so long. This time I have made it back to the barre. I have turned away from the other bar that kept me stuck in limbo for so long, and have opened myself to my body and am focused on healing from the inside out.

The best thing about our human body is our ability to change, heal and feel. I tried so hard my entire life to try to fit into that perfect mold, to look, act, and feel a certain way, yet there is no “one way” or “perfect way” to be in our bodies. Today, I love that my body is perfectly imperfect. Breast cancer may take a lot of things away from you, but if you let it, it can also bring you back to who you are authentically by listening to your body and dancing along the way. My body is a changing landscape. ♡