

Jane M. Roos

When I was diagnosed with cancer, my daughter, Kat O’Neill, sent me Tari Prinster’s book and told me I HAD to take her classes. The book, *Yoga for Cancer*, caught me immediately. Drawing on her experience as both yoga master and breast-cancer survivor, Tari has created a deeply intelligent program of exercises, geared to strengthening the body and mind when dealing with cancer and its treatments. The text is smart and accessible, and I took great heart from the idea that I could do something positive to increase my resilience to the cancer jolt. But I was not so sure I could get to the Y4C classes. Tari teaches in NYC, and though I live just north of the city, I doubted I’d have the energy to deal with the high-speed traffic or take the combo of cabs, trains, and subways needed to make the trip on public transport. Googling around the internet, I found that Tari has trained nearly 200 Y4C instructors and that, miraculously, there were classes in Rye NY, four miles from my front door. Four miles on back roads—no big highways—and a speed limit of 30 MPH. That I could manage.

I didn’t know what to expect that first afternoon. I was 73 years old and had spent my professional life as a rather sedentary academic. I’d done yoga sporadically over the years, but only at the Gentle level. So, a big concern was that the classes might be beyond my capabilities. As I walked into the studio, seven or eight people were arranging mats on the floor. A woman came forward and greeted me with a huge smile, “Hi, I’m Janet. Welcome! You’re here for Yoga4Cancer?” This was Janet Muller, and I explained to her that I’d had a lumpectomy several weeks earlier and was looking at six weeks of chemotherapy, six weeks of radiation, and a yearlong regime of IV Herceptin. The vibrancy of her welcome soothed my anxiety, and I started the Y4C classes that she and Stephanie Gould alternately teach. Both women are breast-cancer survivors, and both are first-rate, wholly compassionate and committed teachers. When I first entered Stephanie’s class, she, too, welcomed me warmly and made me feel totally at home. We soon discovered that our kids knew each other, hung out together, and lived near each other in southern Vermont.

Y4C uses basic yoga exercises to strengthen the body and stimulate the immune system. It avoids the (for me) impossibly difficult “pretzel poses,” which means that its benefits are open to a wide spectrum of people—from those who have never done yoga to those who have mastered advanced positions. Even at my age, nearly everything was within my reach, and when I

encountered an exercise I couldn't quite accomplish, I zoned out on my mat (days of treatment fatigue), adapted the movements, or embraced the difficulty and gave myself a little push. To anyone who shares my initial anxieties—too old, too stiff, too intimidated—my advice is to put negativity aside and get involved with Y4C.

I continued Y4C all through my treatments, channeling Janet's "You've got to be strong!" And reminding myself, as she and Stephanie did, to listen to my body and sit out or adapt whatever seemed too demanding. The important thing was to get there. Always at the end of class, Stephanie and Janet reminded us to thank ourselves: "You did it, you made it here, give yourself a big hug!"

My take-away from Y4C has been immense. I exit these classes feeling invigorated and de-stressed; and knowing that I'm doing something positive for myself gives me a sense of physical and emotional empowerment. The yoga is great, and because the exercises concentrate on the upper body and abdomen, I emerge with a deep sense of centeredness, unlike anything I've experienced with yoga before. It sounds so obvious that if you exercise to strengthen your core, your core will feel strong, but I hadn't realized how real, how extensive that feeling would be. Even though my practicing yoga has been erratic over the years, my bone density scores have turned out to be unusually high. I doubt this is due to genetics, given that I have three sisters and none of them has had similar test results. I don't ski, I don't run, I don't work out in a gym, and my conclusion is that I have yoga to thank for my bone-density health.

Not to be overlooked is that the encouragement of Stephanie and Janet has become an invaluable source of strength, as has the solidarity of the other people in the class—women and occasionally men—in various stages of treatment, as well as cancer survivors for anywhere from several days to many years. In our chats before and after class, we've discussed surgery, nutrition, hair loss, wigs, massage, chemo effects, ports..., and I've learned a lot of coping strategies and first-hand practical information. The courage of these Y4C yogis has been wonderfully contagious, and despite the fact I'm many years older, they have given me the priceless gift of not feeling alone.

All through my treatments, medical professionals have remarked on my no-nonsense, "let's-get-it-done," upbeat attitude. Whenever something like this has been said, I've attributed my outlook to a combination of excellent medical care and excellent Y4C. I've explained the huge

impact Y4C has had on my coping with cancer and provided information about Tari's programs in NYC, Stephanie and Janet's classes in Rye, and Soul Ryeders' amazing range of cancer outreach programs. Soul Ryeders generously subsidizes Y4C in Rye, so that the only charge for each class is a very small *suggested* donation. This puts Y4C within *everyone's* reach. The way life should be!

It's been fourteen months since I started Y4C. My mammograms and sonograms last summer showed no signs of cancer, and I finished IV Herceptin this September. Two days ago, the port was removed, and at Y4C today, I exercised when there was no stress on the incision and took a restorative pose when there seemed to be too much. Yes, there's the possibility that cancer may return, but I'm learning to live in the moment, and so far, so good. Tari, Kat, Janet, Stephanie, my follow yogis, and Soul Ryeders: I send you gratitude from the center of my being.

December 2017