

For me, this month marks the end of a long and difficult year of searching and self-exploration, mostly the result of the medically invasive and complex treatment for breast cancer. There were many joys and much pain, but I was lucky to be an artist and a fiber craftswoman. My studio became a safe house, a refuge where I could visualize pain, actualize healing, and keep my hands ever occupied.

Although I will still be visiting doctors and enduring tests for many years to come, the end of the most intensive treatment was the removal of a port that had been implanted in my chest wall during breast surgery a year ago. It allowed direct access to my veins for the chemotherapy, saving my arms from the effects of toxic drugs and other damage. I need my arms, I am a weaver.

On the morning of this special day, when I awoke, the sun was shining bright, a sure sign after a long, and dreary northeast winter, of good things to come. I had to be at the ambulatory surgery center at 7:40 A. M. It was a simple procedure that required only a local anesthetic, so I was looking forward to it with none of the fear of the previous two surgeries. I knew this one would be okay.

Having spent hours in chemo treatments, doctor's waiting rooms, and even airplane terminals as I continued to travel and teach, I learned always to keep a craft project in my bag. I had picked up a kit for Kumihimo-on-a-plate at Convergence in Vancouver last summer, and after finishing the kit, I started a nine-foot eight-strand Kumihimo braid to make grog closures for a handwoven vest. Into my bag it went.

After I checked in at the surgery center, I was told to take a seat – it would be a few minutes as the surgeon had been delayed by an unexpected meeting, but it was a slow morning so the wait wouldn't be long. No problem. I settled myself and pulled out my Kumihimo-on-a-plate. I was happily working away when Susie, a staff nurse, came to get me. She was entranced by my braiding, wanted detailed directions, and began immediately to think of possibilities. As another nurse began the preparations for my surgery, Susie was searching through cabinets and pulling out umbilical string (a thin flat cotton tape from the days when umbilical cords were actually tied instead of clamped). She moaned that the string came only in white, and I suggested she dye some of it in strong tea. Her eyes lit up and she began gathering specimen cups. As my nurse continued her prep work, I watched in fascination as Susie cut lengths of umbilical string and tossed them into the cups. She squirted Betadine into one cup, tea in another, some cranberry juice in a third.

When I came out of the dressing room in my hospital gown and robe, Susie was complaining the tea wasn't strong enough, and the next thing I knew she was coloring the string with yellow highlighter. She assured me that when I returned from surgery, she would

be braiding. As I was led away, I reminded her that she would have to dry the string first. “No problem”, she replied. “We have a microwave”.

The surgery took a little longer than expected, and as I was wheeled into the recovery room, Susie was waiting for me, happily braiding away. Using a styro plate, she was braiding an eight-strand cord in four soft pastel colors, umbilical-string white, cranberry juice pink, highlighter yellow, and Betadine brown.

The recovery room was abuzz! The styro plate finally cracked under the strain of braiding, so Susie went off to find the cardboard back of a notebook, and the braiding continued.

Lest anyone think that staff nurses have nothing more important to do than Kumihimo-on-a-plate, rest assured it was a slow morning, and their conscientious attention to patients never flagged. But watching Susie’s eagerness to enter the fiber world and turn medical supplies into a fiber experience was an extra gift on my special day.

I gathered my things, changed out of my hospital gown, and carefully moved to the waiting room. Susie was there, rethreaded onto a cardboard disk, teaching the admitting nurse how to do Kumihimo-on-a-plate. I left feeling like I gave a small part of who I am to brighten the days of women who were there for me when it really mattered.

Handwoven Magazine Endnotes column, May/June 2003

-Daryl Lancaster