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Inspired by Faith: Nurturing Your Spirit

December 16, 2008

Rev. Aundreia Alexander, Esq

KATHLEEN KELLY:

Welcome. My name is Kathleen Kelly. I am the education and outreach coordinator at Living Beyond Breast Cancer. I want to introduce our speaker tonight. The Reverend Aundreia Alexander, Esquire, is the national coordinator for community-based ministries with National Ministries of American Baptist Churches USA, and also the executive director for the American Baptist Homes and Hospital Association. She also coordinates the ministry portfolio for Neighborhood Action Program, which consists of 21 Christian community centers throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. And they provide a variety of social services to the surrounding communities.

Reverend Alexander is from Missouri, where she practiced law for five years with the Missouri Attorney General's office before moving to the East Coast to attend seminary. She's an ordained minister serving on the Ministerial Leadership Team with Saints Memorial Baptist Church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania and is a recent breast cancer survivor who describes herself as healthy, happy and healed.

Please welcome Aundreia Alexander.

REV. AUNDREIA ALEXANDER, ESQ.:

Good evening. And thank you all for battling the weather to come on out anyway. . . . I am a breast cancer survivor, thriver — happy and whole. I completed treatment in June of 2005. . . .

A few years ago, Living Beyond Breast Cancer [held] a conference on targeted therapies. I thought that was pretty interesting, understanding how personalized-treatment impacts one's life. It was at a full day conference with several activities going on. One of the sessions was "Targeted Therapies: Understanding How Personalized Treatment Impacts Your Life." I thought it was so interesting that under targeted therapies, there was a subject dealing with faith and spirituality.

As a Christian minister and a person of faith, I've always connected my faith to my overall well-being. I was pleasantly surprised to see Living Beyond Breast Cancer make that connection. One's spiritual well-being is a key factor in living with an illness and will have a great impact on healing, recovery and even dying well. In other words, faith does matter.

It's interesting because you might think faith matters — I think faith matters. But finally it was confirmed, because Newsweek said it: In 2003, there was an article in Newsweek [that quoted] people in the medical field. [Those quoted said] . . . faith in God during a time of illness greatly contributed to patients' recovery rates. In fact, that article indicated that 84 percent of Americans polled believed that praying for the sick improved their chances of recovery.

Medical schools now offer courses on faith and healing, and they're incorporating the understanding of faith and its impact on healing into curriculums. I actually have a friend who just finished a doctorate program where she made that connection between faith and healing. One of the things her organization does is meet with doctors and talk to them about . . . faith.

I want to talk a little bit about . . . religious faith, because . . . we all have faith in something. There are some people who have faith in the mighty dollar, which is not too strong right now. But what [medical schools have] learned, and what they're doing now, is talking with doctors to help [increase understanding of] how sometimes health-related issues are so [directly] affected by spirit[ual belief and practice] and vice-versa, and how you can understand and see certain signs [that a connection to faith and a faith-based community benefits health].

My pastor is originally from Jamaica, and in Jamaica many of the churches, Baptist churches in particular, have healing ministries. He tells of . . . one woman whose blood pressure was just rising

and rising and . . . they couldn't figure out what was going on. . . . So her doctor said to her, "You know, I've done everything I can. Go see your minister." . . . The minister, in talking with her, got out of her [exactly what was causing her so much stress. She told her minister] . . . she was really sad and upset because she wanted to visit her daughter who was in the United States. She couldn't get a visa [so she couldn't visit her daughter]. [The minister] listened and found out, okay, we need to get you a visa. They got the visa. Her blood pressure dropped.

It was a health-related issue that was directly impacted by circumstances in her life. So understanding that connection [is important when managing health]. The more we understand it ourselves, the more we can be proactive in our own health-related issues. Simply stated, having faith and nurturing one's spirit improves one's attitude and sense of well-being, which has a positive impact on one's recovery.

Now, as I said earlier, we can have faith. Faith has many different focuses. You can have faith in [a religious practice, or something unrelated to spirituality]. Some people have faith in money. But I want to talk about three particular areas of faith here today: faith in ourselves, faith in others, and faith in God. . . .

I have a question. How many of you . . . are currently going through [treatment], have been through [treatment]? . . . [Are] you two years out? Three years? Nine years? All right. Okay. I will try to work this around and deal with where we are [in the treatment process] and how we can be with [ourselves and others]. Okay?

One of the things that's extremely important — and it's difficult. When you're going through . . . any kind of serious, major . . . life-changing issue, one thing that's extremely important is to be able to . . . connect to that core inner thing in you . . . — it's the gut. . . . Acknowledging that . . . you know the right thing to do. We don't always think we do.



I remember going through my [cancer] treatment. When I was initially diagnosed ... my thought was, okay, just cut them both off. Cut them. Get rid of them. I don't need it, you know. I only had a lump in one [breast. But] I was pretty confirmed. I just decided, "I'm having a mastectomy."

[Then] I had a meeting with some girlfriends of mine. We were ... all in New York at a friend's house ... sitting around the table. They hadn't seen me since the diagnosis, and they were all being very gentle with me. And I ... [said], "I'm going to have a mastectomy, and then I can get a tummy tuck." ... Then they were all volunteering to donate fat for the tummy tuck. [Laughter] So I just knew that's what I was going to do.

And when it came down to the visit with my surgeon ... one of my friends who was at that table with us was with me [when I met with my surgeon]. We came in [to the appointment together], we sat down and we talked [with the surgeon]. And he said, "So, what do you want to do?" I said, "I'll have the lumpectomy." And [my friend] looked at me and she said, "I knew you knew that was the right thing. You just knew it." And I did. I didn't second-guess it ... even though I'd gone through all of that process [ing of what my final decision would be]. But my gut said, "That's going to be all right."

... So ... having faith [is about feeling as if you are] ... in control. ... One thing I've gotten out of having gone through [cancer treatment while drawing on my faith] is I feel so much more in control of my life. Aundrea makes Aundrea's decisions. ... [Before my cancer treatment, there was] ... a particular time [when] I used to feel like I wavered a lot. I'm one of the most indecisive people [when] trying to decide on things: ... "Do I want the vegetable sandwich or the turkey?" [Laughter] But on those major issues of life, I did find that I can make those decisions, and I'm going to be all right.

But ... it's also important to accept and acknowledge that we need to have faith in others. We don't have all of the answers. Being able to have doctors or advisors ... that you can trust them ... [and] have faith in them. [Medical decisions are still] your decision[s], but [it's important to] surround yourself with people you have faith in, even your family and friends. ... [People] who can be supportive of you and help you. [It's grounding] if you're able to have the right people around you, [people you can] ... trust ... to at least give you the right information.

And if you don't feel that way, especially when it comes to doctors or people who are ... working with you and making various decisions [for you], then change [that situation]. I fired my primary care physician after I was diagnosed. I called the office. ... first of all, it took three days for the doctor to get back to me about my ultrasound. And that was not good. When I finally got her ... they decided, "Well, you need to go see a surgeon." I went through and did all that. I found a surgeon who would see me within 24 hours, which was great, because my referral process [would have normally slowed things down]. ... This was in July, and the [first office I called said], "We can see you in August." One of my friends said, "No, sweetie, that's not a good thing, because you're going to go crazy."

... So I called the doctor's office and said, "... I need a referral." ... This was one of those ... corporations where you have several doctors. And the woman [told] me, "Well, you need three days to get the referral." And I [told her], "No, no, no. You don't understand ... my life is about to fall [apart], and I just need [to see someone right away]." It was Friday, and the doctor wanted to see me on Monday. [She said] I [could] come pick up [the written referral] and ... she's giving me this big thing.

I decided if I just showed up at the office, they'd definitely give [the referral] to me. I drove there, which was a little ways away. I [showed up to pick up the written referral], and the woman just [was] not nice to me. I actually ended up in the parking lot literally sobbing, because ... I [couldn't] believe they [wouldn't help me solve this problem].

... When all was said and done, I wrote my doctor a five-page letter firing her. [I let her know] that I thought she was a great doctor, but that [her office wasn't meeting my needs] as a healthcare provider, start[ing] at the receptionist desk and all the way to whoever does everything that happens in that office. I delineated everything that had happened. ... She called me and said, "Thank you so much," because they had been having problems ... with this young woman — I think she was an office manager ... — but she never had details. Well, [that office manager] hadn't dealt with somebody who ... had a little bit of time on her hands and was a little frustrated.

So make sure you surround yourselves with people who are ... going to be the most helpful to you. ... all of you have gone through this before. But these are things that don't change. This [practice

of honoring yourself] is [important] in anything that we're going to be going through. And, again, understand that ... you're the one in control.

[Back to the types of faith]: ... there's faith in God ... I am a Christian. But I acknowledge and affirm that God does have many names. ... People express and relate to ... their faith, and various traditions and various experiences. So as we go through this, we'll be talking about faith from those various perspectives.

I want to talk about what faith is not, and particularly in this area of faith that comes from a religious perspective. Faith is not not being afraid. ... The fact that we can have faith doesn't mean that we're not going to have some fears and concerns. Faith is not not being angry. Faith doesn't mean we do not experience anger — anger with ourselves, anger with others and angry with God. In fact, [remember if you're angry with God], God can really handle it.

Faith doesn't mean that the journey will not have some rough spots. Faith is not magic[al] thinking — if you just think positively ... everything is going to be okay; if you pray the right way ... you're going to be healed. ... Yes, there are some miracles. But that's why they're called miracles, because we don't know why some [people] get healed or why some things happen to some [people] and some things happen to others. ... faith does not take those [unexplained happenings] out of the equation.

Faith is not a superpower strength. It's not like Wonder Woman's force field or Spiderman's web. I got so tired of people coming to me saying, "You'll be fine because you have your faith." It was like faith — and I live alone — faith didn't wash dishes. Faith didn't cook dinner. Faith didn't clean up when I didn't have any energy. I hate laundry anyway. And when I was going through my illness, I just had no strength. Faith was not doing my laundry. ... it's not this superpower strength that you just pull out of nowhere ... that's going to help you get through everything.

[Faith is] ... a good thing to have around, because what it is, is hope. Faith is believing something that has not yet manifest[ed], but you believe and you move and hope that it will happen. Living in the reality of what you can't see, getting to "okay" no matter what may happen. Faith is trusting a process. Faith is a journey and not a destination. It's an ongoing thing.

Let's talk about strengthening our faith and nurturing our spirit. Some of the traditional ways



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that we may be familiar with ... — prayer, meditation, devotion. And, again, I don't know about you guys, but I — since I've gone through my treatment [and dealt with it, I think, really well] ... I told my oncologist that I have this fear that I'm going to be walking down the street ... two, three years later. I'm just going to be walking and minding my own business. [Then it'll hit me, and] ... I'm just going to go, "Oh, my God, I had cancer!" and ... just fall [down]. And she said to me, "You know, that's pretty much what does happen." [Laughter] But, she said, "The good thing is, you're aware of it. So maybe you can actually do something to prepare yourself."

... You spend so much time going through it, that there's something to be said about having an opportunity to process what has happened. I think that [in] a ... life-threatening type of an illness or ... [a] major transition in one's life, you can gain from the reflection opportunity. ... [That] ... is what makes the journey worthwhile. Why go through this and not get anything out of it? [Laughter]

[In that reflection on my illness], ... one of the things I concluded is that I was angry with my body for violating me and betraying my trust. And to be really honest with you, I'm still [angry] with it. ... I've gained a lot of weight, because I felt like "you violated me anyway, so I can eat what I want to. I can exercise if I want. If I don't want to, I won't, because it ain't going to make no difference, and I'm going to do what I feel like." But I'm getting back to understanding also that it's a partnership, me and my body, and we have to honor each other. So I am in the process of forgiving my body for betraying my trust.

[Part of that forgiveness] is ... about strengthening my faith and nurturing the spirit. Like I said, some of the traditional ways that we're pretty familiar with [are] prayer and meditation and ... reading of sacred text, fellowship in a faith community, or whatever [spiritual practices work] ... for you. ...

[Faith can be nurtured in nontraditional ways as well, such as] yoga, tai chi, spiritual body work. ... I see a masseuse. [Jackie is] an ordained minister in the Lutheran church with an emphasis in counseling. When you go to see her, she talks with you. ... When you walk into the place, it's so peaceful. She has a little dog, Angel. Angel greets you if you have a good spirit. [Laughter] Jackie does really wonderful body work. And when I say body work — [there was a time when] I was not

familiar with the phrase. The very first time I went to see her ... was before I was diagnosed [with cancer], but I was going through some other really serious issues. My family was going through some real hard issues at the time. And I went to see her because I just thought, "I need a massage."

She talked and prayed with me. She did my massage [matching essential oils ... to my] issues. She uses the right oils for all those things. When she finished my massage and left the room, I sat and cried for half an hour, because all of [these emotions were] released out of my body. I have found that [when I see her more often, I feel that I am releasing more of my negative emotions, rather than storing them up.]

Our bodies maintain our memory. I was talking to ... a friend of mine recently, and she said another friend of hers [told] her, "Do you know you get sick around Christmas every year?" And she said, "No. What do you mean?" She said, "You do." And she said, "I hadn't thought about it." But then she began to think about it. If you all remember the [jet crashing near the town of] Lockerbie [on the Scottish border http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthistday/hi/dates/stories/december/21/newsid_2539000/2539447.stm] back in 1988 ... Her son was on that plane, and [the crash occurred] right around Christmastime. He was coming from Germany, [where he was visiting] her older son. He was her youngest child. She said, "I had never thought about it." And I said, "You didn't think about it, but your body remembers."

Body work really will help us deal with some of the [traumas] our body remembers. It can be done in a variety of ways. ... It can be just regular massage [that releases emotions]. But, in [my personal situation], what Jackie does as a masseuse, [and] the fact that she brings these other gifts [of counseling and use of essential oils], I feel very refresh[ed]. She's connecting, for me, in a spiritual way, bringing some things [out], to work their way through my body. [For some people], it might be acupuncture or [other forms of body work that help bring emotions out]. ... So there are a variety of different ways to think about it. A lot of times we think so much about our head. [Therapy can help too.] ... But a lot of times our body is holding ... trauma ...

I found this place that is an awesome retreat/spa. I went on vacation there this year. ... I thought I needed a retreat, but I kind of wanted some spa [time], and I really wanted some

girlfriend time. So I ended up going to this ... retreat/spa place with one of my girlfriends. It's called St. Joseph's Institute [<http://www.stjosephsinstitute.com>]. ... It's right outside of State College, [Pennsylvania]. It's beautiful — just your traditional retreat setting. I shouldn't even say traditional, because they have cabins, but the [cabins are] like little cottages. ... [You can choose whether or not you want a TV in your cottage.] They [will] take it out. [The food is] all very healthy, but it's good food — it's not like you're eating tree bark. ... They have a cookbook. Everything they cook, you can find in their cookbook.

They also do massages. You can speak to ... a spiritual director if you like. And then they do ... alternative kinds of body work. Like I had this [body work done that incorporates sounds]. I feel really bad because I can't remember what it's called — but this woman ... talks about how our body responds to sounds. ... She has this training where she uses various tools that [are intended to] connect the various sounds in your body. And I actually had it done. I don't know what the heck they're doing, but I felt relaxed when she was finished. [Laughter] It's almost like ... she hits you with these little things and it does something inside. It's like Reiki when you're massaging the feet, but it impacts all these internal parts of your body. So, [sometimes it helps to] just find something out there that does something different, [something] that is beyond our traditional understanding of things.

The next area that I'd like to talk about is [creating a sacred space for prayer or meditation]. ... I have this group of girlfriends. ... There are about ten or 11 of us. But when I got diagnosed, sitting at that table with them that night when I decided I was going to have the mastectomy and a tummy tuck, the other thing I was thinking that I wanted to move into a bigger place. And they said, "Well, why do you want to move?" I didn't know why I wanted to move. I have a small apartment, and I thought, well, when people come visit me there won't be any space for them. ... We all know now that you don't make any major decisions in your life while you're going through anything like this, other than decisions related to the illness. Because you just make all kinds of crazy decisions. ... So, they come and talk to me. [One friend], the one that actually [has a] doctorate in the spirituality in physical health stuff — [her name is] Sucié's Filipino. She's just beautiful. We also call



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Sucie “Mama Sue,” because she runs everything. And she [said], “Honey, I don’t think you need to move.” And I was like, “Okay.”

[My girlfriends] came to my house one Saturday, and we had what I call a “Trading Spaces” moment. They created sacred space for me. I never would have been able to do this for myself. They moved the furniture. One person clean[ed] the kitchen and cleaned out the refrigerator and that kind of stuff. . . . I have a rocking chair in one corner of my bedroom. Mama Sue said, “This is your sacred space, this spot. It’s not for you to sit and watch television. This is not where you — you know. And she was really particular about it. “This is what you’re supposed to do.” And I had a little healing garden with the little water [fountain] and all that right near my little sacred space.

I don’t sit there often, but it’s there. I get a certain sense of peace because it’s there. . . . So it’s still my sacred space. I think it’s important . . . [for] whatever you’re going through in life . . . to have a sacred space, and protect it. It’s your sacred space.

I have a friend whose mother died a couple of years ago. She was telling me about a cousin who invaded the family. She’s one of those family members that [showed up], uninvited, and wouldn’t leave. . . . I don’t understand stuff like this, because I was like, “Why don’t you all just say, ‘Well, sweetie, it’s time to go?’” . . . Or you all could pitch in and get her a plane ticket. . . . But one of the things that she did is — and when [my friend] told me [about this] . . . I can feel her pain — this cousin sat in the chair that had been her mom’s, and wrapped herself in her mother’s blanket. That’s when the family found a way to tell her she had to go, which is good, because she violated that space. . . . But we all deserve to have that special space that just yours. And like I said, protect it.

[It’s important to develop and nurture] a sacred circle [as well]. Call it what you will, Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, The Ya-Ya Sisterhood, The Joy Luck Club. I’ll say “sister circle.” It doesn’t . . . have to be gender-exclusive, although I like the idea of just having the girls. One of my friends’ husbands said we should include men in our group. I said, “No, you need to get your own friends.” [Laughter] We can all do stuff together, but then there are things that we are only going to do and [men] cannot come. So he had to just accept that.

But the important thing about the sister circle, again, it’s a sacred circle. You need different people to be in it . . . you can’t just have a bunch

of people who are just your “We all think alike. We all act alike. We all believe everything alike.” Certain categories, I think, are kind of good people to have. The poor baby person: That’s the one . . . friend who actually will say it. She says, “Baby, do you need a ‘poor baby’? Is this a ‘poor baby’ moment?” . . .

You need someone who has the gift of presence, a person who knows how to just be there [without violating] your space. I had a friend in seminary and we were roommates. . . . It’s so funny how close we ended up being, because she had been there all year [and] when I moved in that weekend . . . I [remember complaining] . . . “She took up all the bathroom space. She doesn’t want to share.” [Laughter] Well, I found out she didn’t realize I was moving in.

One of the things that we had that was . . . wonderful is literally just a ministry of presence. I remember her knocking at my door one day. We moved into an apartment complex that the seminary owned. All of us moved out of that particular dorm, and she lived right down the hall. She . . . knocked on my door, and I opened it. She came in and she sat on my couch. I sat next to her, and she cried. When she finished, I hugged her and kissed her, and she got up and left. I don’t know what was wrong. But she didn’t say, and I figured she didn’t want to say. . . .

Likewise, when my father died, which was a major shock, she was one of several people who literally just . . . came into my apartment and packed my clothes. They took out stuff and said, “This is what you’re going to wear to the funeral, okay?” And I said, “Okay.” . . . That was [an example] of somebody who knows how to just be present.

A drill sergeant — we all need a drill sergeant in our lives. Somebody who, when you think you need a ‘poor baby’ moment and they [tell you], “No, you need to get up off your butt!”

All of these people should be confidants. But that’s not always everybody’s gift. So you need a confidant. . . . One of the things that’s very dangerous when you’re going through . . . anything: If we’re not careful, [and we focus to intently on] just living our lives on a daily basis, you can become very isolated. . . . We can cover stuff that we don’t want anybody to know. But there should be somebody who’s close enough — it may be a spouse, but sometimes it’s a girlfriend — who you can share things with. [Someone] who won’t judge [you], or, even if it is crazy they’ll

just say, “Girl, that’s crazy,” . . . but they [I’ll still] . . . be there with you.

I have one friend [who is very honest]. . . . Sometimes I’m afraid of what she’s going to say. She says, “Well, I could tell you anything.” [I agreed], “Yeah, you could tell me anything.” But we have to have that person we just have that confidence in. [That person who] . . . can maintain your confidence, but you can share, the things you really need to do.

. . . Having developed this sacred space and your sacred circle, you know what? . . . [The next piece of advice is to] just live. . . . I say live, love and laugh. We have to realize that having cancer or caring for somebody with cancer and living beyond cancer is serious. But lighten up. . . . I have a really great sense of humor, and it really works for me. . . . I mean, yes, there were times when I’d be at home and I’m crying about something, [and then another thought would come up] . . . and I just cracked myself up. They told us we would lose hair. . . . You all . . . expected to lose your hair, right? Did you all know that . . . you [would] lose your pubic hair? I had no idea. I mean, it was just the dumbest thing. But all you ever see is the top of people’s heads, right? So . . . here I am with this great bikini wax, and I’m alone. I have nobody to practice to see if all the rumors are true.

. . . My family is pretty crazy too. I emailed my family when I got diagnosed. I have a huge family. My immediate family is . . . two brothers and a sister from my dad’s previous marriage. . . . my brothers and my mom, they were all pretty good. But the larger family — my mother [is] one of 11. It’s a clan, okay? And the clan feels they all have a right to know everything. . . . The clan got upset because they felt I was trying to hide [my diagnosis from them], because they were hearing [it from other people and not from me]. . . .

So I finally sent out this huge-group family e-mail [that said], “Look. I haven’t been hiding anything. I just didn’t know, and I wanted to wait until I had all the information before I shared everything.” . . . So I kind of told them “this is what’s happening, this is what’s going to happen. And this is what I need from you.” . . . I said to them . . . “Keep in touch. Make me laugh, because you all are really funny. And if it’s not funny, do not bother me with it.” . . . One of my cousins who I’m very close to . . . told me . . . “I was a little worried and I hadn’t — I didn’t want to — I know you worry because you haven’t heard from me, but I just didn’t know what to do and I just want to



take time." I said, "That's fine. Take the time you need. But, you know, make it quick, because I need you ... because you're one of the funniest people in the family."...

... I remember having a conversation with her on my way to chemo, which I also called being microwaved. And I said, "I'm on my way to get microwaved." And she said, "Are you done yet?" I said, "Nope, three more weeks to go." ... I mean, that's what it is. And chemo — just think about it. Chemo ... that toxic waste is healing you. ... So that's what I called it, toxic waste. ... When I lost my hair, my mom asked me — I was talking to her on the phone and she said, "So, how is it?" I said, "Fine." I said — we call my brother Champ — I said, "I look just like Champ, except I'm cuter," [Laughter] because ... he's bald. ... But [the best way I found to get through it is] ... just this way ... seeing it for what it is and finding ways to laugh.

One of my colleagues gave me a book called *Laughing Out Loud*. ... I carried that thing from my bed to the bathroom ... where and I would just read different stories in it. And it really kept me going. So just find a way to lighten up. Be creative. ... Eat what you want. Drink what you want. Dance and play. [Laughter] ... it is important for us to live a healthy life ... we just get all caught [up in how serious the situation is. But we also need to] realize that life is short, even if you live to be 99, you know? Just find a way to enjoy [life right now. One good way to do that is to] find [your] creative gene. I actually was in a writing class for a while, and ... I found it really nurturing. Write, paint, take up a new hobby, cook, play an instrument. Just do something that nurtures [you], something inside of you that you didn't know was there before, [or that you know is there but have set aside].

One book that I found well before having gone through my breast cancer is *The Artist's Way* ... by Julia Cameron [<http://us.penguin.com>]. ... I started giving it away as gifts for people who were going through [cancer treatment]. One friend tells me every time she sees me how this book changed her life. ... I gave it to her when she was diagnosed, [and] actually before I was [diagnosed]. [At the time] ... she was out on medical leave and going through her treatment. [While reading that book] ... she reclaimed her gift of painting and art. She hadn't done [either one] in years. I saw [art] pieces that she did, and they [are so amazing, they could] be [displayed] in art galleries. It started with her

just ... following some of the [steps] in this book. It's like a workbook. She's [also] written a play. ... It was like her cancer was this great opportunity for her to reclaim some parts [of herself] and discover [others].

I told you a little earlier a little bit about my story, and I'd like to summarize it a little bit. [I think detailing my story will help to tie together] this whole idea of faith in ourselves, [in] others and in God. As I've said, I live alone. I'm single [and] ... even though I'm very family-oriented my biggest fear was that if something were to happen to me, there would be nobody to take care of me. ... I thought that was going to happen when I [became] elderly. ... I'm afraid I'm going to be a little old lady that nobody [will] come to visit. ... and [that] if [I] didn't give enough gifts to [my] nieces and nephews, they may not [visit when I'm older].

[But when I reached a time in life where I had to face those fears, and I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was only] 43. And so that idea of someone taking care of you or care of me became much more real ... at that point in time. But what I discovered was that I could take care of myself, and that others would take care of me. That I could make decisions, and that I was very strong. So it was [in] this way that this experience offered me these great opportunities.

I learned also during that time ... that I could have faith in others, [but I need to see people as they are and not how I want them to be]. But I also acknowledged that people can only do what they can do. I have one friend, and ... we'd talk about how she will write her own dramas and miscast all the characters, and then get upset because people don't play their roles well. [Laughter] You know what I'm saying? I have this one friend who ... wants her husband to be a certain person. He ain't. He has not been [that person she wants him to be] for the 15 years [she has] known him. And he's [never] going to be. [You can have your needs met for a specific type of person within your sister circle, or your family, or other people in your life. But ... I told my friend that] if [she] keeps trying to cast [her husband] in that role, he's going to continue to fail, and the movie just ain't going to be good.

So, [it's important to] acknowledge that people [can] only do what they can do. And that [realization] was really empowering. ... It doesn't make any sense to get upset with [someone for something] they can't do [if that doesn't fit who

they are. But there is a skill in seeing that] ... thin line between can't and won't. But, again, [seeing the difference between "can't and won't"] doesn't help you, especially. And I'm not even talking about in the illness now, because you can create an illness. You can make yourself ill trying to make life to be ... a certain way [if that way is] just not [how it's naturally] going to be.

I have a really fun story about how people can only do what they can do. I call it gumbo-gate. Gumbo-gate stars my friend Cynthia. Cynthia's one of the women in the girlfriend group, and we were roommates in New York. Cynthia ... is an artist. She was an actress, and she wrote plays. She's a great cook. ... she just kind of has this very regal way [about her]. I really admire her. She's a wonderful and beautiful woman. So there were six or seven of us ... sitting at the table in New York, and ... interesting[ly] enough, we're all ministers, [except for] Cynthia. Cynthia — and I appreciate this from her — Cynthia is the avowed non-Christian [at the table]. ...

So she said, "Well, Aundrea, you need to just tell us what you need because you don't know how to tell people what you want." And I said, "Oh, thank you so much." ... then later on, after we were all dispersed ... she called me one day, and we were talking. And she said, "So, what can I do?" I said, "You know what, Cynthia? I really want to take care of myself, and it's important that I eat healthy." I said, "Could you make me some vegetable gumbo?" She [has a recipe for] really awesome vegetable gumbo. So, she says, "I can do that." I said, "Okay." This [happened in] October [or] November.

Cynthia was in the process of doing some work on her brownstone in New York so she could sell it. So, come January, I hadn't had any gumbo. So I said ... "Cynthia, remember you asked me what [I wanted], and I told you I wanted some gumbo? ... Do you think you could give me some gumbo?" So she e-mailed me, and said she's going through a lot, and ... "This is the best I can do," and she sends me the recipe for the gumbo.

Now, this is [a recipe for a] really authentic, serious gumbo. The recipe's like three pages long. [Laughter] So, at this point, I am fat, bald and full of toxic waste. I ain't got energy to try to make gumbo. So I ... e-mail[ed] her and [said], "You know, Cynthia ... as the saying goes, food is not just about a recipe. It's about the flavor in the pot. So are you trying to tell me that I can't get gumbo from your pot? I can wait. I know you're going



through something right now." She e-mails me back, and says she'll do the best she can. And she let me know that I was being rather selfish right now, given all that is on her plate. Remember, I'm bald, fat and full of toxic waste. And she's trying to sell her house. And I understood.

Bottom line is I never got gumbo from Cynthia's pot. Cynthia and I are still friends. She sold her brownstone. Unfortunately, she bought a house in New Orleans two weeks before Hurricane Katrina, but she also has a home in Mexico. I visit her in Mexico. We get along fine, because I realize that she just couldn't do it. I also realized later — it took me a while to make the connection, and I don't think she had made the connection — Cynthia's mother died of breast cancer. So she was as supportive as she could be. But the gumbo-gate became a really interesting story, and to me a lesson on what people can do.

So, having faith in others [is important], I've learned. But ... understanding what people can do is a whole other issue. And ... for me ... my faith in God was enhanced and grew in magnificent ways. In spite of going through this, I did not feel forsaken or left alone, but in many ways I felt that I was experiencing God's presence in a really profound way.

Two particular scriptures were something that I [drew on during my treatment] ... and were very strong for me. ... One was Psalms 41:3, that says, "The Lord sustains them on their sick bed. In their illness, you heal all their infirmities." ... I remember finding that scripture ... after I got my first sign that there may be a problem. ... I was ... really upset, and I [turned] to scripture to find something, and this is what I received. It helped me understand that this illness was not just a physical illness. That's why all the things we talk about, about nurturing one's spirit — which is greater and broader than your mere faith tradition — [focus on] a holistic approach. But there was something that could be gained ... a much broader perspective than just getting through breast cancer. [The second scripture I used during treatment was] ... out of Joshua, and it says, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for your God is with you." So I knew that my God was with me, and [that] God was manifest in the face and the hands and the involvement and the connection of others who were friends and family, who were there to rally with me. ...

I'm opening it now for questions. ... This is an intimate group, and if you've found some ways that either during your journey, going through [diagnosis and treatment] or since [your treatment ended] ... I'd like to open it up, [and give you the] opportunity [to share some of your experiences].

WOMAN:

I'm originally from Nigeria. And I've been in the United States since 1970. I'm [a] Seventh Day Adventist member, and I believe in God. ... Even before the diagnosis, I know it is the power of the Lord that's [helped me to be] so forceful with the doctors. Because I remember when I went, I saw ... [on] my nightgown. I saw some little pin-head [sized], you know, about four of them from my nightgown. [It] was blood. So I first thought maybe I scratched it. I first noticed it in October. So I thought "maybe I've scratched it." So I didn't pay any mind.

Then, in March of the following year, I felt the same thing. So I went to my doctor. When I went to the OB/GYN doctor, then we check[ed my breasts and] he said, "Oh, maybe it's ... [an] infection, because you don't have issue of cancer in your family. You don't have this, you don't have that ... but I don't think it's cancer. Let's see. Let me give you antibiotics." So when he said that, I said, "Oh, no. I don't want antibiotics ... because [about] ten years before they did the biopsy on this one ... [It turned out, he was trying to save me the pain of another test. So, I said] "Yeah, I don't mind going through the pain."

So he gave me — just to know the Lord is good — he gave me the name of the doctor to go to [for a mammogram]. ... So when I went to that office, that was in March, the lady told me they can't see me until June. So then I [decided to just go home. But something in me said], "No, go back to the OB/GYN doctor." And I know that was the Lord directing me.

So I went to the ... doctor, [and he] said, "I didn't send you to that [doctor]." So he wrote the other name, [and] I went back [and I started at the] nurse's station. ... I went to the doctor and [said I] need [a] doctor right there. ... I saw the secretary and said, "I want to see Dr. Whitman, if not today, before the end of the week." And they look[ed] at me, [shocked, and asked, "What?"] But the doctor was right there at the desk, too. ... Then the doctor said, "Okay. Give her an appointment. I'll see her on Wednesday." ... So I went there on Wednesday, [and they] ... did the

— they did the mammogram. They did the — which one is that, ultrasound?

REV. AUNDREIA ALEXANDER, ESQ:

Ultrasound?

WOMAN:

Everything normal. But the Lord told me not to take it that way. So when they said "everything normal," I said, "Ten years ago, maybe 12 years ago, I did something, they [had] me do [a] biopsy ... I want that done [again]." The doctor said, "Okay. Let's make an appointment." So ... that Friday, [the same week as my first appointment] ... they did the thing. ... the hospital couldn't diagnose it. They [had] to send it to a ... lab. ... So when [the results came back] ... I went to see my surgeon. ... He said, "I'm so sorry, and I'm so happy you [were so] persistent. It came out to be cancer. But it is the DCIS, ductal carcinoma in situ ... But it's not too bad. If you [have to have cancer] this a good one [to have]." I said, "None of them [are] good. So, what do we do?"

[And, on the subject of] taking care of your own treatment — [during my treatment], the radiologist said ... [with] this kind of cancer you don't need radiation. Then the medical oncologist said, "I need to do my best" ... I'm a nurse, too. So I read the [information on my condition and my treatment plan, and] I told them ... "Okay, let me just [get a] second opinion." So I went to Johns Hopkins [http://www.hopkinshospital.org/health_info/Cancer] ... [and read the] the literature. So you may need [the additional information and second opinions, or], you may not. ...

... just to say how the Lord is powerful — I go to Johns Hopkins to see [a] medical oncologist. I always tell this story any time I have the opportunity. The medical oncologist told me that I need ... medication. He advised me to take it. I said, "Okay, I'll take it." Then he [asked] me ... "Are you in a hurry?" I said, "No." He said, "Because I want to call my colleague who's a [radiation oncologist], to see whether you need the radiation or not." [It's so uncommon for something like that to happen during a medical appointment. Usually] ... you see one specialty doctor, make an arrangement for you to see somebody else the same day. ... I just [knew] the Lord [was] on my side.

So, anyway, [the radiation oncologist talked to me on the phone and said] ... I need[ed] both [medication and radiation]. So I've been taking



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Arimidex. . . . In November, [I will have been taking Arimidex] for three years. . . . This March . . . will be [my] fourth year [since my diagnosis]. . . . [The experiences I had during this process made] me understand that when the Lord is on your side, no matter what you're going through. . . . He give you that strength and [that] knowledge.

So, my doctor[s], they all apologize. The radiologist apologized. The OB/GYN apologized. And the surgeon apologized. So, just like you said, you just have to be able to [have faith in] and be in charge of yourself.

REV. AUNDREIA ALEXANDER, ESQ:

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. Anyone else, or any questions? . . .

Well, thank you. And you all [have] my benediction and prayer for each of you. May the windows of Heaven open and pour upon you an abundance of blessings, and may God's holistic peace be with you, also known as shalom.

[Applause]

KATHLEEN KELLY:

Thank you so much, and thank you all for coming tonight.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]