

Reeya Khurana



5153 Balch Hall • Ithaca, NY 14853 • Phone: (860) 372-8119 •
E-Mail: rk425@cornell.edu

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Ms. Audre Lorde
Author of The Cancer Journals

Dear Ms. Lorde:

My name is Reeya Khurana and I am a freshman studying Policy Analysis & Management at Cornell University. Although, my career interests lie within the field of healthcare and healthcare reform, as well as the continual betterment of public health, I am currently taking a writing class called Dimensions of Cancer. In this class I am doing a project on the portrayal of cancer in media specifically in books, movies, and in the news. Thus, while doing research for my project I came across The Cancer Journals. I was inspired by your work because it is a representation of an honest experience in which you discussed how having cancer essentially shaped your identity. However, I have some questions for you in regards to some details mentioned in the piece.

But before I discuss what questions I have in regards to your work, I would like to explain to you why I chose this project. In the summer between 8th and 9th grade, I was informed that there was a nodule growing on the right side of my thyroid and if it was not removed immediately then possible thyroid cancer may result. Although I instantly got half of my thyroid removed that summer and was left with a scar across the edge of my neck, it took me 3 years before I took anyone outside of my immediate family about my experience. This realization quickly got me to understand that you can never really tell when someone is going through something serious because people differ based on what experiences they choose to share and what they choose to deal with alone. My question quickly became why did I choose to not share my experience for 3 years? Was I ashamed or scared or felt as if I was being judged? No, not really, I didn't really feel any of those things but for some reason I just chose not to tell anyone, not even my closest friends. Even when they asked about the scar on my neck, I made up a story I would tell them each time someone asked. Consequently, I chose this project because when a story is created or already exists, I want to be able to understand what goes through a director, an author, or a news broadcaster's mind when they choose to share certain details of their story or choose not to disclose them.

Thus, the first question I have for you is what made you want to share your story or write a book about your experience to the public? Some of the details you specifically talked about such as waking up in the recovery room after the breast cancer biopsy, discussing the decision to get the mastectomy done, and how you felt after the post-mastectomy. I understand that you talked about having a support network of other women, but I am curious as to whether you truly shared all of your feelings with them and if you did decide to hold anything back? If so, what made you hold back? Did the barrier of trust make the decision difficult of whether you should've been completely open with your support network? You talked about you being a feminist and a lesbian and how that caused implications on your understanding of yourself, did that confusion get cleared up after you opened up a bit with support network? I am curious as to how open you were with your support network because as I mentioned before I was not so open with even my closest friends for a while. It took a long time before I could tell them the truth about where my scar came from. So I am wondering if it was a similar experience for you. I am aware that when you were first diagnosed you were already divorced from your ex-husband, Edwin Rollins, but did the thought ever cross your mind how your relationship with him would have changed post-mastectomy if you were still in a relationship? How would the relationship differ with being with a man vs. a woman? My guess is that maybe a woman has



the ability to better understand what you went through but gaining your opinion on this I'm sure would help me understand the decisions better.

Additionally, I know in The Cancer Journals, you discussed how you refused to wear a prosthesis that would've essentially hidden the fact that you had experienced what you did. The reasoning for not using them was discussed very briefly so I was just wondering if you could expand on your choice to choose to not use prosthesis. Also, if suppose you had chosen to wear them, how do you think the reactions of society would have been different post the procedure? I find it very interesting that you chose not to cover up the procedure because I still remember that a couple days after I got my surgery done, there was a party at one of my family friends house, where all my closest friends and their parents would be. And I remember how the week before I got my surgery done, I bought a new shirt that I really wanted to wear this party. But my mom refused to let me wear the shirt because my stitches and the scar were clearly visible when I was wearing the shirt. So rather than getting to wear that shirt, I had to wear a hoodie. I remember how uncomfortable I felt hiding my scar; did you think you would've felt that way if you had chosen to use prosthesis? I also felt even more embarrassed by my scar because I kept questioning why I had to hide it from people who claim they care so much about me, did you feel like you would feel the same if you had chose to cover up the only symbol of your surgery?

Furthermore, one thing you said really stuck with me during my project, which was, "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak." I think this is an accurate reflection of my personal experience because I realized only after 3 years that each time someone asked me about my scar during those three years, that the same feeling of anxiety and being afraid that I felt, I also felt when after 3 years I told people the real truth about what happened. And by the time I realized the feelings were the same, so much time already passed by and I began to question what the point was to hide my experience. And after reading this quote by you in The Cancer Journals, was it only when I realized what makes people hold back vs. sharing their experiences. It is the nerves of having that feeling of anxiety go away when you begin to tell people what happened because whether we choose to accept it or not, the experience did cause us to feel some anxiety and by letting go of that anxiety, that means we would officially move on from the experience. Ultimately, I think it is this reasoning that is why people choose to share or not share their experiences.

I want to thank you for sharing your experience with the world because along with having an impact on everyone who has gone through a similar experience, including myself, it also taught me the real reasoning of why I chose to pursue a project on the topic of the portrayal of cancer.

Sincerely,

Reeya Khurana