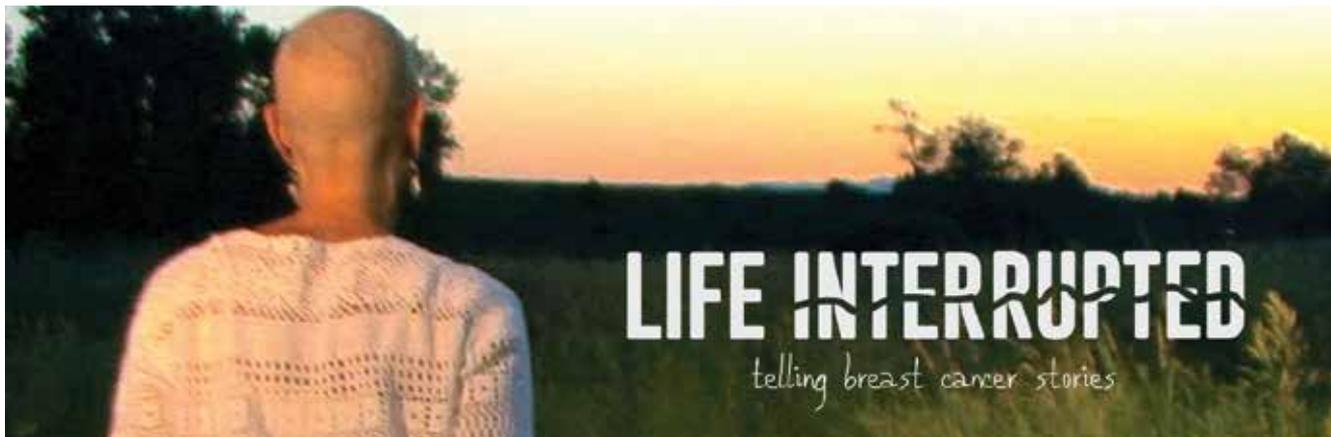


# Medicine on the big and small screen: Citizens of that other place: *Life Interrupted*

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## *Life Interrupted*

Produced and Directed by Paula Mozen. Copyright 2018.

Running time 60 minutes. Blu Ray DVD, DCP. Website <http://www.lifeinterruptedfilm.com>.

During most of the 20th century, public testimonies, open discussions, and published narratives about breast cancer were unthinkable. What became known as the breast cancer movement was first solidified with the publication of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, by the Boston Women's Health Collective in the early 1970s. It transformed the breast cancer conversation from relatively polite lobbying to a militancy in the early 1980s mirroring AIDS political activism.

In 1993, the international model Matuschka captured the next dynamic phase of the movement when she exposed her mastectomy scar on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in an aptly titled display of breast cancer exhibitionism, "You can't look away anymore."<sup>1</sup> The shocking image of an amputated breast and scarred chest immediately captured attention, launching a new political awareness and activism.

Matuschka had made a career and a commodity of her body as a lingerie model, go-go dancer, and photographer of what would now be called nude selfies. When she showed up breast-less in the *New York Times Magazine*, sharply violating common expectations of women's breasts

as visual fetish and sexual object, she immediately gave breast activism more than a face.

Matuschka's pictorial revelation of breast cancer came 10 years after the work of radical art photographer Jo Spence who began her own documentation of diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer with exhibits such as *Cancer Shock* in 1982, and *The Picture of Health* in 1986.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Spence's confrontational and often grotesque images of her own body, Matuschka deliberately exploited the iconography of the conventional visual arena displaying herself in the aesthetic tradition of the nude female figure and in the commercial attitude of the fashion model. Her particular kind of visual activism has inspired similar photographic displays and art projects including the Breast Cancer Fund's 2000 public awareness campaign, *Obsessed with Breasts*, in which breast cancer scars were super-imposed on professional models to mimic the advertising imagery of *Obsession* perfume and Victoria's Secret catalogues. In addition, *The Scar Project*, begun in 2011, launched a series of large scale nude portraits of women in various states of treatment for and recovery from breast cancer created by photographer David Jay.<sup>3</sup>

These still images, so critical for breast cancer education and advocacy, are now accompanied by a number of documentary films—predominantly personal narratives of suffering and resilience such as *My Left Breast* (2000); *Busting Out* (2004); *One Out of Eight* (2009); and *Chasing Sunshine* (2015). Two notable exceptions are *I Want So Much to Live* (2009), which memorializes the pioneering efforts of Genetech's development of Herceptin, the first targeted therapeutic for breast cancer, and *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* (2011), a powerful expose of how the fight against breast cancer underwent a radical transformation from health advocacy to consumer activism to corporate marketing.

Joining this growing list is the recent film, *Life Interrupted: Telling Breast Cancer Stories*. It is the story of the film's producer-director, Paula Mozen, who begins with her diagnosis in 2008, the moment when she is welcomed into what she calls, "the dreaded sisterhood" and "the club you never wanted to be a member of."

Standing relaxed in a natural setting and wearing a trendy jean jacket, Mozen directly addresses the viewer and shares the impetus for chronicling her own, and other women's, stories, "It is so important that those who are going through a cancer diagnosis do not feel alone," she tells the audience.

The strong, healthy, confident and attractive image of Mozen is in stark contrast to the opening shot of a lone, bald woman with her back to the camera poised on the edge of a vast landscape, her journey through breast cancer only beginning.

*Life Interrupted* is a conventional narrative documentary, but Mozen is intent on foregrounding diversity and inclusiveness in order to represent breast cancer as "an equal opportunity disease." The three main storytellers represent a range of ages, racial and ethnic identities, and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity is reinforced with arresting photographs and brief testimonials of women from across the globe, many of them speaking candidly about their physical and emotional trials and victories.

The first storyteller is Pat Bear, now in her 60s, who is a Gros Ventre Tribal Member in Montana. The eldest of 14 children, Pat was born in a tiny log cabin, a mere speck in the dazzling snow that blankets a barren and remote landscape.

The second is Debi Wood, a Black woman from a warm, loving and religious family in Ambler, Pennsylvania. A flight attendant, Debi was diagnosed at 34 years old with infiltrating ductal carcinoma, stage three.

Finally, there is Mozen's own story, the only daughter of political activists, a vegetarian since age 11, an athlete and a dancer, and an Ashkenazi Jew. When her mother is diagnosed at 66 with breast cancer, Mozen undergoes testing but is negative for BRCA1. However, her relief is short-lived, as when she is 49-years-old her life is interrupted by invasive lobular cancer, stage one.

Following diagnosis, each woman recounts the passages of illness, from finding treatment to undergoing surgery, radiation, chemotherapy to recovery. They describe the trauma of hair loss; the fog of chemo brain; the crisis of losing one's identity; the post-treatment depression; and the stigma of the disease with humor, grace, dignity, and above all, candor.

For Debi and Mozen, it is the recurrence of breast cancer that provokes the most intense emotional and psychological suffering. With two small children and a devoted husband who has been at her side since the initial diagnosis, Debi decides on a bilateral mastectomy.

Mozen is more conflicted. She feels betrayed by her body as if breast cancer had won, and she is unsure what to do including doing nothing. She ultimately decides on bilateral mastectomy, but reconstruction, which she blithely imagined as "beauty camp," becomes a harrowing experience fraught with complications, infections, and five additional surgeries.

*Life Interrupted* is neither a ground-breaking nor a call-to-action documentary. Its power comes from the simplicity and earnestness of its storytelling. It takes viewers along as three very different, but equally determined, women journey from one time and place to another. Mozen closes the film with the evocative words of Susan Sontag who wrote about her own experience with cancer:

Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.<sup>4</sup>

Mozen said that she wanted to make a film that she wishes she could have seen when she was diagnosed, a challenging and worthwhile place for a director-storyteller to begin. Present and future viewers will find the film informative and insightful, and for some, they will also feel a little less alone.

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