



# PAINTING A PATHWAY

For cancer survivor Michelle Potter, art has become an avenue of healing and transformation.

I walked into the doctor's office and she stood up from behind her desk. Without a word, she walked to me with tears in her eyes. I knew it; I just felt it in my heart but I was praying that she wasn't going to speak the words I didn't want to hear. "I'm so sorry," she said. "You have stomach cancer."

My life changed forever that day. Indigestion and reflux had been plaguing me for months but, at 39, I never imagined it would be something so sinister until a gastroscopy revealed a 6cm tumour in my stomach. I had never known anyone who had been diagnosed with stomach cancer, let alone survived.

It seemed as though history was about to repeat itself. I had lost my father to bowel cancer when I was six and now I was sharing his experience. I'd look at my sleeping children at night and feel an overwhelming sadness and heartache that my father must have also felt, realising he'd never see us grow up.

I cherished every moment with my family, not knowing if I, too, was heading into the same terminal diagnosis. Time became so precious. My husband became my carer, my strength and my rock. I only had one job: to get well. I was admitted for surgery, which included the complete removal of my stomach followed by months of healing, chemotherapy and radiation. The surgeon and oncologist were confident that all the cancer had been removed and now it was just a waiting game.

The average survival rate for stomach cancer patients is 4 per cent within the first five years. This meant, no matter how optimistic I was, there was a very high chance of having to come to terms with a possible secondary cancer diagnosis.

My total transformation of self began in the months after chemo. Grieving the loss of my old life and coming to terms with the physical and mental aspects of my situation took an enormous amount of strength and energy. The first year after surgery was incredibly difficult: learning how to eat again, managing the nutritional deficiencies that were now an everyday part of my life and staying on top of being a mum to my two primary-aged children.

I was determined to do everything I possibly could to evolve my mind, body and



spirit, so I began yoga and resumed my weekly meditation classes. I gave myself permission to grow. By tapping into my innermost thoughts and feelings through meditation and self-development classes, I was slowly able to redefine my personal boundaries and release old thought patterns. This process brought clarity and change into my life and allowed me to focus on those things that were going to bring me onto my true pathway of healing.

This is how I discovered the artist within. Now, just passing my fifth "cancersiversary", my artwork has become the most powerful healing tool that I've developed.

I had toyed with abstract acrylic art before my diagnosis with no real sense of direction or purpose. In early 2013, I was introduced to soft pastel by my much-respected art mentor, Lyn Whitty. I really needed structure and wanted to step out of my comfort zone to learn how to draw people and animals. In the first few months I practised weekly, reserving my fun messy pastels for my Wednesday morning class.

I finally set up a permanent corner in my living room so I could paint daily. The fact that I could take a picture and create something beautiful in a short timeframe really appealed. I'd get excited about starting another piece; the joy of feeding my inner child continued my momentum.

The more confident I became with my pastel work, the more confident and in tune I became with my intuition. My first commissioned Spirit Art Drawing was

in June 2013. Each spirit animal or guide that passes through my fingertips brings comfort, knowledge and healing to those who connect with me. I love that I am able to take a small piece of healing from each artwork for myself and the feedback I receive has confirmed that I have the ability to truly connect with spirit.

As my art evolved, I started taking on commissions for portraiture, my favourites being loved ones and pets that have passed over. It is such an honour to be able to capture someone's essence on paper to create lasting memories of love.

When I am creating an artwork, I am totally in the moment. I know through personal experience that nothing brings you back into your body quicker than pain or immersing

yourself in your passion. I know which one I'd rather experience! To me, art is so much more than visual. Being in that creative space gives my life balance and a chance to stop and just be. I am evolving from the inside out and that's reflected not only in my work but throughout my life.

Art has allowed me to explore ink, watercolour, acrylic paints and coloured pencils in a way I never thought possible. It feels like a healing dance; I can flow from one medium to the next and have several projects happening at once. It's a never-ending self-exploration of joy, fun, colour.

Deepak Chopra mentioned in one of his meditations, "According to Buddha, your purpose in life is to find your purpose and give your whole heart and soul to it. When we live in our alignment with that true purpose, our dharma will create a ripple of good that emanates from within, extending to everyone around us."

This beautiful creative space has helped me step into a life after cancer. It made me recognise that cancer did not define me; it was an experience I went through. It unlocked a door and helped me delve deep within to find my true self. Giving myself permission to grow and allowing feminine energy to flow has transformed the person I once was. I look forward to many more years of exploring, teaching and sharing my passion and love for art with others.

Nothing is impossible. I am living proof of that! 🍌

■ Find out more at [michellepotter.com.au](http://michellepotter.com.au).