

## Helping Elizabeth Edwards Make a Difference

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There has been too much publicity about Elizabeth Edwards' new book without making it clear how or why it might matter to the rest of us. I have listened to too many interviews where the focus is on John Edwards' affair, or on his "indiscretion," as Elizabeth prefers to call it. But there is little new here: from Clinton to Spitzer to many more, their spouses have repeatedly humiliated political wives. Interestingly enough, neither Elizabeth nor her interviewers seem ready to talk about her cancer, or death and dying. No surprise here.

But I think if Elizabeth has something important to offer at this moment it is just this: our responsibility to confront the horrifically difficult world of disease, and dying. Instead of thinking that her life is unique, we—all of us—healthy and sick, are just a lucky moment away from being tested. I wish she would make more of this precarious reality that we all inhabit.

It is compelling and important to know, think and wonder about the fact that Elizabeth Edwards is living with metastatic terminal breast cancer and has three children that she will leave behind. She has bravely put this out in the public market and we owe it to her and to ourselves to engage with an honest discussion about health, disease, and our precarious and broken medical system.

I am someone who was diagnosed with breast cancer when my daughter was three. Having already lost a young sister to breast cancer, I fought with everything I had to survive. I was lucky, until recently when I was diagnosed with an ovarian like tumor. It was removed. I did chemotherapy again. I am still determined to live but accept death as part of this bargain.

At this very moment I know five women who are waiting for their results from breast biopsies, and two women friends presently struggling through chemotherapy. I also know many people suffering from other diseases—mental and physical—Parkinson's, diabetes, AIDS, bipolar disorder, asthma, congestive heart disease, and so forth. Some can pay their bills and others cannot. Disease is as much a part of life as health. How can we allow our country to not have affordable and accessible health care?

As hard as cancer treatment can be, the ones who have access to it are most certainly still the lucky ones. At least we, the ones lucky enough to have insurance, have access to mammograms and MRI's, and biopsies that allow for early detection. Even if some of our cancers are not caught early, at least it was not the lack of medical care that caused this problem, but the complexity of finding the disease. Imagine being one of the millions of un-insured women who are unable to do any kind of preventive care? No pap smears. No mammograms. Imagine.

I want to use Elizabeth's celebrity status, and her own honest and public exposure of her struggle with cancer, and her openness of death as part of the process she faces now, to publicize what might make a difference. Every single person who should have a pap smear, a mammograms, an mri's should be able to easily obtain them. Hopefully she

will open this platform further, to fight for affordable health care for us all. It is time that the American public—which includes every one living in this country--had guaranteed and affordable health care.

Although I am writing about cancer, preventive and actual care is needed for all the diseases we as a population, suffer. Most disease is a random event. Why one person gets cancer and another not is more fickle than knowable. Yes, if you have the ability to be able to eat well, and live a healthy life style, you might dodge the bullet, but often only for a while. Otherwise cancer is a very democratic disease, afflicting anyone.

I am not a fan of political wives who suck up the pain of their marriages as though this is something that makes sense for them, or for any of us. But I would be a fan of Elizabeth's if she starts to speak up about the way this country bears the burden of its diseases. She, and we need to tell the health care planners in the Obama administration about how unfair deadly disease is, about how much she wants to live to be able to see and help her children grow, about how every person deserves the chance to fight with all their might to live. In order to do this, we need a health care system that insures that every person who should be screened is screened for the diseases that they can be saved from.

Thank you Elizabeth for eliciting this statement from me.

Zillah Eisenstein is the author of *MANMADE BREAST CANCERS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) among many other books. See her at [www.ithaca.edu/zillah](http://www.ithaca.edu/zillah) for other listings and articles.