

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: This is Cheryl Kennedy at the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 11th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival will be two days this year, Saturday 24th 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and Sunday September 25th 01:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Free and open to the public the festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall, Reiner Shine. For more details visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). Joining me is award winning broadcast journalist Hoda Kotb. His memoir is titled Hoda: How I Survived Warzones, Bad Hair, Cancer, and Kathie Lee. Ms. Kotb thank you so much for joining us.

>> Hoda Kotb: Hello Cheryl! How are you?

>> Cheryl Kennedy: I'm good. As testified in the title of your book, we all know that you are a survivor. How did being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007 give you the gift of fearlessness?

>> Hoda Kotb: You know it's a weird thing. Whenever I used to hear people say cancer gave me a gift, you know X, Y, or Z, I always cringed, Cheryl, I would feel like gifted you feel right even hear someone say that, but I think the funny thing is this when you are faced with, with your mortality and it happens to many of us even during the course of our lives, sometimes you curl up in the fetal position and you feel like it's all over, you just want to suck your thumb and the covers and you know call it a day and sometimes something else happens and for me one night I had a sort of an epiphany and forewords came to me and the forewords where this is again after I had my surgery after breast cancer and after I had recovered, the forewords were you can't scare me and I'll never forget that feeling because suddenly everything seems so small in my life that I had been previously worried about and what's interesting Cheryl is it around that time they were starting a new hour of the Today's Show, the fourth hour and I'd heard about it and I did something I had never done in my lifetime. I decided I was going to go to my boss and ask for something, I was one of those girls who always waited to be called on, waited to get noticed and I think you know what I'm going to go ask for this because I felt fearless, so I remember hitting 52 in the elevator bank that took me all the way to, way up to see Just Tucker, who at that the time was the head of [Inaudible] BC Universal and I walked in his office and if he was taken my pulse Cheryl, I would have been, I was so calm because it seemed so little to me to ask for something and with the help of a bunch of great producers and friends I ended up getting the job and working with Kathie Lee and I just, it, it just hit me that if I hadn't gotten sick, I would've never had the courage to go up and ask for something and I, so I do feel like it gave me the gift of fearlessness.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: Now your book is being described as bubbly and engaging just like its author. I certainly felt many things when I read your book, joy, sadness, but mostly hope. Now how has telling your story made a difference to you and others?

>> Hoda Kotb: I think it's a little, it's little strange when you put all your business out there, I'll have to say because I'm, I'm in a funny way I'm a private person, I mean you share a little here and a little there but suddenly when you're writing it all out on the pages, you do feel kind of vulnerable in that way, but I'm a big journaler, I was though, you know I always wrote in journals. In the morning I would take 10 minutes and still do out of my day and I'll write a little bit now. You know I usually write my grateful list or, my lessons learnt at the end, just a couple of things and I felt like at, at, at one point you might you feel like you have to sort of help other people if you can and the way it came to me was after I you know got sick and got better Matt Lauer asked me to go on Where on the World is Matt Lauer, and I wasn't feeling all the way recovered, but I thought you know what I just wanted to go because I was so tired of feeling sick and I'd had mastectomy and lots of recovery and all that stuff that I just wanted to, to do something. So I went on the shoot, I was getting on the plane ride to come home from, from Ireland which is where she was and I was, I was feeling terrible Cheryl, I was feeling off like what you know what I shouldn't have gone, I wasn't ready, I wasn't healed and all I want to do is curl up on the plane, put my headphones on and just go to sleep and this guy next to me says hey, how you doing? I go, hey, I'm just trying to put my iPod ear buds in and he goes what, are you on NBC? I go, yeah, what is Katie Couric like? I go, she's nice. What's Matt, do they get along Katie and Matt or what's the story? Yeah, they get along. So anyway this guy just keeps blabbing on and on and I kind of like it, and he says what's that thing on your arm and I said it's a compression sleeve and he said but what's it for and I said, oh, I had a procedure the doctor said when I fly I should wear a compression sleeve and he said but what procedure. And I said, well I had a operation the doctor said. You know what operation did you have? I said, okay listen I had breast cancer, I said but I hope when you get off this plane you don't say hey I sat next to this girl with breast cancer. I said I hope you have four or five other things you think of before that and he said I'm going to give you some advice and you can go to sleep. I said, okay. He said, are you ready? And I said, I am ready. He said, don't hog your journey, it's not just for you. He said think of how many people you could have helped on the plane right home. So for that guy on the plane Ken Dwayne, I made a choice to share instead of put it deep in my pocket because I think we all have a choice in life. You either put your stuff deep in your pockets and take it to your grave or you help somebody, like it's choice A or choice B. I mean there's not really a lot of other options. So he enlightened me, so I think he sort of sparked me into number one sharing that story and number two just deciding look if you can help out anybody, I mean everyone goes through, through their twists and turns in life and if you can help somebody I'm, I'm going to try.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: Well we know that you learned fearlessness. Are there any other lessons you learned that you can share?

>> Hoda Kotb: I just think you have to, you kind of have to take the focus off yourself. It's weird when you sick because you sort of become self-focused like oh my gosh, my tests, my this, my that, my this and I think there is a point there where you suddenly, there is a time where you realize that it's time to take the focus off yourself and help

somebody else and I think once you start reaching out and helping other people, you just innately feel better. You know for any of us no matter what our issue is, whatever our cross to bear is whether it's a divorce or whether it's you know what illness, whatever, I mean there are you have to be able to break out of that and, and, and do that you can't scare me saying, you have to be able to get out of yourself because I think it's so easy to get trapped and I think that's, that's one of the lessons learned, I mean for me I was married at that time and I was going through a difficult marriage and simultaneously I had breast cancer and was getting divorced. At a double whammy like that's really hard thing to make it through but what's funny to me is and what's interesting is because I had two big monster problems to deal with, you almost have to split your grief, I feel like you have finite amount of grief to go around. It's almost like having two kids instead of one, like you can't keep, you know you can't focus on the one kid who's spilling Kool-Aid on the carpet because the other kid is coloring on the wall with the crayon, so you literally have to share in your, in your attention or in your grief and I think having twin tragedies for me made it more bearable because I couldn't fall the down the mountain on one of them because I'd to worry about something else, like I couldn't worry about why did he do that because I had tests to go in and take with the doctor I couldn't and I stopped worrying about what's going to happen with the test and I thought how could you have done that. So you know, funny, in a funny strange way having two things that you go through at once may actually make things more bearable and the other thing Cheryl that I earned is sometimes in life we think we have to make big changes to change us and someone said had this quote in my life and said the way you spend your days is the way you spend your life, the way you spend your days is the way you spend your life. So if you think about your day today, you got up, you, you're doing you know you had breakfast with your husband, you're interviewing me, you know you have lunch, you have another meeting, you, you know, you go grocery shopping, you have dinner, you know you go to bed you watch Law and Order, you know, whatever and that's a micro-chasm of your life. So if you, if, if you want to change your life, you really only have to change Tuesday, a little bit and then you change Wednesday and pretty soon you change the week and then a month and then a year and you're different. So I think sometimes we think in order to get positive we have to suddenly turn into sunshine and roses and cheerleader but no I think if we do one thing a day whether it's help somebody or reach out or do something outside of ourselves everyday and change a little thing pretty soon you become a different person through, through tiny changes as a opposed to big one.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: You included some of the emails that you received in your book and they were just so poignant.

>> Hoda Kotb: Yeah. People were amazing. I mean look when you, when you tell your story and then you're done, you, you sort of think it's over like I did it and suddenly people were reaching out and telling me their stories and I'd to tell you what I learned and gained so much strength from people to share their stories with me whether it was through the email that you, that you'll see in the book or whether it was through you know a hug like it look if I get, if someone wraps arms around me in New York City it's either a breast cancer survivor or I'm getting mugged, I

mean it's one of the two and I got to tell you there's nothing better than feeling that kind of warmth and love from a stranger because you're bonded with them and when I think about what I, what I went through which was you know I had breast cancer, I had mastectomy, I had the recovery and I'm sitting here at my desk almost five years later grateful to be here and I know a lot of people have much more difficult circumstances and they you know, they had to have much more extensive recovery, they have children, they have you know there's a lot more to it. So I feel like in a way you can gain strength from people who have been through far worse than you have and that's what I feel like I've been able to do, so it's been a blessing, I mean people say you know, related to me you helped me, and I am thinking, no, no, no, you helped me and I'm thinking that no you helped me, you helped me, it's a whole, you know what you give you get back tenfold I'm learning.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: Now in your book you wrote that you've always been asked what are you. How did that shape your life and did you even once feel a twinge of an identity crisis?

>> Hoda Kotb: Yeah, I mean I was so weird I mean think about it, you make your name, my name is Hoda Kotb, I have frizzy hair, I have crazy stop sunglasses, my parents are from Egypt and we lived in West Virginia so hello it was like roll call, I wanted to shoot myself. It was like oh my God, I would die, because I wanted them to just get to my name. Mark Kaufmann, you know the kid would go, here, Chris Kennedy I'm with oh my god here comes my name and any of they, they couldn't pronounce it, I would just sit there and just happens I just had this [inaudible] so I was thinking oh my gosh just skip me because you're different and you're unique and here's the funny thing when you're different you just want to fit in, but the funny thing is, is when you're not like everyone else, when you're not naturally like you know I had I couldn't get dates, just you know all that stuff. You have to try harder in other parts of your life and you don't realize how important that's going to be later. You know that I mean look if you're gorgeous you know homecoming queen or football star or whatever, I'm just, sometimes those, those kind of people God bless them, but they don't have to work all the muscles because everything comes a little easier, people want to be their friend, people want to know them. When you're like a lot of the rest of us, you have to try harder, you know you've to work a little bit more at it. So it was mainly being different and that's one of those things that you don't learn when you're younger and that you embrace so much as you get older, but you know you want to be able to tell your younger self like hang in there because it's really going to get much, much, much better but at the time when you're a kid you know or you could say is oh my god how does my hair look like this and why I want to go flat featherback like the other girls you know, why is it look why am I like this and not like that, I mean those kind of things do play a part in your, in your upbringing but I got to tell you all that stuff turned into nothing but positive reinforcement later.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: Well many of us can certainly relate to that. You've covered hard new stories that took you all over the world including the tragedy of Katrina. Were you able to maintain your journalistic impartiality when covering Katrina?

>> Hoda Kotb: I think some stories there's not really, they aren't really two side to that story that story was a tragedy and I, you know I spent many years in New Orleans and I love that city as to me it's a living and breathing place and when that city celebrates, I celebrate, when that city hurts, I hurt. So watching my city on its knees was really heart wrenching because I felt like helpless and you know part of me wished I was a Red Cross when I was down there reporting, but I had to just tell the stories and, and know that by sharing them with other people would, would come and help. And I don't know that you lose your partiality, I just think you do with much more compassion because you feel it and it also reminded me that whenever I cover a story anywhere, it's somebody's New Orleans, it's somebody's home you know and to be able to see a story that way, so when you go to the Tsunami in Southeast Asia, know that you're covering someone's neighborhood and not just the spot on the map or when you go to anywhere to cover anything, realizing that it, it's somebody's home and then you can, you can do with a lot more intimacy and passion and I think that that's, that's sometimes what these stories call for especially natural disasters you know like that that's way you know with that we report on. And you know I think I did it more humanely because I was so connected.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: You wrote in your book that behind every strong woman is a stronger woman. Tell us a little about the woman who stood behind you.

>> Hoda Kotb: Oh, my mom is a long time, long time Library of Congress employee, in fact when I was a kid in high school I worked at the Library of Congress in the Macho section.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: Oh! You did.

>> Hoda Kotb: Oh yes. Judy Friendly was my boss with Susan Leggett at the time and I worked there for, for summers and stuff and so I really became intimately involved with the people from the Library of Congress, I really love it. And my mom is a long time employee there and to say, the great thing about my mom is she was one of those people who thought I could do anything. Like if I said I want to be an astronaut, you can do it if I want to be a professional whatever you can do. I like she really believed in anything I tried I can do and that reminds me again that it just takes one person, one person telling you you're good enough, one person telling you you're strong enough to make you realize that you can do something and all my life she's, she celebrates with me through this, through the good times and, and rocky one she's been there and I've to tell you, you know she, I call, before I talked to you I called her, I called her at 11:05 every day after my show. What did you wear, what happened, who was on, you know it's just like our, our little time. But I think like I feel such strong support, love and admiration for her, you know I mean look she and my dad came over from Egypt bay, started their lives together here, they had us, they you know they managed to raise three great kids who are, my brother and sister are terrific, at least two of the three, they're both great and you know it's I'm, I'm just in awe and to this day, she ran marathon when she was 60. She's, she works hard, she is got, she's a great friend and a great mom and a great

grandmother to my, to my niece and you know I feel lucky. I mean if you don't know Sammy at the Library of Congress go see her.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: She is very special. The theme of this year's book festival is celebrate the joys of reading aloud. What is your most memorable storytelling, reading aloud experience either as a child or as an adult?

>> Hoda Kotb: You know I'm a big advocate of reading out loud I think because there's something about hearing it. I mean there's something about because look when you look at a page and four words strung together make your eyes swell up. You think to yourself how did that happen, how did that writer put those four words together and make me feel this emotion this strongly and I think there's such a magic in reading and look I mean I'm that way with a lot of things, I'm always reading things either parts of books to my mom or to my friends or to my boyfriend or whatever and I think I'm just an advocate of it. I mean as, as you know it's all about sharing. We do that with books, we do that with the newspaper, we do with all those things and I think there's just an intimacy about it. I mean I love those, the books, the books on tape, I like to hear you know Bill Clinton tell his story from his book and there's just something that makes it uniquely human and, and I really enjoy it, that's kind of how I see that.

>> Cheryl Kennedy: Well, thank you so much. I'd like to remind our listeners that you will appear on Saturday September 24th in the contemporary life pavilion at the National Book Festival on the National Mall. Hoda thank you so much.

>> Hoda Kotb: Cheryl, thank you.

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