

Friend of My Spirit – The Emily Langevin Story

*Let the beauty of what we love be what we do.*

- Rumi

The phone rings. Emily answers. “I’ve got cancer,” she hears her sister say. In the seconds that follow, Emily slips into denial. This can’t be happening, not her sister. She’s a wife, she’s a mother. She’s one of the most significant women in Emily’s life. And she’s only forty-two. No, Laura and cancer cannot be said in the same breath. As Emily holds the receiver, the information sifts in slowly and her mind floods with thoughts of losing Laura. She doesn’t think she could live in a world without her sister. Of the eight siblings, no one would ever have guessed that it would be the youngest, the fittest of them all, to get cancer. Emily thinks back to when she was pregnant with her daughter, how during the prenatal classes the instructors told the class that out of the ten participants at least one or two would have a C-section. Emily’s mother was a baby-maker and she confidently assumed she would be too, so she was shattered to find out she was the one. Who would have guessed?

A few weeks before the phone call, Emily spent time with her sister while on a visit to Toronto. What had been a small lump in Laura’s right side, and had been dismissed by the doctor as nothing, had morphed slightly. Laura showed Emily how the lump now pulled her skin down and appeared to be attached to something. Emily returned home to Vancouver and Laura called the doctor. When he told her the news, she wondered who he was talking to. She turned to see who was behind her. It couldn’t be her. She didn’t have cancer.

Emily hangs up the phone. She wonders what she should do. Should she move back to Toronto? She wants to, but her daughter lives here. She also doesn't have the financial resources to leave work and her home and be with her sister throughout the entire of process of surgery, radiation, and chemo. She wants more than anything to take care of Laura and her family. But she can't. Instead, she rallies her friends, her family, her customers, to pray. Back in Toronto, Laura finds support from her Christian group. They bring meals, drive her to appointments. And although she isn't there, Emily feels like she is going through the whole process with her sister.

They are that close, Emily and Laura. They've always been that close. Born six years apart didn't make a difference. As they grew up, they shared the same bed. They shared secrets and ideas and thoughts. As a child, Emily brushed Laura's dark, curly hair and after it was washed, she wrapped strands of Laura's hair around her father's metal cigar containers. When she unwrapped them, the hair fell in ringlets around her face. Her hair was her crowning glory, it had been since the time it finally grew in and covered her two-year-old bald head. That was one difference between them. Emily wore her fine, light-coloured hair cropped close to her head, while Laura's hair fell to her shoulders, full, dark, and curly. Emily knew how devastating it would be for Laura to lose her beautiful mane of hair. She took what action she could. She scoured downtown Vancouver, Main Street, and the Indian boutiques on south Fraser Street for beautiful scarves and mailed them to Laura. She called her ex-sister-in-law, Katerina, who works in hair and makeup for the Toronto movie industry, and asked for her help.

After the successful lumpectomy, Laura entered the next phase of radiation and chemotherapy. When her hair started falling off in clumps, Katerina cut off the longer

pieces, shaved Laura's head and kissed her bald scalp. Losing her hair was the hardest thing she went through, more difficult even than the treatments. She never did wear the scarves, instead she braided and sewed the long pieces of her hair into bandanas. She wrapped the hair-made bandanas around her head, tying one at the front, and wrapped another over top that one. The bandanas didn't lie flat against her head, so they looked like and felt like the real hair they were, and Laura, comfortable enough with her own hair against her skin, could at least go to the grocery store without being stared at.

She phones Emily and talks for hours about the effects of cancer and baldness. When friends see her bald head, they get a look about them, a sympathetic look, and Laura feels like a walking symbol for cancer. When she ventures out in public with a bald head, she becomes the subject of ridicule. An elderly woman says to her, "That is ridiculous." All she tries to do is deal with the whole cancer thing. She would prefer to hear people say, "Good for you." Emily can relate. In her job, as a customer representative for a grocery store, people feel free to comment about her short hair. "I don't like your hair," they will say. Or, "Have you gained weight?" What makes people think they can cross the boundary and say something so personal?

The fact is cancer affects the entire family and circle of friends. It eats away at the core of family. While some people come to the fore front; other people hide in the background. People who Laura had no idea cared for her came forward, while others stayed away because they couldn't deal with the reality of the disease. Within her family, Laura's children, aged eight and eleven, see their mommy receive all the attention, and they react by acting out. A natural reaction, but a sign that cancer becomes a disease of the whole family.

During the period of treatment, between phone calls, Emily reflects on her relationship with her sister. So similar they are that they think the same thoughts, finish each other's sentences, laugh at the same goofy things. Laura is the one person who will understand what Emily says and means. Laura thinks Emily is funny and Emily thinks Laura is funny. This connection has always been there. As young sisters, they would wear one earring each. They divided a new pair of earrings and Emily wore one in the left ear while Laura wore the mate in the right ear. They walked arm in arm down the street, chanting, "We don't stop for nobody." When they were together, nobody else mattered; it was just the two of them against the world. Even today, their voices are indistinguishable and both are comforted by the thought that when they talk to each other, it's like talking to themselves, and getting answers.

Growing up, they watched their parents scour second hand stores and invent creative ways to feed and clothe eight children. Toys, clothes, and school supplies came from thrift stores, thanks to the keen eye of Emily's mother. Emily's clothes were often not only second-hand, but third and fourth-hand as well, having been through a sister and cousins. If something broke, you fixed it. That's just the way it was. Laura and Emily learned to live on purpose, changing the world one responsible decision at a time, and they took this love of recycling with them when they left home. "Don't throw that away," they'd hear their mother saying, "It's perfectly good." When they had a day to spend together, they searched out antique stores, thrift stores, and secondhand stores. Laura hunted for purses, coats and shoes; Emily looked for jewelry and shoes. They both outfitted their children in cool clothes found at thrift stores. Both loved the idea that they had stuff nobody else had. Nothing they owned was new or faddish. Everything had a

history. Whether a necklace or a pair of cowboy boots, they wore items that had been on a journey, carried an energy, and still had so much story to live.

Emily married Bill when she was twenty-one years old, eager to leave the busyness of Toronto and venture somewhere new. She and Bill set up a van and drove to the east coast before turning and heading to the west coast. Along the way they figured they'd find a spot that felt comfortable, a place they would stay. Emily thought that maybe, just maybe, she would cross the country and no place would invite her stay and she'd end up back in Toronto. But when they stopped in Nelson, B.C., they both felt at home. They found work, had their daughter Leigh, and when job opportunities called them to Vancouver they thought the change might improve a faltering marriage. They moved. They worked. They went their separate ways while remaining close, loving friends. And through it all she missed her sister. Laura did join them on a vacation once. She had just broken up with a boyfriend and asked if she could come along with Bill, Emily, and Leigh to Jamaica. And that's where Laura met her husband, Darren. He was from Ottawa, she from Toronto, but under the warm sun, on the soft sand, their future was foretold. After a diving excursion to a coral reef, her future husband approached Laura and Emily who were lounging on the beach, reading and tanning. "Look what I found," he said. He held out a man's wedding band, in Italian gold, that slid onto his finger. Emily looked at Laura, and she looked at Emily, and together they said, "Oh, oh." Within a year, he moved to Toronto and they began their life together.

Now Emily is scared to death that this journey Laura is on, with her, with her husband, with her children, will end too soon.

While Laura recovers from treatment, her hair grows in darker and curlier than before. When Emily sees her after the ordeal, Laura's hair is short and wavy and for the first time Emily sees her whole face. She is smitten by her prettiness. Laura continues to grow her hair, until she feels it on the back of her neck and it falls once again to her shoulders. And while Laura recuperates and her hair grows, so does Laura's creativity. Although not a sewer, she had sewn her braided hair into a bandana, so making a slipcover for her couch doesn't seem too big a stretch. She registers for sewing lessons, makes her slipcover, but realizes she hates sewing. But that small bit of recycling she had done with her own hair, making it into something else, tweaks her imagination. Why not take what is normally discarded and make it into something that can go off on another adventure? She's always been drawn to purses, so why not design purses? She approaches her sewing instructor, Vicki, and asks her if she is interested in transforming her ideas into reality. Without hesitation she and Vicki embark on the project. Using Laura's collection of old tweed coats, cotton shirts, chenille bathrobes, mixed with recycled, vintage, retro, and remnant fabrics, she begins to create a series of bags.

Emily, in Toronto on her annual holiday, sits down with Laura to devise a name. As usual, the two of them put their heads together and come up with "Echoes in the Attic." The bags gain popularity and Emily longs to be part of the new business. Living on the other side of the country doesn't help. She can't be there physically to source, tag, design, or anything else. When she returns home, she searches out clients in Whistler, Tofino, and Victoria. The bags find homes in stores with business folk whose work ethic and business ethic matches their own. As recyclers, they want to find people who

appreciate and promote the re-usable, those who understand that their products have previous experience.

That winter, Emily can't sleep. She feels grumpy and out of sorts. Menopause overtakes her and she sweats it out. Mid-life. She begins to question her life. She's in her fifties and doesn't know where she is going. What is she doing with her life? Where will she be in a few years? In what ways does she bring beauty into the world by what she creates or generates? Plagued with anxiety, questions, and uncertainty, she takes a leave from work and has a big old breakdown just before Christmas. On a cold, rainy night, she paces the floor in despair. For reasons she doesn't understand, she instinctively goes to her jewelry box and takes out a beautiful cut glass beaded necklace that belonged to her grandmother. She fastens it around her neck. It makes her feel good. She can feel the energy of her grandmother envelope and support her. But only for a moment. The necklace breaks and the beads scatter on the floor. Emily cries as she sees the shattered mess and picks up the pieces one by one. She wonders if this is some sort of sign. Is her grandmother telling her something? Emily is used to fixing her jewelry. For years, she used tweezers and scissors to put pieces back together again, and this breakage is no exception. She fixes it. But it occurs to her that maybe the piece wants to be made into something different. Maybe it broke because it's done its job. Emily pays a visit to the craft store and stocks up on materials and tools. She remakes the necklace into earrings. She doesn't stop. She rummages through her jewelry box and finds the single earrings, the ones that she and her sister split. She takes them apart and wires them into necklaces and earrings. She redoes them in a way that is funky, modern, and yet still old. Emily returns to work in January sporting new jewelry. "What were you up to?" colleagues and

customers ask. “I made jewelry,” she says. She sends pictures of her work to her sister. “These look really good,” Laura says, “Maybe we should add jewelry and accessories to our line.” Emily bundles up a collection of her work and sends it to Laura thinking, “Oh God, I hope she likes it, I hope she likes it.” Laura loves it.

Emily stokes her creative fire. She needed to crash, needed to look to the ancestors to find support, needed to reconsider how she spends her time and energy, and now, in the second half of her life, she finds meaningful work, creating legacy with stones and beads that were once left as legacy. She realizes that without creative expression, she was mired in depression. The more she creates, the more she feels her heart and soul fill with contentment and purpose. When she sends out her first order to her sister, she thinks, Holy moly, I’ve made over 120 pairs of earrings, just by sitting here at night. When she sells her first pieces, she feels like she is parting with her babies, that they are going on their own journeys, with new owners. Once the word gets out that she makes jewelry, customers bring her beads from the Phillipines, Australia, China, and South Africa. She feels at times that she is living vicariously through their travels. She takes time with each bead and marvels as to where it’s been and how she’s recreating it into something new. For years, Emily worked as a hospice volunteer. When one of her wards, Marjory, dies at the age of ninety, Marjory’s daughter gives Emily some of her jewelry. One night, Emily puts on fifteen of Marjory’s necklaces and can still smell the talcum powder that Marjory wore and she feels the closeness of her dear friend. Emily remakes the necklaces, but cannot yet part with the new pieces. Some of the beads are semi-precious stones and Emily can still feel the energy, a power, a spirit, attached to them. Emily knows that there is a connection to the friends and family who have passed

on, and to the ones who are still here. She brings their bits and baubles together, plays with them, and molds them as she sees fit. Her ideas never cease. She takes one of these, and one of those and puts them together. Much like cooking, she finds the process the same. Never one to follow a recipe, she's always altered and added and recreated. She uses instinct, she listens. Then the ideas come out of her head, into her hands, and eventually, onto someone's ears or neck.

She sorts through her old buttons, and makes a white button bracelet. She has boxes of jewelry from the 80s, including long pendants, and is inspired to make lariats that hang perfectly in the cleavage. She finds old brass washers in the bottom of the box, and is inclined to make a washer bracelet. An old friend Diana gives her a costume from the days when she worked as a showgirl in Las Vegas and a skater for Stars on Ice. Emily takes the rhinestone beads and works them into earrings and necklaces using Bali silver. She loves the fact that they have performed one job and will now do another. She uses pearls from her grandmother's necklace, well, they look like pearls, and in the old days, they made them to look real. She uses coral, amber, Swarovski, Chinese, and black crystals. She mixes them with silk, leather, and Grandmother's old buttons. As she sorts through her array of jewelry, she can't help but berate herself. For fifty years of her life she bought earrings that someone else made when she could have created them herself.

Her days are full. She works eight hours, comes home, eats dinner, sits at the table and re-fashions the old-fashioned. As she takes apart old pieces, she remembers who owned it, who wore it, and where it came from. Each has a story to tell. Some nights she works until late, unable to leave a piece until it is finished and at the end of the night, she

looks at her accomplishments, suspended from the rim of a martini glass in the middle of the table.

She decides to approach Flamingo Row, a women's clothing boutique in Richmond, B.C. and asks Wendy, the owner, if she would be interested in carrying her creations. She cringes as she realizes she knows nothing about business. She knows nothing about stock numbers or invoicing. She doesn't even know if she should charge GST. Wendy embraces her and walks her through the process. Now, as Emily walks by the Flamingo Row store front, she sees an outfit in the window with a pair of her earrings hanging on the outfit. They match perfectly and she smiles when she sees the emblazoned name on the card – Auntie Em's Recreations. That's her. Emily, named after her great aunt Emily Mary. And to think she hated the name when she was young. Now, she loves it – Auntie Em's. What she appreciates about Flamingo Row is that the sales staff dress you. They pick out the appropriate pair of pants and match it with a shirt or sweater to create a complete outfit, accessories included. They believe in building relationships with customers. They believe in doing things the old-fashioned way.

Emily and Laura talk daily. They plan and plot the future, just like they did when they were children. Laura has one more year before she is given a clean bill of health, but she is full of energy, organizing for trade shows and granting interviews, and branching out into pillow designs. For the shows, Laura displays Emily's button and bead bracelets on wooden rolling pins. She uses old wooden tool boxes with tall handles, and lines the bracelets up along the top with the necklaces and earrings gracing the lower part. Earrings are lined up in an old butter box. The idea is to be respectful of the retro movement. Retro respectful, a term Laura and Emily coined to reflect their recycling

efforts and the idea that sometimes they want things to stay the same, like a favourite park, restaurant, old house, or a simple wooden box.

Emily will join Laura in Toronto for a show at the end of October, 2006. The company is featured in October, 2006, issue of Canadian Home & Country Magazine. Laura is currently designing a bag for the Rebecca's Hope Foundation at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. The bag will be on the Canadian Living wish list for Christmas. They both feel they've been touched by angels every step of the way. The people they meet, owners of collectible stores, or folks who admire their bags and jewelry, all embrace the story and guide them to the next step.

They know their dad would be beaming with pride at their accomplishments. Their mom is proud. She says, "My daughters, the entrepreneurs." At 82, she's thinking of piercing her ears so she can wear Emily's earrings.

No longer fearful or questioning of the future, as she was just nine months ago, Emily sees her venture with her sister as a way for them to stay connected well after retirement. She knows she needs to continue to feed her creative side. Over her lifetime, she's nurtured everyone else and now it's time for her to do something for herself. And as she hears people tell her, making jewelry is nothing new, she thinks, yes, that's true, it's been thought of before and done before, but it has never been done by me before in my particular way. And when she sells everything at the show, and has nothing to bring home, it will be scary and wonderful all at the same time, because then she starts over, with new beads, new designs, and new stories. She already knows she wants to make sweet, delicate pink ribbon bracelet strung with beads. She likes the fact that it can't be picked up and shoved onto the wrist. Instead, someone has to tie it on, and that creates

time, contact, and connection with another person. She also dreams of expanding globally. After all, everywhere in the world, somebody thinks about their great aunt or great uncle, grandmother or grandfather, and how they can recycle something of them into their life. What she does is like knitting families together.