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TIMES2

Julia Bradbury: My daughter said ‘Mummy, what happens if cancer comes back?’

The broadcaster was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. Now in the clear, the experience profoundly altered her outlook, she tells Hilary Rose

Hilary Rose

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On a warm summer’s day, Julia Bradbury is sitting in her garden talking about her left breast.

“It’s quite tight around the implant,” she says cheerfully, “and it looks like mozzarella when you take it out of the bag, it’s got those ripples down the side. My surgeon said he could suck flesh from my inner thighs and inject it into the ripples to smooth them out, but honestly? I don’t want another surgery, I don’t want another anaesthetic and I don’t want that trauma. I’m going to live with my mozzarella boob.”

Bradbury had a mastectomy and breast reconstruction after she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021, and made a TV documentary about her experience. It was widely praised for pulling no punches. But it wasn’t until two months after her surgery that she could bring herself to look in the mirror. Surgeons don’t talk to you about how you’re going to feel, she tells me today via Zoom, they talk to you about what they’re going to do. “Chop your breast, scrape the tissue. It’s very, very brutal.”

Two years on, she’s at peace with her appearance and grateful that, unlike many women, she was able to have immediate reconstruction. On the other hand, she adds brightly, “as I get older I’m going to have one boob up here and one boob down there”. She looks down at the offending boob and shrugs. “And I’m good with that.”

In her thirties Bradbury struggled to be diagnosed with and treated for endometriosis. When a boyfriend asked her why she spoke so publicly about it, she told him it was to help other women get diagnosis and treatment. In her forties she talked about IVF, miscarriage and her struggle to conceive. Now in her fifties, she’s talking about what she’s learnt from cancer about how to stay alive. Cancer saved her life, she says, counterintuitive though that may sound; contemplating her death was a chance to re-evaluate how she lives.

“When I had that first biopsy, I was like, ‘I want to see my children grow up. I want to live through GCSEs and A-levels and 21st birthdays and university. I want to see them as adults. I just want to stay alive.’”

The result of what she calls her “deep-dive into how to stay alive” is a book called

Walk Yourself Happy

. It does quite a lot more than what it says on the tin, because “Go for a walk. The end” wouldn’t be much of a book. It is not, she writes repeatedly, about or for people with cancer. Unlike some celebrity wellness gurus, she doesn’t just wang on about organic broccoli and aromatherapy acupuncture. She’s talked to experts. Don’t take her word for it, she says, take theirs, because they’re credible and have studies to back up their information. This matters to her because as well as having the platform of being “that woman off the telly”, she has nearly half a million combined followers on X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram who don’t hesitate to tell her that she’s a rotten mother for not letting her children have sweets.

Some of us might be inclined to file the parts of the book that sit at the Gwyneth Paltrow end of the wellness

spectrum — is breathing really something we need to worry about, at least until we can't? — but it's hard not to be persuaded by Bradbury's enthusiasm and positivity. Breathwork is all about stimulating the vagus nerve, apparently, which runs from your brain to your large intestine. She does her breathwork every morning, after she's leaned out of the bathroom window to get the early-morning light on her face (see page 77; it's about your circadian rhythm and the photoreceptors in your brain) and communed with the tree outside ("I've always been a tree-hugger"). She ignores her phone until 9am, after she's finished the school run with her son, Zephyr, 12, and her twin girls, Xanthe and Zena, eight.

Bradbury's shtick is that being in nature is as good for you as not existing on bacon and Haribo. She cites a study by the University of Exeter which points to the benefits of being outside for 120 minutes a week and a psychotherapist who describes the positive impact this has on the brain. Of course, it's all very well for her to say, "Be in nature" — she has a lovely garden at the family home in west London.

"You can find nature everywhere, it's not about having a nice garden," she says. "You can go to the park, walk outside, get a window box, have house plants. It's connection with green things. And walking barefoot on grass," she adds, warming to her theme, "is another really important thing to do — it helps with inflammation, helps you sleep, helps pass electrons from the earth to us . . ." She catches my raised eyebrow and laughs. "It sounds woo-woo, I know, but we're spinning round the sun! Doesn't that sound pretty woo-woo? So why is it so woo-woo that we're electrically charged as well?"

Bradbury grew up in Rutland with her older sister, Gina. She left school at 16 and started work as a receptionist, but she really wanted to be on television. At the time, Janet Street-Porter was setting up L!ve TV and Bradbury saw her chance. She found out that Street-Porter collected towels from hotels so she blagged one from the Ritz and sent it with a note asking for an interview. She got a job, moved to GMTV a year later to be its LA correspondent and she was off.

Countryfile

was the show that made her a household name when she was 38, and earned her the extravagantly sexist title of "the walking man's crumpet".

"Ha!" she says. "I'm definitely not that any more, am I?"

She had Zephyr when she was 41 and her twins through IVF nearly four years later. Their father, Gerard Cunningham, is a property developer. In the book she gives her pre-cancer self a tough time. She's horrified that after a long day's filming she would sometimes wolf down a burger from a motorway service station. But she was pretty healthy, surely? Slim, regular yoga practice, occasional exercise classes, lots of walking and fresh air? She shakes her head.

"Too haphazard. My chance of reoccurrence reduces by multiple percentages if I exercise regularly, if I strength-train and if I don't drink. That's my motivator. If you're downing those social drinks on Friday and Saturday, which I was, you're not doing your body any favours."

She's now pretty much teetotal. She had a drink on her birthday last year and another at Easter and wondered if she would ever "bother" again. She eats healthily, with one portion of grass-fed meat a week. There's almost no wheat in the house ("highly processed . . . horrible herbicides"), no processed foods, no sugar, no cereal. The children make their own breakfasts with nuts, seeds, coconut pieces and berries and are allowed organic Weetabix once a week as a treat. The sweetie drawer has been replaced with a dark chocolate drawer. She cooks for the family but concedes that the children sometimes won't eat what she's having. When occasionally they have bread or pizza, it has to be sourdough. It all sounds a bit joyless when you see it written down, but in person she radiates joy and good health.

"Am I saying never have a bowl of your favourite pasta? No. Am I saying it should be part of your staple diet? No. It's not a staple part of mine any more, or my children's. I just can't, in all conscience, let them continually eat stuff that I know will have an impact on their health."

She wears a watch which monitors her heart-rate variability because apparently the higher this is, the better, and she keeps a gratitude journal because it helps her to appreciate what she has, rather than focus on what she does not have. She used to be a night owl, but now she's up the stairs at 9.30pm and asleep by 10pm because a sleep expert told her that the hours between 10pm and 3am are when the body repairs itself best. She suffered from insomnia before and after her mastectomy because of the worry, the pain, the fear of how her new life would be. The five days she spent in hospital were the longest she had gone without seeing her children — she didn't want to video-call them.

“I didn’t want them to see me like that. I thought it would be worrying for them. What’s difficult with young children is explaining cancer to them without petrifying them. I was very aware that I had to be honest.”

The day she left hospital, her sister helped her do her hair and make-up and put on her “game face” to reassure them. They’ve been brilliant, she says, but she knows that it’s had an impact. One of her girls asked her the other day: “Mummy, what happens if the cancer comes back?”

“That was really hard,” she says, tearing up. “Cancer has shaped who I am, but it doesn’t define who I am. It profoundly changed my life and the way I think and behave. You never forget, but you can try to convert the experience into something else and that’s what I’m trying to do: convert it into something positive.”

Walk Yourself Happy Walk Yourself Happy by Julia Bradbury (Little, Brown Book Group £20). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk . Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

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Julia Bradbury

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Julia Bradbury in Britain's Favourite Walks: Top 100 in 2018

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