

**AN INGENIOUS WAY TO LIVE**

An Ingenious Way to Live  
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*An Ingenious Way to Live:* The book title is a quote from Neil Marcus, an American actor and playwright in the development of disability culture, who has reshaped ways of thinking about disability. Marcus famously said, “Disability is an art: An Ingenious Way to Live.”

People’s names in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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# **AN INGENIOUS WAY TO LIVE**

**Georgena Moran**



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This book is dedicated to people with a broad spectrum of abilities and to my parents who taught me that people living with disabilities belong everywhere that everyone else does. It's also dedicated to my sisters who nurtured my love of adventure, and to my many friends who've assisted, and continue to make sure, my life is full of extraordinary ways to enjoy nature. Last and most importantly, I tribute the completion of this book to Sharon, my soulmate, who consistently reinforces the belief that I can achieve great things, all the while, showing me what it is to be met with kindness, truth and unconditional love.





## Introduction

“Disability is an art—an ingenious way to live.”

—Neil Marcus

The irony of my life was that I learned of my true purpose when I was stripped of all I knew myself to be. I was a physically powerful, adventurous spirit who took on all challenges as a way of life. Through a rapidly progressive disease, I became paralyzed from my neck down within 20 years of my diagnosis. When disabilities obliterated the ways I found pleasure—engaging in outdoor explorations and sports—they opened up other opportunities and ingenious ways to modify play, enriching my life like never before.

This memoir is about how physical, emotional and spiritual pursuits led to a full and interconnected way of being. Following passion through triumph, tragedy and in connection with others, is where I found lasting joy and peace. Haunted by disturbing memories that kept me up at night, I began writing as a way of self-care. Thoughts that I’d done unforgivable acts that resulted in causing pain to those I love played relentlessly in my mind. It left me feeling that I fell far short of the person I’d tried to live my life to be. This exercise took me from childhood to this day, in my 65th year of life.

Growing up in the concrete suburbs of L.A., I had an inner longing to be immersed in natural spaces. My spirit of adventure and willingness to step up and try any physical challenge stemmed from this upbringing. My inner and outer strength helped me survive when I reached a little too far over the cliff’s edge.

My earliest playmates were boys, so I learned how to run, climb and play street games, like baseball, using the stenciled bases on the asphalt cul-de-sac in front of our house. After a childhood full of fun, freedom and creative activities,

I knew play was an essential component of life. This led to a lifelong search for new ways to express this playful nature. In my later teenage years, my somewhat insecure and passive nature transformed, blossoming into what one might describe as someone with practically unlimited strength and resilience; a capable and insanely independent spirit.

My life choices as an adult were similarly outside of the norm. As a self-employed woodworker/cabinet maker, I could set my schedule to suit my whims. Free to follow my passions, I was determined to experience all of life's adventures, wherever they unfolded. I lived life hard and at full speed, as if any day could be my last. Filling an already packed schedule with extreme sports and physical challenges, it's a wonder that I was never sore. Instead, I met each opportunity with enthusiasm, ready for the next chance to play. It did cross my mind: "*How long can my body withstand this?*"

My wayward ways and independent spirit were not encouraged or appreciated by men. When not dismissed or pressured to change, I was met with aggressive sexual advances and abuse. Women on the other hand, thought highly of my work and strong character. Women were drawn to me because of my choices, not despite my choices. Following my passions led to romantic connections with women.

Many thanks to the people with lived experience who have assisted me in learning what it's meant to live life as an empowered person living with a disability. Through these individuals, I learned of my own self-worth and my place in revolutionizing systemic inequalities. The passion for the work I do is fueled by them and past generations—in particular, my loving father, who lived life with a mental impairment, and later in life, a physical disability.

Dad had the slow and steady demeanor inherited from his smalltown roots in Melrose, Iowa. In 1951, when Dad was 37, he was diagnosed as bipolar. He had started a dental practice, had bought a house, and was living with Mom and his three girls in Cherokee, outside of Melrose. As time went on, the kids would be on a need-to-know basis for the reveal of his diagnosis because Mom strove to protect him from bias, both in the family and in society. They moved to California to escape the hometown gossip mill, renewing his reputation and fledgling dental practice. When Dad was 68 years old, he had a major stroke affecting the left side of his brain. As a result, he was unable to walk long distances, so he used a wheelchair to travel and recreate.

Since Dad's need for accessibility was prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) signed into law in 1990, he was denied access to numerous establishments and experienced many indignities. Frequently, he'd be directed to

the back door when he encountered stairs at a restaurant's entrance. Then he'd be escorted through the kitchen to enter the dining section of the restaurant. Worse than that were the times he was carried up the stairs by restaurant staff, entrusting his safety to complete strangers. It was infuriating when I learned of what Dad was subjected to. It left me with a feeling of helplessness that I was unable to lend a hand, living far from them, in a different state. My awareness grew from this. Recognizing all the places that weren't wheelchair accessible, I began enlightening the managers of these establishments to this injustice. I live the life I live and act as I do, with Dad in mind.

My mother was a driving force, advocating for the different establishments they'd enjoyed together in the past, to accommodate Dad as he maneuvered through life with the use of a wheelchair. With the children grown and gone, they were now able to travel to their hearts content. She found a way to make that happen. There was no way she'd let life pass them by. She would not be denied access to the places that brought them pleasure. Mom and Dad helped me recognize that people with disabilities need to be provided with the same respect, access and rights as anyone else. This serves me well when I need to push for inclusion, for myself and others.

My life has been, and remains, full of purpose, love and adventure. Sharon, my partner since 2006, has only known me as someone living with a disability. Her generous spirit and extraordinary kindness are beyond measure. That she'd move heaven and earth for my well-being is a display of that generosity. It also shows an unending capacity to express love, for me, and others she cares about. She has accompanied me on this journey of adaptation and ingenuity, being my hands, so my dreams can be manifested. Together, we fuel each other's efforts to reach new heights of truth and spiritual attainment. The interconnection of friends, family and collaborative action with Sharon renders the future limitless.

My memoir is divided into three parts. Part 1 – *An Ingenious Way to Play* speaks to the creative ways I've devised to ensure "play" was woven into my life, since childhood. It leads you through the creative exploits of my youth to the completion of college, where I chose to take the leap from engaging in other's adventures, to launching my own creative, outside-of-the-box, ways to pursue adventure.

Part 2 – *An Ingenious Way to Adventure* is about venturing outside of what was safe, going to places I was unfamiliar with in the search for adventure. It starts with leaving the country and the opportunities this provided for redefining myself, and expanding my horizons. This was a chance to fully take part in the

numerous adventures that came my way. Being a foreigner in an unfamiliar land heightened my awareness and ability to live in a more present manner. It was the beginning of my recognition that I was in an energy flow that connected me to my heart's desire. Part 2 is brimming with adventurous stunts that I participated in.

The final Part 3 is called *Ingenious Ways to Interdependent Adventure*. After the adventurous life I had led, when I was diagnosed with MS, I wasn't about to stop "playing." Although, now, it was a collaborative effort. I'm extremely fortunate, for I have a plethora of ingenious friends that will do whatever it takes to open up opportunities for me. This part in the book, introduces the reader to my various friends and the adventures they helped make possible.

This is when you'll meet a whole new set of friends who followed their passions, while living with a disability. They taught me how to dance again, when I could no longer stand, and how powerful and meaningful living with a disability can be. It was through them, that I regained confidence in my ability to follow my own passions.

In this segment, my purpose in life is unveiled and I saw how it had spun a web, from childhood to today, touching everything in my life. It grew exponentially through my love of nature and my desire to be immersed in it. It's also where I came face-to-face with my dark side, and the depths of despair, wrestling with my feelings of unworthiness and the seemingly irredeemable acts I'd done. Then, it highlights how I pulled myself from these places, one act of support after another, until I could no longer deny my worth or the true beauty and loving character of my being.

This memoir is a gift to myself, and to anyone else who grapples with life's challenges. Through its writing, I gained insights into actions that had been tainted in meaning by others who were the recipients or witnesses to my behavior. The exercise of self-reflection, by looking back on my life, assisted in changing the labels I'd assigned to my actions. It's given me a chance to rewrite the stories I'd created, with new perspectives.

The journey I've been on has been wild. Sometimes it's been difficult to keep from getting bucked off the bronco of life. At the vantage point from which I now reside as a 65-year-old gay entrepreneur, I recognize the ingenious ways I've navigated through life to maintain my passion to play, adventure and accomplish great things outside the status quo. There were times, my passion for life disappeared or was unimaginable, with painful experiences being all encompassing. Sometimes, my creative ways involved underhanded efforts in

order to fit into an unaccepting world. For far too long, I held onto a belief that if I were fully transparent, others might thwart my efforts to achieve my heart's desire. Over time, I've reached a level of emotional strength and maturity that gave me what I needed to stand up to the scrutiny of others, and recognize the beautiful soul that's been there all along.

This memoir shines a light on my life and my unrelenting pursuit of all that I am passionate about. For those of you reading this, I hope you have the space, time, and support, to follow your own passions. Or if lacking these things, you find your own ingenious ways to do what you love, despite adversity. My desire is that you, too, will find a place of well-being while forging your paths.



## **PART ONE**

### ***An Ingenious Way to Play***





## Chapter 1

### Life or death

After 20 years of adventurous stunts, more than one placing my life in jeopardy, I'd imagined my death would occur doing some ordinary, everyday act. I'd often joke with friends about it. "Perhaps, I'll be jogging down a walkway, slip on a slick, mossy spot, flip backwards and land on my head. Or I'll spin around to avoid a bee, lose my balance and tumble down a hill, breaking my neck." Lo and behold, one experience, the closest I'd ever come to death, fit the bill. Thankfully, preceding this, another occasion served to prepare me so my chances of survival might be enhanced.

Arriving at an Olympic sized swimming pool with my Outward Bound classmates, the instructor directed us to change into swimsuits and enter the shallow end of the pool. Once in the pool, he described how we could use the act of hyperventilating to saturate our cells with oxygen. "Hyperventilating," he said, "will allow you to stay underwater longer than usual." He challenged us to hyperventilate, then swim underwater the length of the pool, back-and-forth. He told us, "Swim as far as your breath will take you before coming up for air. Use full, steady strokes. Don't expend too much energy or you'll run out of oxygen, quickly." He said, "There's nothing to fear because in the worse-case scenario, you might black-out. Then, I'll lift you out of the water." Looking out at the distant edge of the pool, I found it hard to believe that it would be possible. However, I was willing to give it a try. Having quit smoking by running every day, I had confidence in my renewed lung health. "Just maybe I can pull this off," I thought.

After hyperventilating for a time, I felt my lungs expand to the point of bursting. Lowering my head, I pushed off from the pool wall. The instructions

from the teacher ran through my head, “Don’t exert all your energy and oxygen by swimming fast. Instead, take long steady strokes with your arms and optimize the glide as you kick.” This is what I attempted to do. It felt counter-intuitive to do this. My mind kept saying, “You’re not going to make it if you don’t go faster!” But I didn’t listen. “Reach out far with your arms, pull back fully with steady strokes, then glide ...” This was my mantra. Reaching the far wall, I pushed off, once again. This leg proved much more challenging than the first. Feeling my temples start to pulsate, and my chest begin to tighten, it became clear, “I might not make it.”

On the return trip, my lung capacity was greatly diminished. I longed to raise my head and take a life-affirming breath, and yet I swam on. “Reach out far with your arms, pull back fully with steady strokes, then glide ...” Not knowing if I’d make it, I relied on what the instructor said. “The worse that can happen is that you’ll pass out. Then, I’ll lift you out of the water.” Running dangerously close to losing all the air in my lungs, I relied on my strong resolve to succeed. Edging closer and closer, I ran out of air but didn’t stop. After what seemed like an eternity, with one final push, I reached the wall. Hanging onto the side of the pool, I lifted my head, taking a prolonged deep breath. As good as it was to take a breath, I soon discovered that my legs no longer had the strength to hold me up. The lack of oxygen had sapped my ability to stand and walk. All I could do was grasp the edge of the pool and breathe. I was one of only a couple students who succeeded in accomplishing the instructor’s challenge.

My strong will brought me to the wall, but it took a toll on my body. Eventually I regained leg control, and stepped out of the pool. It was powerful to know, through this controlled experience, what duress my body could endure, and that through sheer willpower, my capability to overcome great odds in order to survive.

It was February of 1986, and I was 28 years old when my friends, Mary and Jean, bought a float house on a slough off the mighty Columbia River. Mary had the same proclivities for sports and outdoor adventure that I did. Jean was the first person who befriended me in Portland. They were partners, and I was their constant companion, joining them on all their adventurous trips and local activities. They let me use the float house freely, as if it were my own. It was isolated on an island, surrounded by protected wildlife and waters that were our playground. I was about to experience both sides of isolation: The joy of being surrounded by nature’s beauty, and the terror of being totally alone facing imminent death.

A few years later, I asked my friend, Steph, to join me at the float house to

take in the beauty I found there. We had kayaked to the float house, awaiting Jean to meet us there. While walking around on the deck, we accidentally knocked a barbecue cooking rack through the slats of the deck boards. In the blink of an eye, it was gone. Without a second thought, I jumped in the shallow, murky water and felt for the grate with my feet. The river bottom was soft silt. With each step or swipe of my foot, I could feel the soil envelop my foot, loosening and spreading the dirt from where it had been. When I couldn't feel the grate, I took a deep breath and dove under the float house to feel around with my hands. Still, with no luck and running out of air, I turned to go out the way I'd come. I was blocked. The float house was grounded and I had slipped under the only opening on the island side.

Stopped from surfacing and completely out of air, I desperately shoved my face up between the logs supporting the float house, in search of a pocket of air. I went from one to another ... No air pocket. Finally, I stopped, sensing I could breathe the water. I relaxed; my panic was replaced with peace. I was about to take a deep breath, when a resounding command came from deep within my mind and body, "NO!!!!!!" Startled into action, I moved one more log over, and there was air! I clung to the logs catching my breath. When I could, I shouted, "Steph, can you hear me???" She responded, "Yes!"

Instructing Steph from beneath the float house, I told her, "Go inside and stomp around until I hear you right over head." Once there, I directed her, "Walk loudly from there to the deep-water side of the float house." She did. As one final action to ensure my safe passage, I urged her, "Do it over and over again, until I feel certain of the direction." Building up my courage, I resolved to take one more frightening attempt to escape. Remembering the instruction from my Outward Bound class, "Hyperventilate to expand your lung capacity," I took rapid breaths, in and out, followed by one final deep breath. Then, with trepidation, I left the security of my air-pocket, hoping I'd made the right calculations to save my life.

Pushing off from the soft ground below the float house, I swam and swam, not stopping until I was absolutely sure I was past the undercarriage of the float house. When I surfaced, I was halfway across the slough and facing the side of Jean's motor boat as she approached the dock. Pulling myself onto the deck of the float house, I was filled with a profound sense of relief and gratitude for having survived this near-death experience. I felt that I'd been gifted another day to live, with the assistance (and insistence) of some benign source.

From that moment on, I was determined not to squander the opportunity to be alive. I'd be a bit more appreciative of each passing day. In an attempt to be

more present, I began to recognize and savor the joy or wide-eyed wonder when something unexpected appeared. Putting more effort into fulfilling my dreams led to a greater connection with family, friends and nature, actualizing my passion for all.



Bachelor Island, the Columbia River slough, and the float house  
as seen from my approaching kayak, at twilight.

## Chapter 2

### When I was a boy

Pushing the limits in my search for adventure, as I have, it's a wonder that I am alive to tell the tale. In an attempt to excise the demons that haunted me at night, I looked back at my last 65 years, to face my truth and perhaps find the peace I longed for. Taking a hard look at the stories I created from life occurrences was the perspective I needed, to unearth the underlying truth which led to the unlikely place where I am today. I'd recognize the ingenious ways that I would create all I needed to survive and thrive. It all began in the suburbs of the Los Angeles basin, the concrete laden jungle that I called home.

Before I was born, after having four girls, my parents figured the odds of having another girl were slim. They picked out a name. I would be called Timothy. They even bought me a small baseball bat and glove before I was born. Surprise!!! As the youngest, and most definitely the last (since Mom was 39 at my birth), they named me after her, Georgena. My mother was an outspoken tomboy. My dad was a soft-spoken, gentle and loving man. I was fortunate, destined to take on both my mother's physical, tomboy nature, and my father's kind and gentle ways. I'd soon put that bat and glove to good use!

At about five years old, I discovered something that I knew would please Mom. Approaching her while she was cooking in the kitchen I said, "Mom, I just heard that girls can be turned into boys!" Believing they'd wanted a boy but got me, I was pretty sure she'd be overjoyed at this news. Mom whipped around from the counter and glared at me. "Don't ever say that again!" Surprised at her reaction, I squelched any further thoughts about changing genders.

Like my father, I was happy and yet reticent when it came to speaking my

mind, especially if it was contrary to common conceptions. Thinking long and hard before verbalizing my opinion, I'd weigh my truth, and the surrounding circumstances. Then, I might even mull over the answers to possible rebuttals others would have in hearing my words. My mother used to say, "You think too much." Possibly, but I didn't have control over the way my thoughts unfolded. Or did I have the emotional maturity to expose myself to scrutiny as I spoke my truth to others, at that young age. My strength in my opinions, as well as, my emotional fortitude would grow in time.

There was one similarity to Dad that I am especially proud of. He would find the best in people different than himself. Then I took it to a whole new level. Not only did I find the best in people different from myself, I thrived on difference. I'm drawn to quirky things and people. I like things that make me wonder and people who challenge my norm.

The way I differed from my father was my thirst for adventure. It seems I was born with this insatiable drive for the next new experience. Being a carefree, rambunctious child, often, I'd be found climbing trees, fences and lining up for any physical challenge that came my way. Before I started school, a big portion of my day would be spent outside playing with friends. Having no fear of potential hazards, I tested the limits of my body. Rarely did I find a physical obstacle I couldn't overcome. My body was strong and my will even stronger.

Swimming was a big part of our life. Each of us kids in turn were on the swim team at the local country club. I could swim before I could walk. Mom would toss me from the edge of the pool to my oldest sister, Donna, who'd be waiting. At the age of 13, Donna was trusted to care for Mom's youngest, who wasn't yet one. In the pool, I'd kick my little sausage-shaped legs fast, lifting my head by doing the dog-paddle with my arms. When I reached Donna, she'd cradle my belly to ensure my safety, and I'd keep on swimming. It always felt safe and natural to be in the water.

Once I was a proficient swimmer, I loved diving underwater, swimming from one side of the pool to the other. One time, I was in a neighbor's pool. My friends and I had been playing with toys, and they all ended up in the deep end of the pool. Mom directed me, "Get all those toys and bring them to me." "OK." Quickly complying, I dove down to the bottom of the pool and began gathering the toys. Filling my arms with toys, I was determined to carry them all up in one trip. After retrieving them all, nearly out of air, I attempted to swim up, but the weight of the toys made it difficult. Not letting go of a single toy, I kept jumping up and down, yet, couldn't lift off from the bottom. All of a sudden, I felt my mom rip the toys

from my arms, propelling me to the surface. Realizing her wild child wasn't rising from the bottom, she'd jumped into the pool, fully clothed, to my rescue.

After raising four other kids, my parents were a bit more relaxed when it came to me. Given an extraordinary amount of freedom, I was allowed to run unsupervised in the neighborhood. My parents trusted the safety of the neighborhood and so did I. I'd carry that feeling of safety in the world throughout my life. We lived in a quiet suburban neighborhood at a time when violent crime was low. We were middle class and didn't lack in any necessity of life. We lived life in a bubble. I would play outside all day long, only going home when I was hungry or needed something, like one of my dad's tools.

My creativity manifested in building things, with my primary focus on designing boats and fighting implements. I'd whittle boats out of the bark chips in our front yard, and sail them down the gutter using a toothpick and leaf for the sail. Never having been on or near a boat, didn't stop my yearning or feeling of connection to boats. Dad gave me his pocket knife, trusting in me to use it safely. I pulled from an inner knowing, to design and carve numerous boats, as well as other, more useful, implements. The boys and I would "play fight" each other and a neighboring street gang. I'd make wooden knives, pistols and rifles, propelling sticks by pulling back on heavy rubber bands. Using Dad's jigsaw, I fashioned slingshots out of blocks of wood, firing off rocks and sharp spiny pods, dropped from a neighbor's tree, at my friends or the street lamps.

David, one of my playmates, was my best friend from birth. He was the same age as me, with short-cropped dirty blonde hair. He was always brimming with great ideas. "Let's have a race. Whoever can run and touch the fire hydrant first, wins." All the kids lined up side-by-side, and David would shout, "Go!" We'd run as fast as we could. Then, laughing at the winner and the loser, we'd do it again. As David was always the first to make a suggestion, I once called him the leader of our gang. He rejected the term, saying, "I am *not* the leader." This gave me pause. I knew for certain that when he would suggest what to do, everyone would fall in line, agreeing to whatever he said. I remember testing the theory. I told everyone, "Let's run to David's house, and climb the tree!" (It was the only tree on the block we were allowed to climb.) When I took off running, everybody followed. This brought me to the understanding that I too could be a leader, as long as I had a compelling idea with a lot of enthusiasm behind it.

Our playground was the asphalt city streets where we lived. We'd challenge each other to top the number of times we'd each climb to the cross-member on the street lamp, touch it and climb down without falling. On another occasion,



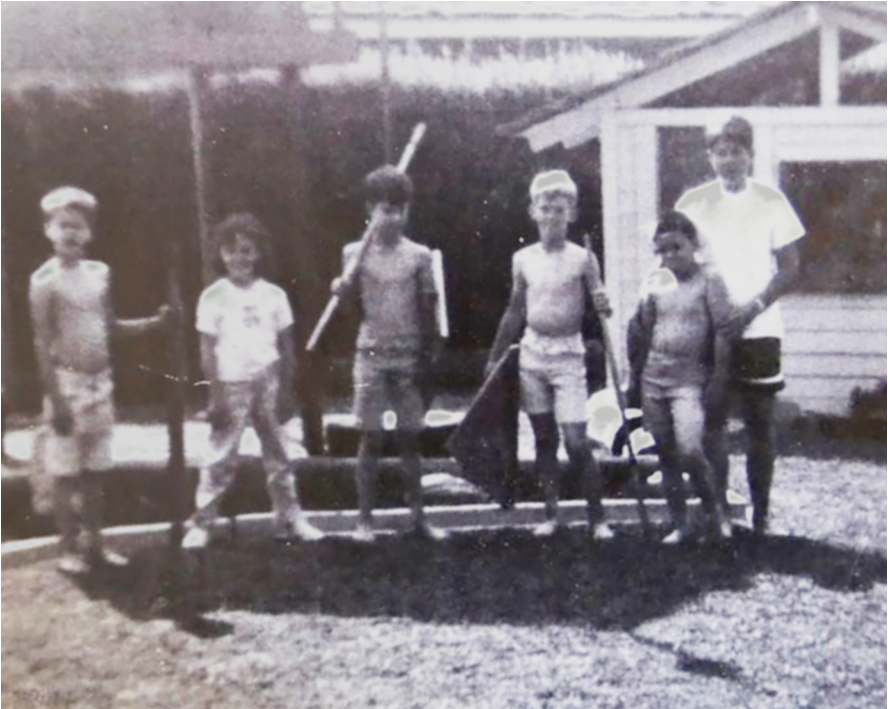
we dared each other to see who was the bravest by jumping from the highest limb of David's tree. I could fall out from a height higher than anyone without getting hurt. These playful challenges, and my willingness to put myself in harm's way, tested my resolve and my strength. My childhood provided a safe testing ground for times when I'd stretch my limits even further, by participating in activities some would think reckless or foolhardy. To me, it was fun, the way to enhance a situation.

When my playmates and I got a bit older, we'd play street baseball and football. My dad would hit fly balls to David and me for hours. It was one of my favorite activities. Proud, of my scrapes, cuts and bruises, I'd wear my band aids as a badge of honor. One time, after getting a minor cut on a finger, I nearly emptied the band aid box, wrapping each uninjured finger to show how tough I was.

At age 7, a new family with boys moved into the neighborhood, providing new challenges. Having watched Jimmy and Artie ride their unicycles, I followed suit. They had a weight room, something I'd never seen before. I was excited to learn how to use everything. When they saw that I could lift more weight and do more reps than any of the boys, I was banned from the weight room. This was my first experience of discrimination. It was obvious, in hindsight, that they preferred hanging out with the other kids, probably because they were boys. They were from a family of four boys, and definitely up for taking physical risks. They had one of the two swimming pools in the neighborhood, and I watched as Jimmie would climb onto the roof, then jump into the pool. *Something I didn't try!* I knew when to draw the line, and so did my other friends.

Though I was a girl, I was never treated differently by my original gang. There was the time that David showed me how he'd devised a track in the crawl space under his house. He laid boards down, and we'd scoot along them while lying flat on our bellies on our skateboards. When David showed me their secret stash of *Playboy* magazines. I remember thinking, "Where's the pictures of naked men?" I'd never seen either, but the women weren't very interesting.

I felt fearless, capable and I had my gang. I wanted for nothing. This experience influenced my approach to life and my belief that I was safe in pursuit of risk-taking adventure. It also reinforced a lifetime of pursuing outdoor adventures. I knew, without a doubt, play was an essential component for a quality life. What I also knew is that I'd always find new creative ways to express myself through art and woodworking. With total confidence in my ability to imagine big, and manifest from there, I would excel and thrive. Nothing could stop me.



My gang and I at age 6 or 7, posing with fighting gear and shields at the fort on stilts and white playhouse. I stand boldly, my legs wide apart, with my favorite five-pocket boy's jeans and G.I. Joe t-shirt.

## Chapter 3

### The sibling connection

The first strong influential characters in my life, outside of my parents, were my four sisters. They helped lay the groundwork for my state of being. I developed a strong sense of self, based on these relationships and the personal experiences I shared with them.

My sisters are all unique. I admire them all. They inspired my adventurous spirit. As the youngest, I had an up-close as well as a wide perspective on their life choices. I witnessed where they succeeded and where they fell short of their dreams and aspirations. In particular, I took a careful account of when one of them went outside the carefully laid out moral and societal norms my parents ascribed to and lived by. They provided a foundational understanding of how to create a successful career and fulfilling way of life. I had advantages many people I knew did not. I've always been aware of my good fortune. It fostered an inclination to give back to society and individuals, particularly those who may not have had the same advantages or opportunities I had.

Donna, the oldest, is calm and steady. She is outspoken and does not shy away from speaking her truth, even faced with challenging circumstances or resistance. Her bold self-assurance has been an inspiration to me. She was the first to leave home. Graduating from college with a degree in English, followed by a teacher certification, Donna enrolled in the Peace Corps and was stationed in Sarawak, the then newest state to become part of Malaysia. Sarawak is on the island of Borneo. At the time she was there, the main roads were the rivers and all people lived along them. The land in Sarawak was covered in huge, spongy jungles until you got into the mountains to the south. Donna's job was to support

the local teachers in the new public one-room (mostly) elementary schools set up in the up-river communities of native people, encouraging the “head-hunters of Borneo” to allow their children to attend public schools. She also assisted the new Sarawakian teachers with curriculum, supplies and workshops where they could get together with other teachers to share problems and solutions.

As a part of her work, Donna traveled a lot, visiting these new teachers and sleeping at night on a mat on their floors, as they did. Sometimes she was invited to attend special ceremonies in the long houses. Guests were smeared with charcoal and splashed with water as a part of the ceremony. Every long house had its own initiation ceremony. Usually, it was to drink a glass of their home variety of tuak (rice wine) as you ascended the notched log (with no railing) up to the long house porch. You could not refuse. Needless to say, it was very exciting to read about and I felt a longing well up inside of me to follow a similar path of adventure.

Mom would read her long letters to us. My sister, Susie, and I would sit in rapture, soaking up every word. Susie was 12, and I was 9 years old at the time. I still remember the musty smell of the letters and how the body of the letter folded, creating its own envelope. Donna described a culture so different than anything I’d known. She told stories about the people living in stilt huts along a river’s edge, how they’d hunt for monkeys, killing them with poisonous darts. They would hollow out bamboo shoots and propel the poison darts with a mighty blow. Donna sent home a lot of beautiful items, among them, a bamboo dart shooter. Cool! Taking it outside to practice hitting a cardboard box target across the lawn, I got pretty good.

Although Donna had red hair, Jeanne, the second oldest, had curly, out of control, red locks. This asset was literally her crowning jewel! Jeanne did everything extremely well. If she wasn’t the best, it wasn’t for lack of trying. Donna and Jeanne shared a room. Donna’s side was a total mess, Jeanne’s neat and tidy. It was definitely a study in opposing forces.

Jeanne was my second mom. She used to guide me, taking over “mom” duties. I remember the day that ended. She ran after me wanting to spank me. I tried to hide behind our clothes tree as she reached around, attempting to capture me. I shouted, “You’re not my mother!” That declaration stopped her in her tracks. She no longer lorded over me, but she continued to be my gauge on truth, and what was right and wrong over the years. Jeanne personified, to me, maternal comfort, trust and nurturing. She remains my go-to gal if I need reassurance, to this day.

Molly, the middle child, was the precocious, unruly child in our family. She broke the mold when it came to following tradition. Molly was my council for any

activity outside the norm. I went to her to ask about contraception. She was the first sister to smoke pot with me. Most of all, she charted a different path, trying new things and pushed the limits as defined by my parents and two older sisters. She cleared the way for me to spread my wings. And in the process of living her best life, was the perfect shield so our parents didn't look too closely my way. (Thanks, Molly!)

Wanting things her way, Molly at times locked horns with Mom. Neither would back down from their position. I think this raised Mom's ire, as well as her admiration. I believe Dad saw the similarities between Mom and Molly, and as a result, he held a special place in his heart for his #3 daughter. Molly was the first, and only daughter (due to the backlash), to let Mom and Dad know that she lived (and slept in the same bed) with her boyfriend, Steve, before wedlock. Mom popped a gasket over that one. I believe she wrote Molly out of the will, or at least threatened to. All was right in the world once they married.

Molly was also bitten by the adventure bug, traveling far and wide. She was an Occupational Therapist and Steve was a medical doctor. Since Molly did her work in the school system, she was able to have summers off, so more time to play. Occasionally, Molly would invite me, or one of my sisters, on an excursion she was undertaking. In 1978, when I was on winter break from college, Molly and Steve lived outside Flagstaff, Arizona. They extended an invitation for me to visit in the dead of winter, knowing my affinity for the wild. Jumping at the chance to visit somewhere so different than my southern California experience, I arrived, sorely unprepared for what I'd encounter.

The snow was high and temperatures were way below freezing, when I met Molly and Steve at the airport. Their small cabin was a quarter mile from where you could park your car. We drove as close as possible, then had to trudge the distance through knee high snow, to the cabin. On the long hike, my tennis shoes and socks were soaked through to the skin, and I was shivering by the time we reached their door. After shoveling out the newly fallen snow from the threshold, we stepped into their home. It was as cold inside as it was outside. Their home was heated by an open fireplace. They quickly stacked the wood and lit the fireplace. Nestling close to the flames, I wrapped myself in blankets and still I shivered. As this was my first real encounter with the cold conditions of winter, I never fully warmed up the whole time I was there. Even the floor in the bathroom was frozen, making it impossible to take a shower to warm oneself. This cold experience did nothing to cool my spirit of adventure.

Susie, sibling #4, was three years older than me. Dad put his DNA stamp on

both of our faces. Sus and I look a lot like each other. Brown, straight hair, and a long forehead and chin, like Dad. When Susie left for college, I was a sophomore in high school, and just beginning to act out by partying and drinking. The one thing she left behind on the counter of our room, where I couldn't miss it, was her driver's license. Wow. Susie was 18; in three years she'd be 21, drinking age. Snatching up her license, I knew I'd be able to pass for her at any liquor store or bar. Oh, yeah!

Susie and I had separate friends so didn't hang out much. We fought when we had to do dishes together or any other household task. When our older sisters left the nest, it was just the two of us for three years before it was her turn to fly. The year before she went to college, we were both in high school. Sus was a senior and I was a freshman. She was a song leader, an extra spirited and bouncy cheerleader. I was trying to find my own way after following four sisters who attended this same school. Her high visibility and cheery demeanor was somewhat embarrassing. After she left home, her life choices changed her image and my opinion of her. She became really cool and my closest confidante.

One of Sus' first jobs outside of college was as a park ranger in the Grand Canyon. She invited me out for a visit when I was still in high school. The first time I went, she dropped me off at the South rim, Bright Angel trailhead, to explore the canyon below. Her only warning was not to go too far; be back before dark. It was already, early afternoon. I hiked to the overlook, halfway down the trail, where I had my first glimpse of the mighty Colorado River, directly below. It looked so inviting after the long hot hike to this point. It didn't look too far away, so I continued down at a good clip until I reached the river and placed my hot, tired feet in the cold, rushing water. Refreshed, I headed back up the trail.

It was slow going hiking up the steep canyon wall. I put my head down and put one foot in front of the other, keeping up a regular stride and taking deep, even inhales and exhales. At one point, as I was about to turn up a switchback, I came nose-to-nose with a formidable bighorn sheep. We both stopped, blocked by each other's presence. I was between the edge of the cliff and the staring eyes (and horns) of the massive sheep. Startled, we were both frozen, lock-eyed. Since I didn't want to jump or get butted off the cliff, I slowly started backing up. I hadn't gone far, when the sheep brushed past me and straight down the side of the cliff. I don't know how he kept his footing and didn't stick around long enough to find out. Making my way to the top as fast as I could, I arrived, just as night fell. The next morning, I awoke with both calves in severe cramps. I had worked my calves uphill and downhill to their breaking point, and without adequate

hydration, I paid the price. Susie was jealous that I had had such a close encounter with a bighorn sheep. For all her time as a ranger she had never been close. My first adventure!!!

My sisters are my lifeblood and bring love and light into my life. We are all adventure seekers, thanks in part to Donna and our parents' encouragement (or more accurate, they didn't disapprove). My sisters have provided support and guidance over the years. Their guidance was not always asked for or appreciated. Whether accepted or not, I knew it came from a place of genuine concern and compassion.

Something I learned from a very young age, if I wanted to pursue activities outside the family status quo, it was best to be silent about my achievements. It was the way I lived most of my life, which in the long run, diminished my value and belief in my own power and self-worth. If it weren't for deep reflection and the good counsel of friends and loved ones, I might still be fearful of the exposure of who I was and how accomplished I'd become.

At any rate, my siblings' examples of how to live with adventurous extravaganzas on the side, was something that I knew I'd want to replicate, in my life, when given the opportunity. First, I needed to hurry and grow up!



In our front yard wearing bathing suits, Mom and her five girls are posing for a picture. Molly, always a stand-out, is striking a “glamorous” pose at age 8. I’m topless with a scowl at age 1 or 2.



Donna is wearing a traditional Sarawakian floor length dress, with fabric that wraps around her body from her ankles, tucked at her left shoulder, then drops down over her arm past her knee. A black shorts-sleeve scoop necked blouse shows on her right shoulder and arm. She is standing in front of ornate metal fencing.





Donna is smiling broadly with dark charcoal smudges on her face, neck and arm, a required initiation for guests to attend a special ceremony in Sarawak.



Jeanne in shorts, hiking boots and knee supports, is sitting on a rock slab on top of Clouds Rest in Yosemite, above Half Dome behind her.



Molly is leaning on her poles on downhill skis and surrounded by snow in Telluride, Colorado. Behind her is the snowcapped San Juan Mountain range and a dark blue sky with clouds above her.



In her early 20's, Susie is pictured in the Grand Canyon working as a park ranger dressed in hiking boots, shorts, identifying park ranger uniform shirt and cap, and carrying a backpack nearly half her height and probably half her weight, on her back.

## Chapter 4

### Girl Friday

Play and working with tools melded in my childhood, becoming a passion that would last a lifetime. Becoming Dad's shadow, I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. He spent a lot of time "tinkering" in the garage. Always at his side, I was watching and learning. On Saturdays, when we were each assigned a task to clean the house, my task was to help Dad organize the garage. I loved that! Creating useful items with tools brought meaning to my life. It expanded possibilities in applying my creative whims. There wasn't anywhere I'd rather be, than at Dad's side, soaking up everything he said or did.

Dad called me his "Girl Friday." I didn't know what that meant but assumed it was about he and I being buddies, which we were. Dad showed me how to use all his tools. He also showed me how to keep tools and hardware organized. This knowledge would come in handy in years to come.

As a child, I would sit on Dad's lap in his lounge chair. He would take hold each of my fingers in turn, gently flicking the end of my fingernails up. It was one of a number of odd habits he'd repeatedly do. Another was to rub each of my toes between his fingers, then tug on it to the brink of it hurting, before releasing it and moving to the next. I think back on these moments fondly, knowing they were intimate gestures of his love, mixed with uncertainty of how else to show it.

Dad would show his love in other ways. He seemed incapable of saying no to any of his girls. My sister Susie and I would go with him to Savon, a neighborhood drug store. He would park far from the entrance, and take each of our hands, skipping the whole way to the store. I would laugh almost to tears at Dad, middle-aged at the time, skipping like a schoolgirl! He could care less what he looked like because he'd do anything to delight his girls. When people heard that my dad

had five girls, he was frequently asked, “Aren’t you disappointed you didn’t have a son?” He never failed to answer, “All I ever wanted was five girls.” That’s love.

A creative activity Dad and I shared was doing large, extremely elaborate Paint-by-Numbers kits. These paintings taught me how to use a paint brush. It was also a lesson in patience. There were hundreds of tiny shapes with little numbers. It was my challenge, once I decided on a place to start, to find all the same numbers across the painting, and fill in between the lines with color. We’d work on it together for hours, on multiple days. When it was complete, I looked with wonder and delight at how different colors complemented each other, and blended to create shadows or nuanced natural environments. It was through Paint-by-Numbers that I learned that green grass was not just green. Sometimes green can be enhanced by the use of yellow, blue or dark gray, maybe the occasional red. It was a fun activity with a beautiful final result, part of which was the great bonding opportunity it provided with Dad.

Dad was a pediatric dentist; being a gentle man, working with children suited him well. He had his own dental office with one associate. His receptionist, Virginia, had a tough demeanor. Quite the opposite of Dad. But Virginia had Dad’s back. Dad had the habit of taking a nap after lunch. Virginia would make sure he was not disturbed unless it was an absolute necessity. Dad’s practice thrived. He furthered his training and became an orthodontist and did all of our braces. Again, displaying his soft spot for his girls, when Susie complained of them hurting and implored him to remove them, he did. Even though they had not completely straightened her teeth, he couldn’t bear to have his girl unhappy.

Dad’s quiet and polite demeanor was a product of his hometown upbringing. His family and friends called him “Tommy.” He was short and skinny, but he stood out because of his curly red hair, and enthusiasm for sports and any rambunctious activity with his friends. Melrose, Iowa was a small close-knit community. At the time that Dad was there, it had a population of 500. As it was on a railroad line, it was expected to grow, but never did. In the 2020 census, it had a population of 110. Nearly all, then and now, are Irish Catholic.

When Mom and Dad got married and had their first child, Donna in 1944, Dad was in the service at the end of World War II, and returned after her birth. Their next child, Jeanne, was born in 1946, after Mom and Dad had moved from Chicago, Mom’s hometown where they’d met, back to Iowa. They settled in the small town of Cherokee to raise their girls and start Dad’s dental practice. Four years later, Molly burst into the scene in 1950.

Since Susie and I were his only daughters not to step foot in Melrose, Dad

took us on a road trip to visit when I was about 8 years old. What I remember most is Dad ordering large plates of fresh, locally grown, sliced tomatoes and that being the entirety of his lunch. I'd known Dad loved tomatoes, but this seemed a little extreme. And later, while at the home of his stepmother, we walked across her lawn that had thousands of green locusts covering it. Each of my steps sent them jumping in all directions. Creepy fun. I found it all unusual and fascinating.

From birth, I embodied the personality traits of my father. As I aged, I thought I transformed into my own person, separate from him. It's only now, in self-reflection, that I realize that I did not shake that embodiment. Not only is my personality similar to his, but my life trajectory followed his. I only hope I can be half the human being he was by the end of my life. I didn't recognize the gift I had in my father while he was living. I do now, and I understand how I am completely in his debt for the many gifts he bestowed.

## Chapter 5

### Playing doctor

Playtime took a nasty turn when I was 5 or 6. An innocent action, based on curiosity, placed a wedge between my mother and myself that would continue for decades. My friend, David and I were hanging out in his tree. He asked if I would show him my privates and he would show me his. I agreed. We climbed out of the tree and went behind his house. We dropped our pants. David looked long and hard at me with a puzzled look. He didn't see my penis. He asked me to pee. I tried, yet to his dismay ... still no penis. Being from a family of girls, I had never seen a naked boy before. It was an eye-opening experience. Our final bodily inspection happened in my bedroom. David and I were pant-less under the covers in my bedroom when my mom came in to check on us. She flipped out. I get it now, that the act coupled with the location must have been unnerving, but her fury was extraordinarily frightening at the time.

Mom walked David to the front door and sent him home, probably followed by a phone call to his mother. Alone in my room, Mom took her usual punishment to an unprecedented level. It started with a bare bottom spanking with the wooden 3-foot yardstick. Her usual implement of punishment. When it broke, she graduated to a wooden hanger. When the hanger broke, she started with her hand. I remember that hurting more than anything. Still, I didn't cry. I'd learned at an even younger age, never to show emotion or speak in harsh or loud tones. Mom told us, "It disturbs Dad." At the time, I couldn't imagine anything disturbing my even-tempered father. When Mom tired of spanking me, she made me stand naked in front of a window facing the backyard. I stood there for hours. It got dark and still I stood there. I don't have memories of her coming back in,

but I know she did for I feared moving an inch. It was never spoken of again. Next time I saw David, I asked him what his mother did to him. He said, "Nothing." I remained silent. Embarrassed by the opposite response from mine.

This experience had a lasting effect on me. I felt ashamed. I felt dirty. I felt that I had done something so egregious that I would be damned for all time. From that day on, I felt like I never quite measured up to my mother's expectations of how a good daughter should act. That disappointment seemed apparent anytime we locked eyes. It may have been her disappointment in herself or maybe it was me, believing my deeds unforgivable. This feeling of not being good enough would dog me most of my life. I'd hide my deeds and talents so I wouldn't be judged or scrutinized. This belief of unworthiness diminished me, and yet I still found my way to live a full life, through deceit and bluster.

Thirty years later, I did attempt to bring the incident up to her. Since we had never talked about it, I wondered if it had even happened. I was only able to get out a few words about the time of the incident before my mother ran out of the room with her hands over her ears. That action spoke volumes. I knew it had happened and that she was ashamed. I never brought it up again. Oddly, it gave me a sense of relief. The air would never truly be cleared in regards to the incident. If we had talked honestly about it, either late in life or immediately afterwards, I believe I would have forgiven her on the spot. It was obviously an out-of-control reaction, triggered by something she wanted to discourage. Not at all reflective of her character. Mom's personality was upbeat and fun-loving, albeit, harboring steadfast views of what's right and wrong. My longing for her to look at me with admiration and pride only grew. It's sad that we didn't know how to speak to each other with this kind of hard truth.

Mom's reaction to David and me playing doctor was not the root cause of my low self-esteem, but it certainly fed into it. It would take some time to grow strong enough emotionally to not be quite so affected by what others thought, stand solid in my truth, knowing when to speak up and when it's appropriate to learn from my gaffes in judgment. Though I don't always respond rather than react in volatile situations, my bounce back to the truth seems to happen a little quicker.



## Chapter 6

### Adolescence: Pushing the limits

Playtime took a hit when I started school. I was excited to go, but I was in for a rude awakening. It was there that I learned the truth about systemic gender inequality. The rule in our school was girls played with girls and boys played with boys. Girl games were boring. Until the age of 10, the choices in our school were jacks, jump rope and four-square. Not my idea of a good time.

Needless to say, school started out rough. Play as I knew it ceased to exist. David and I went to separate schools and grew apart. As I got older, I did participate in activities outside of school, like Bobby-Sox softball, which I loved. Eventually, school would offer girls basketball and volleyball. I joined every team sport. Although I was short and not necessarily the best, no one could match my enthusiasm. I was fast and determined. On the basketball team, I was the “rover,” one of two people per team that were allowed to travel across half-court. Mastering the steal, or catching the ball from one of my teammates, I’d sprint to our basket and do a successful lay-up every time. At the end of my 8th grade school year, I was awarded a trophy for Most Inspirational.

While in grade school, I was approached to enroll in the Girl Scouts. I was told they would do fun activities, like camping. I jumped at the chance! My family wasn’t into camping. After I joined, I was told about all the badges I could earn, sewing, baking or providing services to our community. “Okay, but what about camping?” We would meet monthly in a large hall, and were given creative activities to pass the time. I was bored. Joining with another bored and rebellious Girl Scout, I started “acting out.” When the donuts were handed out, we reached behind the backs of the servers and grabbed more. This led to us being kicked out

of the Girl Scouts, accused of smashing donuts. My mom made me go to each of the leader's houses and apologize. After doing as I was told, I wasn't forced to go back.

Another thing my mother enrolled my sisters and me in was Cotillion. This was a formal social dance training for young boys and girls. It also taught social etiquette. My mom dressed me in a frilly white dress, bobby socks with black patent leather shoes and little white gloves. The boys were also dressed up. They wore black suits, white shirts with ties and shiny black shoes. In the class, the boys and girls sat in metal chairs on opposite sides of the dance floor, facing each other. We were told that when the instructor clicked her finger cymbals, it was a signal that the girls quickly bring their knees together, and for the boys to sit up straight. It filled me with repugnance, even at this mostly obedient, young age.

The dance instructor paired us up to learn classic dances, such as the fox trot, polka, square dance and waltz. Some of the boys I was paired with, swung me hard, and in turn, I swung them back harder. It was the only fun I got from the class. We were corrected by the instructor but never seemed to get it. After the first year of Cotillion, Mom didn't force me to go back. She realized it was a losing battle. She must have decided it also wasn't worth pushing me into piano lessons, because I was the only daughter who didn't have them. Probably true, although I've wished for a musical talent throughout my life.

The boys in school knew I was their ally. I remember an impromptu survey that a boy started in third grade. He passed the paper ballot to every boy, to vote on who their favorite girl was. It was unanimous. I was the favorite. However, once we reached puberty, I no longer topped the list. My tomboy ways weren't as appealing. I switched my attention from boys to the "bad" girls.

My clandestine, wayward behavior began when I was about 9 years old. On my way to school, a friend said, "Hey, I copped some cigarettes from my folks. Anyone interested in trying one?" Quickly responding, I said, "Oh yeah! I'm in." We ducked into a parking garage that hid us from view of the school and the crosswalk guard. I took a puff. It felt strangely pleasurable. Perhaps it was the shared decadence of the act or the feel of the cigarette smoke going in and out of my mouth. In any case, I liked it from the start. I knew I'd want to do it again.

My parents were Coors beer drinkers. They'd pop a can on Friday nights when the family would share a bowl of popcorn. On occasion they'd let me take a little sip. I liked the smell and the sharp bubbly taste. When I was 13, my folks went away for the weekend and Susie, the one remaining sister still living at home, went out for the evening. Left alone to my own devices, I drank every beer in the

fridge. Feeling the oncoming effects of the alcohol, I let loose with wild abandon, jumping on the couch cushions, playing loud music and dancing the night away. I was wasted. When Susie came home and saw what I'd done, she said she would cover for me. She told Mom that she and her friends had drunk all the beer. Mom didn't believe her for a second. Even then, my mom had me pegged as the "trouble child." She would never know the extent of that truth.

Adventure, and seeking new and more challenging ways to experience it in life and nature, has been a driving force in my life. From the creative games of my youth, playing with G.I. Joes and acting out war games, through my wild teenage pursuits, I followed a path that would lead to more explorations in unknown territories.



With a game going on in the background, I am wearing shorts, my white baseball shirt with an All-Star patch on the sleeve and shin guards.

I am the catcher for our Bobbie-Sox team.



At age 6, I'm wearing a frilly white dress and head veil from my Catholic First Communion ceremony between two of my childhood friends looking at my outfit in distress, as it was so out of character for me. One of the boy's fathers is pushing him to stand close to me and his resistance is captured in the photo.



Seven of my grammar school classmates and I attempt to stage a photo op of four of us lifting the other four onto our shoulders. I'm one of two who succeeded, on the far right, with a necklace around my neck of the image of an ancient god. We are wearing our school uniforms: a blue plaid skirt, white button-down shirt and blue sweater.

## Chapter 7

### Deceptive freedom

In high school, I began to sow my wild oats. Starting my freshman year in 1970, I mostly followed the rules at the strict Catholic school. It didn't take long, however, for the strict rules to wear on me, and I began to find ways to stretch my wings, not always in the most graceful or risk-free manner. Hiding my indiscretions, I experimented with drugs, alcohol, and various other types of vices.

Bishop Amat Memorial High School was a college-prep institution, with limited opportunities to pursue anything but basic education courses. They offered two team sports for girls. I was on both teams for softball and basketball. Not long before my attendance, classes were gender segregated. Even in my time, many of my classes were only girls. The classes were taught by nuns, priests and some secular teachers. Some of the education and rules pertained to supporting the conservative and religious views of the Catholic Church, for instance, the class called "Religion." It was mandatory for each student to take it. I wasn't thrilled about the prospect of taking a class where I'd be told what to believe, because a succession of popes in Rome said it was true. I wanted to know the truth of my being, not given moral mandates to live by.

I'd lost my faith in the Catholic doctrine as well as the infallibility of the pope and priests long ago. All five of us Moran girls, went to Catholic grammar school and high school. We also went to church every Sunday. When I was about 10 years old, I decided to go to confession. I'd go there about once a year to get my sins absolved, or if I'd done something clearly shameful in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Going into the small chamber, I lowered myself onto the cushioned kneeler, and the priest slid open the window between us. I recited the required

line, “Forgive me father, for I have sinned. My sins are ...” I started with my usual, “I’ve lied ...” I may or may not have lied, but I wanted to cover myself, just in case. With the priest’s absolution, I was sinless once again and if I died suddenly, I’d go to heaven, not hell or purgatory where I might languish for eons.

Not knowing if it was a sin, I thought I’d play it safe and throw one more deed into the mix, confessing, “I have the desire to be with a boy in school.” This statement was followed with swift and stern consternation from the priest. He accused me of being an abomination to God. That these thoughts were as bad as any action would be. His tirade went on and on. It seemed a little over the top, but he was God’s ears, the channel to forgiveness, so I listened to his words. I started feeling bad that my sin was such a big deal. Then something in his words triggered a thought. “You do know that I’m a girl, right?” That stopped him cold. After a pause, he said, “Well, even so, your thoughts were very bad.” I knew now, he’d assumed I was a boy by my low voice. He gave me a few prayers to recite after I left to absolve me of my sins. Leaving the confessional, I was furious! That he would berate me, then not admit that he had misjudged me, was so wrong. I did recite those prayers, as a safeguard, but I was fuming while doing so. I never went to confession again. This led to my questioning of all of the Catholic doctrines. The strict rules in the Catholic school didn’t help matters.

Approaching the classroom on the first day of Religion class, I was less than pleased to have to go in. I figured that I’d be subjected to more Catholic dogma, which through lingering resentments of the confessional incident, I held underlying doubts about. As it turned out, there was some of that, but the teachings were much more subtle. The doctrine would be disguised through, heavily directed, class discussion.

Entering the room, I was immediately struck by what I saw. The priest who would be teaching the Religion class welcomed me warmly. My first impression was that he appeared way cooler than the other religious instructors I’d had thus far. He was younger, which to me, was one point in his favor. Father Liam was also first generation Irish. His soft-spoken Irish brogue was lyrical and pleasing to the ear. His thick un-coiffed, curly hair flew in all directions. His appearance made him seem approachable, though he still wore the stiff white collar, tucked into the black Nehru-style shirt, common with priests. It made me feel more open to hear what he had to say. His overall demeanor led me to believe that I’d also have a safe space to dispute his words.

Religion class covered issues of the day and the Catholic doctrines related to the proper behavior to follow. For instance, I vividly remember being taught that

premarital sex could lead to a total emotional breakdown. The priest spoke about a young woman he counseled who went mad because she felt so guilty about having sex before she was married. In my mind, I vowed never to have sex while in high school. That was no problem because I had only one boyfriend when I was a freshman and that didn't last very long.

More directly impacting my daily life, was the rule in school that girls must wear skirts or dresses. Not only that, they could only be from 0 to 4" above your knee. Even "middies" that were in fashion, with the length halfway between knee and ankle, were not allowed. If the length was in question, you were told to kneel wherever you were, and if the skirt was not the appropriate length, it would get ripped out. I spent the four years in high school wearing skirts that I could roll up or down, with hems that were mostly held up with masking tape.

One thing that I enjoyed every year was the father-daughter dance. Dad and I would go on a date in the high school gymnasium. All the other girls who had agreeable fathers would be there as well. It was a fun event for me because of Dad's unique way of dancing. He taught all of us girls a dance he called "The Melrose Hop." First, we'd hook elbows, side-by-side. Then, we'd skip to the beat of the music. Sometimes we'd skip with our heads thrown back. Other times we'd bend at the waist, and skip. We would weave our way through the other dancers on the crowded dance floor. It always gathered a lot of attention, laughter and couples attempting to mimic our moves. I loved those dances with Dad. Once, my close friend, whose father was unavailable, asked if she could go with us. This tripled the fun.

The last three years of high school, I stopped playing all sports and started partying. Being insecure and self-conscious in social situations, I became more confident and boisterous when I drank. Alcohol and drugs became my crutch. My drugs of choice were pot, nicotine and LSD, or acid. This hallucinogenic drug was plentiful, and easier to get than anything else. Acid was fun, but it was almost too much of a good thing. Its effects would last for hours. After it wore off, I was depleted of all energy. Due to its aftereffects, I didn't indulge in acid often. My junior year, my friends told me about a local liquor store that would sell to minors. Taking advantage of this resource, alcohol and cigarettes accompanied me to parties most often.

When my friends and I started driving, it was sheer luck that we survived our dangerous exploits. Insisting that I drive in most cases, I believed more in my ability to drive while intoxicated, than I trusted anyone else. I may have been a risk taker but I knew where to draw the line. When I felt things were out of



control, I'd back away. If I felt I was addicted to a substance I'd quit cold turkey. I would not be controlled or lose my precious freedom.

Mom and Dad were liberal when it came to letting me use their car. I took full advantage of it. When there was a beach party, I was the designated driver. Having a thing for Janis Joplin, I took on her favorite drink as my own. Southern Comfort got you high, and in my experience, kept getting you higher as time went on. I'd take a pint of it with me to all the beach bonfires I attended. Dozens of my friends would meet at the beach, about an hour's drive from where we lived. People would bring musical instruments, and we'd sing and drink the night away. It was a lot of fun warming ourselves at the fire, laughing and telling stories, late into the night. Then high as a kite, I'd drive all my friends home, safe and sound. I must have had an angel on my shoulder!

Even more dangerous were our day trips to Chantry Flats. This meant a drive to the mountains for a day of drinking, pot smoking and frivolity in the water. The scary part was the long winding drive home. The only way I managed to drive was by following the dotted lines dividing the lanes. Without that, I would have sideswiped the mountain or gone off the cliff, for sure; super scary in retrospect!

I found an opportunity to get into trouble even closer to home. A single woman and her two twin children moved in next-door. Lorraine was a country western singer in her thirties. I took a liking to this bold, outspoken woman, living "outside the box." I started hanging out at her house, smoking cigarettes and talking. I learned from her that I didn't have to choose traditional means to make it in this world. I will always be grateful for her example, underscoring that there were multiple paths to success. Mom wasn't as enamored with Lorraine as I was but didn't prevent me from going over there. If she would have known the extent of her influence in encouraging my wayward ways, she would have been horrified.

Stuffing my bed with pillows so it looked like I was still in bed, I'd sneak out the back door, jump the fence and go to Lorraine's house. Sometimes I'd meet her at a local bar called the Hob Nob where she would perform. They would serve me drinks. It was during the "streaking" craze (people would run naked in public) when Lorraine made a proposition to me. She said she would pay me \$2 per second if I would streak while she sang the popular song, *The Streak*, on stage. Of course, I said, "Yes!" Physically, I was in great condition. With my svelte athletic body, I knew I could run like the wind and accomplish what this activity required. Emotionally, as a 17-year-old, I was impulsive and rarely thought about the consequences of my actions. I liked Lorraine, so I was willing to do anything that would make her happy.

Sneaking out after my parents fell asleep, I met Lorraine's partner, Bill, at their house. I slipped out of my clothes and donned a robe and one of Lorraine's blonde wigs. Ready for action, we headed to the Hob Nob. We had a plan that I would wait in the back of the bar until the song began. At that point, I'd drop my robe and sprint up to the stage. The bass player would reach out his hand and give me a lift onto the stage. I'd do a spin next to Lorraine then jump off the stage making a beeline to the back where Bill would hand me the robe and escort me back to his car. It was showtime!

When the song started, I froze. Bill slipped the robe off my shoulders and gave me a little shove saying, "You're on, babe!" I started running. I made it to the stage and the bass player stared at me without reaching out his hand. I crawled onto the stage on all fours. As I stood up the bass player extended his hand. I ran to Lorraine at center stage and twirled. One thing we hadn't counted on was the audience rushing onto the dance floor. I jumped off the stage, plowing my way through the crowd.

A man reached through the crowd grabbing my inner thigh. I tore away from his hold and continued to run towards the back of the bar. Bill handed me the robe; I slipped it on and made my way to the awaiting vehicle. At the vehicle, Bill stood staring at the door. He had locked his keys in the car. It took a while as he fumbled with a coat hanger to unlock the door, I stood by in my robe and platinum blonde hair, quite the attraction in this grungy neighborhood parking lot. Finally, Bill got the door open and I made it home. I slipped into bed with my parents none the wiser. Whew ...

The next time I saw Lorraine, we debriefed about the event, from her perspective. She reported, "When the bass guitar player didn't lend a hand to help you on the stage, then extended his hand after you scrambled onto the stage yourself, I doubled over laughing. I laughed so hard; I peed my pants!" She continued, "When the song was over, I went to the bathroom to clean up. While in the bathroom, a woman backed me up against the wall, demanding that I tell her the name of the stalker. I told her I didn't know. It was just some random woman from the bar." Though the woman didn't believe her, she had no choice but to let Lorraine continue her task. It was unclear why the woman was so insistent to have my name. Lorraine handed me a \$20 bill for my performance.

My last couple of years of high school weren't all fun and games. Alongside my reckless behavior, I struggled with depression. Our once lively household was suddenly hollow and silent. All my sisters had left home, either to be in college or to pursue new found careers. I had been shielded from Mom and Dad's watchful

eyes. Now, they put a laser focus on me. It challenged my ability to hide my indiscretions. I would come home from school, go directly into my room and close the door. I'd turn out all the lights and light candles. I would play the song "Revolution" by the Beatles over-and-over again on high volume, especially the beginning when John Lennon screams. My parents didn't know what to do. They left me undisturbed in my room. My sisters would write letters home of their many activities. It fueled my restless spirit. I went through school doing just enough to get passing grades. I didn't feel as smart as my sisters, so I applied myself to what I believed was my greatest asset, making friends. I did excel in my Art class. Like my father, painting and drawing came naturally to me. I could replicate anything I saw.

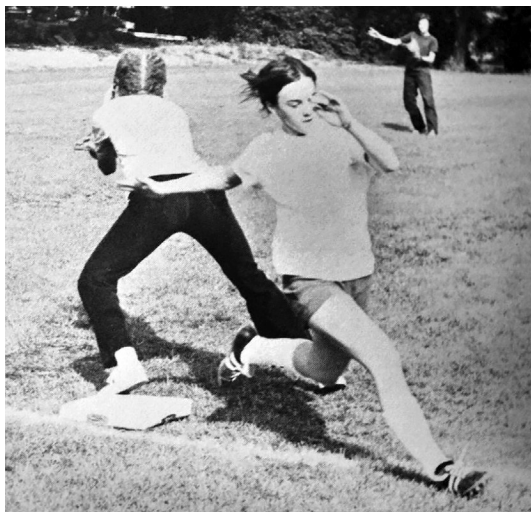
Outside of numbing myself with drugs and alcohol, I found solace by being in nature. This is the closest I'd come to self-care. Riding my bike to a local park, I'd lean against a tree and write prose and sketch. My writing and artwork were dark, but it defused what to me was an intolerable situation. Going to a place where I could be surrounded by large trees and the sounds of birds, cleared my troubled mind. It has been my source of inspiration, where I've reconciled difficulties, and felt at peace. It was a life saver in high school.

Another way I'd found peace from the feeling of being locked up, restricted from the places and activities I longed for, was to paint pictures of nature. I'd sit in the front yard under one of our orange trees with a large canvas, and paint. The only thing I could paint without referencing a picture were dark blue skies filled with large pillowy white clouds. Filling many a canvas with clouds, they were my hope and joy. The sky I saw in West Covina in the 60's and 70's was brown. We lived in a smog-filled basin. I'm not sure where I got my ability to know what clouds and blue sky looked like. All I know is that I longed to live where I could experience clean air, and the season's change. The cloudless, endlessly "sunny" days bored me, they were listless with stale air edging on dangerous when smog-alerts forced us to remain indoors due to the toxic atmosphere. I longed for the vibrancy of extreme weather. A growing determination to live somewhere else began brewing inside of me. A close friend had a brother who lived in Oregon. He made a living making clocks out of burls of wood. Romanticizing his life, I thought, "I could do that!"

Nearing the end of my time in high school, I made friends with a small group of women that made a huge impact on my life. One of the women was proficient at playing the guitar and had an exceptional singing voice. It was this that drew me to befriend her in high school class. These women met me in an extraordinary

way, outside of my comfort zone. They taught me how to express and accept love. They expressed it openly, both physically and emotionally. Holding me tightly and kissing my face, they'd say, "I love you." These are words I'd never heard from my family of origin. Eventually, I learned to be comfortable with their physical touch, and to say, "I love you, too." in return, and mean it wholeheartedly.

My new friends would play music and we'd sing. A few of the albums we'd spin on the turntable were Melanie, Joni Mitchell and Carole King. One of the women had an extraordinary singing voice and played folk songs on the guitar. It broke open feelings that I'd never felt before. Attempting to find ways to express this feeling, I made chocolate chip cookies, drove downtown, and passed plates of cookies through my car window to the homeless people I found there. One thought I had was to put a sign in my car window that said, I LOVE YOU. Not going so far as to do this, nonetheless, feelings of love filled my heart to bursting. These warm feelings toward my fellow human beings were novel and exciting. It was the beginning of a new way of expression and being present in the world.



My freshman year playing fast pitch softball, I am taking a long stride after tagging first base, with the first baseman still reaching for the oncoming ball thrown from a distant player with an outstretched arm. *Safe!!!*



Dad and I are standing side by side posing for a photo at the father-daughter dance. The backdrop has large paper flowers and the large “50’s” indicating the theme of the dance. I am wearing a flowery dress and both of us have an emblem on our left shoulder of a girl in a dress with a ponytail.



Acrylic painting of St. Christopher that I did in art class at age 16. With his muscles bulging, St. Christopher is holding a staff with both hands to steady himself as he crosses a stream, carrying the baby Jesus on his shoulder. He is looking at Jesus who is pointing to the sky.

## Chapter 8

### My fledgling flight

College was mandatory in our family. Mom was denied attending college during the great depression. Instead, she and one of her sisters worked to support their mother and help their brothers attend college. Mom never got over her disappointment. She would make sure all her children would have the opportunity and go to college. She married a dentist and made it clear that college followed high school.

I wasn't keen on continuing my education, but I was extremely excited about leaving home! College was one way to accomplish that. My parents said we could attend any college in California, to take advantage of the lower in-state tuition. They paid for tuition and the first-year of room and board. I was accepted into the University of California, Sonoma. It was nestled in Marin County, a beautiful area north of San Francisco. It was attractive, not only by its beauty, but I'd heard it was a very liberal campus. Pot, it turned out, was prolific and police were not allowed on campus. My reckless ways would be free to manifest!

Unfortunately, my dormmate and I weren't a good match. She was a non-smoking sophomore. I was fully embracing my smoking habit by then. Fortunately, she found a boyfriend and moved in with him the first week of school. That worked out nicely! Though I never skipped, I would go to school stoned. I'd smoke a joint in the shower before my first class to start the day off right. Classes were relatively easy. Coming from a college prep high school, the assignments were familiar and I had the discipline to do the work. I'd party *hard* every weekend. Once, I displayed my physical agility by walking on the top edge of a tall concrete wall, totally drunk. Of course, I didn't fall, but no one was foolish enough to follow me either.

Many interesting occurrences happened my first year away from home. There was one time I was hitchhiking down the coast with friends. We stopped to spend the night on the beach. As we laid side by side staring up at the stars, one guy pointed to the sky exclaiming, "Look!" We all looked where he pointed. I saw a bright ball of light streak across the sky. The more I watched the stranger it got. Not only did it cross the sky at lightning speed, faster than any plane I'd ever seen, it then began to zigzag. Virtually pivoting from one direction to another in a quick progression. Then in one final projection, it flashed across the sky and out of sight. I was stunned. We checked in with each other about what we had witnessed. Besides the first observer who had seen much more of the action, all stories matched. It expanded my perspectives. I believe I witnessed something, depicting life from beyond this world. It made me feel very small, yet blessed, to have witnessed such an extraordinary occurrence.

My one elective course, outside of the standard freshman classes for my undeclared major, was Outward Bound. Developed in the UK, the course was about the power and intensity of learning about adventure in the outdoors. Facilitating the class was an expert on challenges in the natural environment, He brought us to the edge of, but not beyond our ability, stretching us both physically and mentally.

Outward Bound fed my desire to explore the outdoors. One time, the class went on a hike at Muir Woods National Monument. It was named after naturalist John Muir, and located on Mount Tamalpais near the Pacific Coast. At the time, the trails were primarily natural surface, and traversed through extraordinary woodlands and redwood forests. I hung back with one of the students. As an Indigenous man, familiar with the tracking skills of his ancestors, he mentored me as we hiked. "Look behind you," he said. "If you get lost, it will help you recognize familiar surroundings." He also taught me techniques in marking the path of travel for the same purpose of finding your way home. Piling rocks at strategic crossroads could point to the right direction. Native peoples would bend branches along their way, something they could follow on their return trip. These tracking techniques would be used on future wilderness adventures I'd undertake.

Picking up a pebble, he rubbed it between his hands, then popped it into his mouth, explaining, "On long treks or running, my people would put a pebble in their mouths to generate saliva." He continued, "This will provide hydration while in motion." Trying it myself, after placing a pebble in my mouth, sure enough, I felt my salivary glands kick into action. Lessons from my other classes weren't



retained, but I used these insightful survival methods, as needed, from that day on. I was honing the necessary skills to follow my passions.

By the end of the school year, I was unable to go on. My wild abandon in the use of drugs and alcohol left me demoralized and in a mental fog. I knew I needed to rehabilitate. I went home, expressing my need to skip a year of college and asked my parents if I could move back in. I felt like a failure. All of my sisters had completed their education without a break. I don't remember my parents dangling their disappointment in front of me. It didn't matter. I harangued myself enough without them. The last thing I wanted was to be back under their roof. I sucked up these feelings because I knew I had to do this. It was a matter of emotional and intellectual survival.

High school friends encouraged me to apply at Standard Insurance Agency in downtown L.A. as a typist. As a pretty good typist, I was a shoe-in for the position. It was a low point in my life. Working a dead-end job was the inspiration I needed to go back to school for something that I could feel passionate about. Scouring through numerous college catalogs, I saw something that caught my eye. It had coursework that I found interesting.

California State University Long Beach (CSULB) offered a Bachelor of Science in Community Health Education. Overall, it is about improving the quality of life for people through education and training. Courses included: psychology, public speaking, sex education, sciences and various other education studies for the public. The campus was located about an hour's drive south of my parent's house. It didn't matter any longer that they were close-by. I had nothing to run from or no more secrets to hide.

A year after I'd taken a break from college, I started at CSULB in the fall of 1977. I was 20 years old and fervently determined to make it through to the finish line this time. The more classes I took in Community Health Education, the more education opportunities I was exposed to. I recognized coursework more to my interest and sculpted my classes to include this. Environmental Health Education is where I learned of the harm humans have done, and continue to do, to the planet, compromising its health. I felt passionate about this. The refined course work would lead to a minor in Environmental Health Education. Still, it remained a challenge to stay in school with the longing to explore life's greater adventures churning through my veins.

## Chapter 9

### An activist is born

I've had unending curiosity regarding human behavior and resiliency for most of my life. In my first year at university, I went to the Student Disability Services office to see if there was a possibility to volunteer. I was offered a few opportunities to assist people with disabilities that fit in nicely with my school work. First, in my consumer protection class, I was able to do assignments with Chris, a classmate who was completely blind. The class required us to go undercover to personally witness how businesses and even churches deceive consumers for a buck. We devised creative ways to do the assignments in tandem.

Chris and I shared similar proclivities and humor. We got along well. He was tall, lean and clean shaven, and he loved the outdoors. We bonded during the time spent completing the lesson requirements. We revealed stories about our personal lives. He shared his experience of being blind in this world. One grievance he expressed was when he could hear people talking, but when he approached they'd fall silent. I took that to heart, over compensating by shouting, "Hey, Chris!" halfway across the campus when I spotted him.

One outing for the class was to go to an auto dealership and pretend to have interest in buying a car. The intent was to see the deception salesmen use to get you to buy today. My classmate and I went on a test drive. He commented on the sounds the auto was making. We both asked questions about the conditions of the vehicle. We went into the price negotiations, anticipating we'd be met with a hardball approach and weren't disappointed. We declined the offer and moved on to the next challenge.

We went to a funeral parlor to get a price on a burial plot. The same hardball

tactics were applied here. The salesman pressured us to invest more than we originally wanted, trying to play on our vulnerability when facing life and death choices. Unfortunately for him, we heartlessly declined his offers.

The final outing the class instructor wanted us to experience was a service at a church in LA that proclaimed they had an advantage over every other church. They had literally built a massive stairway to heaven. They proclaimed the stairway would entice Jesus to return to earth, in reference to His second coming. The minister was a showman. He pounded on the keys like a rock star. The collection basket was passed three times during the service (two times more than I'd experienced in any church). It was an obvious scam, although admittedly, very entertaining.

Next, I volunteered with a guy who was quadriplegic assisting him in going from bed to work. He soldered electronic boards for the purpose of advancing his sister's electrolysis business. He did his craft solely by using his mouth. Amazing. Every person I worked with used tools or clever ways to bridge the gap between their condition and reaching their goals. I never heard a complaint about living with a disability. On the contrary, they were all proud, independent and accomplished individuals. They destroyed any thoughts that they were to be pitied or taken care of. As the award-winning playwright, Neil Marcus stated, "Disability is not a brave struggle or courage in the face of adversity. Disability is an art. It's an ingenious way to live." I witnessed this first hand.

As life would unfold, a few years later, in 1982, my father at 68 years of age, had a massive stroke and became paralyzed on his left side. After he went through rehabilitation and came back home, Dad was only able to take a few steps, safely, indoors with a three-pronged cane. As difficult as it was to see Dad struggle with his new reality, it was empowering to watch how Dad and Mom did all they could to enhance the ability he had. They supported one another as much as was physically and emotionally possible. When I'd visit, I watched how Dad would use a spring-resistance tool to continue strengthening his one usable hand. Mom established a routine for Dad to thrive and remain at home, without additional assistance. It was inspiring. This added purpose to my desire to do all I could in my own community to advocate for accessibility in the establishments I visited, never wanting Dad or anyone else in his situation to be denied services. It was the beginning of honing my disability rights advocacy.

Dad's stroke not only changed his physical abilities, it also affected his reasoning and confidence level. His preference was to stay home in familiar surroundings. Mom, with Dad's forced permanent retirement, would not let their

chance to experience as much shared entertainment and travel as possible, pass them by. Mom would push Dad in his manual wheelchair to local haunts and distant adventures. He was denied entry to many establishments because they didn't consider it necessary to provide accessible accommodations. It was prior to the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA. Signed into law in 1990, the ADA prohibited discrimination due to a person's disability, or perceived disability. It applied to employment, public transportation, telecommunication and the accessibility of public spaces. Before, and for years after this law, few establishments were wheelchair accessible. Mom refused to accept society's restrictive conditions and pushed establishments, and entertainment venues to do better. She would not stand for being denied services, just because her husband used a wheelchair.

After Dad had been home for about a year and I witnessed my parents venturing out to restaurants and flying to visit my other sisters, I bought them one-way airline tickets to visit me in Portland. They decided to drive up and fly back. Molly met them at their home in West Covina, to take them on the driving portion of the trip. This was their first attempt at taking a road trip and managing the inaccessible lodgings and establishments they would encounter. Molly was an Occupational Therapist so she was familiar with how to navigate the inaccessible world, and advocate for accommodations. They turned the road-trip into a tour of lighthouses up the coast. It ended up being a greater adventure than anticipated.

The one lodging they planned to stay at was the Tu Tu' Tun Lodge in Gold Beach, Oregon. They'd stayed there before. It's located in the rural southwest corner of Oregon, situated on a wooded stretch of the Rogue River, seven miles from the Pacific Ocean. Unfortunately, it wasn't until they arrived, they found the lodge not wheelchair accessible. Dad had to be lifted by the staff into the lodge, then over numerous ledges and steps along the way. They made it happen, though. Even the Tu Tu' Tun Lodge restaurant had to be accessed by going through the kitchen. I shudder at the thought of all Dad went through, just to visit me.

Mom discovered that cruise ships were most accommodating, so they booked trips through the Panama Canal and one that went from New Zealand to Australia. The iconic Sydney Opera House had opened its doors in 1973. When Mom and Dad visited, it was about 10 years later, and they were excited to see this fabulous venue. They purchased two tickets for one of the performances in the grand Concert Hall, for when they arrived. Again, they were disappointed to find upon arriving that there were no accessible means to access the opera house.

One of the Sydney Opera House's most notable features were the granite

Monumental Steps, leading to the concert halls. Monumental, indeed! For Dad, it meant another unthinkable indignity. The staff needed to carry him up more than 80 stairs. Once on the landing at the top of the stairs, the Concert Hall wasn't accessible, either. Dad sat in an aisle because there were no spaces for a wheelchair. It wasn't until 2016 that the Sydney Opera House shut down for a year and made two accessible upgrades. There is now a separate tunnel, you need to track down a staff member to use, that connects to an elevator that will take participants to the various concert venues. The Concert Hall, the largest and grandest of all the venues, now has up to 26 wheelchair-accessible seating positions added to various parts of the auditorium. *It's about frickin' time, for a mediocre, unequal, solution!* All this fueled my activism for the rights of people with disabilities. It would weigh heavily on the direction of my life and my belief in unlimited possibilities.

In gratitude for the comfort and love I'd been born into, I've felt a need to spread the wealth. I've donated my skills, building decks for those who couldn't afford it. I carried food in my pocket, in case I ran across someone in need. When I was 25, I worked with Harry's Mother, an organization who self-describes itself as: "A safe place for youth having trouble at home."

At the time, Harry's Mother connected run-away teenagers with loving homes, for two weeks, before reuniting them with their family. I must have "fostered" six or seven young women before I was told I could no longer have these kids in my home. This was in the early 80's. The agency adopted a new policy, banning gay people from providing services to young women or men of the same gender. The Harry's Mother staff member who had told me, apologized profusely, knowing what a reliable and caring provider I'd been. This was a painful rejection, though I remained close with a couple of the young women as they grew up and had children of their own.

I've run into many individuals in my journey who have hit road blocks in life. I do what I can to assist them to maneuver around obstacles, whenever possible. It's what brings me joy and purpose. In turn, many have offered me the assistance I needed to accomplish my own goals. It's the beauty of life, community and our interconnective nature. It's what makes the impossible, possible.

Becoming an advocate brought unimagined benefits to me, as well. Witnessing the creative ways people with disabilities navigated a world that wasn't built for them, seeded an understanding that the human spirit will not be held back. These experiences expanded my awareness on people with physical and sensory limitations. These limitations do nothing to limit the lengths their spirits will take them in achieving their goals. My belief that the life of someone living

with major disabilities is narrow and unfulfilling, ceased. Rather, I knew without a doubt that it truly was an ingenious way to live.



Mom pushing Dad in his wheelchair at the airport, returning from one of their trips.  
They are smiling. Dad is holding their coats across his lap.

## Chapter 10

### Life expands and births my entrepreneurial spirit

The last couple of years in college were colorful. They fed the passion I'd felt since childhood for outdoor adventure. A requirement for my degree was to do volunteer work for added experience to enhance my future work as a community health educator. The lessons I learned from these experiences influenced my life choices for decades to come. Reinforcing my tendency to give back to society, they provided real life experiences from which to speak about issues plaguing my community and the natural world. After these opportunities to take part in real world engagement, I couldn't deny that I would have a role to play in bringing light to injustices as they relate to humans, nature and wildlife, and to do what I can to right them.

The first experience that immersed me in nature was at the Cabrillo Marine Museum. It offered one particularly enticing opportunity, to take kids out on whale watch tours. My role was to educate the kids on gray whale migration. After learning all I could about it myself, we left in a small fishing vessel in search of whales. Before long, we had our first sighting of whales spouting water from their blowholes. Our boat, as well as other sightseeing boats, converged on the distant pod of whales. The boat stopped a respectable distance from the pod. Hoping for a chance to see more than just the spouting, we looked in all directions while we waited. Then, one after another, whales breached the surface, showing the magnitude of their size.

As a whale broke the surface of the ocean, we saw her nose, followed by her massive body, breaching sideways out of the water. Landing back in the water, it set off a tremendous splash. Again and again, we watched the whales breaching. It was a spectacular sight. The entire tour group banded together at whatever side



of the boat showed the most whale activity, making the boat list from side-to-side. It was thrilling to be a part of this, and yet I couldn't help but feel that the boat invasion was an assault on the whale's sanctuary and peace. Through further study, I learned that not only was the loud noise of sightseeing boats disturbing, but there were other atrocities humans conducted that led to whale annihilation. That was the last whale-watch excursion I'd partake in.

After the whale watch tours, the Cabrillo Museum offered another opportunity, to conduct grunion run watches at a local beach. The grunions begin spawning in March, sometimes continuing until September. Over three to four consecutive nights, on full and new moons, spawning occurs after high tides and continues for several hours. On the night of a full moon, a group of us met just as the sun went down, to talk about grunion behavior, and the do's and don'ts of watching, so as not to interfere with their spawning. At different times, as the grunion are spawning, it is open season and grunion can be captured by hand for the purpose of consumption. This was not one of those times. It was extraordinary seeing the fish flood the shore boring holes to lay their eggs. It touched me to witness this act of instinctive surrender. Risking death to bring life. It was a beautiful dance.

Next, I joined forces with a full-time apprentice and a renowned geologist, an expert on indicators leading to earthquakes, assisting global prediction efforts. She took me and another student on an outing to track frog migration habits. Along the drive to the study location, she pointed out geographic formations, explaining what we were seeing and how they were developed. Gaining an understanding of the geology of land formations was both enlightening and fascinating.

We hiked to our first destination: a slimy muck filled pond. She instructed us to wade into the pond, capture frogs then bring them to her. She sat on a blanket scribbling data in her notebook. She would take each frog and inspect it. If the frog was free of mutations, she would clip one of its toes and then we'd release it. She'd been doing this for years at different ponds in the area, tracking how many frogs returned to their places of origin. By tabulating this data, she could predict the speed, distance and location of their migration. Cool for her and frog enthusiasts, not so much for us sloshing through the muddy mess. It was meaningful work, however. It was necessary to justify, and ensure, the preservation of these vital migration areas.

In the summer of my junior year, when I was 21 years old, I got a paid teaching gig. My future roommate, Linda, and I were hired as counselors at Camp Marietta, a slim down camp for girls, on the campus of San Diego University.

Applying for the position, I presented myself as a yoga instructor. I'd taken yoga as an elective for the last two years in college and thought that I could pull off teaching the class. The camp combined diet and exercise education and practice. I learned a lot about healthy living. It wasn't meant to be about shaming, but I felt ashamed to be a part of this effort. I didn't think it was right to point at people's weight as something that needed fixing. Oddly, or perhaps because of my shame, I gained nearly 30 lbs. the following year. Having never been overweight, it wasn't comfortable, but I made it a point not to diet. Eventually, just by my active lifestyle, the weight fell off naturally.

Another way I made money was to sell stuff at a local swap meet. I would drive in, throw a blanket with all my stuff on the ground, and curl up in the trunk of my car waiting for a customer. It was there I saw an individual using a router to make wooden signs. I thought, "I can do that." Buying a router, I asked the manager at the campus bookstore if I could run an extension cord from the store, and create a sign carving operation outside their front door. She said, "Sure." After class, I'd set up a small work station and carve signs freehand. Although I had a consistent line of customers, I made a modest profit. I hadn't yet learned the value of my work.

In my senior year, I found a great way to save time and money by parking my van in the Veterans Affairs parking lot adjacent to the school. It was closer than anywhere I could park on campus, and I didn't have to pay for metered street parking. One day, I jumped a fence and was heading to my class when I spotted a group of women playing tackle football in an open field. I asked if I could play and they agreed. Someone tossed me the ball and as I ran, I slipped with the ball firmly wedged between my out-stretched legs and chest. Just about to roll over and get up, I was crunched back down when a large woman jumped on my back. I felt something crack inside my body. Shoving the ball out from my lap, someone grabbed it, and everyone went running down the field.

Crawling on my hands and knees to a tree, I reached up to hang from the lowest branch, thinking I could snap my back into place. I nearly passed out from the pain. Holding onto the tree for support, I stood up and slowly walked around about way back to the van. After turning the key in the ignition, I realized that I couldn't lean forward enough to move the gear shift into first. So, instead, I started the van in 2nd gear and there it remained until I reached home. I could lay down and stand, but I was unable to sit. Very inconvenient if I ever needed to use the bathroom.

When my roommate, Linda, came home, I asked her to go to the nurse who

lived behind our house and ask if I could consult with her. The nurse suggested I go to the local Veteran Affairs clinic (ironically, where I'd parked before playing football) to get checked out. Linda drove me to the clinic. The doctor who examined me told me to stretch out on the exam table. I told him it hurt too much to do this. He angrily demanded I comply, that he could not adequately examine me without doing so. With great difficulty, I complied. He then insisted, "You need to sit in a wheelchair so I can bring you to get x-rays." I told him, "I don't think it's possible for me to bend enough to sit." Incredulous that I would disagree with his demand, he retorted, "If you don't, I won't do the x-rays." Managing to lean in such a way that I could "sit" in the wheelchair, he pushed me into the x-ray room.

After reviewing the x-rays, the doctor returned to my room. He was furious! He admonished me for climbing onto the exam table. He said I had broken my back. My first lumbar vertebra was fractured in two places and 40% compressed. I lost it! That he would be angry with *ME* after forcing me to comply with his demands! I was livid! I asked him, "Are the bones aligned?" He responded, "Yes." "Okay, I'm leaving." His enraged reply, "If you do, you'll risk becoming paralyzed from a fall, or an accident. Raising my voice, I told him, "I'll take that chance!" And I stormed out the door.

The next few weeks were challenging. I relied on Linda to lift me on or off the toilet. Attending classes, I'd take the bus and stand in the back of the bus and classroom. Gaining a lot of weight, I succumbed to my diminished state. I'd never been so physically restricted. Feeling caged, I knew I'd heal but was impatient with the slow healing process that followed. As my condition improved with each passing week, there was an underlying feeling that fracturing my spine could verify a premonition I'd had.

Since I was a child, I had a mental block when it came to doing anything that involved my back. I couldn't do a backwards somersault. While taking trampoline lessons at the YMCA, I could not get myself to attempt a back-flip like my fellow classmates. I had an inner sense that something devastating was going to happen to my back. When I fractured my spine, I was somewhat relieved as I recovered, thinking that perhaps I'd broken the spell and I could let go of wondering when the proverbial other shoe would drop, shattering my fragile hold on life. The premonition increased my determination to find a way to pull through this and become stronger than ever before. The shoe would drop however, at the height of my physical prowess and active pursuits, less than 20 years later. Until then, and even after, I continued to live life at full speed, knowing any day could be my last.

Gaining strength and endurance after I fractured my spine, I did my final volunteer experience with Palefire, a non-profit organization that promoted equality in non-competitive play. It connected me to nature and empowered people who had less opportunities than I'd been given. This experience showed me new strengths I could use for the betterment of others.

As a part of the Palefire team, we brought together teens going into high school with those from the high school they would be attending. We facilitated discussion about team work and trust, then conducted activities demonstrating this concept. One activity made use of a parachute. The kids would each take a hold of the edge of the parachute and pull it tight. Then with one motion in unison, they'd hold tightly to the edge and whip the canvas high in the air while running to the center of the parachute. This caused the parachute to billow high into the air, creating a balloon of air. As it began to deflate, we'd move out and do it again. A true test of teamwork!

My final act with Palefire was to take a leading role in a hiking trip with at-risk youth in Yosemite National Park. We hiked for days with these city kids, each carrying a full backpack. It was the height of summer and the mosquitoes were ferocious. A cloud of mosquitoes covered each of us as we hiked in the hot summer sun. We were eaten alive. The greatest thing were the skills we learned along the way. We crossed high above a river on a cable suspended from one cliff edge to another. We moved by pulling ourselves along the cable attached by a carabiner to a harness running through our legs. Then, we learned how to rappel and belay off that same sheer rock cliff. It was exhilarating.

The choices I made of volunteer experiences was a reflection of what I deemed important in life. They also taught me some valuable lessons. One thing that became clear was that supporting and empowering youth was an important step in fostering self-confident adults who might make a positive difference in the future. Advocating for people's well-being could also translate into stronger, more inclusive and creative workplaces. This was a powerful recognition I came away with, as a result of these experiences.

My appreciation of nature, and the necessity to protect it, grew from the efforts I'd been involved with. In addition to what I learned about inclusion and protection of natural resources, was what I learned about myself, along the way. Even with a relatively short-term disability, I discovered that I had what it took to thrive under adverse circumstances. These experiences reinforced the importance of human engagement with nature and wildlife, *especially my own.*



A round wooden plaque on which I routed symbols of a Buddhist mantra, which include a cockerel, snake, and pig biting each other. Considered The Three Poisons: The cockerel represents greed, the snake is hatred, and the pig, delusion.

## Chapter 11

### Leaping lesbians

My first lesson in acceptance of the LGBTQ community occurred at the age of 17. I went to visit my sister, Susie, at the Grand Canyon, and got a close-up view of her personal lifestyle. I had grown to respect Susie's life choices. On this particular visit, she revealed that she was living with two women who were lovers. I was shocked! I expressed my disgust either in words or facial expression. She berated me. She let me know in no uncertain terms that I was seriously mistaken. "These women and their choices need to be respected." I heard her. I stepped back my initial inclination, realizing how my judgment was unfounded. Never would I disparage lesbianism again.

While in college in Long Beach, I rented a house for my last two years. One day, I was changing the oil under my VW van in the front yard when one of my neighbors strolled by. She asked, "Would you like to come to my house for a party, tonight?" Enthusiastically, I responded, "That would be great!" "You can bring someone else, if you'd like," she offered. "I'll ask the woman who lives next-door. She's a friend of mine." My neighbor agreed it could be fun, so we walked down to the party together. When we arrived, the party was just getting started. We sat together as more and more people arrived. All were women. When the music started, women began dancing together. It soon dawned on us ... everyone was gay! Once we recognized this, we relaxed into the festivities. We didn't join them on the dance floor, but it was a fun evening.

Finding my neighbors in Long Beach kind and welcoming, I visited them regularly. Linda, the homeowner, told me, "I thought you were gay, and your next-door neighbor was your lover." We laughed. She said the night of the party

she watched us closely to see if her suspicions were true. When it appeared she was mistaken, she was pleased to see that we didn't bolt out the door. "On the contrary," I told her, "I thoroughly enjoyed myself."

Linda told me about a women's bar called *Que Sera*, where they offered free meals on Mondays to encourage more clientele. I started going there every week, under the guise (to my straight friends) that I was a poor, under-fed, college student. The more comfortable I became with the gay "lifestyle," the more open I was to the possibility of being with a woman. There was one woman I went so far as to invite to my house. At first, finding her physically attractive, it quickly developed into something more, as I started to get to know her. That night, we talked for hours sitting close together on the couch. Not knowing how to reach out to her to express my desire to see her more, she left, with what I later learned, a mutual desire to pursue more. She went to Linda's to get her thoughts on me. Linda told her that I'd never been with a woman. This scared the woman off and she severed all connections with me. Oh well. I deduced it wasn't to be. Little did I know ...





## **PART TWO**

### ***An Ingenious Way to Adventure***



## Chapter 12

### Search for adventure

It was my last year at CSULB, at least I wanted it to be. In order to make this happen I was taking 27 units, plus working two part time jobs. Twelve units was a full load. My six-unit chemistry class was killing me. At the end of six weeks, you could cancel the class without penalty. I met with my instructor to inform him I intended to drop his class. He strongly encouraged me to finish the class. I knew, if I stayed in the class, my head would explode. Making it official, I signed the papers to withdraw.

At the end of the school year, I contemplated my options. Would it be to finish my degree by taking the final Chemistry course? It would be easy enough, and logical since I'd come so far. Or, perhaps, I could put it off, fill out extension paperwork each year, and travel until I felt compelled to continue. Taking very little time to deliberate, I knew the answer. Research began on where I'd start the adventure. I was *FREE!!!*

My first thought was to travel across the US in my Volkswagen van. I could live in it. I'd been very few places outside of California. Exploring unknown destinations in the states sounded exciting! On my last day of Geography class, I went up to the instructor on my way out the door. I told him of my plans to travel across the states in my VW van. He said, "It doesn't surprise me one bit that you'd do this. There is everyone else in the class, and then there's you." Perplexed that he would say that, I thought, "Huh. So, here I was thinking that he didn't notice me." I'd sat in the back of the class with my head on the desk, exhausted by my schedule and breakneck speed of activities. Rarely did I raise my hand. Unbeknownst to me, I apparently stood out to others as different. The instructor just smiled and shook his head as I left the room that day. It wasn't the first or would it be the last time a teacher would recognize my "uniqueness" and comment on it. My

thoughts returned to the road trip, soon to occur. I believed it was one of a few adventures I could undertake that could be affordable. That is until my van died and I didn't have the money to fix it.

My next thought was to look for a cheap round-trip ticket to a choice destination. Running across a \$200 round trip ticket to Calgary, Alberta, I thought, "Fantastic! I'll have \$150 left over for travel expenses. What more could I ask for?" Believing that I'd be camping in the great white north, I imagined hitchhiking from one adventure to the next. Selling or giving away everything I owned, my last act was handing the keys to my broken-down van to Linda. "Sell it for anything you can get." After about a year, she did send me a check for \$100. I'd pared down to a backpack, sleeping bag and a few necessities that would get me through a week or two camping. Boarding the plane, I left without any other preparations or concerns.

It was September of 1980, and I was 23 years old. While on the plane, I asked my seat mate if he knew of any place I could camp in Calgary. Surprised by his answer, I was slack-jawed when his only suggestion was to sneak into parks late at night with hopes that I wouldn't get caught. Huh. I thought it would be quite a bit more rural than it was. Calgary, I learned, was the big city, larger than any I'd lived in before, and the third largest city in Canada. Oops.

Roaming the city, and admitting to myself that camping was definitely out, I started asking where I might find a cheap place to spend the night. It was suggested I check out the YWCA. I was hanging outside waiting for the Y to open when a "lady of the night" sat beside me. Responding to her inquiry, I told her, "I don't have plans. I'm here to see if the Y has rooms and how much they are. I'm on a tight budget since I'd like to stay in the area as long as possible." She suggested, "If you'd like, I can walk with you to a social service agency that's nearby. They provide vouchers for free nights at the Y and food." "Sounds good to me!"

I followed my new friend through gravel lots and alley ways to the services office. We must've made an odd couple, she in her short dress and high heels, me with my jeans, t-shirt and backpack. She spoke for me at the office and before I knew it, I had two free nights lodging at the Y and three meals at the local bus station. It was a successful first day.

Before she left, my friend handed me a calling card I could use to make free long-distance phone calls to my friends and family back in the states. She also gave me a social insurance card (equivalent to the US social security card), I could use to secure a job. The name on the card was Pearl Wales. It made me smile. Janis Joplin's pseudonym was Pearl. It felt like a sign that I was on the right track.

My first night at the Y, I shared a room with two young women. One, a 14-year-old runaway and the other, a gal about my same age, heading to the west coast. The older of the two was a long-haired blonde beauty. She wore casual, crumpled, clothes. My impression was that her frumpy attire was an attempt to distract from her good looks. If so, it didn't work. Later that night, I slipped out to use the bathroom in the hall. When I returned, the two women were huddled together, looking very intimate. It didn't bother me, but I was not going to give up my room in order to give them privacy. I looked at them as I was going to bed and I noticed the older woman did not look comfortable. Just then the young gal lunged onto my bed saying, "Let's have an orgy!" I held the woman off, saying, "Better yet, let's take a walk outside."

Leaving the room with the girl, I turned and I confronted her. "I get the impression the other gal is not welcoming your advances. Is that true?" She admitted it was. At that point I told her, "You either cut it out or you'll need another place to stay." She broke down crying. "Please, don't kick me out. I'll behave. I promise," choking out the words between sobs. She became the child that she was. I told her she could stay but at the first disruption, she'd be out. We returned to the room and she went to her bed without a word, staying there for the rest of the night.

Not able to sleep after the confrontation, I thought I'd go outside and breathe some fresh air. I went to the EXIT thinking it would lead outdoors. Little did I know that when I shut the door it would lock behind me. I went down the stairs to the final landing. It ended at a gift shop. I rattled the steel door to see if it was open. It was not. Instead, it set off a loud siren. I ran upstairs trying to get away from the source of the siren to no avail as it seemed to come from everywhere!

There was a small window at the top landing of my floor. The only way I could look through it was by jumping up for a quick glimpse. No one was up at this hour. Buffering my ears with my arms and clothing, I curled up in the corner of the landing, trying to sleep but there was no way. I spent the next couple of hours with my ear to the door hoping to hear some noise that would indicate someone was awake. When I thought I'd heard something, I jumped up and down for glimpses down the hall. Finally, I heard a noise and jumping up, spotted a woman in the hall. Frantically, I banged on the door while waving my arms in the window. She briefly stopped and then started walking towards me. She opened the door and I stumbled out babbling my gratitude. She said she couldn't hear the alarm but happened to look up and saw me through the window. I was so relieved. With my ears still ringing I made my way back to my room and fell asleep.

The next morning, my roommate's victim, Shelagh, and I went out for breakfast. She thanked me for intervening in the assault. I asked her how she ended up at the YWCA and what her plans were. She had left her home in Winnipeg, Alberta and was heading west to a small coastal town in British Columbia to connect with a friend of hers. She asked if I'd like to join her. Without hesitation, I said, "YES!" The adventure had begun.

## Chapter 13

### Adventure found!!!

Shelagh, my new Canadian friend, and I took a bus to White Rock, BC. It was pouring rain when we pulled into town. The bus station was about five miles from our destination. We were drenched by the time we arrived. Shelagh went in search of her friend and I took shelter in the lobby of McBride's hotel along the waterfront. I was soon joined by two other people dodging the downpour. They were fishermen. They told me about a secondhand store they were going to in search of raincoats. I joined them. Two trench coats and one raincoat later, they felt like friends. Gary invited me to see his boat. Quite the pickup line. I didn't care as I was attracted to his First Nation features, dark skin and olive-shaped eyes. His choice of a crab fisherman's career was also appealing. I followed him down to the mile-long pier to the boat docks.

Gary and I started a "no strings attached" relationship. We'd meet up when it suited me. He took me out to dinner and fishing on his boat. It was great! Shelagh and I ended up staying with her friend, Guy, in a small place near the waterfront. They shared the bedroom and I got the living room. In exchange for lodging, I offered to paint a mural on Guy's wall. My artistic prowess was the only thing I felt barter-worthy. I had complete confidence in my ability to create anything his heart desired. He wanted a forest scene in blue hues. Guy liked the painting so much that he showed it off to everyone who came to visit. After showing it to someone who owned a Greek restaurant at the corner of our street, Alex, the restaurateur, contacted me and I got my first commission to paint a mural on his restaurant wall. Alex wanted a landscape of Greece that took creative license by showing the Parthenon and the Acropolis in close proximity to one another, which they

aren't. From there, word-of-mouth landed me many jobs. Down the road from Alex's restaurant, another restaurant wanted his menu painted in large lettering, approximately 8' x 10' in width and height, with bold contrasting colors, on the outside wall of his restaurant. I painted murals inside various restaurants from White Rock to Vancouver, BC. Due to the Alex's connection to the greater Greek restaurant owners in the region, many of my murals were reflections of Greece, its landscapes and those of the surrounding islands. One of these was at a pizzeria in downtown White Rock.

The Greek owner of the pizza restaurant showed me around the place before he closed up for the night. Above eight table settings, were blank wall spaces, nicely framed by ornate wooden posts on the sides, and a curved top recessed into the wall. It made them perfect locations for a mural. I struck a deal with the owner. Again, not knowing my worth, I agreed to paint one mural every night for \$50 each. I would arrive right at closing time, set up my painting station at one of the locations, and have at it. He opened the kitchen to my delight. I'd make myself a small pizza in his big oven every night. To make quick work of each mural, I'd use wadded up paper napkins to dab in the paint, then apply it to the wall. It was very effective in capturing the dappled leaves of a tree, or speckled wall of a building. Sometimes I'd add more than one color to the napkin, creating the look I was after.

Painting at record speed, I accomplished what I'd proposed, one painting per night. After signing the first painting with my unique, yet understated signature, the owner objected. "It's too small! I want it pronounced. Make it 50 times bigger. I want everyone to see it and know that it was custom painted." I agreed, signing "*Gena*," the name I now called myself in bold italicized font.

It felt good to be holding my own, based on my natural skills and talents. From doing Paint-by-Numbers landscapes with my dad as a kid to painting canvases with nothing but white fluffy clouds in blue skies, was life affirming of where I longed to live as a young child. Here in Canada, I was finally experiencing the environment I'd imagined in my paintings. And, I was bringing the talents of my childhood to this potential new home. It felt like my life finally made sense, and I was right where I belonged. I was literally making my mark.

Others hired me to do a variety of jobs under the table. The one I did most frequently, resulting in profitable returns, was with a painter. We did both residential and commercial jobs. Because it looked like I would be staying a while, I decided to look for a more permanent job. I applied for a position at a local plant nursery using Pearl Wales' social insurance card on the application. I needn't have



bothered because soon after I was hired, my new boss asked, “Where in the US are you from?” I was busted. He said he knew right off because his wife was from the states. He had no problem with me working illegally. We were going to get along just fine.

With regular money coming in, I decided to find another place to live. I was told of a woman looking for a roommate. Meeting her, it was like we were bookends, connecting on various levels. We frequently woke each other up by singing the song from Bob Marley, “Don’t worry about a thing, ‘Cause every little thing is gonna be alright.” It wasn’t long before I considered her my closest friend and supporter. We rented a place not far from Guy and Shelagh. It was through my new roommate, Chloe, that I expanded my group of friends even more. Her boyfriend, Rick, as well as Guy, were in a band, so we spent time at various venues and parties. My party ways had stopped when I returned to college. Now I was back experimenting. Thinking I’d proceed with more discretion, I decided I’d go the “natural” way.

White Rock was nestled in the Surrey valley, the magic mushroom capital of Canada. When the mushrooms were ready to be picked there was an overabundance of opportunities to partake in this hallucinogenic experience ... which I did. Mushrooms grew in cow manure. At picking time, cow rancher’s fields would be littered with young people looking for the magic fungus. The ranchers hated all the trespassers. Sometimes they would shoot warning shots in the air. I heard of one instance where they filled a picker’s car with cow manure. That must’ve been fun to come back to!

In my search for adventure, I went with Gary to his home on Salt Spring Island. Gary loaned me his dingy, a rowboat with overlapping oars, that would clip my knuckles with each stroke. After a few whacks, I devised a way of rowing that gave the oars a wide berth around my hands. Gary towed it out to a little island, he fondly dubbed “Castle Island.” This island, just outside the Ganges Harbour, had a crumbling stone house on it. The rest of the small island was treed. When Gary dropped me off, I told him if things worked well, I would see him in a few days.

There was a semblance of a roof over one corner of the house where I rolled out my sleeping bag. I didn’t get much sleep. Once night fell, I realized how close I was to civilization. The sound of honking cars, screeching tires, and noises in the harbor kept me awake throughout the night. In the morning, I was determined to find a place where I could truly be alone.

The next morning, I headed out with a vague notion of where the next island would be. The water was choppy but not enough to raise concern. Paddling along

the shore of another small island, I scanned the land for signs of life. Sighting no apparent human activity, I pulled ashore. On further exploration, all I saw were cows. I'd heard that ranchers would buy islands just for grazing purposes and I thought this might be the case. Spotting a flat area overlooking the ocean, I pitched my tent. Then, I walked around the area, snapping pictures of things that struck my fancy, which was nearly everything. Enamored by being alone, in an unfamiliar place, and having my first adventure was exhilarating. Things that may have been ordinary, suddenly filled me with awe.

Firing up my first Sterno can, I heated some powdered soup for dinner and slipped into my sleeping bag. In the middle of the night, I heard footsteps around my tent. It terrified me. An animal I could shoo away, but with a human, I felt completely vulnerable. Fortunately, with no words exchanged, the footsteps receded into the night. Again, I didn't sleep well and with the light of day, was ready to look for another island.

Shoving off from shore in the boat, I began rowing to another unknown destination. A few hours into my journey, I saw a boat heading my way. It was Gary. "How's it going?" I told him, "I'm enjoying myself, just not getting much sleep." He offered to take me to his place that night, promising that he would take me back out in the morning. I took him up on it.

Back on the water, I found another possible island retreat. Securing my boat, then climbing a steep and narrow trail, I reached a precipice overlooking the ocean far below. Setting up my tent as the sun went down, I had a quick meal and slid into my sleeping bag. The light of the full moon cast shadows inside my tent. In the middle of the night, I woke to something rustling outside my tent. I listened intently. By the light of the moon, I saw the shadows of something resembling deer leaping outside my tent. It filled me with joy. I was in the midst of wildlife actively expressing itself and I fully embraced it. I was truly happy.

When I woke up in the morning, I opened my tent and the first thing I saw was a huge white cross towering above me and the ocean below. It frightened me. My immediate thought was that I was on the property of a radical religious cult (later finding out, it was an identification marker for ships). I tore down the embankment as fast as I could. That was the end of my first adventure, but I was already scheming how I would make the next one happen.



Gary's double-ender crab fishing boats "BC-n-U" and "Ruby" with crab traps stacked on the wooden dock they're moored to (a random dog is biting himself in the foreground).



One of the eight murals I painted at a Greek owned pizza restaurant. The painting is of the Acropolis in Athens on a stone base, on top of rock, with a background of mountains and sky.



On my first solo adventure in a rowboat, with camping gear in a plastic bag, and one visible oar in the rowboat. Two forested islands, in calm ocean water and overcast skies, are ahead.



On an island outside Ganges Harbor, I captured a fascinating sight of a maple leaf seemingly suspended in mid-air.

## Chapter 14

### Adventure verging on annihilation

Determined to have my own boat that I could carry, I spread the word to everyone I knew. A friend told me about a kayak someone was selling in a nearby town. Without knowing much about kayaks, I bought it. It was a fiberglass white water kayak, handmade by Canadian boy scouts. I later learned that it was on the heavy side for a fiberglass boat, but I could lift it. The only obvious problem was that it didn't come with a paddle. It wasn't until I was in the water, beginning my first kayak adventure, that I realized the difference between a white-water and a flat-water kayak.

Walking down the street, balancing a board across my shoulder that I'd use to fashion a paddle, I was approached by two guys passing by. They asked me what my plans were with the wood. I told them, "I'm going to make a kayak paddle. I'm not exactly sure how, but I'll figure it out." As it turned out, one of the men was a cabinetmaker and had a woodworking shop on the edge of town. His name was Glenn, with his help, I had a paddle by the end of the day.

Glenn had long straight brown hair, and a silver capped tooth on one of his prominent front teeth. He had a kind and gentle demeanor. His expertise went from elaborate, one-of-a-kind kitchen cabinets, to jack-of-all-trades. He showed me his design for a convex faced cabinet door. The lamination of the wood strips needed to have precise beveled edges to make the curved surface just right. I was impressed. I'd never seen anything like it. He hadn't either. "That was the point," he said, "I want to provide something unique and original to my clients."

Peering around the shop, I felt like I'd entered a bastion of delight. Glenn's shop was larger than anything I'd ever seen. Someone could create their wildest dreams in such an environment. Glenn offered shop space to a friend. He hand-

carved wooden spoons. It was all so much eye-candy. Glenn, like Gary, had an enviable career. His shop was extraordinary and his skill was as great as his shop. Enamored by this and his generosity, we met each other's desire to learn more of what we brought to the table.

In my time with Glenn, he taught me many skills that I'd use for advancing my own entrepreneurial efforts. Showing me where the custom cabinets would be installed, introduced me to more of his talents. He and his friends were transforming an open office space into an extraordinary work of art. While I looked on, and occasionally participated, they were adding sheetrock to cover the raw studs in the room. Mesmerized, I watched one guy on stilts, attached to his shoes by straps extending up his calves, applying white "mud" to the sheetrock seams. His expertise was apparent as he held a pallet loaded with mud in one hand, and used a wide putty knife to spread it, with the other. It made the sound of a skater on ice, "Swish, tap-tap, swish." All this done while balancing on stilts three feet above the ground. It was a spell binding circus act. Burning what I witnessed into my memory banks, it would be there if I ever needed to apply the skills at future time.

Glenn also took me to another small Gulf Island I'd never visited, to help install a roof. This experience led to my first solo job as a roofer. As Glenn was unavailable, I went to another island to put composite roof shingles on a garage. The large 80 lb. bundles of shingles were too heavy for me to carry up the ladder, as Glenn had done. Not to be deterred, and unwilling to break up the bundle into manageable piles, I painstakingly pushed each bundle up my extension ladder in front of me, getting closer to the roof with each rung I advanced. Ultimately, after stripping the old roof shingles and laying down new roofing materials, I successfully loaded four bundles of shingles onto the roof. The rest was easy. Add "Roofer" to my new possible careers.

Anxious to have an adventure with my boat, I knew exactly where I wanted to go. Back to Salt Spring Island, I had dreams of circumnavigating the island. For my maiden voyage, I settled on starting at the midway point I'd been to before and kayak to the southernmost tip of the island. Glenn said he would meet me at the coffee shop near the Fulford ferry dock in two days. He'd made a commitment to a friend of his, to look in on a piece of property while we were there. The plan was set and I was ready to go!

My new kayak paddle had blades on the end that were perpendicular to each other. I'd seen a demonstration of the stroke in a book, using this type of paddle. It showed someone with their hands gripping the top of the double-bladed paddle.

The hands were in a comfortable, and yet, wide distance from each other. The left hand had a firm grip on the paddle, the right would have a loose grip, allowing for the paddle to turn. Slicing into the water on the left, the paddle blade would be slightly underwater at a right angle to the water's surface as the paddle drew back, propelling the boat forward. This made for the right paddle blade to be parallel to the water, thus being of least resistance if there was a headwind. Finishing the stroke on my left, I'd swivel the paddle 90° in my loose right fist, tightening the grip just as I dug into the water and pulled back on the right side. I would then repeat the action, going back and forth in a relaxed rhythm.

The kayak was packed full of everything I might need for the two days it would take to reach my destination. My first few strokes were strong, but then I noticed a strange thing happening. I'd go about 40 feet when my boat would start to turn in one direction or another and I had no ability to right it. I ended up curly queuing my way from the harbor to Castle Island. I could hear people laughing at me from the observation deck of a ferry as it passed by. I'd have laughed as well if I'd been one of them! I searched the island and found a semi-straight piece of driftwood. That would do. I secured it to the bottom of the boat with duct tape. I had learned the importance of duct tape long ago. It was an essential tool when packing for any adventure. It worked! Leaping back into my boat, I began paddling down the coast.

A couple hours later, I noticed the wind picking up and the water getting choppy. It wasn't long before the clouds rolled in and it started to rain. I looked around for a place to take refuge. There were sheer rock cliffs as far as I can see. Then I saw it ... a cave! It was long enough to be completely sheltered but with no leeway to get out of the boat. I settled in for a long night in the kayak. A few hours later, in the dead of night, the water started rising in the cave. Outside, the storm was in full-force. Having no choice, I ventured out of the cave.

The direction I was heading was directly into the wind. I paddled hard through pounding rain and heavy surf. It appeared I was making good headway until I looked at the shore and saw that I was barely moving. Paddling harder, I moved further from the shore, so I wouldn't get thrashed on the rocks. Directly in front of me, I saw lights in the distance and thought they might be the tip of Salt Spring or another island close by. Paddling toward the light like my life depended on it, in actuality, I do believe it did.

After a brutal couple of hours paddling through the storm, I looked up and there was a seagull off my right shoulder. It was flapping its wings as hard as it could against the wind, yet remained at my side. It made me feel less alone, as

exhausted as I was, it increased my determination. I thought, well if I'm going to die, at least it happened while pursuing an adventure! I took solace in that. I noticed that the lights weren't appearing any closer. It made me wonder if they were further than I realized. I was staring at them, longing to be there, when a large cylindrical object came up from the ocean surface blocking the lights in front of me. I stopped paddling. In complete shock I dropped my paddle to the deck and stared. As mysteriously as it appeared, it disappeared back into the sea and with it, my will to go on. I believe what I saw was a whale spy-hopping, probably curious about what crazy mammal was out in such turbulent seas! I felt that I couldn't compete with the forces I was facing. The seagull was gone. Letting go, giving in to my fatigue, I collapsed onto the front of the boat and let the wind and current direct me off to sea.

When I lifted my head, dawn was breaking and so was the storm. Imagine my surprise when directly in front of me was an island. Wearily, I paddled to the shore. Pulling my drenched sleeping bag from the kayak, I climbed in and tried to sleep in the wet grassy shoreline. I started shaking and couldn't stop. At one point I opened my eyes and saw a small ferry going into a hidden passage along the distant Salt Spring shoreline. That was my destination! Draining the water from my boat, I got in and made my way across the channel.

Reaching the Fulford Harbour, I must've looked like a drowned rat. Putting the boat on my shoulder, I walked the block or two to the coffee shop. I told my tale to the waitress and was given a bottomless cup of coffee. The timing was right, because it wasn't long before Glenn arrived to pick me up. This was a time before cell phones. He'd been concerned because of the ferocity of the storm, so he arrived earlier than we had planned. We drove to his friend's property. Unfortunately, we needed to bushwhack our way nearly a mile up a steep embankment to the remote cabin. It was heated by a wood stove, so for what seemed like an eternity, I slowly began to experience warmth in my tired bones.

This latest adventure did not dampen my spirit. In White Rock, I became known as someone who was always up for an adventure. One day, a friend of mine was approached on the beach by a guy looking for someone to join him on his catamaran. My friend wasn't available, but he knew someone who might be. He ran up and told me about it and I rushed to the beach to see if I could hook up with him.

When I met Leo, I was taken a bit off-guard by this very large man with an even larger personality. Leo's rotund body didn't slow him down. Handing me a wetsuit, he started setting up the boat for launch. I saw that a storm was quickly



brewing offshore. Rather than seeing this of concern, Leo reassured me that the high winds are what make a catamaran so fun. I slipped into the wetsuit and off we went. Leo was right. Riding the catamaran through the wind and waves was a blast! He showed me how we could latch ourselves to the end of a line secured to the mast then throw ourselves off the end of the boat, only to be dragged like a body surfer behind the boat. When it was Leo's turn, because of his size, the boat would virtually stop in the water before the wind would fill the sails slowly pulling him along. We disembarked on an island beyond the horizon of White Rock. We hung out for about an hour before Leo looked at the weather and said, "We have to go."

The wind was so severe as Leo launched the catamaran that it made the sea extremely choppy. We barely got offshore when the powerful wind flipped the boat. No problem. "That's what catamarans were made for," Leo assured me. We righted it and it flipped with the next gust of wind. It kept doing this time and time again. Then, maybe because of the wind force or the strain from when we had thrown ourselves off the boat attached to the mast, whatever the cause, the mast broke at its base. I looked at Leo. He wasn't his boisterous self. He was scanning the skies for help. We had already gone too far to swim back to the island and the current was rapidly towing us out to sea.

Leo came up with a plan. He lashed the mast to the canvas of the catamaran and took the jib bar and tied a piece of sail to it. It acted as a small sail which he set in the direction of White Rock. Even though it was a little frightening, it was also kind of exciting. The sky was darkening, and rain poured down on us in buckets. With waves crashing over us, we firmly grasped the canvas straps so we wouldn't get washed off. As time went on, the cold became too much and we cuddled together to conserve heat. At least that's what I thought. Leo turned and reached for the zipper of my wetsuit attempting to unzip it. I looked at him with horror and promptly threw up on him.

Getting sick on Leo had the desired effect. He rezipped my wetsuit, apologizing. I moved to the opposite side of the canvas and had nothing to do with him. I stared into the water. After a time, I noticed a bright effervescence in the water. I dipped my hand in the water and threw it up in the air. It was like a handful of fireflies. It was absolutely beautiful! The storm wasn't subsiding, but I was becoming more at peace. I was overcome with the power and grace of the sea. Again, I felt if I were to die there, I would die happy.

My death at sea wasn't to be. We began to see flares lighting up the sky. We knew they were for us. There were also planes aiming spotlights into the water.

They were nowhere near us, nor did we have flares to respond. Soon, however, we would have our first sighting of land.

In time we made it to shore not far from where we put in. Leo walked along the shore towing me and the boat until we came to the spot where his truck and trailer were left on the beach. At the same time, the two Coast Guard inflatable boats that had fired flares, and several local news reporters found us, peppering us with questions about our disappearance. Leo was in his element. I was so done with Leo and this adventure, I quietly slipped away. Chloe, my housemate, came running up holding me tight and telling me how much she loved me, and hated me, for what I had just put her through. We went home to heal our hearts and bodies.

The next morning, Chloe got a call from her mother. She had just gotten back from church. Apparently, our recklessness was the subject of the Sunday sermon. Chloe's mom said she sunk in her seat, pretending not to know the subjects of the priest's consternation whose thoughtless actions required the use of city's precious resources. We were also in all the newspapers with Leo professing his fearless feat surviving the fury of the storm. His bravado made me sick! Still, I bought a bunch of the newspapers and sent clippings to my sisters, letting them know I was fine and feeling more alive than ever. My overly-protective sister Jeanne responded with dismay, waving her big sister finger at me (over the phone). I talked her down, reassuring her that I was good. In fact, I was living my best life. She slowly came around, acknowledging that I sounded good and wished me well. Finding humor and pride in my infamy as a reckless troublemaker, I embraced it as a badge of courage and survival.



A watercolor I painted displaying me in rough seas and driving rain, drifting off to sea.  
My head is resting on the boat with the paddle at my side.  
A distant shore is seen on the horizon.

## Chapter 15

### Detained by the Queen of England

Chloe learned that she was pregnant. It was unplanned and she began preparing herself to be a mother. Feeling close to Chloe, as a housemate, then as a confidante, I was at her side throughout the process. Chloe was wary of the medical establishment. She wanted to give birth naturally at home. After diligent research on who had performed the most successful home births, she chose a midwife to deliver her baby. Rick, the father, was an on-again/off-again boyfriend. During the process of her pregnancy, he showed little interest in being a father. Chloe, on the other hand, became more and more excited. She did what she could to ensure the unborn child had a healthy prenatal environment by eating well and living a stellar life. She was suspicious of ultrasounds and whether they could be harmful to her child. Instead, she relied on the midwife for assurances that all was well with the embryo's development.

One evening Chloe's water broke. The midwife had just finished delivering another baby and stumbled to our house looking exhausted. She examined Chloe and said she was still a way's off, so the midwife laid down in our back room to rest. Every hour or so, she would get up and check on Chloe. This went on for hours. In the early morning hours, Chloe was still not fully dilated. The midwife told her to take a walk on the beach to stimulate the process. Chloe and Rick went for a walk, and when they returned, she was in obvious discomfort.

Still not fully dilated, Chloe would experience grueling hours of discomfort before she could begin pushing. It was then that the midwife realized the baby was breech. She felt she could manipulate the baby and all would be well. She worked diligently on trying to deliver the baby. Finally, he was born, but his umbilical

cord had cut off his oxygen for an unknown length of time. He was blue. The midwife did not have oxygen on hand. Instead, she used a manual trumpet type instrument to revive the boy. I was told to call 911 and raced to make the call.

Chloe and her baby were taken to a Vancouver hospital about 30 minutes away. The midwife and Rick went with her. Waiting three days until I heard that I could come to the hospital, I was racked with concern. Her newborn son was on life support. Chloe was at his side, day and night, for four days. On the fourth day, he died.

Chloe was inconsolable. Arriving home, she wailed every waking hour. I did what I could to be there for her. Then, came the banging on the door. It was the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police). They said that they were there by decree of the Queen. The Queen was interested in eradicating midwifery and this was an ideal case. The RCMP wanted a statement regarding the actions of the midwife which resulted in the death of the child. Chloe refused, so I followed suit.

This RCMP harassment went on for weeks until one day, when Rick was over and the RCMP knocked on the door. He gave them the statement they were looking for. He reported that Chloe and I were negligent when it came to prenatal care and hiring the midwife. He said that Chloe had refused the tests that might have alerted us to the fact that the child was breech. He also let them know how the midwife was ill-prepared for the situation. That was what they were looking for. They demanded that we disclose the midwife's whereabouts. The trouble was that none of us knew where she'd gone.

The RCMP had been on the lookout for the midwife since the child's reported death. Now they had Rick's testimony to put the pressure on us. They threatened Chloe and me (since I was her primary support and encouraged her holistic approach) with criminal negligence and a possible sentence of up to 10 years in jail. They also said that we were not allowed to leave the province until the midwife resurfaced and this could go to trial.

The lockdown was especially difficult for Chloe. She longed to go back to Montréal, Québec, her birthplace. With her insistence, she was finally released to take the trip. I was still restricted to ensure our compliance. The pressure and anticipation of what could befall me was taking its toll. I decided that if I had the chance, I would go back to the states.

Restrictions on my freedom to leave opened my eyes to other barriers I experienced living illegally in Canada. I had been concerned that I would be found out and deported. I limited my ambitions to the work I could easily do

undercover. My plan was to take on a few jobs and go south when I was allowed. Then I had a dream that would add a twist to that plan.

It was one of those vivid dreams where it took a while to know that it hadn't actually happened. Even when I knew it was just a dream, it remained forefront in my thoughts. In the dream, I encountered a woman who embraced me sensually. Her touch was electrifying and I felt unable to resist. She kissed my lips ... slowly unbuttoning my shirt. Fixating solely on my breasts, she knew exactly what would bring me pleasure. They grew hard with her gentle yet unrelenting touch. Reeling under her spell, I experienced complete ecstasy. Reaching a climax, I awoke with an explosive orgasm.

My job at the time was painting the exterior of a large apartment complex. I shared the dream with my colleague. He suggested I follow up on the dream and make it a reality. I wasn't averse to the idea, but I wasn't sure how to make it happen. The midwife was the only lesbian I'd known in Canada. However, I was aware of her last known location.

My take from the paint job was \$1000. I began looking for a vehicle in earnest, anticipating my departure. Looking for a van I could live in, I found just the thing. It was an old milk truck, tall enough for me to stand up in. Chloe had a dream about the van the night before I bought it. In the dream the van was called Murphy. When she saw it, she was astonished. "It looks exactly like what I saw in my dream!" From that moment on, her name was Murphy. The interior of Murphy was covered with thick off-white shag carpeting. Even the walls and roof were carpeted. The exterior was painted white.

My painting buddy offered to prep and spray paint my van the color of my choosing. Seeing a chocolate brown Cadillac that caught my eye, I asked the owner if he knew the color. He did. Looking at the color chart at the Cadillac dealership, I saw a sage green I liked even better. Unfortunately, once Murphy was painted, she looked like a green military vehicle. Not the look I was after. Oh well.

Moving all my worldly possessions into Murphy, this would be my new home. I parked just outside of the houses I had previously rented. Since, I still knew people who lived there, I could count on them for a shower or a kitchen to make a hot meal. As the colder weather was approaching, I installed a wood burning stove. Satisfied with my new lodging and the independence it provided, I couldn't wait to take it on the road to experience new adventures.

It was nearing the end of summer and I got a job close to Vancouver to paint a mural for a local restaurant. I had just received the go-ahead that we could now leave the province. Since the RCMP were still unable to find the midwife,

Chloe and I were allowed to leave but needed to return for the trial if they found her within the seven-year statute of limitations. Relieved, with my new found freedom, I figured the income from this mural would give me the buffer I'd need before landing another job on the road.

Prior to leaving Canada, two of my friends, Shelagh and Mikell, proposed that I go to Belize with them. Shelagh had a brother we could stay with. I thought it would be fun to have a road trip to Central America and explore someplace different. It was 1981. The following year I had a family reunion happening in Solvang, California in early spring about eight months away. Shelagh and I made plans to meet there and make as much money as possible before then. I would have time to finish the mural and Shelagh and her friend Mikell could make a little money playing music and panhandling on the streets. Beyond this, I had one more mission I was compelled to attend to before leaving. Conveniently, the location of my mural installation was near Vancouver, where Chloe's midwife used to live. Maybe I'll just drop by and say, "Hi!"

## Chapter 16

### Expanding romantic possibilities

In my pursuit of the woman of my dreams, I knocked on the door of the only hope I had at my disposal. It was a household of gay women. A woman answered the door and I introduced myself. “Hi, my name is Gena. Your old roommate was my friend’s midwife. I’ve got a job painting a mural for a restaurateur, in Richmond, a few miles from here. Would it be possible for me to park in front of your house? I’ll be sleeping and painting the mural in the van.” She said, “Sure. If you need to use our bathroom, just knock.” Relieved, because I really didn’t have anywhere else to park near here, I settled in, waiting for an opportunity to become a lesbian.

It didn’t take long. I was invited to a concert by a couple of the women living in the house. One of the women played bass in a punk band which would be performing in an abandoned warehouse. I guess this was my first rave. It was wild! Afterwards, one of the gals that lived in the house asked if I wanted to sleep indoors that night. I jumped at the chance. Rae was a heavy-set woman, with thick dark hair, cropped short. She had a bit of a dark mustache, that stood out against her light skin. Even though I didn’t find her particularly attractive and knew next to nothing about her, we slept together that night. It was nothing like my dream. She was a screamer. Every time I touched her, she let out a loud shriek as though she couldn’t contain her ecstasy. Needless to say, everyone in the house knew we had hooked up. I later found out that her ex-girlfriend lived there and perhaps our connection was some kind of payback for her leaving her. Whatever the case, I had a girlfriend.

In regards to relationships, I had a code of ethics. Even though I may not be “in-love,” if I went so far as to make love with someone, I felt through this act, I’ve made a commitment. It was a commitment I intended to keep. I would be



monogamous, even if it was a short-term relationship. This was true while being with Rae, besides, she was a woman! This made the relationship a novelty in and of itself. I was excited to find out what being with a woman was like, and how it may differ from being with a man. In my gut, I felt that I was on the verge of something life changing, for the better. I was excited to explore the world from this new perspective.

Rae showed me around Vancouver. She was a little rough around the edges, but I found her fascinating. As we walked by open trash cans, she would rummage through them, looking for uneaten food. It kind of grossed me out, but at the same time I was intrigued. I have a habit of engaging with people different than me. It was a bit of an obsession, nurturing my unending curiosity of life in general. She was certainly different. She didn't care what the world thought of her. She was living her bold self for all to see. I loved that about her.

By the time I finished the mural, the nice weather of the summer was behind me. I was ready to travel south. Rae knew we were a temporary thing, so we said our goodbyes. The day before I left, a woman approached me in my van and asked what I was doing. I told her I was leaving in the morning to drive south, with my ultimate destination, Belize. She asked me if I would like a place to stay for the night. I eagerly agreed. Her name was Spes (pronounced "space"). She said that she was an electrician and was traveling from woman's land to woman's land helping them in their communities. I learned that Oregon had a lot of these places where women lived in a commune type situation. The way she described it made it sound utopian. The next morning, Spes asked me if I could deliver a package for her to Portland, Oregon. Pleased that I could reciprocate her generosity, I took the package from her hands, and headed out with a full tank of gas and my first destination.

Having lived so long in White Rock on the border of BC and the state of Washington, I grew to have a disdain for the Washington border towns and the redneck mentality I witnessed there. Leaving Canada, I extended that attitude to the whole state, attempting to avoid stopping in the state at all. Succeeding, I arrived on fumes in Portland, Oregon. I went directly to the address on the package that Spes had given me. Handing the package to the woman who answered the door, I asked if she knew somewhere I could go to get a cup of tea. She said, "Yes, I'd suggest a restaurant called Old Wives Tales." She gave me directions and I was off.

Arriving at the restaurant, I was seated at a back-corner table. The "waitron" brought me a bottomless cup of tea. Before leaving my table I asked, "Do you

know somewhere I could park for the night?” “No, but I’ll ask around.” Watching as a lot of people made their way to a back room in the restaurant, I asked the waitron, “What’s going on back there?” “There’s a band putting on a performance. It’s got a cover, but I’ll slip you in for free.” Currently, an all-woman folk band named Motherlode was playing a song with a great tempo when I entered, “... I want a woman with a chainsaw to spend the winter with me ...” It made me smile. I thought, “I’m liking Portland!”

When the band played their last song, I went back to my table and spread out my map trying to determine where to go from there. The restaurant was nearly cleared out. Two women remained taking artwork off the walls. From across the room, one woman shouted, “Hey, do you need a place to stay?” Startled that someone may have just read my mind, I answered, “I sure do!” She came over and introduced herself. Her name was Jean. She and her partner, Page, were artists and had displayed their artwork at the restaurant for the last couple of months. They rented a large house not far from there and invited me to stay with them. I was overjoyed! Jean offered me a large room off the kitchen with a king size heated waterbed. I felt more than pampered. They fed me and gave me access to a huge library of women’s music. I was getting an education on the lesbian community. Jean later told me they wondered if I would ever leave!

While I was finding my footing back in the states, I began looking for work in earnest. I had about six months before I was supposed to meet up with my friends in California. My first plan was to sell several large tires I’d tied to the roof of my van. I went to used tire dealers and was refused at each. They said I would need to pay them \$100 per tire, just to take them off my hands! Well, that was a miscalculation. With her connections, Jean found me a small job building a magazine rack for a women-owned chiropractic clinic. Then, one of her roommates gave me a lead on a job at a Naturopathic College that was under construction. They were hiring people to pick up trash at the site. I was hired on the spot. I was going to make it.

While I worked picking up trash, I started chatting to the builders on site. The lead carpenter was a woman. Filling her in on my experience, she let me work with her team of carpenters. After a short time, she brought me to the accounting office and changed my job description, which in turn raised my wage. After working for nearly 3 months as a carpenter, the contractor came up to me and said he didn’t remember hiring me. I said he hadn’t and explained my evolution to becoming a carpenter on his crew. He admired my hard-work and quality results so he left me on the payroll. Even after the job was complete, he hired me on subsequent jobs.

I was on my way to becoming a true entrepreneur.

On weekends I went exploring my new surroundings. One place I wanted to see was womyn's land (spelled with a "y" to disassociate themselves from men). I learned there was one about an hour south of Portland in Estacada called We'Moon. Making my way up the mountainous roads to the property, I name dropped that I knew Spes, becoming instantly embraced by this community through her good name. A group of women were going to salvage wood at a recent logging site and I volunteered to help.

Arriving at the site, there were fallen trees everywhere, undesirables left by loggers. Backing my van onto the site, I was taught how to use a chainsaw. By the end of the day the van was filled to the roof with logs cut to fireplace size. Exhausted, yet pleased with our accomplishments, I dropped the logs off at We'Moon. This was the beginning of expanding my skill set even more. Portland was providing what I was looking for; a thriving community of like-minded women and numerous opportunities to express my natural talents.

The time came to meet my family in Solvang, California for my family reunion. This would also be an opportunity to reconnect with my friends from White Rock and to continue south to Belize in Central America. This was our proposed meeting location. To be honest, I was hoping they wouldn't show. I was longing to go back to Portland. I was beginning a life there and it felt good to remain in one location. As it turned out, I couldn't find Shelagh and Mikell. I later learned that they were there but had been picked up for vagrancy and spent a little time in jail. I feel bad for them, but it was a missed opportunity I was okay with. I returned to my promising new home.

## Chapter 17

### Life's twists and turns lead to Gale

Jean told me about a possible housing opportunity. She had previously lived in a house that was under construction. An old friend of hers owned it. Jean and a few other women had offered to do some home improvements in exchange for living there. The owner agreed, as it also kept the house safe while it was being worked on. Over time, Jean grew out of favor with her friend, so she advised me not to mention her name. Instead, she suggested I tell her I'd heard about the place, named the Grace Peck House, from the Oregon Historical Society. The owner was making improvements so it could be included on their registry of historic sites and open the house for public viewing. I did as Jean suggested and I had a new place to live.

The only area at the Grace Peck House not under construction was the attic. It satisfied my immediate needs. I could roll out my make shift cot, throw my sleeping bag on it and I was home! There were gaping holes to the outside. Each morning little birds would fly in. I'd duck down into the sleeping bag until they found their way out. There was an old bathtub on the second floor where I'd bathe. It was dribbled with hardened concrete. I didn't mind. It was a marked improvement over my step-van. It was going to work out just fine.

It was during this time that I met Gale. Her calm, unpretentious, yet self-assured demeanor was attractive to me. She was a bit taller than my five foot two inch frame, with short light-brown hair, and large expressive hands. She built the cabinets for the house. I talked with her for a while and she agreed to show me her shop. It was in a large storage unit and Gale slept there illegally on a pull-out couch. Her shop was alluring. As with Glenn, in Canada, Gale had tools I'd never

seen before. She and I were cut from the same cloth. She shared my same passion for tools and building. She was pursuing her passion undeterred by any backlash from others that she had stepped out of a woman's place. I admired her spirit. We became friends, and eventually lovers. I learned everything I could from her about cabinetmaking. I felt I'd finally met someone I could live a lifetime of fulfillment with.

One day as I rode up to the Grace Peck house on a bicycle Jean had given me, the landlord was just leaving the house and met me outside. She recognized Jean's bike immediately. The deception on how I found the place was blown and I needed to find a new place to live. I'd been playing softball, so one of my new friends allowed me to rent a space in her house.

There was a loud pounding at the door of the house I'd recently moved into. It was the police. My first thought was that they found Chloe's midwife, and I was going to be extradited back to Canada to face a trial regarding our "criminal negligence." However, my fear was quickly replaced with one of even greater concern. My father had experienced a severe stroke and since my family didn't know where I was or how to reach me, they contacted the police to track me down. After I called Mom, I got on the next flight to Southern California.

Arriving at the hospital, I saw Dad in the bed, looking frailer and older than I'd ever seen him before. He was only 68 years old but looked like he'd aged 20 years since I'd last seen him. It was frightening. Mom was stressed, as was everyone else. I expressed my concern and Mom lashed out at me, "You didn't love him!" Surprised and hurt that she would say such a thing, I said, "Mom, that's not true. Even though I didn't show it during my troubled years in high school, I have always loved him." Mom just ignored me, focusing on Dad.

The doctor began explaining the damage done by the stroke and casually mentioned how this might affect his bipolar condition. This is the first I'd ever heard that my father was bipolar. Looking quizzically around at my sisters surrounding Dad's bed, no one looked surprised at his reveal. I later learned that Mom had only shared it on a need-to-know basis. My mother said she hadn't told us because, "I didn't want you kids to treat him differently."

Mom protected Dad from public attention to his bipolar diagnosis. She was fearful that it would compromise his ability to maintain clientele, which is a healthy fear. People, on the whole, second guess whether a person with a mental impairment can provide quality services. When the family lived in Cherokee, Iowa, Dad's thriving dental practice faltered after he had his first public manic episode. It took a toll on his reputation and on being able to sustain his practice.

This small town with its robust gossip mill proved to be too much of a financial and emotional burden to bear. Dad reentered the military service and the family moved to California.

In daily family life, Dad's bipolar condition was not obvious. What was most obvious was Dad's lack of ability to make a decision. When I'd ask permission to go somewhere, his common response was, "Go ask your mother." He'd come home from work and fall asleep in his recliner until dinner. We were reared by our mother with a strict rule: Loud squeals of delight or disagreements between siblings were not tolerated. When we argued, Susie and I were told to go in our bedroom until we were friends. We would go into our room, turn to each other and say, "We're friends, right?" The response was always, "Yes," successfully stuffing our feelings as we left the room. After many years of counseling, I finally found my voice and learned how to "stay in the room" and express my feelings. It was a monumental step in being able to maintain healthy relationships as well as healthy boundaries.

When my parents visited me in Portland a year after Dad's stroke, I took them to some of the areas that highlighted the beauty I'd found in the Pacific Northwest. I'd been with Gale for several months by this time. We went to a local restaurant so I could introduce them to her. Very shortly after Gale spoke of her work, Mom exclaimed, "She's just like you." Yup! More than you know, Mom.

Gale and I rented a house in NE Portland. We made for good friends but weren't as good as lovers. To me, the romance was less important than our compatibility. We were definitely in-sync when it came to everything that was most important to me, enjoying time spent in nature and building things. We slept together, but a year after getting together, we rarely made love. One day, Gale decided to go on a solo weekend backpacking trip. When she returned, she said she had had a revelation that we were not meant to be together. I was heartbroken. We still lived together but stayed in separate rooms. I released the tension of the situation by running. I'd run for hours at a time. As I pounded the pavement, I'd listen to music, trying to reconcile this new reality. I found it hard imagining life without her in it. As it would turn out, Gale never fully disappeared from my life. She taught me what it meant to live separate lives, but never give up on love.



Gale squaring an edge of a large slab of wood with a jointer in her shop. She has a determined look on her face and is wearing an apron over her short-sleeve t-shirt and jeans.

## Chapter 18

### Kate

I'm not sure how I first met Kate. Once I met her, I couldn't get enough. She had a couch on her front porch. I would come over early in the morning and crash on the couch until people started stirring inside. Kate had a maternal streak that met my need to be taken care of. She had a huge garden and was always cooking something, which met my equal desire to be fed. It was a match made in heaven.

Kate and I crossed paths a lot over the upcoming years. I referred her for a job at the Lattice Works of Oregon. Gale, having had difficulty making a living as a cabinet maker, was the foreman at the Lattice Works and had suggested that I work there as well. One day in August, Kate and I attended a Leo party set up by Mary (all three of us are Leos). It was along the Columbia River. It was an overnight extravaganza. People brought their boats, floats and plenty of food, drinks and frivolities. I was pretty drunk, when I swam out to some logs tied up in the water. I climbed on them, walking on the logs like I was performing a high-wire act.

Later, Kate would tell me she was fascinated by my agility and wildly crazed abandon, as she watched me walk down one of the undulating, slippery logs, without concern that I might fall and get crushed between two of the one-ton logs. Once I was back on dry land, she reached out to me and, even though I was in a romantic relationship with Gale, I gave in to her advances. Feeling bad that I'd broken the code of trust I lived by, I later admitted this to Gale. She wasn't pleased, but didn't insist that Kate and I stop seeing each other. She didn't have a possessive bone in her body. In retrospect, I shudder at my bold insensitivity as Kate and I continued to see each other romantically for a short period of time.



Ultimately, we both realized the error of our ways and ended our romance but not our friendship. In time, she too would prove to have an even greater role in my life.

When my relationship with Gale ended, running every day to let off steam, led to me becoming a strong athlete. I played softball and volleyball. One season I even played soccer, which was something I'd never attempted. I was lousy at it, but it was there that I met Mary.



My arms are wrapped tightly around Kate from behind, as I sit on a low beach front retaining wall in San Francisco. Kate stands between my dangling legs leaning back against me and the wall, while we both smile broadly.



About to swing at a pitch, I take a long stride toward the ball while at bat. Others look on from the dugout and the stands.

## Chapter 19

### Mary and the melding of family and friends

In the field at the first soccer team practice, I took notice as Mary drove up. She had two touring kayaks on top of her truck. I was immediately enamored with her. As soon as I had a chance, I cornered her and asked about the kayaks. She said they both belonged to her. She bought two because she didn't want to kayak alone. Wow. We became friends, bound by our love of adventure.

It wasn't long before we were on our first adventure. We threw the boats on top of her propane fueled pickup, bought a bottle of tequila and went off to the coast. We started drinking on the drive. We took a small road thinking it would lead to the beach. Soon, we found ourselves four-wheeling through very rough terrain. Mary drove until the truck bottomed out and couldn't move in any direction. We pulled the bottle out of the brown paper bag and saw it was almost empty. We burst out laughing!

Soon after, we heard a large vehicle coming our way. He stopped and asked if we needed a hand. He just so happened to have a come-along tow line on the front of his truck. After pulling us out, we continued to the coast, then climbed into the back of the truck, and fell asleep. When we awoke, the first thing we noticed were the mosquitoes. The truck was filled with them. We propped ourselves up, side by side, slapping mosquitoes as fast and furiously as we could. As they'd been sucking our blood all night, each slap of a mosquito left a bloody mark.

With the light of day, we stumbled out of the truck. After pulling the kayaks off the roof, we eased them into the ocean. Mary didn't make it far before she flipped and pulled back out to the shore. I continued and it wasn't until I hit the breakers, that I flipped, clinging to the boat and paddle. Try as I might, I couldn't catch a wave to come ashore. I was caught in a rip tide and it kept me in line with

the breaking waves crashing over me. Mary waded into the water to her knees, but I knew she couldn't help. It seemed like hours that I battled the waves. I got bashed over and over again but continued to hang on to the boat. Finally, with a mighty kick, I made it out of the riptide and found my way to shore. Mary helped me pull the boat in and I collapsed from exhaustion on the beach. This was the beginning of many more years of adventure with Mary and her friends.

I'd been in Portland now for a couple years. The phone rang one morning and it was Mary. She said she'd just met a friend of mine and then put Jean on the line. I hadn't talked to Jean in months. Apparently, they were now dating. I became their third wheel. Whatever adventure they went on, I'd join them. It was double the fun because of my deep friendship with them both.

Mary, Jean and I went to La Push, Washington for a kayak-surfing and potlatch event on the Quileute Indian Reservation. It was a rare opportunity for a non-Native to be allowed entry to their land, and to engage in their ceremonial activities and feast. I felt honored to be able to partake in this. I brought "Scratch" my heavy, yellow whitewater kayak, thus named by Jean, for its beat-up exterior.

The La Push off shore breakers came in rows, one after another, in close succession. A number of people took their boats out, surfing the waves back to shore. Because of the frigid temperature of the ocean, no one was allowed to participate without a full wetsuit, in case they flipped. Not to be deterred by the rules, I put on long underwear and rubber boots, and launched Scratch away from the masses into the turbulent sea.

Kayaking through the multiple breakers before surfing back to shore, I managed to stay upright through the first two rows of breakers. On the third, I was not so lucky. My boat flipped and I rode the waves back into shore. Again, after draining the water from my boat, I braved the seas and attempted to go beyond the breakers in order to turn and time the surf back to shore. This time I made it past the breakers. When I caught my first wave my boat flipped again. I pushed myself out of the boat and when I did, one of my boots slipped off my foot, into the turbulent wave. I hobbled, one boot on, one boot off, until I made it to the shore. Mary assisted me, taking my paddle while I shouldered the kayak. I was done for the day.

We kayaked in Alaska, canoed the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, and had many local adventures. Once we kayaked from Portland to Astoria, then on another occasion, we did the same trip in reverse. Every summer it was the same thing. Mary was a school nurse, Jean worked as a teacher at a local youth correctional institution, so they had the whole summer to play. And me, I lived to play. So whenever Mary came up with an idea for another adventure, I was there.

Two of our extraordinary trips were launched from the northern most ferry dock on Vancouver Island, BC. We drove to Comox, loaded our boats on the BC ferry and went first to Desolation Sound, and another time to Discovery Islands. Both stretched our strength, endurance and skills in navigation with nautical charts and backcountry camping. I was in a joy-filled state of mind. Mary created a waterproof song book and we raised our voices in unison, in full throated verses, no one but ourselves could hear. It was an extraordinary feeling of freedom, peace and awe being surrounded by nature and being able to witness it in conjunction with dear friends. I embraced the moment, and can draw from it, re-experiencing it at will. From this moment budded a long-lasting curiosity, “Is it possible to maintain this feeling, throughout all of life’s experiences?”

Discovery Islands was the greatest test of our navigational skills. There were so many nondescript islands, big and small, tightly packed together. If you didn’t track exactly where you were, you could become hopelessly lost, and there was no sign of inhabitants on the islands, or sightings of other vessels on the seas. From our perspective, in the body of a kayak, all the islands blended into one.

Before we began our kayaking adventure, we went to Cortes Island, one of the two islands with ferry service. The island has a small population, with a large number of First Nation people. We attended a performance by these individuals on their history and culture. I was enthralled by being witness to this, and to be around this community.

It was time to venture off on our own, into the great unknown. The last thing we did was fill our 5-gallon water containers, at a faucet connected to an old building near our launch location. We paddled until late in the afternoon to our first camp site and began preparing our dinner. We were horrified to realize all five of our 5-gallon water containers were filled with reddish-brown liquid. Apparently, the faucet where we filled all the containers was fed by rusty pipes. All of the water, with the exception of the water in our water bottles, was unusable. We had traveled too far to go back to the occupied island we had left, and there were none where we were headed. As fortune would have it, that night it rained, and rained hard! We emptied all the containers and funneled the clean rain water off our tent tarps, filling each container. We were prepared to continue the adventure.

Mary brought one nautical chart she’d laminated. This meant that all the navigation landed predominantly on her shoulders. This was challenging and made it all the more important that we stick closely together. Determining where we were and where we were headed took a lot of effort. Thank goodness, Mary was exceptionally good at it, for all our lives were in her hands.

Being alone, with no contact with anyone, led to some opportunities to live even more openly and carefree. With the hot summer weather, when it wasn't raining, we were free to wear our birthday suits, whenever the mood struck. We could party to our heart's content, also. One day, a few of us dropped acid on one of our non-paddling, leisure days. It was cool being in a beautiful environment, heightened by the exhilarating high of the drug. There was a long piece of drift wood balancing precariously on a rock, making a perfect teeter-totter! We played on that for a bit, then I had another idea. High as a kite, I strolled down the washed-up remnants of a tree and finding the tipping point, sent the log swinging up-and-down with my shifting weight.

My 40th birthday occurred on this trip. On that day, August 9, 1997, we landed on a new deserted island. After paddling hard to get there, we had to scout out the best location to camp, then schlep all the gear from the boats to the camp sight. While schlepping, Jean approached me. She had woven a crown of wild flowers she'd picked from around the island, and placed it on my head. I was Queen for the day!

Before nightfall, we gave each other full body massages. It was nurturing and vulnerable having many hands gently massaging my naked body. Even though I was in the best shape of my life, I was extremely shy in showing my body. On this particular trip, my bum had been rubbed raw, as a result of the friction from sitting in the kayak and moving from side-to-side with each stroke. Beseaching my friends to let me keep my underwear on while they massaged, they wouldn't have it. Removing my clothes, I exposed my raw, red cheeks to the loving care of my friends. This would not be the last time, my friends would challenge me to go beyond my comfort zone, and figuratively lay out naked before them, trusting that they would treat me with kindness, and without judgment.

Mary has been there for me, in my highest and lowest moments. Her friendship melded into a relationship with my family of origin. When she had fallen on a whitewater rafting trip on the Colorado River, Molly came to her rescue. Molly nurtured her, and helped her navigate her way from Flagstaff, Arizona, where Molly lived, back home to Jean in Portland, Oregon.

Mary and Jean bought a plot of land, then built a house, on a little island called Protection Island in British Columbia. It was fairly close to Vancouver Island and the city of Nanaimo. Once it was built, I went there every summer. At one time, Susie and her family had the opportunity to spend time at a friend's house just north of Nanaimo. I proposed for them to meet me at a café close to the pier in Nanaimo, and I'd arrange to have Mary and Jean be there. This was an

opportunity for them to meet for the first time. In the meantime, Susie and family explored the sights. They took a passenger ferry to an island off the shore of both Protection Island and Vancouver Island called Newcastle Island. As fortune would have it, Susie's daughter, Sarah, was wearing a "Or-y-gun" sweatshirt that day (a spoof on the often-mispronounced name Oregon). Also fortunate, and highly unlikely, Mary, Jean, Susie and family crossed paths while exploring on Newcastle. Mary and Jean had gone to Newcastle Island from Protection Island to get an ice cream cone at a venue there. On the way to the ice cream stand, they passed three people, a man, woman and child. Watching them walk by, Jean commented on Sarah's sweatshirt, and what a small world that people from Oregon would cross paths on a small island in Canada. What are the chances of that? Just then, Susie laughed, such a familiar laugh ... It sounded just like George's (my nickname) chuckle. Jean looked at Susie, and recognized that this could be the sister they had planned to meet with me the following day.

Mary, Jean, Susie and her husband, Shannon, had a good laugh when they recognized who each other were. Susie, Shannon and Sarah went to Protection Island with Mary and Jean that day. Susie and Shannon were enamored with the island and island life. There were no paved roads. The dirt roads were traveled by foot, bike and electric golf carts. Since Protection Island had no ferry service, there were very few cars on the island. The only way to gain access was through a small walk-on boat that went back-and-forth to the Dinghy Dock Pub twice per day, the only establishment on the island. The island felt safe. Safe enough for children to run around without fear of harm. Parks and beach fronts were plentiful. Before returning home from this visit, Susie and Shannon decided to buy a plot on Protection Island. In coming years, they would build a cabin and be neighbors to Mary and Jean.

The day after Susie and family met Mary and Jean, I arrived in Nanaimo to meet them at the predesignated café. I was more than surprised when I was met by them as well as Mary and Jean, and then was told of their unusual encounter the previous day. It was surreal having my birth and chosen family meet and connect in such a friendly way. I was so happy at the turn of events. In the future, I would go to Protection Island to visit them both. So much fun!

Mary taught me the true meaning of friendship, turning friends into family, and what it means to really *be there* for someone. She gave me the opportunity to practice living in authenticity, without fear of what someone else might think of you or your actions. I am grateful to know, without a doubt, she will be in my life for the long-run.



Mary and Jean with sunglasses and head gear in a canoe, in the middle of the glassy flat Boundary Waters, in northern Minnesota.



Participating in a kayak-surfing event in La Push, WA, I'm facing numerous sets of breaking waves before attempting to ride one back to shore.





Mary and me, with “Scratch,” my kayak, on my shoulder standing on the sandy beach with the seashore behind us. I have one boot on and one boot off. Mary is holding my paddle and helmet.



Taking a selfie from a canoe, Jean balances a camera on the edge of an outstretched paddle in the Boundary Waters, while 4 of us in side-by-side canoes, lean in for the shot.



I'm striding toward the camera on a large expanse of sandy beach in the Discovery Islands with the forest, a tarp shelter and a fellow (naked) paddler behind me.



In the Discovery Islands, balancing on the fulcrum of a fallen tree and high on acid, I'm using the tree as a single-manuevered teeter-totter while a friend looks on.



While schlepping gear from kayak to camp in the Discovery Islands, I was gifted a crown of wild flowers by friends on my 40th birthday. I'm wearing shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, carrying a bag in one hand and my floppy hat in the other.

## Chapter 20

### Mitzi

Mitzi exuded sex-appeal, which frightened me. I was much more comfortable with the oddball, or someone with similar proclivities. Mitzi was very feminine and prided herself in the fact. Femininity was something I couldn't relate to or appreciate on a personal level, yet, she obviously appreciated my tomboy ways. Her interest appealed to my vanity and I fell into a relationship with her.

Over the years, I'd heard many women say they were "in love" with someone they were seeing. Puzzled by the term, I never knew what they were talking about. I loved the women I was with but felt I could live my best life with or without them. I thought, maybe I just didn't know what it meant to be in love. I was determined to find out.

After a year of dating, we decided to move in together. We looked for a house to rent and recognized we would need a roommate to defer the cost and expenses. Enter, Zekra, to our home. Zekra stayed with us for the next eight years, even when we moved two additional times. Zekra would prove to be a "lifer" to me. She has become my truthsayer, someone, as with Mitzi, I could always count on to tell me the truth as she sees it.

Mitzi and I made a commitment to be in it for the long haul. We talked about the fact that we were not each other's soulmate, but our love and commitment were real. We had the same temperament, fairly easygoing and comfortable with going where we've never been before. If the destination was enticing, even if it involved a little risk, we were up for the task. When we hit an impasse, we'd see a couple's counselor. Mitzi wanted things her way when it came to the household, which was fine with me. We supported each other where it mattered.

One area where Mitzi and I truly meshed was our love to travel. We both loved road trips, camping and exploring the unknown. We learned how to scuba dive and took trips to Mexico to indulge in that passion. We helped each other on our respective career paths. She became a self-employed bookkeeper and I pursued a career as a self-employed cabinetmaker.

We decided to buy a house as an investment. Financially, with thriving career pursuits, our relationship worked. It was mutually beneficial. What it lacked was the passion each of us desired. I longed for more of a heart-to-heart connection. She longed for a physical dynamic that I could not satisfy. Still, it was the closest to love I'd ever felt. For all intents and purposes, I considered us as close to being married as I ever wished to be.

A few years into our relationship, Susie invited the two of us to her wedding. It felt good that Susie would acknowledge my relationship with Mitzi by inviting us both. It felt somewhat odd that we'd be there but still need to be closeted. For Mitzi, it went beyond feeling uncomfortable. To be seen as a friend, rather than a partner, felt like a slap in the face. She didn't want to participate in family activities outside of the wedding. This meant that I missed out on enjoying them as well, since we'd engage in long disagreements, resulting in me being "late to the party" and Mitzi refusing to go at all. I'd leave her fuming in our hotel room.

After returning home from the wedding, Mitzi laid on the pressure for me to come out to my parents. She'd been out to her parents for years, and felt that keeping it a secret diminished our relationship. Agreeing to an extent, I told her I'd consider it. As I did, I came face-to-face with true fear. I had always kept a healthy distance, longitudinally and emotionally, from my parents and most of my sisters. Having kept up the deception so long, I was worried the truth might destroy the fragile balance we had developed. Dad had had a stroke and was permanently disabled. Mom was strict about what was good or bad, right or wrong. I was certain her strict Catholic ideology would put my relationship solidly in the "wrong" category. Those things gave me enough reason to withhold the truth. I felt I had never met Mom's approval no matter what I did. So, what was I afraid of? I suppose it was the possibility that I was sealing forever any possibility of my dream of her ever being proud of me.



I'm applying caulk to the inside of what will be my first custom made kayak in my shop behind the first apartment Mitzi and I shared.



Mitzi and me alongside the Green Tortoise Adventure tour bus. We're smiling and leaning against each other with my arm over her shoulder.



Kate in the kitchen I designed and built for my house with Mitzi. The large bank of cabinets is painted white with frame and panel doors, as well as some with glass six lite panel doors. Across the top is crown molding with live ivy draping above it.

## Chapter 21

### Coming out

The possibility of forever disappointing my mother hurt more than any physical pain I could ever experience. Since the incident of playing doctor with David, I'd felt a distance with my mother. Everyone that knew her was taken in by her quick wit and jubilant personality. Loving her like I did, I'd always longed to feel her love and pride in who I was. Though, this was my heart's desire, I knew her approval (or pride) of anything I did wouldn't be authentic if I wasn't completely honest with her.

I was boxed into a lie. In contemplating coming out, the biggest factor in my decision was my relationship to truth. I had lived my life, until this point, in the shadows. My thought was, if people learned my truth, they wouldn't like me or they'd try to stop me from being or doing what I was compelled to be or do. My feelings of inadequacy were beginning to wane, replaced with a belief that I had a right to live life on my own terms. Surrounded by people who were encouraging, and thought I was a good person, I began believing it as well. My comfort in being gay was solid. Now, I wanted my parents to know the truth, even if they didn't understand it. Lying to their face about who I was, or who I was with, filled me with shame. Ashamed with myself, that I couldn't speak my truth, when faced with their limited beliefs. Their regular questioning as to whether I was dating anyone, was painful, always ending in a lie. And perhaps (I knew it was a long shot), I'd be able to share with them some of my activities with Mitzi and my friends. I wanted to honor them by letting them know me. If they hated who I was, then at least we would be closer to the truth of what we are to one another. Knowing that I'd never stop loving them no matter how they took it, I decided to give them the chance to love the truth of me.



Since we lived so far apart, I decided to come out by sending a letter. Besides, I was chicken to tell them face-to-face. Picking a book from the library that had compiled letters of people coming out to their parents, I picked one as a template. I also wrote a letter to each of my sisters letting them know what I had done, not wanting them blindsided by my actions. The day came when I would mail the letters. Walking to the mailbox, I can still remember the feeling of dread as I let the letters drop from my hand into the box. I was gripped with fear.

After a few days, when I hadn't heard from anyone, I gave Mom a call. She was livid. Her first words to me were, "You are so selfish!" I hadn't expected that reaction. I thought, maybe it came from talking to my sisters? They were pretty upset. Or perhaps, she'd known I was gay, and saying it out loud went against our unspoken rule. I'd violated that, so maybe that's why I'm selfish? Stunned, I didn't know how to respond to that. So, I was silent. She let me know that when the letter arrived, she gave it to Dad to read. She looked over at him, and he was shaking his head. She told me that my "friends" were not welcome in their house. Fortunately, the ban did not extend to me.

The retaliation from my family was swift and cut deep. I was told that I was sick and that I shouldn't have done it. A relative asked me, "What does it feel like to have just killed your parents?" Though I'd felt separate and not as good as my sisters for most of my life, this placed an even larger wedge between us. It was painful. In my family of friends, I was known as a kind and generous individual. In my family, I was treated like a pariah, creating division and tension, with a couple exceptions. Susie, for example, did all she could to be "Switzerland" between distant warring lands.

A couple weeks from when they received my letter, I flew down to California to see my parents. The reception was cold from my mother and warm from my father. Sitting down with my mom, I tried to talk to her. She looked at me and said, "It's not my fault!" I said, "No, Mom, it's nobody's fault. I've always been different from the other girls. You and Dad raised me right. I had the best childhood any kid could ask for." Mom ran out of the room with her hands over her ears. From that scene, I concluded that Mom thought that allowing me to engage in "boy" activities, even buying me toy guns and helmets, contributed to making me gay. It was not the truth. I'd always been inclined to be that way. I'd pitch a fit if I had to put on a dress. The only doll I ever played with was a G.I. Joe. Mom did teach us all to sew. That was cool. I'd make drawstring pants, and guru shirts for G.I. Joe. I made him an arm band with #23 on it. That was my number

when I played Bobbie-Sox softball. It's true that Mom never discouraged me from my proclivities. For that, I'll always be grateful.

Dad and I spent a lot of time together that first visit. He took me to their country club where I swam while he sat at the edge of the pool. He counseled me to be patient. I appreciated his kind, loving words. I relied on those words to reassure me that my parents still loved me. During this time, as the distance grew further and further apart between my mother and me, I grew much closer to my father. For 40 years, from my childhood indiscretion with David to several years after revealing that I was gay, my relationship with Mom would be damaged. It would either take an act of God, or some other kind of miracle, for our relationship to heal. As time would tell, it may turn out to be a little bit of both.

My connection with Dad was renewed after I came out to him. Each time I came to visit, I'd time it to be when another sister was there to keep the peace between my mother and me. It appeared that once Dad had a stroke people treated him differently, even within the family. He wasn't asked before he was told what was going to be done to his body or in his life. I found this difficult to witness. Mom put Dad to bed extremely early, so she could get some much-needed respite. As he was fully awake, I would lie beside him in bed and talk to him about his life. He told me stories about his childhood. His memories of the distant past were clear as a bell. I cherish those precious solitary moments that I shared with him.

Ten years after his stroke, Dad had a heart attack. On route to the hospital, he died. While packing to leave on a trip to Hawaii with Mitzi, I got the call. It was Susie. After telling me of Dad's passing, I hung up the phone, and broke down in tears. My connection to the one person who loved me unconditionally from the moment of my birth was gone. The impact of his death hit deep in my soul. That night, I laid in bed wanting one last look at his face. I was having trouble remembering what he looked like. Suddenly, with my eyes closed, Dad's face came into view. Knowing full well it was Dad answering my call, I stared long and hard at his profile. I looked at his face from all angles, to my heart's content. Finally, I let Dad know that I was good and he could go. His image disappeared and I drifted off to sleep. My deep connection with Dad didn't diminish with his death. If anything, it made it stronger.

Mitzi and I postponed our date of departure to Hawaii until after Dad's service. I went down to West Covina and borrowed clothes from Molly so I was "presentable." The service happened at the same time that the LA riots were occurring, after the acquittal of the police officers that beat Rodney King, it was captured on video, then publicly aired. After Dad's service, we gathered with

friends and family at my parent's house. The TV was on throughout the time, displaying the chaos in L.A. It felt surreal. At one point, a neighbor sat down at my side. She said that she had a close look at Dad as he was being taken from the house into the ambulance. "He looked scared," she recalled. This was a troubling thought that Dad in his final minutes of life was experiencing fear. Soon after hearing this, I vowed to do everything in my power to be fully aware and at peace before my death. In my final hour, I wanted to savor the moment of transition and experience it in its entirety.

Two years after Dad's passing, Mitzi and I separated. We'd been together 10 years. We made the decision while on a lovely vacation in Mexico. Mitzi brought up the topic. "You know we've never truly met each other in areas that are particularly meaningful to me. Before I'm too old, I want to see if it's possible for me to find someone who does." I wasn't disturbed by her pronouncement. Looking her right in the eye, I said, "All I've ever wanted was for you to be happy. I'm okay with ending our relationship." Mitzi looked relieved. "As long as we aren't seeing anyone else, is it alright with you that we still sleep together on occasion?" "I'd love that," I responded.

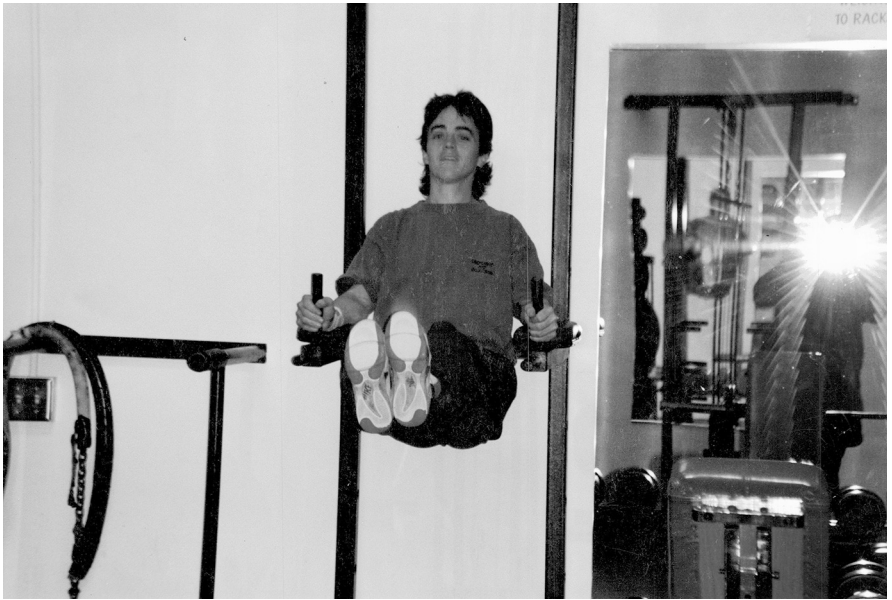
Over the next several months, I lived alone in a studio above a family's garage. It was fully self-contained. Overlooking the beautiful manicured property of the owners, it had a small kitchenette, bathroom with tub, and a living room which was also my bedroom. They only charged me \$150 per month, since it was small, but it served my needs. When this space was no longer available, I moved into the second-floor warehouse, illegally, where I rented a studio for my shop. I was excited to be on my own, my reckless ways in play and with the use of recreational drugs renewed. Mitzi once said, "It's great that you're okay with our relationship ending. But do you need to be so happy about it?" When Mitzi and I ended our relationship, it was sweet that there was no ill-will, but we didn't connect much afterward. It was a relief to have my uncompromising freedom again. Mitzi was off to find the woman of her dreams. I was off to find my next adventure.

Having a lot of playmates in Portland, I continued to work hard and play harder still. My cabinet making business was thriving. I was in demand. Mitzi and I sold the house we jointly owned. Our profit was significant, largely due to the kitchen remodel and deck I built, with a fancy copper tubing I used as styles in the railing. I used the money to purchase property where I could build a shop/home. Taking one to three months off per year to travel, I never lacked for the ways, means and opportunities to engage in adventure.

Being a self-made entrepreneur was challenging. However, it allowed me an

extraordinary amount of freedom. Very disciplined, I would set project or task related goals and reward myself when I met them. Always true to my word, I would estimate a completion date and do everything I could to reach and honor it. I don't believe there was a promise I didn't keep.

It was amazing how much abuse my body could take. Never sore or physically ill, I was grateful for each day, knowing I wouldn't be able to maintain this pace forever. Living life as if each day could be my last, I packed each day with as much as possible, not letting a minute go idle. I know I've said this before, but I'll say it again, I absolutely loved my life!!!



Honing my strong abdominal muscles at the gym doing straight leg lifts from a wall mounted stand.

## Chapter 22

### The White Rock Experience

There was a mystery that first became apparent in White Rock. While subtle at first, it became so commonplace that I dubbed it the “White Rock Experience.” It would happen when I was intensely focused on my desire. For instance, when the cabinetmaker stopped me on the street to help me fulfill my dream of building a paddle. Or the time I was walking down the road on a remote island and Gary, the crab fisherman, just happened to be passing by. He picked me up and we had another extraordinary adventure. This began happening like clockwork. I would look for a new adventure, a job, lodging, etc. and it would appear without effort. Synchronization was an everyday occurrence.

The reoccurring nature of the White Rock Experience was new, I felt like I was connected to a wellspring of alluring possibilities. It would appear out of nowhere. Popping up in the most mundane moments, I’d never know when, if or how it might transform a situation. What is it and why did it come to be? After I left White Rock, it still happened for a time, then it stopped. I noticed it was gone when I started my relationship with Mitzi. Was it abandoning the single life that stopped the flow? Maybe I didn’t need it? Was it that I was exerting so much effort to accomplish my dreams that I missed the opportunities that were present? My wonder and curiosity in the search for an answer has been unending.

Over time, I’ve seen the White Rock Experience resurface, off-and-on. I’ve come to believe that when I’ve had a laser focus on what I’d like to accomplish and am open to how it occurs, miracles happen. Shit happens, too, don’t get me wrong, but if I spend a little less time licking my wounds, and a bit more time gazing at the stars for the answers to my dreams, White Rock seems to show up more

often. There appears to be a kind of funnel effect that leads people to meet. Like a magnet, this unseen energy pulls the right people to the same location. What happens from there, is up to them. Mary used to say I was exceptionally lucky. Rather, I believe my good luck stems first-of-all from being open to life's subtle offerings. One such gift, I've had since childhood, is a feeling of safety to step out, take uncertain steps and trust that something good will occur from my efforts. Growing up in a family that didn't struggle for basic necessities, and surrounded by supportive friends, didn't hurt. Besides this feeling of safety, curiosity and wide-eyed belief in possibilities, I really don't know anything for certain. I'm sure those of you reading this have been scratching your heads throughout this chapter. I just had to express that: *The White Rock Experience is real, and it's out there longing to manifest itself.* (Okay, back to "reality" ...)



White Rock at sunset with the mile-long pier and the mainland slope of White Rock rising from the pier and beyond.



## Chapter 23

### Imposter syndrome

From disguising myself as the Canadian, Pearl Wales, from Toronto, Ontario (the people, I was told, spoke the most “American” than any other Province), I took to whatever lie that would serve my purposes to advance my dreams. Feeling that either living and working illegally in Canada, or being a woman with little experience, professing to be a legitimate builder, house painter, roofer or muralist, I was an imposter. Lies about who I was, where I was from and what I was proficient at, allowed me to reinvent myself. Confident that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to, it didn’t bother me at all, that I gained acceptance under false pretenses. It was like a game I played, moving the chess pieces to my advantage, when no one was looking. Deceitful, and yet I don’t believe anyone was hurt, with the exception of myself, and my personal integrity.

After moving back to the states, I continued the lie. Starting with the day of my arrival when I went to Old Wives Tales for a bottomless cup of tea. The two women removing their art from the walls around the dining hall were going back-and-forth from the restaurant to the parking lot, putting their paintings into their car. They eyed my milk truck with Canadian license plates. They made an assumption that the woman in the restaurant with a map spread out on the table before her, owned the van. When asked if I was from Canada, I did not illuminate them as to my true citizenship. I was “coming” from Canada, and in my minds-eye I was embracing my Canadian identity much more than my “American.” I was not proud of the United States of America, of what it stood for, its capitalist, colonizing, elitist, arrogant and ethnocentric ways. Where I failed terribly was when I created a story around my history. I told a long series of lies to support

the false Canadian origin. The lies were built from my diminished self-worth and self-esteem. I felt it increased my value to be an illegal immigrant woman living in the states. It made me stand out as someone “special,” which I was, but didn’t recognize, at the time.

Another way I hid the truth of my being, diminishing my worth and ingenuity, was in my work as a self-employed, builder and cabinet maker. Never admitting to my lack of training before taking on a job I’d never done before, without fail, I would meet each challenge. Becoming a Jill-of-all-trades, I hung my shingle as a builder: creator of decks, fences, roofs, sheet rock installer and painter, both interior and exterior, residential or commercial. When I first began my entrepreneurial career, I’d take on nearly any project that was asked of me. Later, I was able to be more picky, only accepting jobs that suited my fancy.

My favorite fair-weather job, as well as being lucrative, was building decks. When the weather was agreeable, single-handedly, I built many decks. Mary had given me my first job building a deck that led from the French doors of her house, to stairs and her backyard. Once I mastered one craft, I’d promote myself as an expert, knowing I could figure it out as I went along. After building a kitchen for my friend, Wendy, I became a custom cabinet/furniture maker. This spin-off career provided opportunities for my creativity to truly flourish. It was also a great excuse for accumulating numerous tools to play with. Learning as each new challenge presented itself, I relied on my strong body and instincts to create works of art.

Unaware of the worth of the products I created, I undercharged my customers, compared to the going rate others received providing similar quality results. I never researched this at the time. I made enough to maintain a decent quality of life and the self-employment allowed me to be flexible to take time off at a moment’s notice. I’d take at least one month off every year to travel. I didn’t hire assistants. I would do everything from design, to bidding, ordering and picking up materials. I would build and install the product. When it came to cabinet making, I would go so far as to apply the finishes, countertops and do any trim work or clean-up daily, if necessary. That way, I never had a complaint, had to explain the work, the reason I did things the way I did or supervise an employee. It took a toll on my body, and also made me stronger and more resilient. The underlying truth behind my solo endeavors was to hide my lack of experience so I wouldn’t be criticized.

Lacking formal training, my education came from observations, working with others on their projects and reading how-to books. Also, because I charged

lower rates, I didn't make enough to pay for a bond to have my work insured. At first, I didn't know it was necessary. When I knew others did carry such a thing, I skirted it still, knowing that if anyone ever questioned the quality of my work, I would gladly reimburse them or build it to their liking, for free. I was fortunate enough for it to have happened only once over my 20+ year career.

A real estate agent in town owned a property and hired me to build a pantry. After delivering it, and in the process of installing it, with the agent closely watching my every move, I discovered that it didn't quite fit. The agent impatiently berated my efforts. I let her know that I would rebuild the cabinet free of charge or she could hire someone else. She went with the latter. Fine with me. Her hovering was unsettling.

This hiding in the shadows came at a stiff toll to my self-worth, self-esteem and my relationship with the truth. I believed in my ability to accomplish things in the world of construction but had zero confidence in the world seeing me as legitimate, affording me the dignity or the opportunities awarded to the white good-old-boys club. I was just fine living and working under the table or above, not partaking in the education, mentorship, benefits, or higher wages like those who had union jobs or charged going rates. I paid my fair share of taxes. The flexibility and control over my business allowed the freedom to live the life of my dreams. Although, there was an undercurrent of uncertainty as to my legitimacy, I was thriving nonetheless.

My life has been full of love, fun and adventure. Besides the lies, I've been happy with my decisions and the trajectory of my life and work. In time, I came clean to all those I'd deceived over the years. It cleared the slate of any shame I may have held on to, leaving me with the knowledge and pride in my accomplishments. It's taken most of my adult life to live the truth of my being, and believe in my self-worth and abilities, expressing this broadly and in public. I've been blessed with the space, time and opportunities to learn the truth of who I am, for which I'm grateful.



Standing with my hand on top of a WOMEN WORKING orange construction sign, wearing a plaid work shirt, jeans and a tool belt, in a residential neighborhood.



I'm standing with other tradeswomen at Gay Pride, my cap on backward, and work gloves on my belt. One woman is holding a paint roller on a stick and wearing a painter's cap. Two others have on hard hats. One is holding an Oregon Tradeswomen Network sign.

## Chapter 24

### Fun in the neighborhood

Mary and Jean's float house, attached to Bachelor Island, was the location of my near-death experience, in that unfortunate grill search under the float house. It was also a source of pleasure and personal growth. Exploring the nature preserve, its surrounding waters and hanging out at the float house with friends, provided a plethora of activities and good times. Mary said that if I had died there, she and Jean would have sold the float house. That would have been sad on many levels. But because of the voice that came from deep within me while underwater, I and others had many more amazing and heartwarming experiences at the float house, before and after that fateful day. I'm so glad I survived and was able to enjoy this precious playground, for as long as it was available. The ownership of the float house was fortuitous. It was a matter of being at the right place, at the right time.

Mary joined a tour of the Columbia River and Columbia River tributaries, which was led by Portland Audubon and Oregon Ocean Paddling Society (OOPS). The group stopped at a float house along the way, that had been gifted to Audubon, but they had never seen. The building was in disarray. It had been used as a hunter's refuge, then it was taken over by a colony of rats. There was a long ramp that extended from Bachelor Island to the house. While most people would view the house as rat-infested nastiness, Mary saw a gold mine of possibilities. The Audubon rep was talking about selling the float house. Mary asked, "How much?" He said, "\$5,000." Mary went home to talk to Jean about it, then called and made the offer. After some negotiation, it was a done deal!

When Mary and Jean bought the float house, they gave me and others access to the house as well. Lending them assistance in renovations, we made the once rat-infested shelter, a home away from home. There were many work parties

hosted there, making numerous improvements to the place. We took out the bunk beds and added a sliding glass door. In time, more deck was added, even an addition was built for a separate bedroom. Once, we put a refrigerator on a canoe, paddling it to its new home. We tried to do the same with a pallet of deck boards, to replace some of the old rotting ones. The weight of the boards turned the canoe on edge, sending the banded lumber into the river. The good news was that it floated! So instead, I climbed on top of the bundle and paddled the wood to the float house. Mission accomplished!

The float house offered many opportunities for adventure. Suzy, an environmental conservator, moved into the one habitable house on the island. She would soon join us on adventures, as well as bring new opportunities to us. Suzy was a long haired, redheaded firecracker. She had access to a three wheeled all-terrain vehicle which Mary, later, gained access to. It allowed us to traverse the island easily. We worked with Suzy as she performed the regular bird counts and bird research activities to collect data on the water fowl. Bachelor Island was an annual stop in the migration of Canada geese and white swans. One year, we joined Suzy in her data collection effort that turned out to be particularly messy.

As part of her conservation efforts, Suzy used the data on the bird migration patterns on the island to justify the need to protect the island habitat that served the wildlife. One vital aspect of bird data collection was a physical collection of data from the birds themselves. This meant the birds first needed to be safely captured. A cannon that shot a net into the air was brought to the island. The cannon was positioned towards the wide-open field where the geese would gather, feeding on the wheat remnants. When a significant number of geese were on the ground, BOOM!!! The net flew out propelled by the blast and trapped dozens of geese. Volunteers crawled under the net, grabbing the frightened birds, putting them in boxes. The birds were brought to the barn where they were inspected and banded.

Awaiting the birds in the barn, we were outfitted, head-to-toe, in rain gear. One by one, the birds were removed from the boxes. Tabulations of their wing span, weight and sex were recorded. We held onto each bird as the measurements were taken. Tucking their head under their wings made them more docile while enduring the treatment. It became abundantly clear why we were dressed in all the rainwear. When stressed, birds defecate. Our jacket, pants and boots, once bright yellow, were now a sickening mixture of white and green bird doo. Fun ...

Mary and Jean also hosted a bird-sighting/golf tournament on Bachelor Island. Teams were comprised of two people, one golfer and one birding expert.

Scores were tallied according to the number of swings before sinking the ball, minus the number of different bird sightings the team made. An additional challenge was the rough landscape of the course. There was high grass, rocks and ruts. The “cups” consisted of old tires. You needed to chip up to the hole. Jean even made trophies. One for the best team golfer/birder score and one for the best dressed. We had been forewarned of this, so everyone dressed up. I went to a second-hand store and dressed in the tackiest golf garb I could muster. Wearing plaid shorts, a three-quarters sleeve shirt with a fake V-shaped undershirt, a flat cap and white golf shoes, I won first prize!

Mary and Jean’s float house once offered a profound opportunity as a refuge to ground myself. At that time, my shop was in a multi-unit warehouse. My unit was shared with another cabinet maker. Our shops were divided by a wall that didn’t extend to the ceiling. The wall split the only operable window to the outdoors, which forced us to share its access. The cabinet makers sprayed automobile lacquer as a durable finish on their cabinets, without proper containment or ventilation. The lacquer, which was banned for anything other than commercial use, was so toxic that I could hardly breathe when they used it. The fumes lingered in the air for hours afterwards. After numerous angry blowouts with my shop mates over their use of toxic chemicals in our shared space, I didn’t want to work while they were there. Once, while I was getting out of my truck on the street, one of them swerved their car in my direction, nearly running me over, forcing me to flatten myself against my car door. The stress of the situation began manifesting in physical symptoms, as well. The bottoms of my feet became numb. It felt like there was a thick cushion between my feet and the ground. It was unnerving. I knew I needed to get out of the situation.

Escaping the challenging situation at my shop, I took a six-month sabbatical from work. The float house became my retreat. Arriving with my watercolor supplies and my thoughts, it provided the quiet repose I longed for. It helped me regroup, and recognize that even though I “fell into” my career as a self-employed cabinet maker, it suited me more than anything else I could imagine. I left my sabbatical, refreshed and fully committed to resolve the current problems I was having with my shop mates. The new commitment led to a search for a shop I could call my own.

Soon after returning from the float house, another shop, on the opposite side of the three-studio warehouse, opened up. I jumped on it. The new studio was located far enough away to be free of the toxins. Slowly, feeling returned to my feet. In a healthier environment, I regained my passion for the work and renewed

my sense of control over my environment. The search for a shop evolved into looking for land where I could build one.

The joy I received from the time spent at the float house was profound. It brought extraordinary opportunities to play, close enough that I could even go there after work, or on an unexpected weekday off. I'm very grateful that Mary and Jean extended this glorious resource to me, making it available whenever I was interested. Taking advantage of this, it became my "home away from home." It brought me peace and clarity when times were tough, or when I wanted time away, to be alone with my thoughts and enjoy the beautiful scenery. The opportunity to get lost, and sometimes "found," by being in nature, has always been healing to my soul. It has assisted me to center and look within by looking out at nature as it manifests without a thought of why, how or whether it's fair. Nature balances itself. There's a lot to learn from nature on how to be present and accept the cycle of life, however it unfolds.





Off the Columbia River slough, a barn and small building near the ramp to the float house, is seen from Bachelor Island.



Holding a sawzall, and wearing a dust mask, I'm prepared to tear out bunk beds at the float house. Mary and a friend are holding onto the top bunk rail before I cut it loose.

Mary has an excited expression on her face.



I'm dressed in white golf shoes, diamond shaped cardigan socks, plaid shorts, a white three-quarters shirt with a fake V-shaped second shirt, and topped with a white flat cap. I'm at a golfing-birding tournament on Bachelor Island, sitting with Mary and Ben Franklin, laughing.

## Chapter 25

### Epic adventure

Free of romantic entanglements, I fully jumped into new adventures. I went to Mexico with Kate to do some scuba diving. To say their dive regulations were lax is an understatement. I was a certified open water diver, not authorized to dive deeper than 60 feet. One of the dives that was available brought you in contact with hammerhead sharks. Kate and I were all in. Little did we know that would entail diving deeper than 100' below sea level.

The dive boat took hours to reach a desolate location far beyond sight of land. We jumped overboard and began the long journey down. I was startled to see the depth gauge on my regulator continue to drop. The one warning we were given before our descent was that we had nothing to fear from the sharks unless we found ourselves in their midst. I wasn't concerned, because I knew I would keep my distance. That was until the water became so murky, we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces. We continued to descend with our vision completely obscured for what seemed an eternity until it instantly cleared. I peered in all directions and was relieved when I didn't see a single shark in sight. We dropped to a high plateau in the abyss. The dive master demonstrated how we were to position ourselves as we waited. We all looked like lizards with our bodies flat on the ground and our heads raised by pushing up with our arms.

In the distance I saw a swirling cloud coming our way. The closer it came, the more unnerved I became. It was a massive school of hammerhead sharks. They spotted us and began circling overhead. There were a hundred or more hammerheads of all sizes, from babies to giant adults. I tried to be inconspicuous, but I was hyperventilating, sending massive amounts of bubbles towards them. I

was shaking like a leaf from the cold depth and the potential of danger above me. After several passes, they swam away. We ascended. Back in the boat, we returned to shore, exhilarated by the experience.

This up-close encounter with hammerhead sharks left me full of gratefulness that I had experienced such an amazing sight. Yet, I was even more grateful that I had survived drawing the attention of so many curious sharks circling overhead. The next morning, contemplating our next outing, Kate announced we should do it again. I was skeptical, thinking once was plenty, twice might be pushing the odds. Yet, not wanting to be a party-pooper, I agreed. I was shocked when we had the same exact experience. The murky water, the clearing, the swirling cloud and the circling of the one hundred plus hammerhead sharks. Again, I felt lucky to have experienced it and survived. The next morning, surprise-surprise, Kate wanted to do it again. This time, I refused. Kate went solo. To her chagrin, no hammerheads showed up. So, the next morning, we changed up our itinerary. We decided to swim with sea lions.

Swimming in the natural environment of sea lions was the most fun I've ever had scuba diving. We jumped out of the boat and were suddenly surrounded by sea lions. They were so playful. The whole sea lion family, relatives and friends were represented, from tiny babies to monstrous daddies. They would tug on our fins, then do belly rolls over us. I never laughed so hard underwater! It only got scary when they'd tug on our oxygen hoses. I'd bop the culprit on his nose and he'd swim away, no hard feelings. It ended all too soon. As I made my way to the boat, I noticed a boat motor on the ocean floor. Odd. It wasn't until I climbed into the boat that I realized the motor belonged to our boat. Not good ... Without a motor, we hailed another boat and hitched a ride. The end of another awesome adventure.

A kayak trip to Glacier Bay in Alaska was also a dream come true. Mary helped coordinate the trip. We took a BC ferry up the Inside Passage, to Prince Rupert, its northernmost port. This in itself was an adventure. The ferry provided free shower facilities. People set up tents on their upper deck. They also had a covered section with overhead heat lamps, where you could lay out a sleeping bag on plastic reclining chairs. We found this was an easy, comfortable way to go. The views outside were much better and provided our desired experience.

As the ferry weaved its way up the passage, there was so much natural beauty to take in along the way. At Prince Rupert, we transferred to the Alaska Marine Highway ferry system. The ferry stopped at numerous ports. If we chose to briefly disembark, local artisans would meet us at the end of the ramp. We'd look at the

wares, sometimes make purchases, sometimes venturing into town if time allowed. At Sitka Island, we spent a couple days visiting with a friend who had moved there. Back on the ferry, one night the captain broke the silence by alerting us to the appearance of northern lights. It was amazing to witness the swirling colors in the dark sky. Normally, without city lights, the sky was just black and packed with stars. Both skies were extraordinary to this southern California city bred gal.

Juneau was our destination on the ferry leg of the journey. We explored the local sights but were soon off to the greatest adventure of my life. Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve was accessed by using local boating outfitters. We scheduled a boat to bring us, our kayaks and our gear to the heart of Glacier Bay. It was somewhat chilling when the outfitters dropped us off. They drove the boat as close to the remote shoreline as possible. Then we jumped into the shallow water, making our way to dry land. They tossed our gear to us, slid our kayaks off the stern of their boat, and they were gone. We were on our own. We scrambled to get our boats loaded, then we were off to unknown places.

This area was true wilderness. It was a preserve, so all wildlife was strictly protected, though there was a hunting season. Grizzlies abound in the region and there were plenty of signs of bear activity. I was unfamiliar with being around such wildness. It kept us on high alert throughout our trip. The further we paddled into Glacier Bay, the more isolated we became from human contact. We'd hang our food from trees, away from our campsite, in bear-proof boxes. Our cooking location was also a distance from where we slept. It was as much a challenge as it was exhilarating.

As we ventured deeper into the glacial waters, we'd have our first sightings of icebergs. We gave them a wide berth, knowing they could spontaneously flip upside-down, sending large waves in all directions, enough to turn over our small boats. Occasionally, seals would be on them as they floated by. It was surreal. We also paddled a significant distance from the glaciers, towering high above us at the shoreline. If the ice were to "calf" by breaking off into the sea, the result would be catastrophic if we had paddled too close. In Juneau, prior to kayaking in Glacier Bay, we had been forewarned of both the ice dangers and threats from bears, and the appropriate action to imminent danger. It was a good thing. We took all the warnings to heart.

At night we were lulled off to sleep by the howling wolves. During the day, we experienced many sightings of eagles and whales. At first, we were excited over each eagle sighting, so we'd shout out and point each time we spotted one in a tree. With time, we realized they were everywhere and announcements ceased.

The whale sightings, however, remained extraordinary, each time. Once, while paddling, one woman announced that she needed to have a “bathroom break.” This meant we needed to go ashore, even though we’d barely gotten underway. The rest of us were slightly annoyed but obliged. Soon after stepping out of our boats, we heard a whale spouting. We sprinted around two sides of a large rock outcropping to the water’s edge. Emerging from the water, right where we stood, was a large humpback whale, with its mouth open wide. I remember looking into the large void of its mouth, staring at its pink tongue and momentarily feeling out-of-balance, like I might fall in. As soon as it appeared, it slid back underwater, leaving us all slack-jawed, amazed at what we’d just seen. Another time as we paddled, we witnessed close up, a whale pectoral fin slapping the water over and over again. This loud, raucous, activity is a way whales communicate with one another. Whale “spy-hopping” was another common activity we’d witness. Spy-hopping lets the animals get a better view of activity near the water’s surface. We were a curiosity to them, as much as they were to us. This was reminiscent of my time battling the storm, while circumventing Salt Spring Island and being blocked by a spy-hopping whale. It was all awe inspiring.

One incredibly exhilarating and frightening exhibit of whales in action happened at a renowned feeding ground. We’d been told it was worth visiting if we wanted to witness lively whale behavior. We were staying close to shore, out of close proximity to where most of the action was happening. We could clearly see the turbulent water where the whales were feeding. Suddenly, my kayak and the water swiftly rose. In between the tight space between myself and the shoreline, a whale appeared with its mouth open wide, taking in krill and whatever else was in its path. We were all pounding our hands on our kayaks, hoping to alert the whale of our presence, knowing it would be near-impossible to escape it when it turned. Somehow, it was able to spin around and avoid being grounded on shore without tipping any of us over. Whew!!! I don’t know how it pulled this off. It took a while for my heart to stop racing.

These types of extreme adventures were the apex of what I longed for in life. The beauty and heart-stopping scenes of nature at play brought me incomparable joy. My being was bursting with the gratitude for the good fortune to take part in the awesome display of nature and the treasure of sharing it with loving friends.



On a ferry, traveling through the Inside Passage to Alaska. There's a pitched tent and people using sleeping bags on plastic reclining chairs to sleep and do daytime reading, complete with overhead heat-lamps for warmth.



The boat is leaving after dropping us off with our gear and kayaks on a remote shore in Glacier Bay. It's sunrise with overcast skies.



Kendal and Beth in a two-cockpit kayak, paddling by a glacier in Glacier Bay, Alaska.



Whale fin slapping the water, as seen by the splash, in Glacier Bay, Alaska.



## Chapter 26

### Finding my voice

My tools were precious to me. They not only served the purpose of providing a livelihood, they allowed me to turn my imagination into works of art. Through woodworking, I could turn lumber into practical and artistic creations. Protective of my tools, I kept them in pristine condition and well organized. I was happy with the quality tools I'd collected in my shop. Before moving to the new shop space, one more thing happened which convinced me that I possessed a powerful voice in protecting what was mine.

Hidden in the back corner of my shop, I was out of sight, when someone entered and grabbed my chop saw and cordless drill. Hearing a noise, I turned to see a burly, heavily bearded man walking out the door with my tools. Shouting at him to stop, he dropped the tools and kept walking out of the shop and down the hall. Running after him, I jumped on his back and shouted, "You're not going anywhere!" I also yelled to my shop mates for help in restraining him. The intruder was huge and all he needed to do was shrug his shoulders and it sent me flying against the wall. Two more times I jumped on his back to unsuccessfully restrain him before one of my shop mates emerged.

After a quick explanation to my shop mate on the attempted theft of my tools, he took on my actions to ensure the guy was accountable. Someone had previously stolen tools from the studio I was soon to move into and my suspicion was that this could be the same guy. Another shop mate joined forces with us, and I stepped back and let them follow the guy down the street. As they were leaving one told me, "Call 911." Although, hesitant to call the police in most situations, due to the way they compounded transgressions, I placed the call. The police

found the potential thief and the trailing shop mates on the street as they were doing a slow walking pursuit around the neighborhood. We discovered that this person was living with a cognitive disability and no charges were placed.

This altercation left me with the recognition of the strong woman that I am. That I had a clear, resounding voice when it came to injustice regarding slights against me personally. I've known myself to be a defender of others being discriminated against but had been quick to discount, ignore or minimize any defilement to myself. From that moment on, I knew that I was capable of defending myself at the instant a violation occurred. It gave me confidence and a warm feeling going forward that I would not cower in the face of adversity. This felt more monumental than my many accomplishments. Embodying the power of my voice and my actions, I knew I could rely on them in the future, to protect myself and whatever I held dear. I'd carry this important factor about myself into all situations.

The quarrel with my shop mates over spraying toxic chemicals, inspired me to begin looking for a shop of my own. I looked for a small shop space that I could afford to buy. Since these were few and far between, I started looking at plots of land where I could build a shop. Inspired by living at the float house, I began looking at various opportunities near water. This search went from Portland to Astoria. I even considered a plot in Olympia, Washington, a state I swore I'd never live in! But Olympia was different. It was a fishing port, and a hip college town. I felt I could fit in there. After one potential lot fell through, it turned out this wasn't to be.

My search ended shortly after this, when I found exactly what I was looking for these many years. An affordable waterfront property on the Whitaker slough, off the Columbia River, it met all my desires, so I bought it. My excitement was unparalleled. Imaging all that I could do here, and the proximity to nature, was a dream come true. Letting my creative juices flow, I began designing my new shop and home. I couldn't have been more elated or anticipatory of what was to come.



My waterfront property with a large weeping willow and other shrubbery overlooking the Whitaker slough. Thick trees and undergrowth are seen across the water.



## **PART THREE**

### **Ingenious Ways to Interdependent Adventure**



## Chapter 27

### MS

Though I preferred the single life, during the 90's, I was pursued by a string of women, resulting in a few non-committed, yet monogamous, relationships. Finding it difficult to resist these solicitations, it certainly made the nights less lonely. One was with Jasmine. Out of the blue, after my relationship with Mitzi ended, she called me and asked if I wanted to come to a party she was having at her house. I didn't know her, but I knew her two roommates. One of them was the woman Mitzi had been dating before we got together. When our paths would occasionally cross, her accusatory glares told me she didn't approve of me being with her ex. In my gut, I knew she wouldn't be too pleased if I was at her house. I told Jasmine, "Sure, I'll be there." What's the worst that could happen, I thought. Maybe it will break the ice now that I was no longer with Mitzi.

It was a house warming party. Since it was less than a mile from my house, I decided to walk. My gift for the household was a wheelbarrow filled with logs for their fireplace. An appropriate gift for a house warming, I thought. Unfortunately, their house was at the top of a steep hill. I arrived at their doorstep sweaty but ready for whatever unfolded. Mitzi's ex came to the door after I knocked. She did not open the door. Instead, she pulled back the curtain of the glass storm door and stared at me, unsmiling. I smiled sheepishly. Finally, Jasmine broke the spell, opening the door and welcoming me to their house. It was then that I saw the slightest grin cross the face of her housemate. She'd made her point. All was not copacetic between us.

Jasmine brought me food, but I didn't interact much with her. It wasn't until I was about to leave that she stopped me at the door. "Why don't you stay? It's late

and you could sleep here and leave in the morning.” I said, “If it’s okay with you and your housemates, that would be nice.” Jasmine said, “I know it will be fine. Besides, their room is on the third floor. You can sleep in my room on the second floor.” “Okay,” I said. Not completely convinced that they’d be pleased, but I was tired and it would be nice not to hoof it home in the dark.

Jasmine led me to her room. It had a feminine, well-kept, flair to it. Everything was pleasing to look at, including Jasmine. Stripping down to my t-shirt and underwear in preparation for going to bed, I saw that Jasmine was similarly dressed as we both slipped into opposite sides of her bed. Trying to respect her, I hugged the edge of the bed, leaving her plenty of space. It quickly became apparent that she didn’t need that kind of space. Moving closer to me, I could hear and feel her breath on my skin. My breathing tightened and my heart was beating fast, but I kept my back to her. Then she spoke, “Are you okay?” I responded, barely able to voice the words, “I’m having trouble breathing.” Turning to face her, she embraced me, pressing her lips against mine. Needless to say, I didn’t get much sleep that night.

Jean once wrote a poem about Jasmine. One line read, “Even the chairs would smile when Jasmine sat on them ...” Yes, she was tantalizingly beautiful. Her Hawaiian/Polynesian features were attractive, but what attracted me more was her choice of activities, outrigger canoe racing! I joined her in this. It was the most challenging and thrilling sport I’d ever engaged in. I was hooked from the first time I tried it.

Outrigger canoe racing was a full body sport, demanding the ultimate level of physical strength and endurance. We would have early morning or evening practices 3 or 4 days per week. On the other days, I would run or work out in the gym. I could bench press 145 lbs., 20 lbs. more than my body weight at the time. It was a display of significant strength. My daily rigorous exercise routine, coupled with the physical work as a builder, stretched my body to its limits. I wondered what would be my breaking point, and yet I pushed on. Because of my profession as a builder, I already had “Popeye” sized forearms. With the addition of racing outriggers, my arms bulged and my six pack became more pronounced. At the age of 40, my body was at its apex.

It was in February 1998 when I recognized that something was wrong. While out in the outrigger canoe, I dropped my paddle mid-stroke. I would trip walking along a flat city sidewalk. This uncharacteristic clumsiness would happen no matter how hard I tried to control my actions. Dumbfounded, I researched possible symptoms and conditions that could cause my missteps. Two most likely



suspects were a brain tumor or multiple sclerosis. I didn't delve deep into the "what if's" of either possibility. I'd deal with it once I knew for certain what the cause was. It was time to get a professional diagnosis.

Since I was on my own, my strong body and general health gave me a false sense of security, so I never felt the need to have health insurance. While deciding who to see for a diagnosis, I decided to apply for the Oregon Health Plan (OHP). The State of Oregon offered this insurance for people with low incomes. I fit the profile. People who had applied for the OHP told me, most applicants were denied initially. Deciding not to wait until I was approved, I determined that a neurologist was who I needed to speak with and made the call. I'd pay out of pocket as long as I could to get a diagnosis. When the neurologist's office answered, I asked, "When is the soonest I can see someone?" "Two months." "Nothing sooner? Perhaps I can be on a cancellation list?" Their definitive answer, "Nope."

In the meantime, I continued to work, but it was getting more difficult. At my first attempt to hire others to assist me, I discovered new symptoms. It was a hot summer day, and the small crew gathered at the job site where we were to build a large residential deck. After building decks for over two decades, I couldn't remember the first thing we needed to do. I was super-hot, so I distracted the crew and went off to cool down. To my relief, once I regulated my temperature, my mind reengaged and I was able to direct the building process. Whatever was happening, it was affecting my body, and *my mind!* This freaked me out. With my body, I could find ways to adapt things so I could continue my adventurous lifestyle. With the loss of my cognitive faculties, I'd be at a definite disadvantage in this world ... a frightening thought.

The transition from physical prowess to progressive disability was not always graceful or smooth. Jasmine was the first to notice my mental confusion. The last time we were together, we were driven by her roommates to a Tracy Chapman concert. While at the concert, Jasmine and I were engaged in a conversation. In the middle of expressing a thought, I lost track of what we were talking about. This had happened when I was alone, but never with someone else prior to my diagnosis. It startled me and I tried to bluff my way out of the discussion by saying whatever I thought might cover my brain malfunction. It didn't work.

One of my greatest fears came true. Not wanting to be found out as being less mentally astute as others, I rarely exposed myself to situations where I'd be subject to public scrutiny. After my gaffe, Jasmine looked at me with complete shock and disgust, turned and quickly walked away, disappearing in the crowded arena. Her

shock was matched by my own. I was left with feelings of fear at the realization that I had experienced a mental breakdown that had no explanation. It scared me to death. My father was bipolar. I'd read that it could be hereditary. Could I be experiencing the onset of this condition? I had certainly inherited my mother's fear of anyone finding out that I might be deficient in some way. Now, I had been exposed, and by Jasmine's reaction, I seemed to have struck a chord of fear with her as well, literally scaring her off.

After Jasmine took off, I searched in vain through the sea of faces for the last place Jasmine's roommates were seated. They were nowhere in sight. When the concert was over, I went to where they had parked the car. They were inside, so I let myself in and we drove in silence the whole way home. As Jasmine would not return my calls, the next time I saw her was at her house when we had an outrigger canoe team meeting. Jasmine was the host and spent the majority of the time in the kitchen preparing snacks, or so I was told. One of our team members spread out some pictures for all to see, directly in front of me. She expressed her delight that she was now in a relationship with Jasmine and these were some of shots taken on their exploits together. I was shocked. Jasmine and I were not in a committed relationship, but we had been seeing each other, solely, for over two years. You'd think that alone deserved at least an email to me. But without warning, I knew without a doubt, she had moved on—all based on fear of something neither of us could explain.

My appointment with the neurologist finally arrived on April 1st and I still didn't have insurance. In the neurologist's office, one of the first things he asked was, "Do you have any thoughts as to the cause of your symptoms?" "I believe it's either a brain tumor or MS," I replied matter-of-factly. He agreed. To eliminate the brain tumor theory, he scheduled me for an MRI. It came out clear. He then scheduled me for a spinal tap. They would draw fluid from my spinal canal and if it showed signs of inflammation, that would lead to the diagnosis of MS. I was told to bring a friend the day of the spinal tap. I brought Gale, who waited with me as I lay in recovery after the procedure. The doctor came in and confirmed what I had anticipated. The diagnosis was Multiple Sclerosis.

Being a practical person, I looked at Gale and shrugged, knowing full well that I'd make the best of the situation once I figured out what the hell it meant. Even with the diagnosis, nothing was definitive. Through my research, I discovered that MS manifests through lesions on the spinal cord. As with a fractured spine and severed spinal cord, it can cause permanent damage, possibly paralysis from where it's located down the body. I learned that MS was a potpourri of odd and

random symptoms that vary from person to person. I could have mild symptoms or a rapid onslaught of symptoms that could affect my ability to do my job and live independently in a matter of a few years. It may have been April fool's day, but it was no joke. The good news was, when I returned home, I learned I had been approved for medical insurance and all my appointments and procedures were retroactively covered. Whew!

Mary and Jean had moved from Portland by this time. They sold their float house to a couple who then contacted me. They asked me what I knew about the condition of the float house and, in my opinion, what were the primary improvements they would need to address to keep it intact and floating. I was happy to provide any assistance to them. They also worked to establish a relationship with the Ridgefield Fish and Wildlife Refuge staff, so that the float house could remain in their possession. As I worked with them, they encouraged me to visit the float house frequently and to continue to consider it my place of refuge. They even went so far as to train me on the use of their motorboat, moored near the refuge, to make my travel easier between the mainland and the island. As I didn't know them well, this was quite a generous offer, yet one I didn't feel comfortable taking them up on often. One of the exceptions was borrowing their boat so it could serve as a chase boat for my outrigger canoe racing team.

No longer being able to rely on my strong body and resilience to take part in practice or races with the outrigger canoe team, I was still apprised of their racing schedule and supported them when I could. Once, they needed an accompanying boat to trail them in a race to provide assistance if needed. I volunteered to provide the boat and captain that boat in the race. I asked the float house owners if I could use their boat for the event and they whole-heartedly agreed. One of them even drove me and the trailered boat to a boat and trailer parking lot, close to the launch for the upcoming race that would occur early the next morning. We parked and unhitched the trailer. We hadn't thought to bring a lock for the trailer, but since it was late and I'd return before dawn the next morning to put it in the water, we didn't think it would be a problem. Boy, were we wrong.

Arriving before dawn, I looked at the space where we'd parked the trailer and boat. It was empty! I couldn't believe what I was seeing, rather, what I wasn't seeing. Calling the boat owners, I asked, "Did you retrieve your boat, overnight?" That was a negative. Placing a call to the police, I then followed that up by letting the outrigger team captain know that I wouldn't be providing boat support for the race. I felt bad that I was in part responsible for the loss of their boat. I couldn't buy them a new one, so I offered my services for anything they might find of

value. They said that they'd wanted a large wraparound deck with stairs leading from their driveway, two floors down. Jumping at the chance to pay them back in trade, I eagerly agreed.

The boat owners and I formed an agreement that they would buy all the materials for the deck and I would put in all the labor. The first day, the outrigger team, with the exception of Jasmine, pitched in to help me build the deck. From that day on, I completed the deck alone. They were pleased with the results. Soon thereafter, they bought another used motorboat, better than the previous one which by then we knew for certain was stolen. The trailer was found across the border, in Washington, with what remained of the shell of the boat, stripped of anything valuable/sellable. Lesson learned ... Do not trust that anything valuable is safe when left to chance in the public eye. Got it. I began locking my doors; a practice I defiantly ignored prior to this incident. I had wanted to live my life believing in my safety and the goodwill of others to respect my space. This belief had effectively been shattered.

After diagnosis, and facing an increase of symptoms, I calculated that I had about six months of work scheduled with my cabinetry/woodworking business. My plan was to complete my commitments and plot an alternative career path in case things progressed rapidly. Also on my mind: How do I proceed with my recent purchase of property? Should I continue to build a shop/home, or sell it and buy something more urban? Would I be able to continue working with my hands? Without the luxury to wait and know definitively, I'd have to make a shot in the dark, now. I didn't have the financial resources to invest with impunity.

My property, along the edge of the Whitaker Slough in North Portland, was a rarity. Having looked long and hard to find something I could afford, as well as close to water, I felt this piece was a godsend. Knowing this added extra weight to my desire to keep it. Since it was waterfront property, it was on the edge of an environmentally protected zone. This involved conducting a multitude of additional tests and reviews to ensure it was safe to build.

After much litigation and paperwork, I was ready to build on my property. A friend of mine had recently drawn up building plans and they had been approved by the city. Now, I had a decision to make. Do I follow through on my dream, or do I take the safe route, sell the property and buy something that could be quickly modified for accessibility. Being a risk taker, I believed in my ability to overcome the odds, and yet this disease was already challenging me physically. Gripped with uncertainty as to what was my best path forward, I threw a lifeline out to a friend.

To assist me in the decision of selling my property, I talked to the one

person who knew me better than anyone else, my ex-partner, Mitzi. I told her my dilemma. She knew how capable I was, but instead of urging me to do the impossible, as she had in the past, she broke down in tears. “Georgena,” she said, “I am so afraid for you. I think by building this house, you will destroy yourself.” Her words gave me pause. Did I need to follow a different playbook with this diagnosis? I’d lived my life defying what was deemed too difficult for someone of my experience (or gender). At the age of 41, feeling like I was at the prime of my life, physically and in my career, do I stop pushing forward? It was as if I was back in that storm so many years ago, paddling hard for my life, when something formidable (the spy-hopping whale) blocked my vision, I had to let go and trust in whatever the future might hold. With my rate of progression and degree of disability in question, I decided to take the “reasonable” path of action. That was one of the most difficult decisions in my life. It felt like I was turning my back on my spirit. Time would tell whether I’d made the right choice.

As I awaited a buyer for my property, I began to look for another house to buy in town. The convenience of nearby stores and services was on my mind. I was playing it by ear as to when to move on from my career. Six months of work turned into nearly a year. After that, Gale hired me to assist in her fledgling business. Ironically, she was building modular access ramps. She taught me how to weld, install and do other shop related tasks. Once I found a place to live, I sold all my shop equipment. Previously, I had been living in my shop, illegally, saving my money to build the house. My new home was in a nice residential neighborhood, between two bus lines and walking distance to a store and bank. The house itself was one level. I figured it would be easy to make fully accessible, if need be. I was ready for whatever would come my way.

Even with Gale’s help, my neurological symptoms were affecting my job performance. I went to Vocational Rehabilitation to get some ideas on what work I could do given my uncertain future. It was suggested I apply at Independent Living Resources (ILR), a nonprofit agency that provided services to people with disabilities by people with disabilities. I landed a job as their assistant Accessibility Specialist. I was able to expand my skills in building design to making buildings more accessible. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to assist others in making their businesses and homes more universally accessible. The fact that my father was denied access to establishments because of their lack of accessibility fueled my commitment to the work. It made it personal. My work at ILR provided a new platform, vocabulary and perspective to empower others as well as myself.

Working at ILR, I found joy and fulfillment in providing the services of ADA

site assessments and access to homes and facilities. Outside of the work I did with ILR, I disappeared from society. All of the friends who shared in activities I used to hold dear, were reminders that those activities were no longer available to me. I was embarrassed and didn't want anyone to see me struggle. In my isolation, I languished in my new life. Lacking the drive to do anything but work, I'd expend enough energy to sustain my physical needs and sleep. Having lived my life as a generous person, providing help and never needing assistance, in this spirit, I let a woman live in my insulated garage free of rent with her two large dogs. She was underemployed and in school. It felt right and satisfying. This also meant I could no longer hide. I had a witness. The result of exposure was that I could no longer ignore my circumstances. This led to my full acceptance of my condition. My self-image did improve. I began stepping out from my safe place, and reengaging with what brought me pleasure. Of course, it meant returning to nature.

Independent Living Resources, and my work as an Accessibility Specialist, connected me with colleagues and consumers with disabilities. It was an educational resource that I probably wouldn't have reached out to because of my pride and denial, but as a newbie to the disability community, it was pure gold. It was the salve I needed to heal my damaged self-image. Not only did I learn how to meet people with the respect that they deserved, it was also a safe place to work with a rapidly progressing condition. Three years after my diagnosis, I relied on a cane to walk. I could still ride my bike, which I did, to work and back home every day for the first two years at ILR. The bike acted as my cane when I wasn't on it. This ended the day that I could no longer take my foot off the pedal fast enough when I braked at a stop light. I was like Arte Johnson on *Laugh-in* falling over on his tricycle. I stopped, hung there precariously for a moment then fell over on my side. People stared in disbelief or concern, but I just waved them on with a smile, while in my mind I was feeling defeated and ridiculous.

During my third year working at ILR, I was able to procure a powerchair from the local Rotary Club. Not needing to use it full time, having a powerchair made long walks possible, like to the neighborhood grocery store or bank. Insurance wouldn't kick in for a wheelchair unless you needed it inside your home. Instinctively, I knew if I waited until then, I would not have it when I needed it to maintain work. Soon afterward, I bought an extremely reasonably priced wheelchair accessible van. The gentleman I bought it from had just lost his wife who used a wheelchair. I was extremely grateful and brought him a bottle of champagne to celebrate with him when I picked it up. He said he'd had several calls between the time I told him I wanted it and when I arrived at his house.

Though he was offered more money, he was true to his word, and we popped the cork of the champagne before I drove off. Lucky me!

Vividly etched in my mind is the day that I drove the van with my powerchair to work. Attempting to hide in my office, one staff member who used a manual wheelchair poked her head in and commented, “What a nice-looking chair you have.” I didn’t turn around, and I may or may not have responded. It wasn’t a graceful transition. I was devastated and embarrassed that my life had come to this. I felt that it drew a line in the sand between who I was and what I may be capable of achieving. Fortunately, I was too poor not to work and working meant that I had to face my fears and changing sense of self without hiding. It was a blessing in the long run.

ILR gave me an opportunity and the support to pursue related side issues around accessibility. I was now using the powerchair for every aspect of life: work, personal affairs and recreation. It helped me keep up with the fast pace of my life. I recognized accessibility issues were getting in the way of finding new ways and places to recreate. I was determined to use my new position to shed light on one issue I found particularly annoying. My frustration at not having access to the same recreational pursuits I loved, spearheaded an effort that gave back to the community in an unimaginable way. It wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t ventured out of my comfort zone.

With the passage of time, the meaning of my acronym “MS” changed from *Multiple Sclerosis* to *Moving Spirit*. These are words I co-opted from an acquaintance who also had MS. She chose to not let MS diminish her, instead she focused on the power it provided to continue achieving great things. It took a little while, but the power-filled truth behind “Moving Spirit” became recognizable in my own life. As time would reveal, the quality of my life did improve as a result MS, moving me, as well as my family and friends, in extraordinary and positive directions.



At outrigger canoe practice on glassy, clam water on the Willamette River, I'm in the first seat, setting the pace.



Sarah and I, looking across the Whitaker slough from the edge of my property, after my recent MS diagnosis. I'm holding Sarah with my hip and arm as I point out across the slough.





Workers are troweling the concrete ramp to make my new home accessible.

## Chapter 28

### My life's purpose

Speaking with a kahuna from Hawaii, I asked her of my life purpose. She laughed and said, “Your life purpose is to play and have fun.” This rang true to me. For as long as I can remember, I’ve chosen a lifestyle that would allow me the greatest opportunities to play and explore the unknown.

Working within the limits of my full-time job and regular hours, I centered my explorations closer to home. I had yet to explore all of the wonderful hiking opportunities in this region. The Columbia River Gorge was in my backyard. I had hiked a little there before I used a powerchair, but I was completely unaware of what I could or could not do now, on those same trails. When I explored someplace new, I learned to bring along an alternative plan. Time and again I would arrive at a park site only to find I was thwarted in making it far on the trail for one reason or another. If I traveled a great distance, it doubled my annoyance. I was determined to do something about it.

In search of an adventure in the Columbia River Gorge, hiking with a powerchair demanded I bring all my creativity and adventurous friends together to figure out how to do it. The Gorge was less than an hour’s drive east from Portland. Here, you could climb from sea level, up steep trails that provided spectacular views of the Columbia River. The trails took you close to numerous waterfalls. I felt blessed to live so close to the incredible natural environment. After my disability required the use of a powerchair to hike, I felt cursed to be so tantalizingly close, and yet so far from being able to enjoy it.

It was 2003, when I asked my friends Sharon, Zekra, Kendal and Erin if they’d assist me in finding a trail in the Gorge where I could have an expansive view of the Columbia River and the gorge, as well as a close encounter with a

waterfall. First, I looked online to find the information I'd need to hike with a powerchair. All I found were pretty pictures, descriptions enticing me to go and a detailed history of the area. This told me nothing of what I needed to know. What I'd hoped for were pictures of the trail itself—ones showing the typical to most difficult stretches of trail. This would assist me in knowing whether I could, or couldn't, use the trail. My questions that I longed to have answers to included: "Would I be able to park my van and deploy the ramp to exit? What is the maximum grade, cross-slope and height of tread obstacles?"

The website descriptions of the trail weren't helpful, either. Other than the occasional mention of steepness, nothing spoke to someone with a mobility device. My powerchair could manage steep grades. What I couldn't do was a severe cross-slope or obstacles over 2" in height. "What about the trail width?" My chair width is 26", pretty narrow as wheelchairs go. But any tread width less than 25" is definitely a showstopper. Not a single trail shot or description answered any one of my questions.

After reviewing the US Forest Service website, and trail guide websites on the Columbia River Gorge, I turned my focus to people who might know. Calling the agencies and visitors centers, again, I came up lacking. No one knew the answers to my questions. Next, I asked everyone I knew what Gorge trails they'd recommend that might be usable, given the capabilities of my powerchair and my adventurous spirit. My co-conspirators and I left with three possibilities in mind.

The team I assembled were determined to find a backcountry trail where I could take in the natural beauty and majesty I'd experienced before, in the Gorge. The first trail we embarked on was an utter disappointment. There was no parking lot, only roadside parking, where I could not deploy my ramp. The next wasn't much better. There *was* an accessible parking space in the small angled parking lot. From there, I found the trailhead of the rough, natural surface of the trail. Hiking nearly 100 yards up the steep, narrow and rocky trail, I encountered an insurmountable road block. Crossing the trail width were rocks, embedded in the trail, that couldn't be moved or traversed. It forced me to retreat down the trail, backwards, since there wasn't enough trail width to turn around. One of my team steered me in the right direction by acting as a traffic controller on an airline tarmac. Facing me, they'd look over and around the powerchair at the trail I was backing down. Trusting them for my safe travels, I followed their hand gestures, turning left, then right, until I was back on flat, wide and stable surface. From there, I could turn and determine the best way back to my van. On to the last trail.

The approach to the final trail looked promising. First, there was a large

parking lot with many accessible parking spaces, connected by a paved access route to the base of Wahkeena Falls. The falls were magnificent. Cascading down from far above, I could see a bridge nestled close to the waterfall three-quarters of the way up the falls. I was excited for the possibility to make it to that bridge. We continued down the paved access route that soon became a rocky natural surface trail. One online resource described the Wahkeena Falls Loop Trail as a beautiful experience featuring two spectacular waterfalls, Wahkeena Falls and Oregon's largest waterfall, Multnomah Falls. It sounded appealing, like precisely what I was looking for. It also said it was very popular and heavily trafficked. On the day of our hike, we didn't encounter a single hiker once we started up the trail. Though the trail was steep, narrow and rocky for the most part, I didn't come across a single obstacle I couldn't overcome. However, I did face a few that proved challenging. There was a large rock narrowing the trail less than the width of my powerchair. I had to bank my chair off the high side of canyon wall. Soon after, the surface of the trail was compromised by a patch of loose sand, where my tires spun down to my axles, requiring my posse to push me out. We were determined to make it to our desired destination.

At long-last, I made it within view of the bridge and the falls. Unfortunately, the last 50' of trail was extremely rocky and narrow, with a steep cross-slope toward the deadly drop-off. With one of my friends hanging on the back of my powerchair, as ballast, I inched my way toward the bridge. Finally, I reached the threshold of the wide flat, concrete bridge. I went to the edge of the bridge, close to the waterfall, and could feel its powerful surge, and was hit by its spray as it plummeted to the pool, far below. This feeling of the spray from the waterfall on my face, surrounded by close friends, and with the broad expanse of the canyon and Columbia River below, was what I'd dreamt of achieving. It filled me with joy and satisfaction. We'd accomplished what I knew in my heart was possible. Now I wanted more.

After returning from the hike, I felt exhilarated, yet doubly frustrated by the fact that I was denied the information to know about more fabulous trails like the Wahkeena Falls Trail. I was determined to find out why this was lacking and who had the information I needed about other trails that I might be able to use. When I was back at ILR, I told my co-worker about my experience and my wish to find more backcountry trails. She gave me the number for an architect and accessibility specialist with the US Forest Service (USFS), who used a manual wheelchair. I called and he agreed to meet with me.

The US Forest Service office was very secure. I wasn't allowed entry unless

someone inside vouched for and escorted me to their office. Chuck came down to meet me and I followed him as he sped down the halls, navigating turns by grabbing the corner and quickly swiveling into the next direction. I liked this guy! Once situated, I asked Chuck, “Are you aware of other trails with the Forest Service, in and outside the Gorge, that I might be able to use with my powerchair, similar to the Wahkeena Falls Trail?” “Yes, but I won’t give you the names.” Stunned by his answer, I asked, “Why?” He replied, “If I insinuated that a backcountry trail might be usable, and you got hurt on it, the USFS would be held liable!” Okay, that made sense. I asked, “Why isn’t more information put on trail websites, that I could use to make an educated guess about whether I’d like to take my chances to attempt hiking a trail?” He said that trail agencies don’t know what people with a broad range of disabilities need to know, before going to a trail site. Then I asked him one final question, “Would you be willing to sit down with a panel of experts to figure out how to do this?” “Yes,” was his reply.

Leaving Chuck’s office that day, I felt hopeful. Though I didn’t get the answer I’d come for, with this man’s assistance (and others that I was determined to find), I felt my desire to discover more natural surface trails that I could use with my powerchair might be attainable. Time to reach out to other trail agency representatives, to find those who might be similarly inclined to create a solution for this troubling oversight. The lack of providing equitable recreation opportunities for people with disabilities, felt typical of how people with disabilities are regularly overlooked in accessing what others may take for granted. Before using a powerchair, I was guilty of this. Outdoor recreation was one area of activity that I was particularly passionate about. Energized by Chuck’s support in finding a solution, I slipped a parting gift he’d given me into my bag—the business card of someone with Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. Richard, the name on the card, would be my next contact.

As part of my job at Independent Living Resources, I wrote and procured a 6-month grant, to bring together federal, state and city park agency representatives to discuss to discuss how to create the desired outcomes on trail websites for people with disabilities. We generated surveys and forums to gather information from people with a broad range of disabilities on what outdoor recreation activities they were most interested in. This would determine what element of outdoor recreation we’d focus on, first. Like the general population of recreation enthusiasts, hiking was the number one preferred activity of those we surveyed. “That’s cool,” I thought, “It’s where my focus is as well.” After the survey, we conducted a small forum of people living with a cross-section of disabilities to

discuss more of the finer details in regards to the information they most wanted before embarking on a trail. At the conclusion, we knew more about the problem, but we were no closer to a solution.

With promises to continue the discussion and our quest, I returned to my regular work at ILR. I was excited that these experts were committed to find a solution to this inequality for people with disabilities. This effort was central to fulfilling my dreams and ambitions to find new places to recreate. I had the backing of the director of ILR. She had just hired a grant writer and I was told that my project would be one of many he would pursue. I would ask about it from time to time and was always reassured its time would come. It never did. Instead, the director was let go by the board of directors and the grant writer became the interim director. All grant writing was put on hold and my offer to write the grant myself was denied.

In early May 2003, my job changed at ILR from Accessibility Specialist to Independent Living Specialist. I was given a caseload for individual counseling. It was good work and a worthy cause, but my heart wasn't in it. Retaining my composure throughout the stormy atmosphere at ILR, I did what I could to assist in the office director transition. Without any intention on my part, I was thrust into the role of liaison between the board, staff, and the newly elected permanent director ... the grant writer who everyone blamed for prompting the dismissal of the previous beloved director. Under a lot of stress, it started to manifest in new symptoms. Prepared for possible physical changes, it was the new mental changes that, as before, were much more disturbing. Having trouble focusing, retaining information and expressing myself logically, I gave myself to the end of the year to leave my position at ILR.

After ILR, the lack of information on trail agencies websites for people with mobility disabilities still bothered me. I'd bought the name, *Access Recreation*, as a placeholder for a time when I might resurrect the project. I'd call Chuck, Richard, and maybe more trail agency representatives to ask them the same questions that I'd previously asked Chuck: "Do you have parks and trails that might be usable by people with disabilities but don't know how to promote them? Are you interested in joining with others to figure out how to provide information on these trails so there's not added liability for your agency?" Then, I'd add one more question. "Who else would you suggest to join us?"

Locked and ready for the future, I turned my attention toward the present. Without the income from ILR, I was dependent on covering expenses by way of my monthly Social Security Disability Insurance. The nominal amount I

received, barely covered the cost of my mortgage, food and utilities. In order to purchase any other necessities, I received assistance from the generous support of my sisters. Reviving the project would have to wait until I was stable, emotionally and financially. First things, first.



A large rock partially obstructing the trail on the Wahkeena Falls Trail with Zekra peering over my shoulder. We have looks of concern on our faces as to whether my powerchair will be able to pass.



In front of the Wahkeena Falls, on a cement bridge near the falls, with my friends who have camera and surveying equipment.



## Chapter 29

### Healed with a little help from my friends

I knew I could heal myself. From my diagnosis of MS in 1998 to 2000, I noticed physical changes that anyone, outside of my closest friends and family, might not have recognized as different from my usual ability. Though it was obvious to me that my physical strength was diminishing, I carried on doing all that I could, to the best of my abilities. Research for possible cures for MS became a regular part of each day. From afar, Kate would be doing research on how to reduce the symptoms of MS and funnel her findings my way. She went further, by questioning whether it was truly MS that manifested my symptoms.

Researching alternative therapies to enhance my chances to heal, I ran across a book called *The Multiple Sclerosis Diet Book: A Low-Fat Diet for the Treatment of M.S.*, by Roy Laver Swank and Barbara Brewer Dugan. This book described a diet and the clinical tests that have proven its effectiveness at “curing” MS. It’s a low-saturated fat diet, extremely restrictive on everything but fruit and vegetables. The diet did away with any dairy with over 1% fat, egg yolks, red meat. Only white meat skinless poultry and white fish were allowed. Whole wheat bread, rice and pasta were encouraged, but no other processed foods. Challenging at first, following the diet became my “normal” as time went on.

For 10 years, I was on the “Swank diet,” much to the chagrin of my family and friends. Due to its dietary restrictions, I was no fun to share home cooked meals with or go to the relatively few restaurants serving what I could eat. Diligently following the prescribed diet, I believed in its curative powers, that is until I met Dr. Swank. He agreed to examine me, even though he’d retired. He told me, “Many people who manifest MS symptoms are cured by following this diet.

This is because they don't really have 'true MS.'" After examination, he said, "You definitely have MS. The diet, though wholesome, won't cure your condition." Okay, what next?

In 2000, while I was still walking, I started exploring extreme therapies to overcome MS. One thing I was looking into was Stem Cell Replacement Therapy. There was a study using this treatment with people who had MS. I decided I would pursue being a part of this study. Problem was, even if I was accepted, it wasn't covered by insurance and I would have to come up with \$100,000 to participate. After mentioning the study and my dilemma to a few of my friends, "Georgena's Journey" was born. My friends took it upon themselves to start a fundraising effort. We had a couple lesbian dances that brought in a little cash. Then they hosted a large concert with a silent auction that collected a huge amount of money. Trish, an old school chum of mine, wanted to help. As she lived in Seattle, she planned a house party to sell her numerous house plants. Thinking this would be a simple, yet fun affair, I invited a couple of my Portland friends to join me.

My friend Karen said I could stay at her house and she'd take me to the party. Being carless at the time, I jumped on a train and headed for Seattle. Karen was waiting for me as I disembarked. Passing through the lobby, I saw a woman sitting on a bench. I told Karen, "That woman looks a lot like my sister." I looked again. It was my sister! Susie and her daughter, Sarah, had come to Seattle to surprise me for the fundraiser. I was thrilled! This made it all the more special.

Karen led us out to her car. Leaning against her car was my mother. I couldn't believe my eyes. I never could have imagined she would make the effort to be there for me. Embedded in my heart and mind, I remembered her saying, when I came out to her and Dad, that she never wanted to meet any of my friends. That she had hashed out a plan with my lesbian friend, Karen, was beyond belief. We hugged and I kept holding my head. "Why are you holding your head?" Mom asked. "You have blown my mind!" I replied.

Susie later told me that it was Mom's idea to surprise me. It was astounding that after so many years of keeping me at arms-length she would make such a gesture. She even went to Karen's house for dinner with a bunch of my gay friends. From that moment on, I felt that our relationship was healed. I didn't care that it took a diagnosis of MS to do it. I felt love from my mother like never before. I had longed for this.

The stem cell replacement treatment didn't happen. My friends had raised more than \$87,000 on my behalf. When the fundraising had begun, I could walk.

By the time we finished the last fundraiser, I could not. One of the requirements of the study was that the participant was ambulatory. I was sad that it had come to this. I was not defeated, though. I was determined to find another path from which to physically heal. My mental and emotional healing, though, was on its way to full recovery.



Mom and I, with our arms over each other's shoulders, when she surprised me at the Seattle train station. Mom is smiling with delight. I have a tight-lipped smile, as if to say, "She got me!"

## Chapter 30

### An ingenious way to live

Starting in 2001, my symptoms grew to the degree that I couldn't walk without an assistive device. At first, I used a cane, then I graduated to the use of a walker and eventually a powerchair. As before, having confidence in my strong resilient body, I maintained complete certainty in my ability to heal.

Beyond seeking alternatives to enhance physical healing, I discovered ways to heal the psychological deficit I was feeling due to the increase of physical limitations. Stretching outside my comfort zone, I began embracing life living with a disability, expanding my perspectives and exploring what I was capable of. I decided I would like to scuba dive again. Bringing this up to two friends of mine, Zekra and Rhia, they worked with me to make it so.

In 2003, I was using a powerchair for all indoor and outdoor activities. Zekra, Rhia and I concocted a plan to go scuba diving on the Big Island, in Hawaii. Taking a solo flight to Hawaii, I brought my mask and snorkel, and a telescoping two-piece ramp with me. Rhia and Zekra, already in Hawaii for some time, met me at the airport and threw a fragrant lei around my neck. They had rented a van I'd researched, hoping it would meet the necessary parameters for transporting me and my powerchair. Although it worked, I was nearly decapitated on my first entry. Quickly charging up the steep ramp on the parallel ramp tracks, I didn't adequately calculate my height in the chair and the height of the van opening. Last minute, I ducked, barely missing my face slamming into the sharp edge of the van roof. We adapted our approach from then on. The next trip, I transferred from powerchair to the passenger seat of the van. Rhia and Zekra used the joy stick controls of my empty powerchair to bring it to the back of the van, line it up

with the parallel channels of the ramp, and drive the chair into the van, locking it in place. The van served its purpose. Next hurdle ... the dive.

We got on the dive boat, excited with what was about to happen. I could move my arms but not my legs at this stage. Fully suited up with a wetsuit, scuba gear, mask and fins, I was helped to the edge of the boat. Then I tipped forward, falling into the water. Zekra and Rhia soon joined me at my sides. Wearing a heavily weighted belt, I expected that once I began reducing the air in my BCD (buoyancy control device), I'd sink below the surface. Strangely, after emptying the entire vest-like BCD, I didn't descend at all. Rhia grabbed my legs and pulled me underwater.

Once down, Rhia hooked my arm and attempted to swim with me. I swiveled on the crook of her arm, ending up back-to-back with her. Well, that didn't work. Next, Zekra and Rhia each took an arm, and we were off exploring. They pointed and I'd nod or point elsewhere with my head and eyes. It was quite the adventure! My posture in the water was a bit odd, though. As Zekra and Rhia were swimming horizontally, I in turn was vertical, my hair flowed straight up from the crown of my head. Hilarious! We explored other places around the island. We also did some snorkeling. It was so wonderful. I learned that I could still do some activities I was passionate about, with a little adaptation. Fun!!!

Others have assisted me in navigating the world as a person living with a disability. These people accepted me into their worlds, teaching me about the arts and advocacy they pursued, pushing the limits, insisting on inclusion, breaking barriers. As the sole staff member at a satellite office of Independent Living Resources, east of Portland, I was tasked with representing and advocating for people with disabilities at a large, multi-faceted center. In this role, I had the ability to offer free meeting space, to diverse groups. DanceAbility was one such group. Erik was teaching the class and graciously allowed me not only to observe but to participate. This eclectic group of dancers showed me how I could still make my way round the dance floor.

On the first day, Erik had us gather in a circle to do introductions. This is the first time anyone had asked me, "Let us know who you are and what your preferred pronouns are." I listened how the others defined themselves. When it was my turn I said, "My name is Georgena and I use she/her pronouns." Through this exercise I learned how to show respect for people who crossed perceived and birth gender identities.

To orient those of us who were new to the dance form, Erik described its origins, and what it was about. He described DanceAbility as an improvisational

dance that dissolved barriers and connected people, with and without disabilities, through dance and movement. It was founded in 1987 by Alito Alessi and Karen Nelson. Erik studied this unique art form with Alito before starting his own classes in the Portland region.

The dance style that I learned through DanceAbility was different than what I was accustomed to, but it had the same feeling, releasing the wild and free side of myself, in a creative art form. The group Erik gathered were predominantly using powerchairs. A couple people could walk. Erik hit play on a portable cassette player. He rolled around the room, engaging with those with us in the large room's dance floor. He reached his arm out to me, I took his hand, and we spun around each other, before releasing and spinning our way to engage with someone else.

Wanting to learn all the different ways I could dance with my powerchair, I watched every move that Erik made. One dance move was to slide off the seat of his powerchair, never releasing his hand from the chair's joystick. Manipulating the direction of the chair from the ground, Erik was drug across the floor in a wildly graceful, yet controlled fashion. Still having strong upper body strength, I mimicked his actions. The feeling evoked from this controlled abandon dancing was one of release. My previous view of using a powerchair was loss of freedom. Now, it's provided a means to experience the freedom to dance, again. Each newly devised move I made on the dance floor filled me with joy. Free from the restrictive feelings the powerchair had symbolized for me, I was truly happy.

Participating in DanceAbility opened my eyes to new ways to move. It also broadened my perspective on gender. For the first time, I recognized that gender was not necessarily what was assigned at birth. Rather, it's what someone knows themselves to be, in their heart, not just their body. I am grateful that the dance group welcomed me, a newbie, to all that they knew and lived.

Then there's Jan. Before my physical ability declined, I was working with Gale, installing one of her modular access ramps. We'd been hired to add the ramp, temporarily, to a stage at an indoor event. I spotted a fireball of a woman in a power wheelchair. She was mesmerizing! On the outside, I guessed to be in her 40's. She had short reddish-blond hair, was professionally attired, and an obvious physical disability. Her small, underdeveloped legs folded in front of her on the seat of her chair, which only enhanced her upstanding posture and long arms. She looked almost regal in her powerchair. I watched as she took command of the room. She darted back-and-forth at high speed, talking with people, her intensity demanding attention. People she talked with listened intently, nodding before she sped off to speak with someone else. Making the final connection of

the ramp to a stage, I watched as she charged up the ramp to the stage, to begin preparations for the presentation. I was pleased to have been a part of making the stage accessible. Watching this woman spin her prowess in the room that day would leave an indelible impression on me. I saw in real time, how powerful one woman living with a disability could be. In that moment, I was determined to personify her strength in spirit, when or if, I ever needed to use a wheelchair to conduct my daily living.

At a future space and time, Jan would ask if I'd accept an honor from the City of Portland, a lifetime achievement award, when I had just begun my work as an Accessibility Specialist and advocate for people with disabilities. I received it before she did, which didn't seem right. Fortunately, she was in the room, so I could call her out from the stage as my inspiration. Twenty years later, Jan remains my inspiration. Since then, I have had the pleasure to work with her on committees, advocating for the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities, in all aspects of life (daily living, health, work and play). I am overjoyed that at this time, to call her a friend.

The people I'd witnessed living their best life with disabilities, opened up parts of me that had grown dormant. Their confidence and creativity spurred on new creative pursuits of my own. As my physical body diminished, I discovered that I could paint, something I'd given up years before, thinking it was beyond my capabilities. My curled fists and limited arm movement meant I couldn't do large masterpieces, but I could do tiny works of art, on small 3" x 3" canvases, and small pieces of slate. I'd bite the wooden tip of the paintbrush, slip the shaft under one of my fingers near the bristle end, and from there I could control the brush on the canvas. With one closed fist over the other, I was able to make the slightest of movements, with encouragement of my tongue, to navigate around the canvas. Then I'd edge the paintbrush out from under my finger, reach for the water to rinse off the paint, dab it on a paper towel to clean it thoroughly, then repeat the process. Mixing the paint, I'd load the brush, slip the shaft under my finger of my closed fist, and head back to the canvas to continue my artistry. It took some time and concentration, but it brought me extreme pleasure and satisfaction. I made dozens of paintings of water dragons.

It was the Chinese year of the water dragon when I discovered this creative approach to painting. I took a liking to them, so for me, this particular Chinese year continued for another three years, until I lost the limited movement of my hands to paint them. Perhaps, the next Chinese *year of the water dragon*, in 2024, I'll find another way to paint. The possibility of this happening seems within



my capable and creatively ingenious ways that I've lived my life. My passion for creative outlets will be the driving force in accomplishing the art of painting, once again.

The first five years after diagnosis were enlightening, setting the trajectory of how I'd approach life living with a disability. What I discovered about myself was my tenacity when it came to living life fully and discovering new ways to follow my passions. It was clear that I'd never take fully healing my physical body off the table. It was also apparent that I would be present with my condition. No longer hiding, I would engage as a strong woman, living with a disability. I'd pose a threat to those attempting to by-pass their responsibility to accommodate the people living with a broad range of disabilities. Also, I would not miss out on opportunities to enjoy what comes my way. Fearlessly, I'd meet life with joy and optimism, trusting that I had what it takes to make it even more exciting and fulfilling, than I'd yet to experience.



Scuba diving with Zekra and Rhia holding my arms on either side of me.  
I am swimming *vertically*! My hair is standing up on end  
and my body is perpendicular to Rhia and Zekra.



A fierce looking water dragon is underwater, holding a round object that's reflecting the sunlight coming through the water. This is a painting I did on a small piece of slate.

## Chapter 31

### Sharon

I was running late. Like most days, I had a packed schedule. I was used to the breakneck speed of scheduling a million things in a day, not letting a minute be idle. Even after I was diagnosed, I still thrived on it.

Entering the meeting, I caused a bit of a scene as I charged into the room in my powerchair, stopping at the first available opening alongside the table of attendees. The room was full. Half of the people in the room were writers, like myself, having just finished an intensive 12-week session in creative writing. The other half of the people were actors.

This meeting of actors and writers was a part of a healing arts program called Well Arts. I was asked to participate by the MS Society, who were familiar with my work as an accessibility specialist in the Portland region. I would be one of eight people with MS. I declined ... twice. When they called a third time, I told them I'd think about it overnight and get back to them. I did think about it ... long and hard. The program stipulated that I would be given 12 weeks of creative writing training. This I found appealing. I'd always been interested in doing some writing but unsure where to begin. Even though I was crazy busy, I'd make time for that! The sticking point was what they wanted in return.

At the end of the writing portion, we were obliged to have our writings acted out on stage by professional actors. This was the part I dreaded. I was a private person. I didn't like talking about MS or being on public display. I'd gained a reputation as an advocate of accessibility rights and provider of services for the accessibility of businesses, and for people with disabilities. Before MS, as the sole owner of Norwest Woodworks, a custom cabinet and furniture shop in town, I

preferred to do my work in the shadows. Even still, I would frequently be asked to speak because I was a bit of an anomaly in my career choices and good at what I did. With the morning light, I'd made my decision. I would do it.

The creative writing process wasn't anything like I'd imagined. The goal wasn't to bore into one's innermost feelings about having MS. It was to connect with what the instructor called your "wild child." She challenged us to think outside of our usual parameters. We wrote about things, places or people beyond our life experience or with an enhanced perspective. As the weeks wore on, I wondered if we would ever begin writing our stage piece. It wasn't until the last two weeks when we were asked to reflect back on the time when we had just learned of our diagnosis and how it affected our life, thoughts and actions. I dug deep and poured my thoughts and feelings into the pages.

After the writing course was over, we were told that at the next meeting, we would meet the actors who would play us on stage. We were tasked with choosing one of our writings to hand to the actors to read. There were two pieces I felt good about, I printed them out and brought them to the reading.

The writers and actors, who would transport our words from the page to the stage, were sitting around a conference table when I came in. I handed one piece to the actor closest to me. This woman sat away from the rest of the actors on top of a cabinet. Her odd choice of seating caught my attention. Her appearance was the most like mine. She was about the same age, and had both a similar height and weight as me. The ways we differed were that I was white, with short light-brown straight hair, and she was African-American with dark brown curly hair. The feeling I got from her was that she could care less that she was out-of-step with the other actor's appearance and proper seating. She wore casual, loose-fitting clothes, like me. Her disregard for normality mimicked the unusual ways I lived my life, outside of the norm. I liked her immediately.

When the instructor asked who wanted to read first, my chosen actor raised her hand. As she read my words, I felt my face burn. Hearing it read by a stranger, reawakened parts of myself I'd forgotten I possessed. At that moment, I saw my strength of character, something I'd thought no longer existed in my current state. At the end of the reading, the room was silent. I looked up at Sharon and we locked eyes. The reading was titled, "These hands." Sharon extended her hand down from her perch to touch my hand. There was a rush of energy between us.

Three of my writings were used for my 20 minutes of fame. The first was about my initial symptoms leading to the diagnosis, "These hands." The second was about my spirit and how the diagnosis affected my daily decisions in "Kaitlin."

The third had yet to be written. At the next cold reading with actors, I handed my writing to Sharon again. The instructor corrected me, letting me know that the objective here was to compare one actor's reading to another's. I reluctantly handed my reading to another actor. Her reading didn't come close to what I felt when Sharon read my words.

The time to choose our actors came at the same time I would be out of town. I was allowed to choose first, before I left. I chose Sharon. When I returned, we began working on our performance in earnest. Sharon wanted to understand who I was so she could portray me on stage more accurately. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with her. She asked about different times in my life and got to know me and my approach to life in general. I took her to places that were pivotal when I came to terms with my diagnosis. I took her to the property I'd sold, where she met Kaitlin, one of the neighborhood kids, about whom my second writing was written. Very quickly, Sharon became a close confidant. I shared intimate feelings and personal stories that I hadn't told a soul. Our mutual trust and intimate conversations grew deeper as the performances drew near.

A couple weeks before the performance, Sharon posed a question to me. She felt that my two pieces did not tell the whole story. After getting to know me and my story, she wondered if my life improved after the diagnosis. "Yes, it has," I responded. She asked if I'd be willing to write one more piece that would reflect this. I agreed. The final piece was called "The Scrapper." This writing was about my philosophy of living with a disability. How MS had opened up a new way of being present in the world. (Read full scripts in the appendix.)

Entering the hall on opening night of the Well Arts performance, I was nervous. The thought of being exposed in such a public way, scared me half to death. When it was time, Sharon calmly walked into the stage lights, and began to speak my words. She wore an old grey sweatshirt, black t-shirt and jeans, mimicking what I might have worn as a builder. She strutted around the stage with confidence, portraying the stronger version of myself, before MS. Then, she moved in thoughtful repose when my writing reflected on life with MS. Sharon's performance was flawless.

Mesmerized by watching Sharon's performance, I was sitting in my powerchair directly in front of her in the audience. Lost in the story, I was taken to another place and time by hearing my story played out before me. It came to the end when I was to make my appearance on stage and give the final line. Sharon noticed I wasn't moving and spoke her final words looking me right in the eye. Like in a trance, I stared back. Suddenly, I snapped out of it. Turning my powerchair on,

I tore onto the stage, made my mark and delivered my line in short order. The audience erupted in applause and laughter.

My old spirit of survival arose from the magic of that evening. It was the beginning of a long run of performances. The result of that kind of exposure was a healthy and honest relationship with myself and my diagnosis. I recognized my strength and resilience as I'd made the difficult choices that followed in the wake of the diagnosis. I wasn't going to hide in the shadows any longer.

Sharon and I remained close after the performance. One day, I asked her if she'd like to join me at a local community pool to exercise. Without hesitation, she responded, "Yes!" It wasn't until we were on our way that she disclosed, "I don't know how to swim." "No problem," I said, "I swim in the kiddie pool. If you think you're about to drown, just stand up." I suggested she get a mask and snorkel, which she did. Next, I bought her fins and she became unstoppable! It was a lot of fun watching her gain confidence being in the water. She was like a kid frolicking in the water. She said herself, "I feel like I'm channeling my four-year-old self." I'd learn, as Sharon began revealing her own life experience, that she grew up really fast, taking on adult responsibilities at a young age. Then, as an adult, she continued taking responsible steps in her career as a TV and radio broadcaster. She'd somehow missed having a childhood. Lucky for her, I never stopped living a play-filled life. Through our connection, Sharon would discover what it was to play and the joy of exploring the great outdoors.

At one of our excursions to a local park, I shared with Sharon a story, I hadn't told a soul. After we'd settled on a lovely, solitary, grassy knoll overlooking the Willamette River, I decided to tell the tale of my mom's abuse after she caught me playing doctor with David. With total confidence in the integrity of my new friend, I felt I could entrust her with this hidden truth. As I began to speak, it brought the experience right back up. Sharing this distressing event gave it more clarity and brought me face-to-face with the pain of my five-year old self. I finally felt heard, and my pain was acknowledged. I don't remember what Sharon's precise response was. It wasn't a matter of what she said, the act of saying it aloud and being heard, was what I needed to heal.

An ongoing gift I was able to share with Sharon was knowledge and resources brought from a lifetime of building experience. One of the first things I did was find a way to make Sharon's house accessible. Though I used a powerchair, I had a strong upper body. At first, to attain access to her home, I'd slide out of my chair onto the first of five steps leading to her front porch. With my back to her house, I'd push myself, one step at a time until I reached the porch. Sharon would

meet me on the porch with my spare manual chair, that I'd transfer into. This led to me asking Gale if she had any spare parts from her, now defunct, modular ramp business. She did. I talked Sharon through the removal of her side porch railing. Gale arrived with the materials for the ramp. Sharon, myself and other friends came to assist in the installation. A few hours later, Sharon's house was fully accessible.

Since the new ramp would also block access to her water meter for future City inspectors, Gale built stairs off the back of the ramp platform once the ramp was installed. Sharon assisted. Growing more confident after watching Gale, and with my minimal guidance, Sharon single-handedly built new stairs off her back porch, replacing the old rotting ones that were previously there. She was becoming a budding tradeswoman. Something her tool savvy mother could be proud of. This also led to many more projects at my place, where she would become my hands, building amazing works of art.

Early every morning, Sharon would sit in her living room for a minimum of two-hours in silent meditations, open to whatever Spirit revealed to her. After we met, she'd take me into these meditations. During one of these sessions a word came to her that she interpreted as depicting who I was. "Liberation" was the word that came to her. It came as a surprise. "How does Georgena embody liberation, when by all appearances, she's limited by the essence of her physical condition?" The longer we were a part of each other's lives, the clearer it became. Liberation may have been less about me, than of what would unfold as a result of us being together. Liberation has been a by-product of stripping away false exteriors, and our willingness to approach life's challenges with truth and love.

Another thing that came to Sharon during a meditation was her purpose in being with me. The words this time were "smooth transition." At the time, she thought it was about being there for me at my transition to the afterlife. Its meaning has also morphed with time. Later, as life offered each of us challenges that altered our direction of choice, it was through our connection that we'd weather the forceful winds, in a more graceful or "smooth" manner. We would assist each other in discovering how to survive and thrive through these transitions. Growing personally and interpersonally, we learned how to dance together, rather than trudge alone through difficult times.

Our growing emotional connection and active presence to assist in each other's life circumstances, seemed endless. We had both reached a degree of emotional maturity by the time we'd met. Having had previous serious relationships, we learned through practice and therapy, to communicate honestly. We didn't carry



baggage from our previous friendships, or various intimacies, into our budding relationship. As Sharon has often said, “When it seemed like we’d grown as close as was humanly possible, the bottom would drop out, and we would reach a deeper level of connection.”



Sharon playing me on stage at the Well Arts performance. She is looking intensely at the audience while speaking, gesturing to herself with one hand and holding the pages of my words in the other.



Sharon and I after saying our final words on stage at the *Georgena's Journey* Well Arts performance. We are both sitting in wheelchairs, side-by-side, holding hands and looking into each other's eyes, grinning.



Sharon, accompanied by her dog, Rosie, pointing with enthusiasm at the bamboo screen she built at my house.

## Chapter 32

### 99% outside of her comfort zone

*Sharon's running joke with me has been, "Since knowing you, I have lived 99% of the time outside of my comfort zone."*

Zekra, Rhia and I were planning our next trip to go scuba diving in Hawaii. I invited Sharon. She responded enthusiastically, "Absolutely! I've never been on a vacation before." Surprised, yet delighted to share something else that brought me such joy, I thought, "Another first." Since this trip would be about diving, I asked Sharon if she would like to get certified. She said she was open to it but couldn't afford it. Approaching her friends, I asked if they would join me in covering the cost of the certification. They were eager to contribute.

To say Sharon was surprised with the gift of a scuba certification would be an understatement. She expressed her appreciation, but I could tell she was somewhat uneasy with the prospect. She still considered herself a non-swimmer and the thought of being in a pool and eventually the ocean for her certification was frightening. Recognizing her concern, I let her know that she could walk away at any step of the process, but I would be there to help her through it any way I could. She said she would try to do it and welcomed my assistance.

Getting prepared for Sharon's scuba certification was the first time I'd experienced Sharon's vulnerability. One of the requirements for certification was the ability to float. Sharon sank like a stone. I suggested that we go to a community pool where we could have some privacy in the pool. Coaching Sharon, I gave her tips on how to lay on her back and fill her lungs, then skull the water with her hands to keep afloat. After a time, she mastered the art of floating. The

certification instructor was harsh however. Sharon didn't want to continue with her, so she quit. After making some calls, I discovered that the instructor who at one time had certified me was still teaching. She was a kind woman. Thinking that Sharon would thrive with her instruction, I arranged for Sharon to meet with her, then set up private lessons. As I had hoped, she helped Sharon through her fears and she was certified pending her final deep-water dive, in Hawaii.

We were met in Hawaii by my friends Zekra and Rhia. I also asked my friend Kate and my sister, Susie, to join us. Zekra had grown up in Hawaii and set us up with lodgings. Sharon stayed with Kate in Zekra's brother's house. Susie and I stayed at a neighbor's Airbnb a couple of doors down from Zekra and Rhia at Zekra's mom's house. Sharon felt uncomfortable and somewhat abandoned with Kate. Kate was demonstrative and challenging for Sharon. It did little to ease her fears for the upcoming ocean dive.

The day came when Sharon was led to the water's edge to do the first of two certification dives. In this one, she walked into the ocean from the shore. The water was choppy and both Sharon and I were extremely concerned for her safety. When she dropped out of sight, I went to a high bluff and fixed my binoculars on the bubbles, willing her to be safe. In what seemed an eternity, Sharon emerged. She looked like she had just gone through a battle, but she was alive! I was so relieved. So was Sharon. One more to go.

The next dive included all of us and a boat. As the boat left the dock, Sharon sat across from us with the other divers yet to be certified. She didn't look at us. She was peering out to sea and looked terrified. Once we had driven out to the diving location, Sharon and the others who were to be tested went over the side of the boat first. Anxious about her safety while diving, I watched as Sharon stood on the edge of the boat, and with one long stride, she was gone.

After entering the water, myself, and joining everyone on the ocean floor, Sharon was nowhere to be seen. Assisting in my dive, Zekra and Rhia each held one of my arms, leading me toward points of interest. It was an intense practice in letting go of control and just enjoying the moment. Unable to monitor my oxygen usage or equalize my ear pressure at will, I trusted my dive partners to do it all for me. They managed it all, flawlessly. My only focus was to keep the regulator in my mouth, which in itself was challenging with all the jostling and tugging it took for the three of us to maintain balance.

By the time I rose to the surface, I saw that Sharon was on the boat. My fear dissipated and was replaced with extreme pride in her accomplishment, knowing full well all she'd had to overcome to achieve her underwater certification. The

rest of the trip, I saw Sharon begin to unwind. We did one final beach dive near Zekra's family home in Kailua on Oahu. It was just after Sharon's 49th birthday, when I gifted her (as a joke) a pair of water wings. Sharon donned them and Susie's colorful swimsuit (because it was dry) for the occasion. Sharon was still wary of her ability to safely swim underwater. Susie, seeing Sharon's trepidation, asked if she could be her dive-buddy. Susie said, "If it makes you feel better, we can hold hands underwater." Sharon gratefully agreed. It wasn't until we were on the plane returning home that Sharon completely relaxed in the seat next to me. It wouldn't be long however when she would be presented with her next challenge.

In 2006, Sharon's brother, Hobart, had a stroke. He was flown to a hospital in Portland. Sharon went to see him and he was in really bad shape. He was disoriented and the MRI showed that he had had a massive stroke. He was unable to walk and was sent to a nursing home to recover. Sharon's mother came from Minnesota for a week to assist Sharon in managing what Hobart's current situation would necessitate. Both she and Sharon had a distant relationship and little interaction with Hobart over the past several years. However, they were fully present in his current state to assist him any way they could. Sharon's mother stayed with her, searching through Hobart's records to gain a clear understanding of the status of his finances, to determine what assets and pitfalls Hobart was facing. This left Sharon, solely responsible for overseeing Hobart's care. She had drawn a line of never having him in her house. There had been a parting of the ways due to traumatic childhood events that happened between the two of them. Unfortunately, he had nowhere else to go. The nursing home he was in was clearly disturbing for Hobart and not fully meeting his needs. She agreed to allow Hobart to live with her, as it was the only way he could get released from rehab.

Hobart moved into Sharon's house in the only space available—the living room. This disrupted Sharon's peace of mind in every imaginable way. Her home was her sanctuary. Her daily ritual of meditating in the living room ceased. Sharon shared her bathroom with Hobart. She washed his clothes and cooked healthy meals for him. She was miserable as the months wore on, as was Hobart. Neither of them were accustomed to the restrictions living together imposed. Sharon's daily meditation practice had kept her grounded. She lost the quiet space that may have served as a way to remain calm during these difficult circumstances. Hobart wasn't used to eating healthy and cleaning up after himself, as Sharon insisted. He felt like she imposed unnecessary restrictions on his freedom of choice. The confinement and lack of privacy to do as they pleased created a volatile atmosphere. Even Sharon's two dogs, Jazz and Rosie, felt it. Usually inseparable,

now Rosie wouldn't be in the same room with Hobart. She'd growl if Hobart approached Sharon's bedroom door. On the other hand, Jazz never left Hobart's side. It was like they were doing what they could to keep the peace between the two humans.

In an attempt to relieve Sharon's stress, two or three days a week I would pick up Hobart and spend a few hours with him. Procuring a free membership for him at the gym where I worked out, we'd go there regularly. By this time, he was walking, albeit slowly. I also got him services at Independent Living Resources, where I worked. This gave him access to computers that were available to ILR consumers. Slowly but surely, he began regaining his social and personal activities, as well as his ability to walk unassisted. He even began singing karaoke at a local tavern he could walk to. As Hobart began walking better, Jazz lost the ability to stand on her hind legs. Sharon had to put her down when her condition worsened. It felt like through Jazz's connection with Hobart, she'd given up her vitality so that Hobart could thrive.

It had been so long since Hobart had been to his own home, we had to clean it up and eventually sell it. Though Hobart no longer had a home, I knew he couldn't stay with Sharon much longer. His presence in her home stressed her out so much, I thought she would have a stroke or heart attack herself! I encouraged her to contact one of his daughters who were willing to house him. Sharon refused, saying that he was in no state to take care of himself and his daughters weren't up to the task either. It was Hobart himself who administered the final blow that would send him packing.

Standing by Sharon, I was there to lend support and encouragement in her decision to let Hobart move in. Buckling under the stress of her situation, she had little resistance to her feelings. One day as we sat and talked, she leaned over and kissed me. It took me by surprise. She spoke of her love for me, though I loved her back, I tried to dissuade her. "My condition is so unpredictable. It's progressing, and I'm not sure how life will be in one year, more or less in 10." Looking deep into her dark-brown eyes, I continued, "I don't want you to be my caretaker. I don't want that burden on anyone I love, especially my partner." She responded, "You are the most able-bodied person I have ever met. I would never think of you as a burden." Pulling back from my arguments, I fell into the arms of the woman I loved. Fully understanding in that moment what was meant by the term "in love."

Ironically, I've had a long-standing premonition that I would have a serious relationship with a Scorpio woman, with a deep connection with the color red. I assumed that the woman would have red hair. Sharon was a Scorpio. One day while

chatting, I casually asked, “What’s your favorite color?” Her immediate response, “Burgundy” (a version of red). My eyes grew big, in my mind, I exclaimed, “You’re who I’ve spiritually been drawn to!”

Hobart was on the phone with their mother who was berating him for how he was (not) caring for himself and was disrespecting Sharon and her offer to have him stay in her home. Hobart outed Sharon’s relationship with me in an effort, (we presume), to distract Mom and make Sharon look bad. Jackie, Sharon’s sister, overheard the exchange and said Mom looked confused after his disclosure. Mom didn’t say anything. Jackie did.

Jackie immediately called Sharon and told her about Hobart’s words. Sharon was livid. She had only been in one other relationship in her life and it had also been with a woman. She had successfully kept it hidden from her family and work colleagues. She took a risk telling Hobart, as he had a history of trying to undermine her, but she would not hide this truth in her own home. Sharon was furious that Hobart would use the knowledge of our relationship as a weapon. She gave him two weeks’ notice to find a new place to live. He made plans to move in with his daughter-in-law by the end of the week. Relieved, I thought, “That’s good. Either Hobart or Sharon would surely die prematurely with the stressful nature of their relationship!”





Sharon wearing a wetsuit and carrying her fins and snorkel after emerging from her certification shore dive on the beach in Hawaii.



Sharon, me, Kate, Zekra, Rhia and Susie huddled together with big smiles and wet swimsuits after Sharon passed her open water scuba diving certification tests.



Sharon with a colorful swimsuit and water wings is preparing to go scuba diving off the bench in Hawaii.

## Chapter 33 Breakthrough

My desire was for all my sisters and my mom to meet Sharon, the incredibly talented woman who brought my story to life on stage, in the Well Arts performance in 2003. After all the shows were over, we were promised a copy of the entire play, on DVD. With the weather waning, I asked the film director if he could give me an unedited version of Sharon's performance of me, before he'd get to the more polished version. He agreed, admitting that he wouldn't begin the editing process for some time. After I had it in hand, I arranged a road trip to visit each of my sister's homes, as well as my mother's, to show the video. It would be an introduction to Sharon, my new friend, and it would fill them in on a time of my life of which they were unaware. Unsure how they'd take it, this felt kind of fun and kind of scary.

Mary met me at my house, we loaded the van and were off on our road-trip adventure. We took turns driving and navigating. From Portland, our first destination was the Redwood National Park hostel in Klamath, at the northwest corner of California. My childhood friends, Kathleen and Tricia, met us there. After showing them the video, we proceeded to the hostel. It was perched high above groves of redwood trees, close to the coast. The hostel accommodations were composed of bunk beds, a common dining area and kitchen. Everyone was expected to cook and clean up after themselves. It was a beautiful location and extremely affordable.

Back on the road, San Jose, and meeting Donna for lunch, was next on our itinerary. Setting up my laptop outside the restaurant, with a view of the ocean, Donna had the opportunity to see Sharon in action, morphing into me on stage.

She thoroughly enjoyed it. Thinking ahead, still trying to honor the fact that Mom once said, “I don’t want to meet any of your [gay] friends.” I felt it best for Mary not to accompany me to Mom’s house. Playing it safe, I dropped Mary at the airport, to catch a flight back to Portland. Before seeing Mom, though, I had one more sister here, to introduce to Sharon.

After staying one more night at a Bay area hotel, I met Jeanne and her husband, Bernie, at their home to show them the video. Afterward, I had the opportunity to go to their printing company warehouse, and witness Jeanne in her administrative role, manage the staff’s questions in order to keep the operation humming. It is a memory I cherish, as I’d never had the chance to watch any of my sisters at work, and not knowing at the time, that before long, Jeanne and Bernie would need to sell their precious printing business. With two sisters having successfully watched the video, it was time to hit the road for the six-hour trip to West Covina, in southern California, and Mom.

Susie had flown in to meet me at Mom’s house and was already there when I arrived. She would accompany me on the next leg of my road trip. It always made for a more pleasant trip when I wasn’t the lone child with Mom. One evening, we all sat down around her TV and I gave the back story of what she was about to see. “This is a play that Sharon and I did together. I wrote the script, which is about when I learned of the diagnosis of MS and how I dealt with it. Then, Sharon read the words I wrote, while portraying me on stage.” Susie slipped the DVD in the player. Looking at Mom out of the corner of my eye while she watched Sharon on stage, I wondered what was running through her mind. She was seeing a snippet of my life and hearing thoughts that I’d never shared with her. When the 20-minute show was over, I turned to Mom. “What did you think of the play?” Mom looked at me and said, “I don’t get it.”

After explaining the story behind the video, again, using different words, Mom remained confused. Recognizing that further discussion wasn’t making it any clearer to Mom, we moved on to talk of other things. It was okay by me. I never expected grandiose expressions of praise, or an embrace of my truth, by my mother. She didn’t do that with any of her kids. Besides that, Mom was 88 years old, time to cut her some slack. I’d accomplished what I’d set out to do. Mom had now been introduced to my good friend, Sharon.

The road trip continued with driving Susie home to Tucson, Arizona. Sarah, her daughter, jumped in the van and we headed north, for a final video showing at Molly’s house in Flagstaff. Kate flew in to meet us there. Molly had a large, almost “theatre size” flat screen TV. Seeing it so enlarged was a bit daunting, but it was

well-received. Time to hit the road again. Susie, Sarah, Kate and I headed north to the Grand Canyon, where we spent the night at a lodge on the canyon rim. Then, it was off to Zion National Park where we stayed for three days, exploring the sights. For the last leg of the trip, it was just Kate and me. Having dropped Susie and Sarah off at a nearby airport, we made a beeline back to Portland.

Noting the steady progression of the MS, and the toll it was taking on my physical abilities, I thought this road trip might be my last. My intent was to make it memorable, full of fun new sights and good friends. It was that and more. Though she wasn't there physically, Sharon was with me every moment and every mile. My next plan was for my family and friends to meet her in person. I knew Sharon would be a lifelong friend. It seemed important to cement the deal through some face-to-face time with the other people in my life that I held dear.

By 2006, in ascending order, each of my sisters met Sharon. She met Susie first, in 2005, on the scuba diving trip in Hawaii. They completely bonded as Sharon entrusted Susie to keep her safe while diving after her certification. Then, in 2006, Molly came to visit. Sharon, about to go to a play, was all dressed up with make-up, which is highly unusual. Molly called out-of-the-blue, saying she was in the neighborhood and wanted to stop by for a visit. This kind of spontaneity was not unusual for Molly. Though she lived in Flagstaff, Arizona, she was a jet-setter. She was in Portland visiting old friends. Meeting Sharon for the first time, Molly was impressed with the elegant figure before her. Sharon got her stamp of approval as well. Two more to go.

Later that same year, Jeanne joined Susie in a visit to Portland. The three of us went to Sharon's house, where they met her, Rosie and Jazz, Sharon's two large, poorly behaved, dogs. They were so excited to meet new people, they wouldn't stop jumping, straining on Sharon's firm grasp, and attempting to lick us. After a time, filled with laughter and storytelling, we left Sharon's house, covered with dog kisses and fur. Leaving Sharon behind with her dogs, we took a drive up to the Pittock Mansion. This was a favorite destination of mine for displaying the wonders of our fair city. The majestic mansion was open to the public. We didn't step foot into the 46-room mansion, instead, we went around to the back of the estate. Perched high above Portland, the edge of the property provided a commanding view of the city. On a clear day, unlike the cloudy day we went, you can see 10 of the 12 bridges over the Willamette River, separating east and west Portland. You could also see Mt. Hood directly to the east. It was awe inspiring even on a cloudy day.

Lastly, I invited Donna to come to Portland. After meeting Sharon, Donna

and I enjoyed another Portland attraction, a Jetboat tour on the Willamette River. It is a high-powered excursion that takes in the sights and history of the region from the water's perspective. The boat travels at high speed. Then, without notice, the driver would turn the wheel sharply, spinning the boat and sending a wave of water cascading over the passengers. The people most drenched were at the rear end of the boat, closest to the edge, where I sat. Unable to move or shield myself, the water would smack me in the face, over-and-over again. I looked like a drowned rat. The Jetboat driver had no mercy for this hapless passenger. On the contrary, he seemed to take delight in my misfortune. He relentlessly turned the boat in the direction that doused mostly me, even after I implored him to stop.

After the Jetboat tour, we pulled up to the dock to tie up the boat. I sat in a puddle of water, waiting for my opportunity to disembark. My clothes were soaked and my hair laid plastered to my head. Since I needed to have the crew lift me back into my powerchair, I had to wait until they were free, and everyone else was off the boat. This meant that each passenger filed past me. The laughs and finger pointing in my direction were somewhat humiliating, but I couldn't hold back from laughing at my predicament along with them. Too bad Sharon had to work, she'd either have loved it or been scared to death. Come to think of it, not knowing how to swim while getting tossed around in a boat, probably wouldn't have landed this activity in her "fun things to do" category.

Hearing the tales from my sisters about their visits to Portland, and the wonderful Sharon Mitchell, Mom began contemplating the thought of coming up to Portland to meet her, too. When Susie mentioned that she'd be coming to Portland for a visit, in late September 2006, and it was going to be Sharon's 50th birthday this year, they hatched a plan to surprise Sharon. Sharon's 50th birthday wasn't until November 1st. Hobart had had a stroke after my sisters had come up, and he was now living with her. I got a call from Susie. "Mom wants to come up and surprise Sharon for her 50th birthday." Even though Mom had proven her love for me, and acceptance of my friends, I was still blown away when she would expand, opening herself up to new depths of connection. Sharon and I were not yet partners at the time, but Mom knew how important she was in my life.

My sisters and I had a tradition of getting together when we turned 50. It started when we surprised my oldest sister, Donna, on her 50th birthday. Jeanne and Molly asked Donna to join them for lunch to celebrate her birthday. She agreed. Unbeknownst to her, she was in for a big surprise. At the restaurant, Susie, Mom and I were preparing for their arrival. Susie had just returned from Pakistan and had a plan for how we could surprise Donna even more. She had three

burkas; the head coverings used by traditional Muslim women. They effectively conceal one's identity, especially if you wear sunglasses, which we did (I want to acknowledge now, how disrespectful it was to impersonate Muslim women, I sincerely apologize). Mom was the first to jump at the chance to play a joke on Donna. She was always up for playful mischief. By the time Donna arrived, the stage was set. The restaurant staff were in on the deception. They sat us next to the table they had reserved for Donna, Molly and Jeanne.

When they pulled into the parking lot, we could tell that Jeanne was feeling a little distracted as she pulled into the parking space. She jumped the cement wheel stop and had to carefully back her way off it. Once inside, they settled into the table next to us, and proceeded to chat and order with no regard to the animated diners at the table next to them. Molly kept taunting Donna to look at the women at the table next to her. Donna refused to join her as she judged our behavior. Despite our racket and uproarious laughter, she hadn't a clue it was us. Finally, we dropped our veils and called her name. She turned and we all fell out laughing!

After that, each time one of us turned 50, we knew we'd get together, but the birthday girl didn't know where we would go. Mom wanted to be a part of introducing Sharon to this tradition. We had many things going for us that would ensure Sharon would be utterly surprised. First, she was not one of my sisters. Also, it was over a month until her actual birthday and she had never met my mother. So, even if Mom sat down right beside her, she wouldn't have a clue.

Susie, her daughter Sarah, and Mom arrived in Portland and we hashed out a plan. I would make a reservation at a local restaurant. I would alert the staff of the plan and ensure we could have two tables reserved, one for Sharon, myself, Susie and two other friends, Zekra and Rhia, who Sharon knew from our scuba trip in Hawaii. The other table was reserved for Mom and Sarah, who Sharon had also never met.

The stage was set. I called Sharon to invite her to dinner. Sharon's brother was still living with her at the time, and as a consequence, Sharon was really stressed out. She didn't feel like getting together with a bunch of people. I was distressed but didn't let on. Instead, I told her I'd really like her to come, but I understood if she didn't. I figured we'd work out a Plan B in that case because I wasn't going to pressure her. In the end, she agreed to come.

When Sharon walked in, we were all in our places. Mom and Sarah's table was out of direct view of her. As we were settling in, Sarah came behind Sharon and dropped a toolbox on the table in front of Sharon. "I believe this belongs to you,"

then she walked away. Sharon was startled and watched as the girl sat down with an older woman at an adjacent table. We were laughing and offering suggestions as to who the girl could have been, and why she would have given Sharon this toolbox full of tools.

Not long after the girl had given Sharon the toolbox, the woman and girl came to our table and asked if they could sit with us. “You look like you’re having so much fun!” Mom said. “Sure!” I quickly responded. Sharon looked really confused, especially when the woman kept staring at her, smiling. Finally, I spoke up. “Sharon, I’d like to introduce you to my mother.” Sharon jumped from her seat, and ran around the table to hug Mom tightly. Sharon had wanted to meet my mom, since we’d gotten close. That Mom was actually here, celebrating her, touched her deeply. I couldn’t have had more pride and joy at that moment. It was a dream come true.

By the next year, at my 50th, Sharon and Mom openly showed their admiration and love for one another. Sharon and I were now partners. Returning from an extravagant trip with my sisters to celebrate my 50th, Sharon, excluded from that, joined my family at a local restaurant, before they left town. Walking the two blocks from the parking lot to the restaurant, Sharon and Mom walked the entire distance with their arms draped over each other’s shoulders. Donna and I looked at each other in wonder. We were stunned by what we were witnessing. A show of physical affection was not typical Mom behavior with her family or friends. Both of us, snapped pictures of them from behind. My heart was bursting with gratitude and love for both my mom and Sharon.

Only Sharon could break through and ignite Mom’s love like this. Acts of compassion, respect and grace are expressions that come naturally to Sharon. Mom’s heart cracked wide open when she met Sharon, I know the feeling. Sharon’s love is difficult to resist. That Mom cared so openly, and deeply, for Sharon, brought me so much joy. It also told me that she accepted our relationship, and that being with this woman was A-OK with her. It brought an even deeper degree of healing to our scarred relationship. My inner smile couldn’t have been broader.





Sharon and her 50th birthday surprise party, with six of us seated around a table smiling, at the Old Wives' Tales restaurant.



Mom and Sharon from behind, walking outside at night with arms over each other's shoulders.

## Chapter 34

### My spiritual side

My spiritual side evolved from my Catholic upbringing to its fruition in nature. The joy and peace that I reaped from being in natural settings has been incomparable. Ultimately, spiritual experiences spilled into my daily life, connecting me to the truth behind my physical being.

The first introduction to spiritual things as a child, came from my mother. She would sit near me as I knelt by my bed every night reciting a prayer that she'd taught me. It's still seared into my memory banks:

“God bless Mommy and Daddy, and Jeanne and Donna, and Susie and Molly, and everyone I know. And make my country safe.”

As a child, spirituality was more about learning and embracing religious doctrine than having a spiritual connection or personal relationship with God. After the incident in the confessional that resulted in my mistrust in priests and the doctrine they preached, my Catholic faith was challenged. It was still mandatory in our family that we go to mass with my parents every Sunday. Fortunately, sometimes Susie would drive me to church at a time more to our liking. We'd go to church as promised but never parked the car. Instead, we'd roll down the street and end up at the local donut shop or In-and-Out burger drive through. We'd both lost our faith in the doctrine of the church by then. It was best just to keep up the deception and maintain the peace at home.

Ever curious, I did dabble into different forms of Christianity for a bit. When an acquaintance of mine said she played the drums at her church, I was fascinated. I'd only attended Catholic mass with music comprised of drab organ tunes. I asked if I could tag along the next time she played.

Unfamiliar with Foursquare churches, one Sunday, I entered the large hall

where my friend was drumming. I was brimming with wide-eyed wonder, excited about what I was about to witness. There were a lot of happy people around, and the music inspired people to jump out of their seats and clap to the beat. Getting caught up by the rhythm, I was right there with them clapping and smiling.

Halfway through the service, people began “testifying” all around me, throwing themselves at the feet of the minister and getting “slain” by the Holy Spirit. Stunned by what I was witnessing, I froze. None of this made sense to my milk toast Catholic upbringing. Once I regained my composure, I looked around the room and saw that I was the only person left standing in the pews. I eventually sat down, knowing I’d never return.

When I decided to go to California State University, Long Beach to continue my higher education, a friend hooked me up with women she knew who would be going there as well. They needed a roommate, so we made plans to rent a house together. It was through them, all liberal Christians, that I began attending a weekly bible study group. I was curious what was behind their genuine compassion and peaceful demeanor. They seemed happy and at peace with themselves. I wanted some of that! This led to my first “real” boyfriend. Doug was studying at a bible college to be a counselor. He spoke with certainty. I trusted his word and his interpretation of the bible. He said it was okay to touch each other sensually but not okay to have sex before marriage. This was the line we followed until we stopped seeing each other.

One day, long after we’d separated, Doug called me and asked me out to dinner. We never ate. We stopped at the bar of the restaurant and he bought me a drink. After several more, he drove me back to his apartment where he proceeded to rape me. It seems obvious to me now, that this was his plan in asking me out. Finished with me, Doug left the room and took a shower. I felt dirty. I felt betrayed. He brought me home and I never saw him again. My trust was shattered. If I couldn’t trust a good Christian man, who could I trust? I vowed if there was ever another attempt to violate me, sexually or otherwise, I wouldn’t take it. I would fight back! Any thought of pursuing a romantic relationship with a man, essentially ended that day. I didn’t think I’d find the man I wished to be with, someone who was trustworthy and mutually supporting, for a lifelong relationship. This turned out to be true.

Although, my college roommates were Christians, none of us went to church or displayed any overt spiritual tendencies. I was feeling less and less Christian after the way I’d witnessed some Christians behave. The rapist wasn’t the only man I’d come across with egregious tendencies. Married “Christian” men, unabashedly

had come on to me. Eventually, I recognized that I was more agnostic with a spiritual twist. I've always felt a powerful force at play that defies understanding.

My spiritual side came alive when I was in nature. My faith came to rest in something greater than the human experience, I've come to name it *divine intelligence*. In Buddhism, Joy is the ultimate result of tapping into this place. I'm honored to have experienced this magical place a few times in my life. Manifesting as a feeling, one time is particularly etched in my memory. It happened while kayaking in Desolation Sound with friends.

Nearing the end of a ten-day kayaking trip, the five women entourage and I, decided to take advantage of the shower facilities at the top of a boat dock. Since people who docked there often stayed for days in their boat, the showers were solely for their use, a perk included as part of their mooring fee. We kayaked the equivalent of five to 10 miles from our camp site to the shower facilities. Once our stealth mission was complete, we returned to camp. Soon, one of the paddlers called out with distress, "I left my jewelry in the shower." Everyone groaned, knowing it meant someone needed to go back quickly, and it was getting late. Not being one of the moaners, I volunteered, jumping at the chance to do a solo kayak trip. Paddling away from the shore, I was soon out of sight.

Finding the jewelry in one of the showers, I began the trip back as the sun began falling in the sky. Soon, I slipped into a steady rhythm of breathing with each paddle stroke. I began feeling at one with the sea and the natural world. A warm feeling, starting in my solar plexus gradually filled my heart. I couldn't remember feeling more alive, present and at peace. I was without thought or feeling of concern. This was my first experience being "filled" with that level of joy in nature. Raising my voice in song, I really let it rip, thinking no one could hear me. Little did I know how much sound travels over water. Once in sight of my friends they stood up and applauded my vocal efforts. There would be more fleeting moments of this joy that I'd experience in nature, but none as long lasting, in its duration or have seared themselves in my sensory memory, as this.

The joy of that moment seemed so easily achieved. As I experienced it, I wondered, "How can I maintain this feeling of joy?" It felt like I was wrapped in a warm embrace of unconditional love. It wasn't paternal, maternal or cardinal love. It was much more profound than that. The love felt like it came from the source of my being. Because it happened so easily, I set an internal goal, to find a way to harness this feeling so I could experience it consistently, or at the least at will. My heart raced in wild recognition that I'd longed to experience this, and now here it was. I felt complete and at peace.

Sharon and I met in a deeply spiritual way. Starting with the miracle that we'd met at all, as both of us were seriously reticent, yet ultimately agreed, to take part in the Well Arts performance. After that, our spiritual growth has been a central factor throughout our connection. We each had spiritual roots, coming into our relationship. These roots grew and blossomed when we became friends.

Soon after meeting each other, I revealed to her that I had a premonition that breath was the key to my physical healing. She offered to do breathing sessions with me. This led to weekly visits from Sharon, where I would lay flat on my bed, and she would sit cross-legged at my side softly breathing in a rhythmic manner, which I mimicked. We graduated from the breathing sessions to conducting long meditations together. I had never meditated regularly or shared such open and honest spiritual experiences with anyone. It felt profound and opened up parts of my larger being I hadn't known existed. We'd talk about what we individually experienced after each meditation, solidifying the experience in our minds and hearts.

We discovered a community to pray with and receive spiritual teachings from, called Unity Spiritual Center of Portland (Unity of Portland). They were hosting an event by a "Oneness" group that Sharon was involved with. Sharon was asked to serve as a greeter when people arrived, and I worked with the administrative staff to make sure the event would be welcoming to people with disabilities.

The accommodations I asked the staff to make, started with signage to reserve parking close to the entrance for people who may need it. I was told they already had signage that they'd post at the entrance of the closest parking lot, reserving the whole lot for those with special needs. I was impressed by their preparedness and how it went beyond my desired outcome. The sanctuary, where the event would be held, had no reserved seating for people with mobility devices. I instructed them where to remove seats in various locations on the aisles, so people would have options as to where they'd be most comfortable sitting. To this day, those reserved spaces for people using mobility devices remain in the sanctuary.

When the event was over, Sharon asked if we could attend the upcoming Sunday service. Though she knew I wasn't keen on attending Sunday services, I agreed because of her obvious interest. Charles Holt was the guest performer. He was utterly amazing, rousing everyone to their feet. The crowded room of people swayed and clapped, in rhythm with the beat. The service itself was cool, too. The pastors were a mother and daughter team. The message was inclusive of faiths, with a heavy influence on divine feminine intelligence. Sharon looked at me and said, "Can we come back?" Surprising myself, I enthusiastically responded, "Yes!"

We attended Unity of Portland regularly, officially becoming members of the center, a few years later. At one point, when our weekdays became extra busy with the work of Access Recreation, we opted to go much less frequently. Since Covid, the services began being video streamed, suiting the uncertain nature of our mornings perfectly.

Various opportunities have arisen, and we've engaged where and when we're called to act, teach or learn. This has led to Sharon being asked to deliver the Sunday message at Unity of Portland. She spoke from personal experience of being Black in this country, and how people can use their white privilege to combat racism, in large and small ways. After that, the minister asked Sharon if she would lead a book study for Unity on *Caste – The Origin of Our Discontents*. This book is about how the US created a caste system based on ethnicity long ago, that is still in place today. Unity is learning, through Sharon and me, how to be more conscious of inequities at Unity and across the city, state and nation.

Just by attending Unity of Portland, my role appears to be that of bringing more awareness of inclusion practices. Having experienced the staff and congregation being unconscious of their bias and demeaning ways they spoke and acted around me, I conducted a disability awareness training. Bringing together a panel of “experts” living with a broad range of disabilities, we discussed the use of appropriate language, and what it means to treat people with respect, regardless of their abilities. My hope is that those who attended came away with new perspectives, as well as an enhanced comfort level when interacting with people with disabilities, outside of their own personal experience.

Life is presenting an interesting array of spiritual challenges, education and opportunities to expand and grow spiritually. We are *all-in* for the journey!

## Chapter 35

### The Truth

From *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

*“What is REAL?” asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy up the room. “Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you. That’s when you become Real.”*

*“Does it hurt?” asked the rabbit.*

*“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”*

Hobart successfully leaving Sharon’s house meant we could be together unimpeded. She wanted to move in with me. Nothing would please me more. I recommended she keep her place as an investment/insurance policy (in case things didn’t work out with us). She would have none of that. She did not want to split her focus between her house and her new life with me. I let go of trying to convince her. Sharon moved in September 2007. Three months later I was in the psych ward.

It was hectic getting everything ready before Sharon moved in. I was on a demanding ayurvedic protocol that meant ingesting over 100 pills per day. I had a vivid dream that left me shaken. I was walking with all my sisters when I noticed that Sharon was not with us. Urging them to wait while I went back to find her, they weren’t listening to me. They were going to move on without her and insisted

I do the same. I refused. I wanted them to wait or join me in the search. Upon awakening, I knew in my heart, I would not leave Sharon behind, even if it meant walking away from my family.

Then came Thanksgiving. I invited my friend, Kate, to join in our gratefulness celebration. Kate was very pushy about doing things her way. Quickly reaching my tolerance limit, I yelled at her to stop her domineering ways! This outburst stood out from my usual mild-mannered demeanor. It was a breaking point on many levels. With the intensive ayurvedic protocol, I drank tons of water to down the large number of pills, resulting in extensive bladder loss. When I called the ayurvedic clinic, the doctor was out of the country, so I talked to the doctor on-call. She told me to discontinue the protocol immediately and get a urine analysis.

Throwing all my medications away, being unconscious of the difference, I stopped taking my necessary medically prescribed prescriptions, also. This added even more stress to my body. The urine analysis was positive for a urinary tract infection and I went on antibiotics, but it was too late. Entering into a psychotic spiral, I was led on a spiritual quest where I completely lost touch with the physical world. Living in this spiritual plane, I experienced utter fearlessness. Scaring nearly everyone I knew in the process, I was compelled to follow this energy, wherever it led.

In this fearless state, it was impossible to lie. Deceit had been what I used to bolster my own importance over a lifetime. In my heightened state I felt inclined to reach out to those I'd lied to and admit to my transgressions. Any opportunity to do this, I'd take it on. No longer was there trepidation or concern over what someone might think of me. Truth was all that mattered.

"Ask me anything!" I'd say, feeling tapped into a higher spiritual realm. In this altered state, I was aware of truths that had been elusive. In my quietest moments, I was aware of how one truth would reveal an underlying truth leading to an even deeper *Truth*. These truths went beyond my life experience. In the silence, my mind would slip into this alluring transcendental state, completely open to receiving all that came my way. Like peeling layers of an onion, profound Truths that stood the passage of time were revealed. If I stopped to focus on one truth, this curtailed the flow and I would need to begin the process all over again if I was ever to reach the Supreme Truth I longed for. Such as: "What is the Truth of our being? Why do personalities exist? Is there an overarching purpose for being manifested in physical bodies?" What I knew for certain is that I would do whatever it took to reach this Truth, believing I was on a hero's journey that could end in my death. When I asked, "Why me?" I understood that it was due to my



unrelenting curiosity and adventurous spirit. This rang true, so I relinquished any hold I had on staying in the physical realm.

The feeling I held, while I was straddling two worlds of reality, was that I alone had what it took to save humankind from its downward spiral, which would lead to being disconnected from Spirit for all eternity. To me, this meant a disconnection to the endless possibilities that source energy contained. The White Rock experience would no longer happen. This would also mean that all of humanity would be forever disconnected from the unconditional love from which all human love derived. Harkening back to the couple of times, I'd experienced universal love, with my high school friends and kayaking alone in Desolation Sound, and how they filled my heart with joy, I knew I didn't want anyone to be deprived of these possible experiences. Especially if it meant we'd be eternally banned from this. I would pay the ultimate sacrifice, if that's what it took to protect the future of all that exists in the world and reconnect humans to the truth of their being. I willingly dove head first into the "rabbit hole."

Sharon saw me go through an extraordinary transformation. My intuition was razor sharp, and I was acutely aware of people's feelings, sensitive to the energy these feelings evoked. In the beginning, Sharon and I were in sync. Embracing the experience as a spiritual awakening, she supported me though it went beyond her understanding. Interesting things manifested. Electronics malfunctioned any time I was in their proximity. It seemed oddly coincidental that each time I'd log into my computer, it would shutdown or shutter in a sideways manner, that would compromise its use. Also, I was physically able to do things Sharon had never witnessed. From lying in bed to swinging my legs off the bed to a standing pivot-transfer into my powerchair, I'd perform this action in one succinct and fluid movement. I predicted events before they happened. For instance, I knew Zekra would show up at our car at a time of need, and just moments later, she opened the car door and leaning into the van, said: "Hi gals! How are you doing?" It fed Sharon's belief that she was witnessing my spiritual awakening.

A consequence of living in the spirit world was my careless disregard for my body. I became emaciated. My cheeks were sunken. I lost control of my bladder without a care. Since Sharon had just moved in with me, she hadn't quite settled into a personal routine and was far from experiencing the space as her own. Essentially, I had left the building. Misinterpreting the totality of my experience, led both Sharon and me, down a rocky path. I extended truth to experiences without discretion. This made me susceptible to advertising and I began an extravagant spending spree, uncharacteristic of my usual thrifty nature.

Sharon supported me as best she could, as my atypical behavior continued, day-after-day. She was also on a spiritual journey, so what didn't make sense in the physical world, made sense in the broader vision. Sharon's close circle of spiritual friends assisted her in navigating through that which could not be understood. They'd make suggestions as to how she could support my spiritual quest, by providing her questions to ask of me and ways to keep me focused. For instance, prompts to differentiate between what may be archetypal versus the core of my spiritual being. This was helpful since what I was going through was clearly outside of Sharon's realm of experience. Despite my resistance she did her best to encourage me to eat and sleep. When Sharon looked at me, I saw her concern mixed with fear, so I stopped looking into her eyes. I did not want to join her in that place.

The journey ended one day when I failed to respond to Sharon at all. She had no choice but to call 911. I ended up in the hospital and going through a battery of tests. Mary and Jean stopped by the hospital and in my fearless state, I admitted lying to them about my Canadian origin, something they knew, but we'd never talked about. Mary took it in, unflinching and without expression. Jean, on the other hand, had a whiplash-like reaction. She went from looking at me, to looking at Mary for her reaction, seeing none, she looked back at me. I smiled internally at her reaction, knowing my words hit a nerve, yet satisfied that the truth was out in the light of day. Neither of them said a word to me about my disclosure. As I predicted, all the tests came back normal, and I was sent home with Sharon more concerned than ever.

Sharon suggested that I make an appointment with my neurologist, to which I agreed. Before the date I was living in the "spirit" world more than not. I felt like I could not exhale. At night I would sleep with a straw in my mouth thinking this would help. Without grounding, I felt I could not help but live in the spirit world. Grounding to physical reality could happen through touching something cold, having someone read to me or looking at the sky or nature.

Zekra and Rhia were witnesses to my behavior and came with Sharon and me to meet with my neurologist. As I struggled to explain my peculiar behavior, I was looking out the window, concerned that if I did otherwise, I might lose touch with reality. My neurologist seemed confused, so I gave Zekra and Rhia permission to speak on my behalf outside the room with the doctor. When they returned, I was told that I would be staying in the hospital. The neurologist told us that there was no room in the neurology ward, so I would be in the psych ward, until a room was available.

The psych ward was the worst possible place to regain my sanity. The staff told me what they thought I wanted to hear, whether or not it was true. There was no clock, so I was disoriented most of the time. I asked for a calendar and they posted it across the room where I couldn't see the dates. After, requesting staff to move it closer, when I wasn't looking, they took it down and though I asked for it, repeatedly, their resistance wore me down and I let it go. They didn't know how to handle my degree of disability, so I spent a lot of time lying in my own urine. There was no way to contact the staff. They gave me an old-fashioned call bell with the ringer taped down. They gave me a bell to shake, but when tested, they couldn't hear it outside the room. As an added insult, they left piles of straws on my bedside table after I told them I no longer felt the need to use them to breathe as I had in my psychosis. Instead, every morning I would awaken to an ever growing pile of straws. It was as if they were encouraging me to return to my delusions.

There was a window in my small psych room, located high on the left corner of the back wall. Around the window was a fake 4-pane window, painted on the wall. Throughout my long hours languishing in this difficult situation, I'd stare at the window. It was too high to look through, and too small to give a vast view. For me, it was my lifeline to sanity.

Sharon didn't visit me in the psych ward. The way things were left between us in our last moments together were weighing heavily on her. Her fear, and my resistance to look her in the eye, wasn't a reflection of our best. She didn't want to set me off. Susie flew in from Arizona and visited me daily. Mostly, though, I was alone with my jumbled thoughts, and the confusion that was amplified by the staff. Susie talked to the staff about me. "Georgena just received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the mayor of Portland. She is very accomplished, and shouldn't be treated like she is incompetent or incoherent. Dignify her with the truth." Susie's words were not heeded. Instead, they continued saying what they assumed I wanted to hear, regardless if it was not true.

After asking about when I'd be moved to the neurology department, one of the staff said, "Tomorrow." Excited about the impending move, when Susie arrived, I relayed the news. Susie checked with the staff and came back with bad news. "No, there is not an order for you to be transferred." Breaking down in tears, an extremely rare occurrence for me, I said, "It's okay. I'll be okay ...". Susie left my room, determined to assert pressure to get me to neurology as soon as possible. It worked. That night, an orderly came to my room, lifted me onto a gurney and took me to my new room.

The neurology section of the hospital was worlds different than the psych ward. Through the daily calendar date boldly displayed, to the honest dialogue and attentive treatment of the hospital staff, I was able to regain my cognitive attachment to what was “real” and came back in touch with the physical world. Sharon finally felt it was safe to visit and did so regularly. All of this did much to assist in my recovery.

While in the neurology ward, spiritual things continued to happen. One of my attendants wrote his name on the board. His name was Ephram. Sharon and I both did a double take at his name, then looked at each other. Sharon had long been “visited” by a spirit guide whose name was Ephriam. As this tall man with a dark-complexion went about meeting my needs, Sharon and I watched his every move. When he left the room, I turned to Sharon. “His name is Ephram! Does he look anything like what you’ve imagined Ephriam would look like?” Sharon nodding enthusiastically said, “I’ve imagined him to be a dark-skinned man from Africa.” Feeling like this was oddly in sync with the spiritual journey I’d been on, I asked her, “Is there anything you’d like to ask him?” “I’m not sure. Maybe where he’s from?” When Ephram returned, Sharon asked her question. “Ethiopia,” he said. We both stared at him in awe.

Released from the hospital, Sharon and I walked down the numerous, winding corridors with a hospital staff member leading the way to the parking garage. After many twists and turns, we went down a long hallway, filled with paintings and other works of art. Pointing at a large framed painting at the end of the hall, she said, “This is my favorite painting in the entire hospital.” Looking up from my seated position in the wheelchair, I focused my gaze in the direction she was pointing. Startled by what I saw, it filled the wall with bold colors depicting a scenic landscape.

Viewing the image up close, in its entirety, took my breath away. It portrayed two older women; one was black and one was white. They sat on either side of a small round table, holding hands, and looking intently into each other’s eyes. Both of us thought it, and Sharon expressed it, “That’s us!”

The women wore fancy blue and yellow dresses, with wide brim hats, and yet were barefoot. An apple orchard is seen in the background and each woman held an uneaten apple in her lap. A donkey was eating an apple from a tree directly behind them. As the painting was titled, “new friends, two eyes” (by Mary Josephson), it was fitting that there was a multi-colored snake, winding through the bare feet of the women.

The Black woman’s hat had a gardenia on it, my favorite flower. As a child,

our next-door neighbors, my surrogate parents, had three gardenia bushes in their front yard. Holding them close to my nose, I'd breathe in their sweet fragrance. There were more plants in the painting. Surrounding the white woman's chair were large white flowers, with red centers and spiky green foliage. Most commonly known as a white lily, it's a symbol of love along with strength, support and purity. Sharon recognized it immediately. "That's an alstroemeria ... my absolute favorite flower!"

A variety of animals were in the painting. The white woman had a gecko on her right shoulder. At the time, I had an affinity for geckos. I'd recently purchased a gecko sweater and pin that I was quite attached to. Under the other chair, where the Black woman sat, a black panther calmly laid. Its presence reflected a sense of peace throughout this natural landscape. There was also a hummingbird, another favorite, that I considered a sign of joy. It was hovering above the left shoulder of the Black woman.

Sharon had told me about a time she'd had a special connection with a hummingbird. It was the morning of her spiritual commitment ceremony, before we'd met. The spiritual commitment ceremony was a conscious commitment to Sharon's spiritual destiny, no matter what may come to pass. As she gazed out her living room window, contemplating how the day would unfold, suddenly, a hummingbird appeared before her. It was the first time she'd ever seen one. Hovering in front of her face, they looked at each other for a time, before it darted away. She felt it was a confirmation that a greater life force was with her. It felt like a sign confirming the importance of the upcoming ceremony. Having heard this story, it felt right that the hummingbird was hovering close to her in the mural, it appeared to be relaying a message directly into her ear.

The overall landscape of the painting was one of peaceful, loving interaction. Sharon and I both had a warm feeling seeing it, leaving this long trying hospital stay, as well as on future visits there. It had a calming effect. We left with a sense of comfort, that all was okay. We had each other and our love would see us through.

To this day, both Sharon and I believe it was a spiritual experience complicated by MS. I feel blessed to have had this experience. Recognizing that I have free will to follow through with any action, living in truth or with lies, I was changed by the experience. From the moment I left the hospital, I was transparent about my truth. During the experience, through speaking my truth and admitting to the various lies or hidden truths, that I'd kept locked up inside, I felt renewed as the woman I wanted to be. Living without fear of the truth brought me inner peace.

It was a traumatic experience, but it did not destroy my relationship with

Sharon. On the contrary, it made us stronger. That Sharon believed in my spiritual experience, despite the blow-back from both sets of our friends, and the watchful eyes of my sisters, was affirming of her trust in me and our shared spiritual beliefs. She'd supported me throughout the experience, to the best of her ability, while not knowing precisely, what was happening.

Thoughts, from others, that Sharon acted irresponsibly cut deep. Sharon knew herself as an extremely responsible person, dependable in all situations, especially when times were tough. To be told that she was less than that, especially with someone she professed to love, was difficult to hear.

My sisters, flying in from out of state at the time of my hospitalization, interrogated Sharon. "When did you recognize that Georgena was acting strangely? Perhaps, then may have been a good time to alert us?" Other than Susie, my sisters hadn't had much interaction with Sharon. Sharon's response to their questioning was to reiterate her unwavering perspective. "What was obvious to me, was that Georgena was doing extraordinary things, physically and psychically. She was performing feats beyond what she was previously capable of. Her intuition was razor-sharp. My hesitancy came from my belief that what she was experiencing was physical and mental, yet overwhelmingly spiritual in nature." My sisters may not have agreed with Sharon's perspective, but they worked with Sharon to meet my needs, knowing she'd be there when they went home. Susie said something in the family discussion that helped relieve some of the guilt Sharon felt. "We were all doing the best we could." This everyone could agree with.

Sharon's friends, who at first were supportive of the spiritual emergence theory that I was going through, suddenly reversed their views. After it became clear that I was delusional, they ridiculed her for being too caught up with "understanding" the spiritual experiences I was going through. At the end, their criticism became too much to bear and either Sharon, or they, cut ties. She lost all of her friends by sticking up for me.

This experience stripped Sharon and me of all pretenses that we were evolved spiritually. It would take years before we would tentatively express our spiritual beliefs with others. Reviving our faith, in ourselves and higher truths, grew in time. Our truth was now built on solid ground. Though our hearts were torn apart, they realigned in a way that would never have happened, if our house of cards hadn't blown down. For this, we are both grateful. This experience cemented what we knew before but would never be in doubt from this moment on. Sharon and I were bound by our steadfast love, and we had each other's back. Neither of us were going anywhere.

After being released from the hospital, I was not completely back to my old self. I had little patience with Sharon. Prior to hospitalization, I was deeply supportive of all Sharon's oddities and limitations. After the hospital, I was quick to point out her faults. Irritated by the sounds she'd make while eating, or her attempts to meet my needs, I didn't give her a break. When she would make a stir fry dinner, I'd point out that she'd made it dozens of times, she should be able to make it without my step-by-step instructions. Sharon just wanted to make sure she did it right, not wanting to disappoint me. Then, I'd push her to express her feelings. She'd let me know what she was thinking but seemed out of touch with what she felt. We had couples counseling, but it did not result in the expression I was hoping for.

When I eventually came back to my true nature, I let go of my need for Sharon to change, and she had the freedom to express her inner most feelings. The experience brought us both to our knees. Rather than break us, we grew from it, recognizing greater truths about spirituality, each other and our strong bond. Our families, and my extended family of friends have also grown to respect and embrace us, and the decisions we make, even though they may follow a different path, have different perspectives and make different life choices. I am grateful for that and their support.

Rather than break us, it brought us more recognition of each other and our strong bond. Our deep love kept us together. My friends and family came to understand and respect this place of love that influences our decision making. From this experience, we learned about and lived from the truth at the core of our beings. Sharon and I never swayed from this. It is what brought us together, keeps us together and will be there in our future and in those we touch, long after we're gone.

My relationship with truth has become clearer having had this deeply personal experience with my spiritual self. Truth has always been a curiosity to me. Tenuously, I'd played with it, as a balancing act, in deciding whether it was more advantageous to live by it or withhold it to reach my goals. Now, after coming clean of my indiscretions, I felt weightless. Stripped of any image of myself, good or bad, I was free to just be. Fully exposed, I was fearless in the face of criticism or judgment. It was me that I was accountable to, not others. With Sharon as my witness, I live as best I can, in full integrity.



Sharon holding the 3" x 3" canvas I painted of what I saw when looking at her during my spiritual experience. Her face appeared as pixels of brilliant, sparkling lights.



## Chapter 36

### Seroquel

Since the cause of my psychotic break was unknown at the time, I wondered if I was bipolar like my father. Was I following in his footsteps there as well? My neurologist put me on an antipsychotic drug called Seroquel. This medication was meant to help me sleep and prevent hallucinations. It did that as well as send me into a deep depression. Two of my childhood friends, and another acquaintance in high school, committed suicide soon after high school. I never had the desire to hurt myself or leave this world, and I'd wondered what would drive someone to lose all hope and take their life. The answer became clear while taking this drug.

Once I took the Seroquel, I lost my desire to pursue anything that brought me joy. All I could think of was how I could die, without it reflecting badly on Sharon. I didn't have the ability to physically put myself in harm's way easily. One thing I could do was intentionally drown. I would have to go to a pool or body of water. More than likely, I'd go with someone who loved me. I knew, without a doubt, I wouldn't do that to someone looking after my safety.

The only other way I imagined doing it, was to fall out of my chair in front of a moving MAX train. That wasn't ideal either. There was a chance I would only seriously injure myself. That would make for an even more miserable life. As long as I was on Seroquel, I ended each day searching for another sure way to die.

Understanding the consequences, that I'd probably land back in the psych ward, if anyone knew what I was thinking, I kept silent. Even though, I was pretty sure it was the drug making me feel this way. Also, it was clear to me that the drug was what gave Sharon a sense of security that I would not go psychotic again. Making a deal with my neurologist, he agreed to cut the dose in half after six

months, if I didn't have another episode. Six months later, under half the dosage, the desire to end my life continued. However, I had come to the conclusion that even if I could, I would not do it. So, with the promise that I could stop Seroquel in another six months, I steeled myself to endure my misery and retain as much dignity as possible.

After a year of Seroquel, it was agreed I could stop the medication. The first day off the drug, nothing changed. I still dreamed of ways to die. I was shocked! Was this my new normal? Thankfully, the following day I was back to my true self. A feeling of relief washed over me, that I had once again survived a near death experience. This one lasted a year.

One takeaway from this horrible year was an understanding of the devastating impact of being on the wrong medication. Also, I recognized the importance of meeting people with mental or emotional conditions with love and compassion. Now, I understood the feeling of being powerless against a formidable opponent residing within your mind. Having been placed in the psych ward and recognizing its detrimental effects on regaining my sanity, I was hell bent to do everything in my power to prevent a repeat performance. Having returned to my norm, I spoke with a counselor about my experience with Seroquel. She said the system failed me. She said that if I had told her that I had thoughts of suicide, she would have had an obligation to report this to authorities, which likely would have led me back to the psych ward.

It saddens me to think of the countless others who have gone through similar experiences and have either followed through with their desire to die, or found themselves misdiagnosed, poorly medicated and placed in prison, psych wards or out on the streets. We, as a nation, need to do better. There needs to be change within our systemic policies to learn and use tools of compassion when it comes to people with mental health conditions. I was resilient and it paid off. Today, I live a wonderful life, filled with joy, fun activities and love. I'm so grateful to be here!

## Chapter 37

### Following my passion: Access Recreation

*your next step will become clear  
the moment you bravely walk towards  
what your heart is calling you to do*

—Annmarie Molina

Upon coming back to myself, I had a yearning to revisit a project I had spearheaded but not completed. This was Access Recreation (AR), the grant funded project bringing together federal, state and city parks and recreation representatives and experts to determine how to present better information in outdoor recreation to people with disabilities. The goal was to have better information on all trail websites, so people would know if they could use the trails before they arrived. This was especially necessary for natural surface trails. I didn't believe that I could pull it off on my own. I asked Sharon if she would join me in resurrecting this effort. She agreed.

Three years previously, while I waited for the grant writer at ILR to continue the work I had begun, I didn't let the agency representatives know what was happening. I just disappeared. This had always bothered me. I called all those I'd worked with in the past and more, asking them if they would be interested in attending a meeting, to discuss how to reach the goal of providing better information on natural surface trails to people with disabilities. Everyone I asked said, "Yes!" I was surprised, grateful and terrified. I would facilitate this meeting with zero confidence in my ability to do so.

After welcoming everyone at the meeting, I asked them, one by one, what

they expected from the meeting and why they had attended. Every trail agency representative said something related to their desire to bring better information about their parks to people with disabilities. They said they had parks that might be usable but didn't know how to promote them without the risk of liability. Saying a trail might be usable, then someone getting injured, could lead to a lawsuit against the agency. This is precisely what Chuck had said in his office a few years earlier.

The last time I had pulled people together, we talked about the use of the word "usable" when parks were not completely accessible. I offered this as a place to begin our discussion. The suggestion was met with immediate rebuttal by one of the representatives. He said if we proceeded with this word, he was walking out. I was at a loss as to how to proceed. Fortunately, I had also invited accessibility specialists with disabilities to the meeting. One woman, the ADA Accessibility Coordinator for the city, spoke up, "[As a wheelchair user] I don't always want a trail considered 'accessible.' Even without using the word 'usable,' I'd like website information, so I can know, before I go, if a trail meets my unique needs and desired experience. Since there's a broad range of people with disabilities, each having their own take of what is accessible to them, makes it even more imperative that this information is inclusive and applied to all trails, beyond the so-called accessible ones." This woman called out precisely what needed to be heard at that moment. Her words bolstered my confidence and reassured me that I was not alone in this push for equal access to outdoor recreation.

It became clear that reaching the goal of providing more inclusive information on websites would be more challenging to accomplish than I previously thought. I proposed we go around the room to determine who would be interested in meeting once a month to find a way to bring better information to the public. Everyone said they would make every effort to find time in their busy schedules for such a meeting. However, those coming from small departments with limited staff, said it was doubtful that they'd be able to attend personally. Time would tell who would show up.

From January 2009 to 2017, the monthly meetings consistently brought in a handful of agency reps and disability specialists. Two strategic players, Chuck and Richard, representing the US Forest Service and Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, had participated in the original grant and attended regularly. Others attended when they could. Still others heard about the work of AR and asked to be included. They became AR's fiercest advocates leading the way to ensure inclusion in agency policy.

After a couple years, the AR ad-hoc committee figured out how to do this. The key was to provide specific information on the current conditions of trails, highlighting what was appealing as well as any potential obstacles. We created something that people of all abilities could find beneficial. ILR became our fiscal sponsor for a grant that was written by the AR team. With this financial support, we published our findings in an on-line document called Guidelines for Providing Trail Information to People with Disabilities ([accessrecreation.org](http://accessrecreation.org)). When park agencies apply the Guideline principles on their trail websites, additional information, pertinent to park and trail usage, is available that benefits people of all abilities in finding their desired experience. For example, in my case, I like natural surface trails, especially if the destination is desirable, even those not considered accessible. My use of a powerchair allows for some obstacles, not to be obstacles at all. People living with disabilities know their own limitations and given sufficient trail details they could determine what level of accessibility they can, and wish to, undertake. The Guideline principles, when applied, make use of photos, descriptions and videos of vital facts, to provide people of all abilities the information that would make a park visit more enjoyable, safe, and in many cases, even possible.

The Guidelines took the fear of liability off the table. It recommends trail agencies not use words, such as “usable” or “accessible,” unless referring to an amenity like an ADA accessible restroom or parking space. Instead, agencies are guided to describe the current condition of the park, its amenities and features, especially the condition of natural surface trails. Most importantly, this information provides all users the ability to decide for themselves if the park or trail meets their individual needs and adventure they seek.

The AR federal, state and city park agency representatives were excited to get this information, and yet, we didn’t notice any of them applying the Guideline principles to their websites. The Web designers didn’t know how to apply the Guidelines and the AR park agency reps didn’t know how to express or prioritize the information from the Guidelines. So, the AR team designed a mock website, from one of our partner’s current webpages, to demonstrate how a trail agency could apply the Guideline principles to their website.

After we finished the one mock trail website, we got a wild notion to do more. We received two more grants from Metro, in Portland, to create a website, [AccessTrails.org](http://AccessTrails.org), that produced information on 36 trails and parks in the Portland-Vancouver Region, including the creation of 18 videos, based on the Guidelines. Again, ILR came through to sponsor our “Nature in Neighborhoods”

grants from Metro, to cover the cost of the AR activities and time, in the creation of the AccessTrails project. The director, former grant writer of ILR, is now our champion, supporting all AR's efforts. It's a beautiful union of collaborative effort, in support of people with disabilities.

AR chose the parks to profile on the AccessTrails website based on their popularity and if they were "hidden gems." We attempted to spread the parks evenly across the region, with particular focus on the inclusion of parks in underserved areas and those served by public transit. We also included parks and trails that had accessible features and some whose trails could not be used by someone with a mobility device. The purpose was to provide information on any, or all trails, regardless of their accessibility, so people would know before they go. This spoke to our mission: *Access to Recreation [Trails] for All*. We created a map for each park, of a preferred trail loop that included many of its enticing features or amenities, on both hard, as well as natural, surfaces. AccessTrails has proven to be a valuable resource for hikers of all abilities. Through, knowing what they might encounter, it enhanced their chances of being prepared and achieving their desired experience.

In addition to providing trail information, Sharon and I created videos for the AccessTrails project. Sharon's video prowess blossomed during the creation of AccessTrails. Sharon and I worked together to pick the video location, choose the people who would be featured in the video and edit the pieces. The story would be told through photos, video and narration. I'd write the scripts and she'd use the script to narrate the video. The process was so satisfying. With Sharon's 25-year background as a TV broadcaster, she knew what made a quality video. She'd ask me, "What's the hook?" A video needs to lead off strong, catching the attention of the viewer. Sharon was also familiar with the editing process. Prior to this project, she was hired by a local school district, as a host and story producer/editor, on their cable network program. She'd edit the videos using the Final Cut Pro program, the same program she'd use for the AccessTrails videos.

Sharon was less familiar with doing the videotaping. She knew, from experience, what needed to be taken, just didn't have the equipment or expertise behind the camera. While creating the 18 AccessTrails videos, she became proficient with the digital and video cameras, and expanded her editing skills. In her years as a broadcaster, she'd mastered the art of interviewing. Her comfort and proficiency came through when interviewing the talent for the videos. It resulted in beautifully designed videos that had an important story to tell. Access Recreation created at least one video for each partner agency, as well as ones

for parks we had found particularly enticing, resulting in more AR park agency partnerships. Our videos struck a chord with the public and have become a very popular resource on the AccessTrails website.

The revival of Access Recreation not only turned my love for the outdoors into an opportunity to have more places to personally explore, it also expanded opportunities to a much broader group of outdoor enthusiasts. This made it a greater achievement than I could have ever imagined. It heightened the awareness of our local park officials to inequities in who could take advantage of the parks they steward. My goal is for trail agencies to now use the AR Guidelines to provide better information on *all* their trails. Not only will I do what I can to promote this, I will offer my expertise through trainings on the Guidelines for anyone wishing to do so. Through the AR trainings, my hope is that it will motivate other trail agencies to take the necessary steps to be more inclusive when informing the public of recreational opportunities in the future.

The gift I received from creating Access Recreation, the Guidelines and AccessTrails is immeasurable. With the Guidelines, it was a start with improving trail agency websites but didn't provide me the access to the parks and trails I longed to visit. The creation of AccessTrails did. Not only was I able to visit these places, it gave me an opportunity to provide a service to the broader Portland-Vancouver area outdoor recreation enthusiasts. It amazed me how following my passion for finding new places to play, created a movement. Well, maybe it wasn't a movement *yet*, but it moved the needle in our little corner of the world. Time will tell if the pebble our work dropped into the trail agency pond, continues its ripple effect, extending to others across the nation.

Through Access Recreation, I revived my resilient spirit once again. My confidence that I had something to contribute to society was restored. It filled me with pride that I was the fire that ignited the Access Recreation efforts. It wasn't time to curl up and disengage from society. Now was the time to break into my creativity and find more ingenious ways to engage in my passions.

## Chapter 38

### Ingenious action on *speed!*

In 2008, the summer after coming out of the hospital, I pursued another dream of mine: to build a motorized floatation device that I could control with my limited mobility. At 51, my arm range and finger dexterity were severely limited, but I could still use them. I'd purchased a fisherman's float a couple years prior and had taken it with me to Protection Island, in BC, Canada, to test it in the ocean. I could float but could only move if someone pushed me. Everyone I knew on the island had floatation devices they could maneuver under their own power except me. Not okay!

The fisherman's float was like a chair in the water. The floatation was an inflatable tube in the shape of a "U." I sat in webbing suspended between the "chair arms," leaning back on the center of the U-shape. I'd bought waders that covered me up to my armpits because I would be sitting in water. We brought the float to a boat ramp and placed it on a bed sheet at the water's edge. I slid my powerchair alongside the float. Shannon and Susie lifted me, fireman style, onto the float. Then Shannon, Susie, Sarah and Sharon took a corner of the bed sheet and lifted the float and me, walking into the water. When they released me in the water, it was the moment of truth. I could float! Unfortunately, I had no control over my direction. They pushed me back and forth. It was great to be in the water, but I wanted to be able to go where I chose. With renewed determination, I knew I'd figure out how to put a motor on the float before next summer's trip to Canada.

The following summer, I'd brought all the pieces I thought necessary to motorize the fisherman's float. Shannon began assembling everything as I imagined it to be. Since there wasn't anywhere to pick up materials on the island, I hoped



that I'd packed everything that would manifest my dream. One vital component to make the float motorized was a small trolling motor. My idea was to extend the handle of the motor across my lap, turning it into a tiller. That meant the motor would be attached to the port side of the float pulling me sideways. That should work ...

Shannon took the batteries and electronics I'd housed in waterproof cases, and strapped them to the stern and starboard sides of the float. My only other concern was how to deal with my legs causing drag. My thought was to make them float with the use of large Styrofoam pool noodles. Shannon cut two 18" long sections from the long pool noodle, threaded PVC pipe through each, then connected one to the another with an adjoining PVC pipe. I would rest my heels in the crease between the two noodles and attach it back to the boat with straps. Time for a trial run!

We put in at a beautiful cut between two islands. It was a windless, sunny day, not a single cloud was in the sky. The water was calm, without so much as a ripple breaking the glassy surface. The entry was a bit tricky. We put the float on top of a hammock, this was Susie's idea. She thought it would work better than the bed sheet, used previously, to carry me to the water. Then, I was lifted into the float. This time, the support team would have to carry me and the float down a narrow, steep and rocky slope, ending in the water. If they slipped, I would surely get a little or a lot hurt. I was ready for it.

Good news ... I made it to the water unscathed. The final step was to attach the motor to the fisherman's float and plug it in. With Susie and Shannon in wetsuits at my side, Shannon turned on the motor. I was off! The first thing I noticed was I couldn't turn the float completely around in both directions. I couldn't push the tiller out far enough. When I tried, I'd lose my grip of the tiller and it would slip off my lap into the water. The motor continued turning driving me and the float out of my control. Shannon was within reach each time, placing the tiller back in my hands. I tried it many times. Each time, I lost it.

Cutting the maiden voyage short, we reversed the launch procedure. I trusted my sure-footed support team as they scrambled up the embankment holding me slightly above the jagged rocks. We had some modifications to make. Shannon took the Dinghy Dock ferry, a small passenger boat, from their island to Nanaimo, on the large island of Vancouver. He picked up more PVC to modify the tiller. His idea was to turn the one tiller into a double tiller which should allow full turning radius. We also added a security line to the tiller, so I wouldn't lose it again. Now it was time for the second run.

The support team expanded, as word had spread with the islanders. Everyone was eager to be involved. It struck a chord with people's connection to nature and the reason they had chosen island life. They understood my desire to play in the water. They wanted to make sure I could accomplish my dream.

After the modifications were added to the float, I had renewed confidence in my ability to captain my vessel. Once I hit the water, it was clear Susie and Shannon were not as sure as I was. They hovered very close as I tested the new tiller's capabilities. It worked as intended. We had made other modifications that kept the motor mount stable and helped the float track better. The latter was accomplished by adding something that caused drag at the stern to correct the alignment. We used a rubber vegetable strainer, as the ballast, and tied it to the stern. It turned out everything went as we had hoped. I was able to make my way in the water under my own control. The pleasurable experience was compounded by the group involvement. It was an incomparable accomplishment. I was filled with joy.

My life was full of activity and purpose. That my physical abilities were continuing to dwindle did not overly concern me. I'd just activated opportunities to give back to society through Access Recreation. Now, opening up an opportunity to be back playing in the water, was more healing for my spirit. Also, it was a time of healing for my feelings of incompetence. I felt like I could breathe a little deeper and lift my head a little higher. Creativity and innovation seemed to be reaching a higher degree of execution. Describing the level of accessibility of park and trail features has allowed people of all abilities to find their recreational experience of choice. More and more I'm recognizing that what's good for the most marginalized individual is of benefit to the majority of people.

My character, resiliency and creativity are expanding being a part of an often mistreated, discounted and overlooked group. People with different abilities possess extraordinary talents and innovative ideas. They've had no choice due to the systems and facilities that don't value or serve them equally. I'm learning how to navigate around obstacles in order to realize my dreams and passions. I've done it all my life. Now, it's time to put my skills and extensive entrepreneurial work savvy into play, accomplishing what I choose to do, as a strong, capable person living with a disability. Game on!



Wearing a sun visor and waders, I'm laughing while in a fisherman's float in the ocean off Protection Island, BC, Canada.



In calm seas, I'm trolling and laughing, as I pass by a REDUCE YOUR WAKE sign in my fisherman's float with a motor, dubbed: "U-Boat on *Speed*."

## Chapter 39

### Navigating through troubled waters

*Now or never.*

—Henry David Thoreau

At the age of 90, Mom began experiencing changes to her cognition. She started losing her memory to a degree that compromised her ability to take care of herself. My sisters and I were in agreement that Mom needed to live closer to one of us. We went to Mom to discuss her options and hear what her wishes were. With reluctance, Mom agreed to move to the San Francisco Bay Area to be close to Donna and Jeanne, my two oldest sisters.

Before Mom moved, Susie and her family, Sharon and I went to her house to celebrate her 90th birthday. This would be the last time I'd be in my childhood home. Because of Sharon's support of me after returning from my first hospital stay, Mom viewed her as a God-send in my life. She was excited to see her again, as the first hospital stay had happened less than a year earlier. Not only was it cool that Mom welcomed Sharon, "one of my gay friends," to her house, it led to another remarkable occurrence.

We had a great time, partying and exploring the sights. We did a drive-by at our old high school, Bishop Amat. We drove by the Catholic Church we'd attended, pointing out some of our childhood haunts along the way. Lunch was at the old country club, where we swam and my parents played golf. It was fun showing Sharon the sights from my childhood. It generated many stories and laughs. After lunch, Mom ushered us to the women's locker room. I'd never been allowed into this private room because of my age, and then my interest. This is where the women would gather and play cards. This is what we did on this visit.

We played Kings Corner. Neither Sharon, Sarah or I had played this card game before. After Mom taught us the game, we played several rounds. Sarah, 12 years old at the time, was having a difficult time following the rules of the game. Sharon made an overture to assist Sarah in knowing which card to play. Mom wouldn't stand for anyone "cheating" by getting help. Serious card player that she was, Mom glared at Sharon, as if to say, "Don't you dare help her! Sarah will figure it out on her own, and I want to win!" Sharon got the message and backed away from her efforts.

On her actual birthday, Susie made the "Moran birthday cake." An extremely difficult French Pastry cake, that Mom had made for each of us on our birthdays. Sarah insisted that there be 90 candles on the cake. So, when Shannon carried the cake from the kitchen counter to the family room table, the cake appeared to be on fire. We laughed as Mom blew out the candles and began opening all her gifts. Later, after the sugar crash and our naps, we went to Covina Park, Mom's favorite place to walk and did just that.

Sharon and I were preparing to leave to catch our flight home. Mom approached Sharon. Putting her hands on each side of Sharon's cheeks, cupping her face, she said, "Thanks for taking care of my kid. Your being there gives me peace of mind." My heart skipped a beat. Watching this rare expression of caring between my mother and my significant other was extraordinary. It felt as if I was witnessing a moment of catharsis in Mom. It didn't matter that her impression of Sharon, "taking care of me," wasn't completely accurate at this juncture in the progression of my disease. More accurate was that Sharon and I were supporting one another. What mattered to me was that Mom openly expressed her gratitude and appreciation for the woman I loved. Showing how important she felt Sharon's presence was, in such a heartfelt way, further displayed how deeply she cared for me and my wellbeing. It was a profound moment in time, a shift-change in Mom expressing her love more overtly. It was beautiful to witness.

Leaving behind her home of more than 50 years was difficult for Mom. It was harder still to leave her friends and all the things they did together. Mom was very active. Physically she was fit, even more than her younger friends. She went for walks every day and was usually the designated driver to gatherings. Mom knew she couldn't live without assistance but didn't want anyone moving into her home to help with her daily living. She visited three different senior living facilities in the Bay Area. One stood out above the rest. Susie took a look at her finances and determined she could afford to live there until she was 106. We felt it was safe to say she'd be able to stay there for the long run.

Mom was depressed with her life at the senior living facility. She did as she was told, eating in the dining hall and participating in activities, but she wasn't home and these were not her friends. She missed her long soaks in a bathtub. Only showers were available. She lamented the loss of her independence. Eventually, she did make a few friends and even won the miniature golf putting contest!

Sharon and I were on our way to a three-day retreat, when we stopped enroute to see Mom. My sister, Jeanne, forewarned us that Mom was not feeling well. She had a hemorrhoid flare-up and she was having difficulty sitting for any length of time. Upon seeing her, we decided to forego our retreat and get a hotel room nearby so we could spend more time with her.

Mom went to a doctor about her condition, which ended up being a blockage in her colon. When she returned, she went to the nursing unit for recovery. With no apparent improvement, she was moved into a dreary room in the facility, which she shared with another woman. Mom's roommate was a disagreeable woman who didn't have a single pleasant thing to say about anything. Jeanne saw to it that Mom was moved to another room the very next day. Mom felt trapped. She wasn't hungry and yet they attempted to force her to eat. Her back hurt because of a pinched disc, but they demanded she exercise. It was a difficult time. It wasn't long before hospice was called in. Thankfully, she was no longer forced to do anything from that point on.

As Mom's life force began waning, the family all had a chance to see her, to spend time talking and rubbing her back, the only thing that gave her relief from the pain. She pleaded with each of us to take her from this place. It was heartbreaking to witness. Sharon and I talked about the possibility of Mom living with us, knowing we were the only ones who could possibly arrange our lives to accommodate her. Sharon said she was willing to move to California and rent an apartment where Mom could join us. Thinking back, though we knew it would have placed a considerable burden on Sharon, maybe it would have been unbearable and regretted down the road. Regardless, it wasn't to be. Molly made it clear that Mom had made her choice long ago not to live with her daughters and she was at a stage now where none of us could meet her needs.

It was heartwarming to watch Mom meet each of us where it was most needed. She affirmed her love for us and assured us that she was okay. She also expressed her concern for us. "How will you girls make it when I'm gone?" Molly reassured her, "Don't worry Mom, we'll be there for each other." When her grandchildren, Sarah and Megan, visited, she rallied and despite not eating for days, shared pizza and coke with them. She giggled, "The soda tickles my nose." The girls would be

left with fond memories of their last moments with Grandma George.

In her last days, Mom stopped eating, drinking and talking. All her loved ones tag teamed to ensure she would not die alone. Jeanne would put a straw in water to her lips. "Take a sip if you're thirsty, Mom." Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't. Whoever was there would field phone calls to Mom, putting the phone to her ear. When words were spoken, Mom's eyes would flutter. This was interpreted as Mom hearing the caller's words. On April 16, 2010, I was on the phone with Mom. Donna was in the room. I heard her say, "Is her heart still beating?" Donna came back on the line with me and said Mom had passed. She remarked, "She looks the same in death, as she did in life." This gave me a sense of peace. When I was told by my mother's neighbor that Dad looked frightened on his way to the hospital, it had lodged in my memory. It still troubled me these many years later. That Mom passed without obvious distress was heartening. I hung up and called my other sisters.

Soon after Mom died, I had my second experience of the great beyond. Thinking I was in the afterlife, I expected Mom to enter the room at any time. People came to our house. Knowing it wasn't coincidental who appeared, I felt their presence was to witness and experience unconditional love. Jean came into the room where I sat alone. She began talking and asking me questions, and I would not answer when spoken to. In my mind, I was expressing pure love. It felt odd and somewhat painful not to answer, but I knew it wasn't necessary. Without saying a word, I believed Jean now knew, without a doubt, how much she was loved.

Entering the living room, Sharon, Jean and Mary stood together and told me that 911 had been called and I was going to the hospital. Instantly snapping out of my spiritual revelry, I was aware I'd slipped into that dreamy spiritual state, once again. It was time to revisit the hospital. Fortunately, I had been assured by my neurologist that I would not go to the psych ward again. Unfortunately, Mom's memorial service would need to be postponed.

The experience of going directly to the neurology ward was completely different from that of three years earlier. It was a much quicker turn around. The cause of my psychotic break was still unknown and I would experience one more before urinary tract infections (UTI) would be discovered as the culprit. I had frequent UTIs. On those momentous occasions when I ended up in the hospital, the infection had passed through the blood barrier of my brain. It's called encephalopathy. My diligence has heightened with this knowledge, to ensure a possible UTI is treated before it escalates.

On the third occurrence of encephalopathy, it took much longer to come out of it compared to any other time. This was attributed to my age, my advanced disability progression and it being my third occurrence. After spending several days in the hospital, from there, I needed to go into a rehabilitation facility. Molly came to help Sharon find the best one to send me to. They had limited time to provide the hospital with two options. Molly left after visiting several rehab centers and finding only one suitable. Sharon found another that was moderately okay and fortunately, I was accepted at the one she liked best and was walking distance from our home. This stay would be for more than three weeks.

Susie came to town to assist Sharon after I was settled into the rehabilitation facility. They'd come by morning and night to make sure I was okay. As we would discover, this rehab facility lacked the skill set to meet my needs. I'd experienced this even in the hospitals, but this was worse, partly due to the duration of stay.

Once, I was left alone to use the bathroom. Because of my lack of torso stability, it wasn't long before I tilted precariously, within a hair's breadth of falling face first on the hard bathroom floor. Many years ago, I'd fallen off the toilet in my home. Unable to raise my arms to protect myself, I landed on the side of my face, cutting my eyebrow and sported a colorful black eye for some time. Sharon and I rectified the issue at home. I didn't want a repeat performance here.

Fearing the possibility of falling, I called multiple times for help, but no one came. Concentrating on my breathing to remain calm and keep my tentative balance, I was focused and determined not to fall. When they finally opened the door, they rushed to right me. I asked the women, "Did you not hear me when I was calling for help?" One of the women said, "Yes, but I needed to wait until a fellow staff member would be available. I can't transfer you alone." I was incredulous that they wouldn't respond to a cry for help, even if it was against protocol, to check on my wellbeing. It was disgusting.

Along with toileting mishaps, rehab dropped the ball in other ways. They'd leave me in bed until everyone else had gotten up and gone to breakfast. Again, they blamed it on not having two staff available to transfer me. So, instead, I'd lay in my own urine or feces until they were ready. If Sharon was there, they wouldn't allow her to assist in transferring me out of bed because of liability. At one point, Sharon went to the supervisor's office to address some of these concerns. The supervisor said, "This is not a skilled nursing facility. The staff are not trained to work with someone with such an advanced disability." Surprised, Sharon realized that this facility might not have been the best choice for me. Too late now.

Spending hours in my powerchair with nothing to do, I felt useless and depressed. People in the facility mostly stayed in their rooms watching TV. That's



what my roommate did; which is why I'd escape to the lounge. Gladys seemed addicted to noise. Something that I wasn't used to. Gladys was older than me, with no apparent physical impairment and had shortly cropped blonde hair. We weren't a good match. She had an infatuation of men. Standing at the only window, on her side of the room, she'd focus her binoculars on a wing of the building across from us. Our room was on the third floor. Her obsession had a room on the fourth floor. She'd say, "He's up! I can see his light is on. He's really into me." I met her "knight in shining armor" one day. Frankly, he didn't look too enamored with her. A little embarrassed by her banter, might be more accurate.

Gladys's TV would stay on, day and night. One night, early on, I asked her to turn it off after I'm in bed. She responded, "Why? The curtain's closed. What's the big deal? I have it turned down low." The thin curtain between our beds did not reach the ceiling, floor, or space where it met the wall. My bed faced her curtain, along the same wall that her TV hung. This allowed the glow and flickering light of the screen to shine right in my eyes. After turning off the TV with a loud "Harrumph!" she followed that up with, "I hope you're satisfied." Responding to her sarcastic wish, I said, "I am. Thanks." Then she started crying, loudly. After a time, I spoke, calmly and soothingly, attempting to ease her sorrow. Was she upset over the loss of her precious white-noise? Was she upset with me, or herself? I'd never know. She never spoke a word through her sobs, or afterward. I didn't get much sleep that night.

Once I was up, I'd never go back to my room. Often, I'd escape to the facility lounge. The large screen TV in the lounge was usually on, but I had control of its volume and channel of interest. Since it was baseball season, I'd have someone turn it on a game if one was playing. Most times, I'd be found gazing outside through the large plate glass window, at the beautiful garden and manicured grounds of the facility. On fair weather days, I'd go outside in the gated yard. Strolling down the winding, hard-packed gravel paths, I'd take deep breaths, immersed in the beauty of nature. This, as in the past, is where I could center myself, and found the solace to endure my situation. Unable to open or close the door of the facility on my own, I'd wait until someone passed by, beckoning them to assist me. Nothing could keep me from the place that fed my spirit. What made it even better, was that I was usually alone, so I could breathe in the healing properties of nature in peace and quiet.

During this month of rehabilitation, my disability progressed rapidly, losing my arm strength and range of motion. I went from driving my powerchair with a hand powered joy stick to not being able to drive my powerchair at all. My ability

to extend my arm and finger or knuckle to push buttons on my computer ended. This diminished my ability to continue my work with Access Recreation. In rehab, I visited a full-time resident on a different floor. I'd been told that he never left his bed, had no use of his hands, arms or legs, yet could navigate on a computer with his eyes. The software he used was called Eyegaze. He could control his large smart TV with it as well as turn off and on lights. I was intrigued, knowing I'd look into the possibility of purchasing one, once I was home.

The good that came out of this experience was that Sharon and I got married. My brother-in-law, Shannon, encouraged Sharon to go to a lawyer to determine the appropriate steps to protect my assets (my home), in case I would ever need to remain in a care facility. She agreed. The lawyer said that if I was permanently placed in a care facility, my assets would be taken by the governing agency that would pay for my services. They would liquidate everything of worth and take control of my social security. Sharon would have nowhere to live. He said the only way to ensure that the house went to Sharon, was for Sharon and I to get married. Then, I could sign over the rights of the house to her. There was no doubt that we loved each other, but I'd never thought of getting married. Neither one of us hesitated at the prospect of legalizing our union. Sharon broke me out of rehab to do the deed.

First, we went to the local Multnomah County office to get our marriage license. Susie went with us and began snapping pictures of this monumental occasion. At the front desk, they took our names and directed us to fill out the necessary forms. Sharon and I went to the electronic station with computer generated forms. Most of it was the basics, names, address, etc. One question stopped us, needing more thought and discussion. It read, "What is your chosen last name?" Options: Moran, Mitchell, Mitchell-Moran or Moran-Mitchell. Sharon looked at me. "Do you like your last name?" "Yes, how about you?" "I like my name." "Okay, that's easy." Sharon filled in that we were keeping our names, as is. Next, we waited until our names were called.

When it was our turn, the clerk was gazing through our paperwork, then paused and looked up at us. She said, "I don't usually comment on people's information, but I have to say something. I've been processing licenses all day and yours is the third one I've had today with the same last name as mine, 'Moran.' In all my years at this job, this has never occurred. I just had to share with you how unusual this is!" We collectively smiled at one another. It felt like a divinely orchestrated stamp of approval. Susie was taking a video of us now. The clerk, taking in our response as it escalated from smiles, to louder expressions of delight

and wisecracking quips, remarked, “You’re dysfunctional.” I turned to Susie, and the camera, with a quizzical look, “We’re dysfunctional!” Another smackdown from Spirit, “Yeah, you’re not that great. Check your ego on the way out the door.”

Another step outside Sharon’s comfort zone happened the night before we got married. Sharon knew she couldn’t get married without telling her mother first. Her mom knew of our relationship, but Sharon wasn’t sure how she’d react to the marriage. Sharon started by saying how much she loved me. She followed that with the legalities and how marriage would solve any potential issues. Mom raised her hand to stop Sharon from saying more. She looked down at her clothes, then back at Sharon. “Do I have to be there? I have nothing to wear.” Sharon, relieved, said, “No.” She explained that Susie and her daughter would serve as witnesses. We would have a celebration sometime after I left the rehab center. Mom smiled. “I’ll be there for that,” she said adding, “What you kids do with your lives is none of my business. You are grown adults.”

Susie, Sarah, Gale and Holly Jo, a close friend, came to our wedding at Unity Spiritual Center of Portland. Sharon had brought my wedding attire and Sarah had done my make-up at the rehab center. Reverend Lisa said it was the first wedding she’s ever presided over that she would be doing sitting down. Knowing us personally, she was deeply moved that we had asked her to officiate. She was determined to make it special, tailor-fitting the wedding vows specifically to us, and who she knew us to be. After Sharon setup her video camera on a tripod, Susie monitored the taping of the ceremony. Sarah was our DJ and would play two of our chosen songs before we proceeded with the ceremony: Whitney Houston’s song, “I Believe in You and Me” and Barbra Streisand’s “A Piece of Sky.”

Sharon’s chosen Whitney Houston song was a beautiful reflection of our love; its resilience, our belief in each other, and our willingness to be vulnerable. The lyrics spoke to what we both believed, that our love would last forever. We’d already demonstrated that through life’s good times and difficult experiences, we had each other’s back. This song spoke to the depth of our love.

Barbra Streisand’s song was my contribution. This song reflected my belief that sometimes you need to take risks, and that the fearless act of trusting can achieve unimaginable things. It felt like the story of both of our lives, and the improbability that we had met. It also brought the appeal of a beloved father who had transitioned. It felt like a shout-out to Dad, so he was a part of the ceremony. I know he’d have loved and embraced Sharon into the family, as Mom did. Sharon is my “someone,” sharing, and in most times my coconspirator, who’s ensured “my ev’ry sweet-imagined possibility” will become a reality. With everything in my

power, I attempt to do the same for her. Of all the people I'd been with, without a doubt, Sharon was my one and only, the person I'd longed for, my soulmate.

In the chapel, everyone was gathered, awaiting the wedding ceremony. Susie had filled the room with flowers. She attached flowery garlands to the back of our chairs. Susie and Sarah signed the official wedding certificate as our witnesses. It was beginning to feel real. I wasn't completely back to my previous cognitive clarity, but I was getting closer. Then, the music began.

Reverend Lisa welcomed our guests, spoke to the reason of our gathering, and prayed us into the space. She asked Sharon and me if we'd like to say a few words about each other, and the love that brought us to this moment. We spoke of our deep love, and how it continues to grow with each passing day. We described how our connection lifted each of us up, providing support so we could reach new heights individually and together, in business, health and spiritual pursuits.

Then, Reverend Lisa directed us to look into each other's eyes and recite our vows after her. Sharon leaned forward, and I felt her dark eyes sear into mine. In my current state, I found it difficult to not to feel overwhelmed by their intensity. She recited the vows, as we held each other's hands. Then, it was my turn. Tuning my ears to Reverend Lisa, wanting to make sure I got this right, and keeping my eyes toward Sharon, I began. My voice was soft, unable to match the volume and intensity that Sharon outwardly expressed. But inside, my heart was pounding. Saying my last words, Sharon leaned over and placed a kiss, full and prolonged, on my mouth.

In that moment, with this intimate display of affection, I felt changed. Like when my story was played out on stage with the Well Arts performance, expressing our love in front of others, who we asked to witness and participate in this ceremony, was profound. It expanded the experience beyond just the two of us. Those friends and family were then given an opportunity to express their love and acknowledgement of our connection. Tears flowed. I'd never given much credence to marriage, but it really is an extraordinary way to commit to your love. Our love felt certified legally, as well as validated publicly. I looked forward to the celebration where more family and friends would gather to embrace our love. But first, I needed to heal myself. After having dinner together with family and friends, back to rehab I went.

I would spend one more week in rehab. Sharon needed to prepare for my return. The tub room I'd built onto the house with the inheritance from my mom would become my bedroom. Sharon and I hired the plumber, who had put in the seated bathtub in, to remove it. I donated the tub back to the mobility distributor

that it was purchased from. They picked it up for free and agreed to offer it free of charge to anyone in need who may want it. Next, I needed a new bed similar to what I used in rehab that rose up and down, had a back tilting function and guardrails. Ironically, one of the staff knew of a woman who used one and had just died. Her family was looking for someone to give it to for free as long as they picked it up. Gale helped Sharon get it and install it in the small room that was now my bedroom. I also needed a mobile hydraulic Hoyer lift to hoist me into the bed. The technician at the agency where I bought and modified my powerchair ordered one for us, at cost, and brought it over and trained Sharon on its use. Sharon bought an air compression mattress cover and pump to prevent pressure sores. With the accommodations for my return complete, I was released from rehab and came home.

The wedding celebration took place a few months after I left rehab. It took a while, once again, to fully come back to my senses. Our wedding was June 10, 2017 and the celebration was in October, four months later. We knew of a venue where a friend of ours had gotten married. We booked it and sent an invitation to family and friends. Of all my sisters, Donna was the first to respond, "I'll be there!" One by one we received confirmations. With more people expressing their delight at attending the upcoming celebration, I began to worry. The venue had a maximum occupation of 35 and the number of people interested was pushing that limit. Everyone wanted to come celebrate our union. Then they invited others to come with them. Uh oh.

Sharon's mother and one of her sisters represented her side of the family. All four of my sisters were there. Sharon and I were becoming overwhelmed with the preparations so my sisters, with Jeanne leading the pack, took on doing the room and table decorations. Shannon was the MC and comic relief for the celebration. He was the perfect choice. He revved up the guests, getting the party started! My cousin, Bobby, came from Chicago and brought two of his nieces (one of whom was gay). The room was packed with my friends, many of whom had already embraced Sharon as their friend as well. It was a beautiful thing. It was an unimaginable high point in my life to have my sisters embrace my wife and all my friends whole heartedly. It was another dream come true.



Mom's 90th birthday at Covina Park in southern California with Sarah, Shannon, Sharon, Susie, me and Mom. Everyone is standing side-by-side behind me in my manual wheelchair.



Sharon and me sitting together smiling after saying our wedding vows on June 10, 2017.  
There is a vibrant, decorative cloth hanging on the chapel wall behind us.



My extended family at our wedding celebration: Sharon's mom, my four sisters, Shannon, Sharon's sister and husband, and my cousin, Bobby.



## Chapter 40

### Healing from within

*Times of chaos and challenge can be the most spiritually powerful ... if we are brave enough to rest in their space of uncertainty. Three ways to use our problems as the path to awakening and joy: go to the places that scare you, use poison as medicine, and regard what arises as awakened energy.*

—Pema Chodron

Returning home after weeks in the hospital and rehabilitation center, and my third bout with encephalopathy, I had little faith in my abilities to heal or continue the work of AR. I was still being heralded as an accessibility specialist and offered job opportunities. I just didn't believe I could provide the expertise that was necessary. My previous activities such as: watercolor painting, going outside under my own power and using a phone or computer ceased. My world came to a screeching halt.

By then I had no use of my hands and arms as well as a lack of tone in my torso to sit without support. My speech was soft and my breathing shallow. My only voluntary movement came from my shoulders up. Meeting with an Occupational Therapist, she setup the Eyegaze technology I'd seen while in rehab. Eyegaze tracked my eye movement, once calibrated, I could utilize navigation keys which allowed scrolling, clicking on links and typing on a keyboard. It was cost prohibitive so I contacted Vocational Rehabilitation Services to see they could assist me in purchasing it. Although they had provided funds for me to purchase equipment that would keep me employed in the past, the specialist now believed I was no longer employable. She strung me along for over a month with one request for documentation after another. When I satisfied one request, it seemed

only to fuel her desire to prove my incompetence. This made me angry and more determined to prove her wrong.

Sharon convinced me to use all the money that was gifted us at the wedding celebration to purchase the Eyegaze and a PC SurfacePro to go with it. Once installed, I quickly learned how to use it and the PC. The Eyegaze technology was a lifesaver. Without it, I was completely dependent on others to use the computer to bring up sites of interest and scroll through articles. Subjected to being placed in front of a TV for a full day, watching mindless shows, I thought I'd go mad. Now, with Eyegaze, I could send, receive and respond to emails. Writing notes as reminders, and keeping a schedule, were possible. It made daily life worthwhile and reconnected me to the world, family and friends.

With the loss of my hands and arm movement, I've needed to modify much of the Activities of Daily Living (ADL). In addition to Sharon and my homecare workers spoon feeding me, they needed to rub a cloth on my face if my eye, nose or ear itched. Unable to lift my arms, I could no longer cover my mouth when I sneezed or wipe a tear that might fall. Going down slopes, that before I'd navigated with ease, now required extra attention. Traveling down the threshold ramp when leaving my house, or my van's ramp, I was vulnerable to falling out of my chair. An involuntary spasm could send me toppling to the ground. Since my most recent paralysis, Sharon's done nearly all my homecare and household shopping, cooking and cleaning by herself, with limited assistance by two other homecare workers I've hired. My daily activities have transformed from one who was insanely independent, to one who cannot survive without interdependence. What a wild ride it's been.

Product advancements have made some independent activities possible. My wheelchair was modified so I can drive it with my chin. It is more challenging to control, but it gave me the ability to move independently. I still needed Sharon to keep a close watch on me. My throat has been known to suddenly close, restricting me from speaking or taking a breath. A quick sip of water could prevent an oncoming closure. Just recently, I purchased a stainless-steel water bottle that clips on the back of my powerchair. A long tube winds its way from the bottle to my lips, when secured to my chin drive apparatus. I can sip to my heart's content. This simple act, was extraordinary to me, as I hadn't been able to take a sip of water independently for over 10 years.

Losing trust in my own instincts and ability to move forward in a meaningful way after leaving rehab, I needed to reach deeper than ever before to find a place of joy and contentment. In search of reconciliation, I read the book *Radical*

*Forgiveness*, by Colin Tipping, and applied the processes of self-forgiveness. The forgiveness I sought was for all that I had done that hadn't met with the level of kindness and empathy that I aspired to. Feeling like a failure in a fundamental aspect that I deemed important in life, left me wondering if I might deserve the physically diminished state I experienced.

On numerous sleepless nights, I'd dwell on my regrets and transgressions. As I went through the processes, posed by Tipping, I recognized what kept me from feeling worthy. For some time, I'd carried a heavy load of guilt for some of my life choices. In particular, the turmoil in my family that unfurled, as a result of "coming out" to Mom and Dad. Letting them know I was gay and Mom's stinging retort, "You are so selfish," was something I couldn't disagree with. Coming out was self-serving. Living a lie by letting them believe that I might seek a relationship with a man someday, when in actuality, already being in a loving relationship, pained me. And yet, I knew admitting to the truth might hurt them even more. My desperate desire for them to know, and love the truth of who I am, was overwhelming and led to the action that I knew could end badly. After 30 years, I still didn't know if I'd made the right decision.

A part of Tipping's process was to forgive myself and breathe in the belief that I am a part of the Divine. "This universally attainable space," he wrote, "encompasses all possibilities, all that is good and the embodiment of pure love." This is the place I visited during my first and second spiritual emergences. I've prayed to that place. I'd lost sight of how I was a part of this beauty, no matter my past actions. After going through the practices laid out in Tipping's book, I was willing to believe it and forgive myself. Like with the White Rock experience, I didn't have to understand it, only be open to it, recognize it when it arrives, and accept it in gratitude. Healing from inner wounds may take time, but I was willing to believe it could happen. If I could once again live from the truth of my being, then I'd know my worthiness, and my desire to be free from the suffering that could follow.

Unity of Portland offered an online class based on the book *Gifts of Imperfection*, by Brené Brown. The class was a deep analysis of the book's principles and provided an opportunity to take personal action, in order to embrace our imperfections as triumphs. The book reminded me of my ingenious spirit and that I wasn't giving myself credit for my innate ability to overcome obstacles, while achieving unimaginable feats. I'd forgotten the part of me that is naturally creative. Not knowing where this would lead, I let my creative curiosity express itself.

The classmates challenged each other to tap into their creativity. My commitment was to write stories about times in my life that led to feeling “not good enough.” The exercise became this memoir. Two of my classmates, as a way to keep me accountable, made a commitment to read the journal entries as I composed them. It became apparent that this commitment, to continue writing as a creative way to heal my inner wounds, wouldn’t need encouragement. No longer needing them as my witnesses, I centered my thoughts by way of the written word. The more I wrote, mysterious truths about myself, my actions and my inner motivations began revealing themselves.

Another commitment I made to the class for unleashing my creativity was attempt another way to paint. Familiar with people who found a way to paint by using a mouth stick and attaching a paintbrush to it, I made a commitment to try it. Ordering a mouth stick, I tried and failed, to achieve the degree of artistry I’d enjoyed while painting with my hands. Even so, I continue my efforts. My longing to express my creativity through art continues to drive me on.

In 2018, as a way of reengaging with Access Recreation efforts, I contacted all my AR partners, asking them to look at their parks on AccessTrails and scrutinize their accuracy, so I could make any updates to the web information. Taking a look at their park websites, I wondered if, and where, they’d linked to their AccessTrails webpage, as was agreed upon when we profiled their trails. If not, I asked them to do so. It was good to update my contact list. It felt empowering to reach out, rather than cower when contacted. It reinforced my belief in myself and that I still had a role to play in making advances to the world of accessibility in nature and recreation.

Pushing my level of computer literacy, I created my first website promoting my expertise and my new business, *Access for All, LLC*. Suddenly, I started getting emails from individuals who were interested in the services I provided. The White Rock Experience began happening. Open to life’s unannounced gifts, and saying yes to offers when they’re aligned with my passion and purpose, they began appearing out of nowhere. That familiar flow, the feeling of opportunities, events and individuals coming my way, began happening with no extensive effort on my end.

Looking back on my life now, I can see how my strong spirit has carried me through the best and worst of times. The wild child from birth remains active to this day. I can follow the thread as I sought adventure through adolescence to my senior years. In hindsight, I can see how I’ve been given divinely orchestrated guidance that’s led me in my various, sometimes outlandish, pursuits.

Drawn to connect with people with disabilities, they offered me a glimpse into how empowered and limitless living with a disability can be. When I started experiencing my own limitations, I didn't experience fear or anger. I knew it was not the end, instead, a beginning of living in the fullness life has to offer. Always curious and eager to learn, I can also see how the process of healing began taking place at the very moment of my diagnosis. Foremost in that healing was the relationship with my mother. Never could I have imagined the degree of love and acceptance that she would eventually show to me.

At the end of her life, Mom couldn't express enough how proud she was of me. It amazed her that even though I had a severe disability, I'd never let it stop me. She took delight in the way I'd engage in new adventures, or developed a new career that made a difference in the quality of people's lives. In the last several years of her life, I felt her immense pride, not only in my accomplishments, but that I was her daughter. Through her character and how she lived her life, she instilled a sense of strength and resiliency in all her kids. Both of our parents taught us what it is to love, and be loved. Both demonstrated what resilience in the face of adversity looked like. From my vantage point of being the last child, I've been influenced by the strength, love and choices of both my parents and my four older sisters. I have much to be grateful for in my good fortune of having an abundance of loving friends and family. It's this interconnectedness that has enriched the journey and has helped in my inner healing.

Another wound that needed to be healed was the lifetime use of lies to get what I wanted in the world, and the transgressions that occurred with its use. This healing was difficult to achieve. It took the writing of my memoirs, and deep reflection while doing so, to come to a resolution in the process. Lying was a method for advancing my dreams. It was a tool I used to refine myself, accessing freedom and in a way of defining who I am, then achieving what I knew I was capable of accomplishing. What I realize now, through this "truth experiment," is that I've possessed my robust and resilient character all along. Also, at my young age of 14, when the lies began in earnest, I didn't have the emotional maturity to reach out for the support that could have led to a different avenue for the fulfillment of my desires. Then, when it appeared to work in achieving my dreams of freedom to choose, it just became a habit; one too creatively enticing to break, until it nearly broke me.

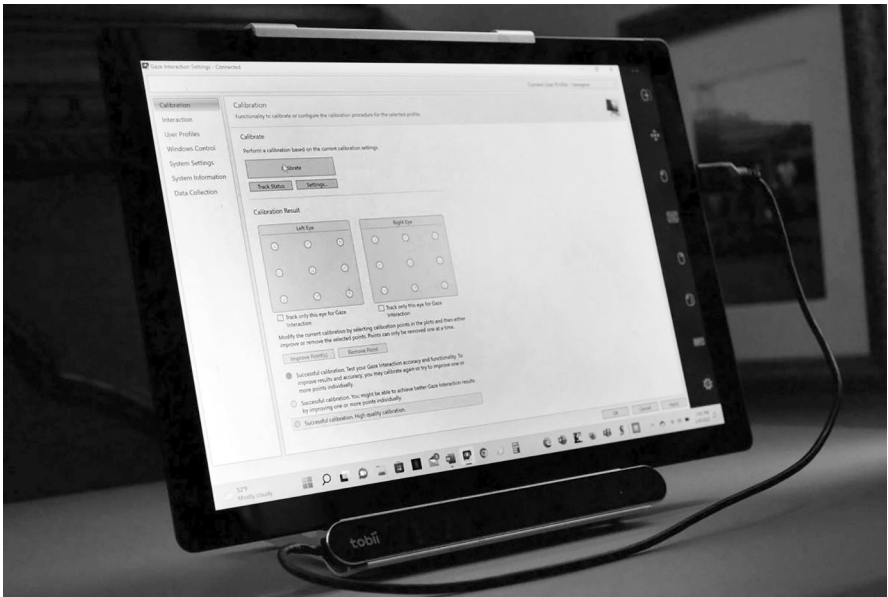
Freedom came when I stopped carrying baggage that needed a cover story. Truth, the more difficult it was to share, became my path to liberation. Admission of my lies (during my 1st and 2nd UTI breakthroughs) to people whom I'd

deceived, led to being open to truth in a new way. Being an open book, speaking and taking action in perfect accord with what I know to be true in the moment, is what I strive to do. I'm a work in progress.

Meeting and loving Sharon has provided a safe space to live the truth of my being in the open. Our relationship has always been based on complete honesty. No longer spending energy hiding my truth, she sees the good, bad and the ugly in me, offering a different perspective that allows me to love all of the places I go, without judgment. She challenges me to look in different directions for answers, and to love deeper. Our laughter at ourselves and at each other is a constant reminder, not to take ourselves too seriously. When we wrap ourselves in knots, grappling with life's challenges, and need a safe space to growl, groan or moan, it's there. At the times we need to shout about the injustices we've seen or experienced, we make time to listen. If space to be alone with our angst or creative pursuits is what we want, it's provided whenever possible. I'm amazed by our resilience and dedication to our individual passions, and with each other. I'd never expected to find someone who I completely synchronized with emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and physically. As Mom said, "Sharon is a God-send in my life."

The love of family, friends, divine providence and plain good luck have enriched my life beyond measure. I've learned to embrace my wild side, knowing that speaking my truth may sting in the moment but is essential for my growing evolution and for change to occur within my life, and those lives with whom I connect. It is when I am fully authentic that I recognize what it is to live a full and empowered life.

What I learn each day is how to love myself through the changes I go through. Loss of my physical and mental being doesn't touch my soul or the essence of who or what I am. In the final hour, it comes from within. The spiritual existence that we've all spun out from, in my belief and experience, is the essence of unconditional love. This means we all have this at our core. Though, I can't see it or often feel this unconditional love, I remain open to this passionate experience, which when manifested, finds a way to produce good things in my life. This became abundantly clear as my inner healing process unfolded.



Eyegaze technology coupled with a Microsoft SurfacePro on my office desk.  
The calibration page is shown on the screen.



Mom and me holding each other tight after she surprised me at the Seattle train station.



Sharon sitting on the edge of a bench next to me in my powerchair, taking a picture with her phone, of the Tualatin River and the forest across the way.



## Chapter 41

### My indomitable spirit

Reflecting on my life has led to the recognition of the determined and steadfast being that I am. My life purpose to play is and has always been, alive and well. I've followed my curiosity, delving deep into the unknown, in the pursuit of what brought me joy. My passion for adventure and search for ways to engage in nature, resulted in remarkable discoveries. At first, I put out a great deal of effort, diligently pushing against any resistance to make things happen. Then, I entered a current of possibilities, where things just seemed to manifest on their own. This is primarily where I reside today.

People are now knocking on my virtual door, wanting me on their committees and willing to pay my worth. Currently, I'm a consultant with the Friends of the Columbia Gorge. Jan was also hired to provide her expertise. The Friends are dedicated to protecting, preserving and stewarding the Columbia Gorge for future generations. Our job has been to inform them of the best practices to embrace in order to accomplish this goal. The majority of people on the committee are people of color. Representation is comprised of women and one man who are Indigenous, African American, Asian and Hispanic. Jan and I brought the white person's accessibility issues to the table. Working on accessibility issues in the Gorge is a full circle moment in my life. This new endeavor brings me back to the passion that led me to create Access Recreation. My awe of living so close to this majestic natural beauty of the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area, and my desire to find hiking trails I can use there with my powerchair, is once again at work. Pretty amazing.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reached out to Access

Recreation for us to assist them in learning how to further inclusion practices on their websites and refuge sites, with a five-year cooperative agreement enacted in early 2021. The USFWS wants their four local refuges to reflect the AR Guideline principles. They hired a youth intern who worked with AR to update the current information on AccessTrails, by going to all 36 of the parks and taking new photos. Then, the local USFWS office promoted their work with Access Recreation to the Director and staff of the USFWS, who were visiting Portland's local FWS Refuges and places of interest. One place they wanted to see was the Education Center, near the Portland Zoo. This is where we would patch in virtually and give a presentation to the Director on the Guidelines and AccessTrails. As it happens, my story of founding AR, told by way of a large display and "comic book" flip-book, is at the Education Center. The Director and staff had a picture taken of themselves in front of my display, before our presentation. Imagine my surprise when they appeared on screen, laughing that they were honored to be in the presence of such a decorated celebrity, before we'd actually met!

The AR team is being asked to provide trainings on the Guidelines and AccessTrails by other agencies. Trailkeepers of Oregon created the Oregon Hikers Field Guide, the go-to online resource on trails throughout Oregon and southern Washington. They sought us to do a training for their staff so that they can apply the Guideline principles to trails in their field guide. Then, they hired us to do another two-part training for their ambassador volunteers. These are the people who have boots on the ground, noting the trail information that will ultimately be in the Hikers Field Guide. It seems this released the floodgates for more to follow suit, because a slew of other federal, state and city agencies began calling me, wanting to setup trainings. The Guideline principles are evolving into a widely recognized and valued resource that we've known it to be, locally.

Access Recreation has received accolades from near and far for its projects. As I was writing this, a writer for the New York Times contacted me to set up an interview with myself, Sharon and the USFWS representatives. The New York Times published the story in February 2022 called *I Wanted That Self-Reliance Back: Disabled Hikers Forge a New Path*. The article is about efforts people living with disabilities have undertaken in order to access outdoor recreation, specifically hiking trails, for people who have been marginalized from accessing these opportunities. The New York Times article, in conjunction with AR's work with the USFWS, was the beginning of propelling AR's efforts nationwide.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service continued promoting the Access Recreation Guideline principles. They developed a national task team, led by our

local FWS partner, to improve all of their websites based on AR's approach to inclusive information sharing. Their goal is to complete this by March of 2024. Because of who's leading the effort, I have no doubt they will succeed at meeting their goal and do it well. It is exciting to watch the spark of an inclusive idea, expand. I couldn't be prouder of all those who have put countless hours of their time and expertise into its making and distribution. It just means more trails will be available to explore for me, and all those looking to explore unknown places, and be reassured as to what to expect before they arrive.

Tools have emerged along my journey that have assisted me in being the indomitable person that I am, with my current level of disability. Paramount of these is the Eyegaze technology, which I use to navigate and type on my computer. It has allowed me to manage the projects of Access Recreation. Using Eyegaze, I wrote agendas, developed trainings and created websites. Focusing my eyes on each letter of the keyboard, I typed this memoir. All of these triumphs have me thinking about unleashing other creative pursuits.

In the last month of this writing, I worked with Vocational Rehabilitation once again to purchase a new Eyegaze technology. (They finally acknowledged that I am employable!) It's called Eyegaze Edge link. Once I master its use, it will allow me to connect to Apple products like my old MacBook and a future iMac. These have creative programs that will increase my ability to create documents that serve my business, enhancing the scope of services I can provide, and perhaps be the key to electronic eye-painting. Before this technological advancement, the Eyegaze only worked with Microsoft products, specifically, the SurfacePro. With the Eyegaze Edge and Eyegaze Edge link, my intent is to create videos using the iMac. Sharon creates all the videos for AccessTrails, with Final Cut Pro on her iMac. Having watched Sharon navigate Final Cut, as her co-producer, I've been able to watch, learn and provide creative suggestions on many of her videos. Thus, I have an advantage in learning how to use it, independently. I hope to relieve Sharon of some aspects of AR that are more burdensome, like creating some of our presentation materials and their accompanying videos. Besides that, it will be so much fun!

My indomitable spirit had a chance to fully express itself when my passion turned to purpose, and I was able to give back to others from the gifts I'd been given. This beautiful give-and-take has brought so much joy and satisfaction. I live in gratitude for my family, friends and co-conspirators, especially Sharon, for being there for me to help make my dreams come true. Their exquisite diversity (different perspectives from my own), and individual oddities, make life amusing,

interesting and extraordinary. I couldn't have done half of my most fabulous adventures without them. This interdependence has increased the joyful moments in the ebb and flow of my life.



Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service and staff  
in front of the display featuring me and the AR team, profiling a trail.  
It's at the Education Center, entitled "Blazing a Trail."



"Blazing a Trail" comic strip. Featuring Georgena, Chuck and Sharon, as we tell the story of the founding of Access Recreation, in comic book form.

# ‘I Wanted That Self-Reliance Back’: Disabled Hikers Forge a New Path

Outdoor enthusiasts with disabilities are pushing to encounter nature on their own terms, with self-written guides, better equipment and even guide dogs trained for the backcountry.



Syren Nagakyrie and Vickie Boyer hike in the Lettuce Lake Conservation Park in Tampa, Fla. Mx. Nagakyrie has begun to write trail guides for national, local and state parks. Todd Anderson for The New York Times

February 2022 *New York Times* cover page titled: “I Wanted That Self-Reliance Back: Disabled Hikers Forge a New Path.” An image of a woman in a wheelchair looking over the railing on a wood bridge.



Leading a field training with the Trailkeepers of Oregon. I am surrounded by eight people as I instruct them on what to pay attention to when profiling a trail for people with different-abilities. Photo credit: Patrick Stark, USFWS.



## Chapter 42

### Interdependence and the future

*All men [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be ... This is the inter-related structure of reality.”*

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Time will tell what comes next in my world. As my history has shown, life is uncertain. Although, I do know one thing for sure, I will continue to approach challenges with the heart of a wild child, a Leo lioness, open to life’s unending possibilities. I believe in the interconnectivity of nature and all sentient beings, and our dependence on one another to grow to our highest potential.

Finding new ways to work together can result in creative solutions that benefit everyone equally. Like the invention of the automatic doors at a grocery store. They benefit the athlete with an arm full of groceries and pushing a kid in a stroller. Not to mention the benefits it provides for someone using a mobility device. The same goes for a moving walkway that transports people across a horizontal or inclined plane, as seen in many airports. It is particularly helpful for slow walkers or people with injuries, but everyone uses it, meeting the various concerns any one individual may have in the moment.

The fisherman's float evolved over time with the assistance of others. A trip to the battery store for a battery to fit in my waterproof case, spiked the interest of one of the staff who used a manual wheelchair. He turned me on to an extraordinary inventor, Steve, who had another battery store, less than 20 blocks away from the other. Through his ingenious vision, he developed the new and improved U-Boat. He took the basic concept to a heightened level of previously unimaginable abilities for the float. Shannon started the ball rolling by purchasing a new fisherman's float that looked more like a "V" shape, as opposed to the previous shape resembling a "U." His thinking was to get me out of sitting in water while I captain the boat. The float he bought would have a seat that elevated me above the water's surface.

Steve ran the shop by himself. When he wasn't with a customer, he had me bring the float into the work station. Lifting the float onto a platform, he asked me to sit in the seat so he could take measurements of my leg and arm lengths. He'd use the numbers to determine how the structure around the float that would support me, lift my legs and attach the equipment, which included two trolling motors.

The innovative design for the motorized float would mount two trolling motors, one on the rear port, and the other on the starboard side. The motors were cut shorter, so the shaft length extended just below the float. Steve would create a central control box with a joystick on top of this waterproof box. When the joystick was moved to the left, the port motor would turn in reverse and the starboard would turn forward, quickly turning the float to the left. The additional motor propelled the float forward at a more rapid pace than my previous U-Boat, depending on the chosen speed. The V-Boat would have 5-levels of speed. The motorized and joystick operated V-Boat could be beneficial to a broad range of people with or without disabilities. It is a fisherman's float, but its usefulness isn't limited to fishermen. As an explorer of the water world, I'm a prime example. The V-Boat provides a silent and unobtrusive way to take in the wonders of nature, with little disturbance to wildlife. (Maybe I'll begin manufacturing these when I have nothing else to do in my 90's!)

In my realm of friends, I have creative geniuses, like Gale. Although recently retired, she bought property with a large shop on it to house her wood working and metal fabricating tools so she can continue to engage in her passions. Together, we have designed numerous one-of-a-kind inventions that have increased the quality and capabilities of my daily activities and work life. Likewise, my good friends, Zekra and Rhia, have been entrepreneurs their entire lives. They have a

tie-dye business that is thriving. Rhia is a scuba divemaster, conducting dive tours, worldwide. They have made my dreams come true of scuba diving in Hawaii. Then, offered another opportunity to float on air, in a simulation tube, that mimicked the feeling of skydiving. *So cool!* These three creative geniuses would move heaven and earth (and they have) to make my dreams come true. I imagine many more outings and accomplishments in my future. I would like to take my motorized fisherman's float to places local and back in Canada. Achievements with Gale are only limited by the extent of our combined creative imaginations. Who knows, I may join Rhia and Zekra on another scuba diving trip to somewhere I've never been before. The opportunity to find and create new ways to play and work are unlimited, especially when others join the effort.

And then there's my favorite tool—Sharon. We joke that Sharon has learned from me how to use her body as a tool, and now we use that as a running joke with each other. Sharon not only meets my physical needs with kind, loving care, she also makes it possible for me to advance my business and creative pursuits. Without her support, Access Recreation may not have happened. She raises me up and never lets me down. Our love seemed divinely orchestrated. Both of us were happily done with relationships. We were more surprised than anyone else that we got together, yet are more confident than anyone that we will remain so. It's due to the love and support of family and these extraordinary individuals that so many opportunities have occurred. I am grateful for all that life has sent my way.

Outside of the support in this world, a divine unknown factor is also at play, affecting possible outcomes. Thinking back through experiences I've had, I can pinpoint different times when something beyond my understanding stepped into my life, steering me in a direction that saved my life. Under the float house, about to take a deep breath of water, I believe it was divine intervention when I heard the resounding, "No!" I felt it in my body, almost like a command, that I attempt to look for one more pocket of air between the logs. It led to my survival. It was the formidable image of a whale, blocking the lights of the island, which made me stop pushing myself in a futile direction. After letting go of trying to win against the fierce sea and driving rain, I surrendered, and laid my head on the front of my kayak, drifting off to sea. I think it was divine providence that directed me to the island shore, so that when I awoke, it was a couple of paddle strokes in front of me, and directly across from my destination. What were the odds of that?

The Kahuna who spoke to me about my purpose, asked me, "Are you aware that you are surrounded by large number of spirits, that are here supporting

you?” I told her, “Yes, I know this.” I’ve always felt surrounded by guardian angels, protecting me from danger in my youth, and visiting me when I was most vulnerable with “White Rock experiences” and through expansive connections while in nature or even when infected by UTI’s. Then, there’s the visits from Dad, after his death. These times brought me to a place of peace. I know I’m not the only soul that is surrounded by benevolent, loving spirits, but I’m grateful to those who have made a difference in mine.

Why did I write this? At first it was to appease my feelings of angst about the harm I may have caused people I loved. In the end, it was a love story to myself so I could recognize and be at peace with the creative way I lived my life. I witnessed my unwavering pursuit of my passions, particularly for the outdoors and nature, and the many ingenious ways I’d devised to be immersed in it after physically waning to near complete immobility. The paralysis only fueled my creativity. MS is definitely *Moving Spirit*. Through MS, I’ve had opportunities for growth, connection and development that I never could have imagined possible. Though, I wouldn’t wish it on my “worst enemy,” if I had one, it’s served to enhance my growth. Observing my life through my actions, juxtaposed with the beliefs that I’ve long carried about them, assisted me in the development of new beliefs, effectively rewriting my stories to reflect the truths I uncovered. This exercise led me to recognize the strong and uniquely creative person that I am.

Once again, I say, “I love my life!” Besides the ongoing challenges caused by sitting for long periods of time, I wouldn’t change a thing. Regularly, I find places to immerse in nature. It doesn’t take much to refresh, energize and find joy, even with a glimpse of natural beauty. Also, I’ve got a long list of extraordinary places that I intend to visit. My life is filled with purpose and opportunities to give back. Living with my soulmate and best friend, and her mother, a fellow lioness with a mischievous spirit, our home environment thrives through regular engagement and light-hearted banter. I’m able to have a close relationship with “Mom” in which we assist each other to live our best life, with some control over life choices and decision-making, in a dignified, self-empowering, manner. It is something I wish I could have done for my own mother, so it’s a pleasure to be here with Sharon’s mom at this stage of her life.

Continuing to dream big and be open to life’s adventures, challenges and seemingly inconsequential gifts, that result in monumental life expansion, I look forward to whatever tomorrow sends my way.

### **Final thoughts**

Looking back on my life, I understand my greatest desire has been to live in the Joy that play and adventure seeking brings and to give to others from a place of abundance. It seems odd that playing would be my life's purpose, as the Kahuna said, but what the hell, so far, it's been a whole lot of fun with great opportunities for growth. My purpose is continuing to evolve. As of now, it reaches far outside myself to include advancing opportunities for people of all abilities to find new ways to play outdoors. It is heartening to bring so much joy to myself and others. I hope my father can look at my life and that I've given my all to whatever I've done, playing my way into full integrity and be proud of his youngest daughter. Hopefully, he sees how his influence made me a better person. And maybe, he'll want to tell me himself sometime and visit me in my dreams!

Two days after writing the words above, Dad visited me in my dream. He and I were paddling in the back end of a canoe. It was one of those vivid dreams; a still frame, like when he showed me his face when I was troubled by not being able to remember what he looked like, after he died. In this latest image, I was enthusiastically reaching forward with my paddle to take the next stroke. I had a wide smile on my face. Dad was behind me, reaching forward with his paddle on the opposite side of the canoe. He was wearing his favorite floppy golf hat, with a calm expression on his face. I asked Dad, "Are you here with me, creating this image?" I received a confirmation by way of an intense body rush. I told him that I would call my sisters in the morning and let them know that I'd heard from him. I felt a calmness envelope me, a feeling of his unconditional love. I know that I'll find a way to paint the image of us paddling together, someday.

### **Physical healing**

I believe it is possible for my body to fully heal even from this place of being completely paralyzed (with the exception of head and shoulder-controlled movement). It might be equally possible that I've made a spiritual agreement to experience life's extremes and to discover new ways to find joy, play and giving back to society through this remarkable journey. Both physical conditions produce extremely different physical perspectives from which to live. I've fully embraced both ways of living. With the gifts that arose through living life with a disability, I'm not sure if given a choice, I'd want to return to my old way of living. Certainly not if it meant giving up any of the miraculous things that happened as a result. Particularly, the MS diagnosis renewed my relationship with Mom and led me to Sharon. It has been a powerful way of being, living both extremes of

physical agility. I believe I have unique qualities: my insatiable desire for outdoor adventure combined with my tenacity, my unending curiosity and openness to embrace different experiences, that leads to finding enjoyment and purpose no matter what manifests in my physical body.

**My daily intention**

Live from a place of unlimited, unbounded possibilities and in all ways be available to physical, emotional and spiritual healing. Do the best I can in all situations. Trust that Spirit's got this (divine loving intelligence), no matter how bleak situations appear.



Gale filing the leg of a rocker in her large home woodworking shop, surrounded by a multitude of tools and large equipment.



Zekra and Rhia with their arms around each other wearing a pink triangle and rainbow-colored tie-dye t-shirts inside their tie-dye booth at Gay Pride.



Floating in a calm ocean in my chin-drive controlled fisherman's float with two trolling motors, I've affectionately dubbed: "The V-Boat." I'm smiling broadly.



Mom looking really cool with her sunglasses and floppy hat, leaning back in a chair on our back deck. She's *ready for action* with her bright violet work gloves on.





Mom and I are racing through the store; she's coming up behind me in my powerchair with her grocery cart, eyeing me and saying words that make me turn and laugh.



Sharon has her hand on my powerchair as we hike along a natural surface trail in an open area scattered with leaves, nearing a heavily treed section of the trail.

Photo credit: Tye Lenert.



Dad's wearing his floppy golf hat, fishing and smoking a cigar, in a motorboat in the Ozarks.



Sarah at about age 4 is standing next to me. I'm on my knees, after my recent diagnosis.

We have our power helmets and belts on, made out of foam, with our arms in the air and triumphant expressions on our faces.

## Acknowledgements

The following are a list of books I was reading in the final days of writing this memoir. They demonstrated what good writing was, and strongly influenced my understanding in the use of descriptive language. Unfortunately for me, I read each after my book had mostly been written. Instead of rewriting the entire book and from start to finish (or bagging the book entirely, in light of its inadequacy), I had the opportunity to go through the book once again, enhancing stories that were originally just told in snapshots. *The Art of Relevance* by Nina Simon – *Devotion* by Patti Smith – *Quantum Revelation* by Paul Levy – *The Light We Carry* by Michelle Obama, are all brilliant works. Each are well worth reading for their extraordinary insights into the ordinary. *Quantum Revelation* provided understanding and context, both to “truth” and the White Rock experience, that I’ve grappled with understanding once I acknowledged their impact in my life. I’m grateful each of these books came my way before the book was published. Each, I believe, have given me the insight that I then attempted to convey, albeit a bit late and minimally, in the book. I extend to them my gratitude for their words, and for their bold courage to expose the truth, when they could have remained silent. It was a testament of how powerful speaking the truth can be, and how one voice can make a difference.

Gale Schmidt, Edie Rylander, Laurie Whittemore, Donna Beaman, Jeanne Pietrosilli, Susan Moran, Sarah Shannon, David Shannon and Sharon Mitchell provided much needed advice about the book’s structure, its relevant content and grammatical mishaps. Gale read the book over-and-over again, providing extraordinarily helpful insights and sighting numerous mistakes in my final drafts

of the book. Her unrelenting support has always been there to help me achieve my dreams. This was definitely a labor of love to make the book the best it could be.

My book advisors insisted that I had something worthy to say, and encouraged new methods to express it with more clarity. As it was the first public manuscript that I'd ever published "alone," they made me feel *less alone*. The book became much stronger, with richer description, as a result of their input. They suggested I "dig deeper" into the stories, thoughts and feelings to support my one sentence observations. It beckoned more thoughtful introspection, which in turn, provided more personal healing and more poignant depth to the story overall. Unfortunately, dear reader, it also added many more pages and thought-filled ramblings to the book. Hopefully, the added clarity did not dampen the passion and healing properties of the book for you. Personally, their honest and heart-felt direction gave me insight on what I'd been missing and longed to unearth in my search for the truth behind my actions. The book may have grown in girth, but their input helped fill in the gaps and repetition in my story and the improbable projection of life circumstances that have unfolded in my life. For this, and for their love and support, I am grateful.

## Appendix

The following are the three writings I did for the Well Arts performance. They were written as a result of a 12-week creative writing program and consequent performance that brought Sharon and me together.

### \*Well Arts writings

#### #1 These hands

I've had a love affair with my hands since I've been aware of my body. I like how square and solid they are. Just like my fathers. We both were naturals at working with our hands. I found I could replicate nearly anything. Just by laying my hands on the material, they would set to work as if having a mind of their own.

It was a hot summer day, and I was building a deck for a friend. I had a fist full of nails in my left hand. I was flipping one nail after another between my forefinger and thumb, in rhythm with my right hand swinging the hammer.

Tink

One nail slipped through my closed fist hitting the deck. I barely gave it a thought. I pulled up the next nail, and kept swinging.

Tink, tink, tink ...

I stopped.

Curious.

Puzzled.

I looked at my left hand, shuffling the nails back in order, tightening my grip. As much as I used my will to resist, the nails fell from my hand. I felt powerless. I watched in shock as the nails fell one by one from my grip to the wooden deck.

At first too astonished to think anything, I went from fascination to horror.

Feeling the full impact of what it would mean to lose my hands. I let my tools drop to the deck. With these hands I had created my whole identity. These hands were my self-confidence. They provided what my intellect could not. They were my living, my loving, my survival, my recreation. I had always felt that my hands embodied my essence. Looking hard at my solid, callused hands, I focused on the life line and heart line that ran across both palms. They met half way across my hands forming one continuous crease. My heart and life as one.

At that moment I felt ill prepared for anything beyond my current experience. It wasn't until much later, as my diagnosis and progression became clear, that I realized that nothing was certain in my life any longer. My semblance of control and independence in my body, once a sure and sacred reality in my life, was in jeopardy.

I understand now, the only thing I can be sure of—the one thing that won't be taken from me—is how I use my heart while I am alive. Yes. My heart and life are one. When I lose my mind, my body, and all that maintains familiarity to myself, I can still have the love I make now. It cannot be taken away. And I find comfort in that. I can rest assured in a quality life.

Beginning with myself, my body and these hands.

## #2 Kaitlin

Kaitlin.

You were 7 and I was 40.

It was as if we were each other—in a different space and time.

I was a stranger, moving into your neighborhood. Somehow, Portland had forgotten all about this street. Nestled, almost invisible, in the midst of industry. There was something magical about it. Large trees disguising its surroundings. In search of it, you could easily pass it by. It dead-ended on the Whittaker slough, a murky polluted waterway, you wouldn't want to touch. And the kids owned the street. It felt safe, and at the same time I could tell it fostered lawlessness by the home industry displayed in people's front yards. Poor and industrious. People just getting by. I felt I could fit in here.

It was obvious that no one on the street felt the same. I was met with sideward glances, and bold mistrusting stares. I was a woman. Alone. Purchasing a piece of property on the wild edge of town. I was a curiosity even in this strange neighborhood.

It was you kids who made me feel welcome. Winding your way down the street, you walked boldly up to this woman who sat alone in this empty lot, where a house had been torched several years before, (presumably by another neighbor). “What are you doing? Do you live here now?” Only kids who had seen it all on this street would believe I could be living in this vacant lot. Just me and my truck.

I loved you all, but Kaitlin, you won my heart. Strong willed, and bold, thoughtful and adventurous. You reminded me of me, or maybe who I wanted to be. You’d meet me at every opportunity. We’d spend the whole day together, talking and working on projects. I was building a house, and you and your gang were my crew. Each day as I drove down to the property on the slough, you would all come streaming from your homes, hanging on to the back of my truck, riding the bumper. I had won your hearts, and consequently I had become an accepted member of the hood.

I worked the week at my cabinet shop in town, and would come out to work the land on the weekends. My hobby was racing outrigger canoes. I relied on my hands and strong body to bring me pleasure, and make my livelihood. I was at the height of my physical ability when I lost my grip.

I would drop my paddle mid-stroke. My finish nailer would slip from my hands. I tripped uncontrollably walking down a level sidewalk.

For the first time in my life, trying harder didn’t work.

Back at the slough, I sit once again, alone in this vacant lot. I have gone through all of the tests and bureaucratic red tape, and I hold the permits and a set of plans in my hands. I am ready to build. I have MS, and am wondering how much time I will have without severe disability, and will it be enough time to complete the project. I have vast community support, and will not have to do it alone. This project encompasses not only my home, but my woodworking studio. By extending myself on building this empire, my dream, will I also be destroying my ability to do the work for which it was intended? Mitzi, my trusted ex-partner, had sat with me only yesterday and had broken down into tears. “Oh Georgena,” she said, “I am so afraid for you. I think in building this house you will destroy yourself.”

As I look over the slough, (which appears absolutely radiant in its beauty), you come to sit beside me. “What are we going to do today?” It hits me what I have to do. “I want you to gather all your friends. I have a camera, and I want to

take pictures of all of you, and of this land.” And we do. When the fun is over, and film is gone, we all stand together. “I have something to tell you. I will not be building here. I have this disease and I may not be strong enough to finish.”

“But we’ll help you!”

“Even with your help, it will not be enough.”

Oh Kaitlin. Without a word, you stand, and walk silently away from us. No fit. No arguing. With one decision I have displaced us both. Taken down by the weight of a reality we do not want to accept. But I have. And you will be forced to also.

In that instant, I became a responsible adult. Something I had successfully avoided all my life. Saddened by this, I felt I was losing this wild and free child I’d nurtured since birth. And in some ways I had, as I went forward making the *appropriate* choices I could live with in an uncertain future. But even as I took on this responsibility for my care, I knew I would do it my own way. I would thrive. I would be the radical disability activist. I would race down the halls in my powerchair, startling passers-by, and show up in places that one would think insurmountable in a wheelchair. I would not lose what was most precious: My love for life, and my love for those two wild children, myself and Kaitlin.

### #3: The Scrapper

I’ll always be a scrapper, just getting by. Some say I live a little too close to the edge (for their comfort). Well, I don’t see the edge as much as the opportunity to fly. The difference between now and before MS, is today I pay a lot closer attention to the wind currents.

It was somewhere in Canada, sometime after I disguised myself as Pearl Wales, from Toronto, in order to get a job, that I learned that I could trust myself to find a way in this world. My way has proven to be somewhat unconventional, but effective. I relied heavily on my hands and my body to make it work.

I find myself in a compromising situation. Compromising myself to my own advantage. I have given in to the idea that this disease does not react well to stress, physical or otherwise. Resistance has been futile. Slamming on the brakes, I have let go, and propelled myself into a new life. The truth is, that since I’ve slowed down, I have come to understand my own pleasure, and take the time to relish in it.



Decadent in my pleasure, luxuriating in life's uncertainty, I remain open to life's crazy adventures. Still a risk taker, these risks center more on my heart than with my body. Just as challenging, I find them infinitely more satisfying.

I grow more and more at ease in this shifting landscape, knowing I will never fully arrive. This is it. And I am ok with that.



Kaitlin (wearing shorts) and her sister are being held up in the air by two other neighborhood kids on my waterfront property. All are bright-eyed with smiles.



