

Single Steps: Strategies for Abundant Living

by
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Dedication

*To Gram, who began, inspired, and will always be part of my
life's journey.*

*Difficult times have helped me to understand better than before,
how infinitely rich and beautiful life is in every way and
that so many things that one goes worrying about
are of no importance whatsoever.*

Isak Dinesen

Introduction

A life's journey

One of my rules for life is that I make every effort to do those things that give me pleasure and joy, and I do them as often as I can. I love my career, so I work at it with a passion. I love public speaking, and I try to do workshops on a regular basis.

I love chocolate and bread, and I eat them way too often.

And, I love to travel. I like the preparation and planning. I like assembling an agenda. I like various forms of travel—by car, by plane, by train, by boat. I like experiencing new things and going to new and unusual places. I like adventure. And, as much as I like the going, I also like the coming back home.

New York City is one of my favorite weekend destinations. I enjoy the theater, the culture, the history, the shopping, the delis, and the street vendor hot dogs. When I go to New York, I try to take someone different with me each time, because it's always nice to see the city through someone else's eyes. That gives me a different perspective on things, especially things that have become too familiar to me.

On one occasion I took my fourteen-year-old great niece, Sami, who, as teenagers often do, brought a whole new vision to things that I had learned to take for granted—Wall Street, the Statue of Liberty, NBC Studios, Ground Zero, Chinatown, and sidewalk shopping. On Sunday, we went to church services at Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Sami's sense of being overwhelmed with its grandeur and affluence recalled my own reaction the first time I visited there.

On the way out of the church, we encountered a woman, most likely in her late seventies, wrapped in a shawl, with her head covered in what my mother would have called a babushka. She stood in the rain with her hand held out, speaking only the word, "Please." As my young niece looked at the old woman, the contrast was enlightening. But more so was my niece's expression as she looked at the poor woman, and then at the church, and then at the woman again.

As we passed by, and I put some money in the woman's hand, Sami asked me if I did that because the woman was poor. I told her that I thought it was important for us to help those in need, and that it was also our way of showing that we were thankful that our life's journey had not required that we survive by begging on the streets. As our grandmother would have said, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Sami didn't quite grasp the philosophy of that, except to say, "But why did God give us the grace and not this old woman?" I could only respond by saying something that I had learned early in my life, that the hardest questions to answer begin with "why." Why does life treat us unfairly sometimes? Why do some people seem to have all the luck? Why do bad things happen to good people?

I learned to stop asking "why" at the age of twenty-five. I was married to my college sweetheart, Ken, who was a Warrant Officer in the Marine Corps. We were living in officer's housing on a base in North Carolina. We had been married for five years and had a nine-month-old son, Christopher. Although I was a teacher by education and profession, I was fortunate enough to be a "stay at home" mom. Life was good.

We were making plans to travel to Pittsburgh to join our families and celebrate our son's first Christmas when my husband received orders for temporary duty in Memphis.

As disappointed as we were, he jokingly reminded me that if the Marine Corps wanted him to have a family, they would have issued him one. He went to Memphis, while Christopher and I headed off to my mother's home in Pittsburgh.

A few days before Christmas, I received a welcome call from Ken saying that he would be coming to Pittsburgh for the holiday after all. He would stay through the New Year and then we would travel back to North Carolina together. He planned to leave for Pittsburgh the next morning and hoped to be with us by dinnertime.

But as dinnertime came and went, I became restless and concerned, as I put Christopher down for the night, and my mother also went to bed. Finally I went to sleep myself, assuming that Ken somehow got delayed and would wake me when he arrived.

Sometime after midnight a ringing phone woke me; and the voice on the other end asked to whom they were speaking. I said I needed to know who was calling. I didn't get an answer to that question, but the caller finally asked me if I was Mrs. Musuneggi. When I said I was, the caller quickly hung up. The noise of the phone had awakened my mother, and as I passed her room to check on Christopher, she asked me who had called. Standing by her bedroom window while I explained, I suddenly saw a police car pull up in front of the house. I ran to the door assuming that somehow our car had broken down and that Ken had gotten a ride from the police. Since this was years before cell phones, I really hadn't expected that he would call from the road.

As I opened the door, it was not my husband after all, but rather two young police officers who greeted me with their heads hung down, as one of them softly said, "We are sorry, ma'am, but there has been a car accident and you need to call the county morgue."

Although I recall very little of what happened during those next few weeks, when I look back at that moment, I realize that I went from being a wife to being a widow . . . from being a part of a family to being a single parent, from living in officer's housing to being homeless, and from being a "stay at home" mom to being unemployed.

That day, life taught me many lessons. I learned that life just happens and that I need to accept that. And in doing so I will learn what I can and can't control. And that asking why will never get me the answers I am looking for. But I **can** ask how. How do I accept what has happened? How do I get on with my life? How do I change the things that I **can** change? How do I not let the things I cannot change overpower me and keep me from building an abundant life for me and my son? And how do I begin my new life's journey?

I began with a single step.