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Learning How To Breathe

Linda Elaine
College of DuPage

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Good scouts don't panic. I wouldn't panic. I needed this mantra to command and comfort me as I drove 770 miles to Columbia, Maryland. Before now, I had never driven more than thirty miles anywhere. I hoped these words could guide and anchor me against the den of fears that inhabited the cave of my stomach.

I looked left into the face of another driver, alone in her luxury car, and felt her eyes say, "What's the big deal, lady? So you're driving to the east coast. I did that twice in college and at least a half dozen times since." My eyes implored her to understand that there had been reasons a forty-year old woman had never traveled alone. She zoomed past and crossed in front of me without signaling. I desperately wanted her kind of confidence to break the dependent-child manacles that had strangled my emotional freedom for nearly twenty-five years. I hoped, on this trip, the shackles would fall off and I could fly free. I pushed into the player one of the many tapes that would be my traveling companions. "Highway One, and the fog rolled out to sea. He was overcome by how it happened all so easily." I listened to the lyrics, listened to my breathing, let my shoulders drop, and turned a zen-like focus to the road.

As the purring of the car's engine played its way into the pulsing guitar and drum rhythms, I thought about balladeer Kenny Loggins exploring his relationship struggles in song. The thundering tympani had raised up his demons and expelled them. I heard my life in his words, and he encouraged me to journey away from the travails of a past that weighed me down like a boulder strapped to my heart.

Thirty miles to Hammond. I'd pass through Gary, my high school hometown, where I had habitually slept to numb the twin feelings of imprisonment and abandonment. A demanding maternal authority policed her barracks like a cruel drill sergeant and issued edicts that I explain, defend, and prove that I was innocent of violating her laws. I had no one else's knowledge, opinions, or experiences to trust, no one else to help me unravel my adolescent emotions. Prohibited from teenage experimentation, my breath and growth were choked off. So I slept.

In that sleep state at fifteen, I met the boy I would later marry, giving Mother more excuses to judge me. She criticized that I had belonged to his family longer than my own. Her words were meant to remind me how stupid she thought I had been to attach myself to a boy at that age. I didn't think I was stupid. I thought I was in love. I might not have been so eager to fall into his arms had the arms of Mother and Father not been perpetually engaged in battle. Anyone's open arms would have sufficed; his were just the nearest.

What I had found at home and in high school was not real love. Real love unconditionally accepts, cares for, and champions. I found that kind of love at thirty-nine, when a woman at work understood, supported, and accepted me. She saw the authentic me, and she helped me see who had been hiding to please others. She exposed the dualities in my life and urged me to integrate them. She was life-giving water; I was a thirsty sponge. Her stability and support encouraged me to value myself. In her presence and in my professional life, I was a confident, assertive woman free to be me. In my personal life, I was a prisoner; he was Bluebeard, the keeper of the keys to life. Like Mother, he controlled what I thought, how I felt, who my friends could be, where I could go, and how long I could stay. I tried to hide the integrated woman I was becoming, but as she grew stronger, she wanted to unlock the prison doors. Eventually, his addictions collided with my evolving and integrated self. Upon impact, and lying in the wreckage of that collision, I woke up.

Like a good girl scout working for her merit badge in courage, I planned my trip of freedom. Triple-A designed the travel path; I reserved a hotel room at my halfway point in Westlake, Ohio; I rented a cell phone, for on-the-road emergencies; I would be driving my new, 1992 Honda Civic. I stowed my insecurities and fears in the back seat and trusted myself.

Eight hours and forty-five minutes after I had left home, I reached Westlake. I had traveled flat terrain all the way, under blue skies, the sun streaming through my windshield. That stranger in her car had been right: My trip had been no big deal. I slept that night like a seasoned traveler, confident I could conquer the remaining 500 miles the next day.

Day two brought clouds, fog, steadily falling rain, and the Appalachian Mountains. I gripped the steering wheel until my palms burned but continued through the mountainous and winding, wet terrain. I had known no other way but to press on, as I had always pressed on in the face of obstacles.

I had not imagined the experience of snaking through this chain of mountains, fog blanketing the air, and driving at the periphery of the peaceful Allegheny and Monogahela Rivers. I had not imagined trees whose arms stretched into the heavens and draped over quiet, wooden cabins. I thought of Thoreau at Walden, Anne Morrow Lindbergh by the sea, and Thomas Merton in his cloister. The mountains reminded me of their retreat to solitude and my desire to retreat to my thoughts, without interruption or contradiction.

With the mountains looming above and the rain drizzling down, I found the self that had lost her way. For miles behind me, the road lay empty. I pulled into a rest area, got out of my car, and breathed in my freedom.