

"My Gutsy Story" Anthology

Real stories of inspiration from authors around the globe

by Sonia Marsh

-Second Edition-



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A collection of inspiring stories from authors around the globe

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Brooke Bridenstine

“Sometimes It Takes a Five-Year Old”

One thing to keep in mind: gutsy is relative. I am reserved by nature, I get that from my grandmother, who readily admits it is not necessarily one of the better traits she handed down. Allow me to illustrate:

The riskiest activity I participated in during those crazy high school days was forking. Forking is exactly what it sounds like; we stuck plastic forks in the ground of the front yard.

I took a job at the first company that gave me an offer because, as a pre-Obama 22-year old, I was concerned about my health insurance. That was a job in insurance administration, not something I ever dreamed of doing, and yet four and a half years later I am still in that line of work. I use line of work because I refuse to call it my career; insurance administration is not my career.

I paid off my first big purchase, a new car, in less than two years because I did not want to keep paying through the nose from the high interest rate.

As you can see, I express traits that more closely align with those of a conservative middle-aged man rather than a woman in her twenties. So it came as quite a surprise to everybody who knew me that this past November I spent a great sum of money (a figure I have not totaled yet) to see the musical *Wicked* thirteen times. After one of the performances, several things were offered as incentives to donate to the organization Broadway Cares/Equity Fights Aids. I made a quick decision to make a sizable donation to go backstage and meet the stars and snap a photo. It was a blast; I was shaking afterwards from the adrenaline coursing through my blood. I saw the show again the next day and actually waited at the stage door to talk to the stars again and have them sign my program and snap a couple more photos. When I relayed the story to my dad, he asked me to send him the photos so he could take a look. Later that week when I was having dinner at his house, his five-year-old son said to me, “Brooke, in the pictures of you with the people from *Wicked* you look really happy.” Kids, they have a gift for getting right to the heart of the matter. I looked really happy because I was really happy.

If going to the theater and writing about theater makes me happy, shouldn't I go after that? I had started a blog a few months earlier, after thinking about it for over a year, but I was not committed enough. That moment crystallized what we all know, but can have difficulty executing: nothing will change if we don't do anything differently than what we were doing before. Now I update at least once a week. And, though it is hard for me to swallow this fact, there is no way to know where it may lead. I won't be able to see a show on stage every week, but if I want to change the direction of my life then I have to start somewhere. There are going to be more pictures of me looking really happy.



Brooke Bridenstine's Bio: I graduated from Iowa State University with a Liberal Arts degree. I currently work in benefits administration. I have a passion for Broadway shows and want to follow that passion. I started blogging last year as a first step to hopefully making writing my full-time job. Thanks for [following my blog](#).

Barbara Hammond

“Flying Blind on a Leap of Faith”

My parents divorced when I was two. My father wasn't part of my life after that. My half-brother was born when I was ten and my mother and step-father separated a year later. Mom worked nights and I was the primary care giver for the baby.

One night, as I was making dinner, I heard a knock at the door. We didn't get visitors very often so this was curious. I made sure the chain was on the door as I opened it. There was a man with a grocery bag in his arms. He said, “Hey! Aren't you going to let your dear old dad in?”

He looked vaguely familiar but from where? He said, “Your mom told me it would be dinner time, am I too late?”

I searched his face and remembered seeing him briefly on my fifth birthday, he was, in fact, my dad. Immediately I thought, “What the hell is he doing here?!”

I let him in. He took his bag of goodies to the kitchen where my brother was sitting in his high chair eating cheerios. As the stranger unpacked the groceries it was obvious he had no idea what kids like to eat, but then how would he?

Mom came home early that night, which was very unusual. She was as giddy as a school girl and falling all over her ex-husband (twice removed). I was actually embarrassed for her.

He stuck around for almost two weeks. Most nights he hung out at the bar where my mother worked. Sometimes he brought dinner home for us, and once he actually took us out to dinner.

Then he was gone. Just when I got used to seeing him when I came home from school he was gone. I wasn't all that emotionally invested but it seemed odd.

Mom came home and informed me... “His other daughter is sick... he loves her more than he loves you so he went home to her. It's your fault.”

Fast forward eleven years... I'm married, living in New Jersey with my husband and two small children of my own. I found a letter in the mail from Florida. A letter from the sister I'd never met. The sister my dad left us for because he loved her more than me.

She had just discovered she had a sister and nephews. She wanted to know anything and everything about this 'wing' of the family. The letter seemed heartfelt to me. I answered her.

Soon after the letter was sent I got a phone call. I heard, “Barb?” I said, “Yes.”

“This is your dad.”

Stunned silence from my end.

“I saw the letter you sent your sister.”

That seemed so strange to me... my sister. What the hell did I know about a sister except YOU love her more than me?

“I would love to see you and really love to see my grandsons!” he said.

Trying to think on my feet I said, “I really can’t afford to fly to Florida right now.”

“I’ll wire you the money!” was his answer.

Holy shit! What do I do now?? I said, “That’s really nice of you but I can’t just pick up and fly to Florida right now.”

“Why?” he asked.

I had no answer.

“Think about it,” he said, “I’ll call you back tomorrow.”

Needless to say I got absolutely no sleep that night. Why would I want to take my kids into this, potentially, hostile environment? Hadn’t he proven he relegated me to second class?

But... there was a sister. I had never had a sister. She seemed genuine about wanting to meet me, learn about my life... get to know her nephews. A sister. I was intrigued... and I had never been to Florida.

My husband thought it was a good idea even though he couldn’t join us. He suggested I leave the return flight open. If I was uncomfortable when I got there I could return the next day. That was my safety net.

I didn’t have an extensive wardrobe in those days but I had every bit of it on my bed trying to decide what to pack as a million questions ran through my head. What if his wife hated me? Would she be the shrew my mother said she was? What if _____ (fill in the blank). My stomach was in knots.

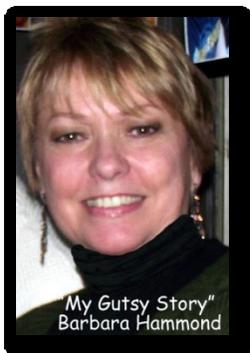
As it turned out I stayed a week. His wife was lovely and I really enjoyed being with my sister. Time with my father was awkward. He kept trying to find common ground and the sad truth... there was none.

He had a horse... I’m not into horses. He had a boat... I don’t swim and fear deep water so that wasn’t happening. He played golf... I had just taken lessons. Eureka!

So on a balmy and overcast day we went out to play golf. I was terrible at it but we enjoyed a peaceable couple of hours. It was a start.

I felt it was good for my kids to get to know their grandfather, since they had no relationship with my mother. Unfortunately over the years my father has shown his true colors and we no longer have a relationship.

I’ve never regretted taking that leap of faith and flying blindly into uncharted territory. I’ve always felt it’s best to know the truth than to wonder.



Barbara Hammond Bio: Barbara is an [Artist](#), Writer/[Blogger](#) and Published Author and illustrator of [The Duffy Chronicles](#), her first children’s book. Blogging made her realize we all have a story. Sometimes we don’t want to expose the underbelly of our story but that is often where the true lessons come from. Our circumstances do not define us. She is a true optimist and living proof that a good sense of humor can get you through almost anything.

Jennifer Hemmeyer

“Wake-Up Call”

Wake up calls come in many forms. For some of us, it can be as simple as magical words uttered by a friend at the right moment. For others, it's a job offer that takes us across the globe. Sometimes, clarity hits us “like a Mac truck”. Mine was a Toyota pick-up truck going twenty-eight miles an hour.

I stepped out into a late July evening, yoga mat tucked under one arm, breathing in the full potential of my liberation. The front door slammed behind me, a tangible barrier between my life as mother of three and my much-anticipated weekly yoga class. I breathed in jasmine and breathed out taco dinner. I breathed in the neighbor's laughter-laced barbecue party and breathed out the Erma Bombeck reality of my domicile.

Had I really been that frazzled by my six-year-old daughter's outburst over wanting to play longer with Jackson, the friend with whom she'd spent her entire afternoon? Yes, yes I had. Had I seriously seen, in my mind's eye, my baby son in six years still not potty-trained and cried over his last diaper change? Yes, yes I had. Had I truly had a little outburst when my older son asked for just one more snack three minutes before the tacos were to be ready? Yes indeed, that had been Yours Truly. This sister needed a break, a different path on which to cycle her hamster wheel of life.

Instead, I proceeded down the same street to my Wednesday night yoga class. I could walk this mile-long route in my sleep. Right on Huntington, left on Tremont, left on Park Way... My angst with the homestead scene diminished as I passed all these familiar houses. I really needed to do something different, I thought as I walked down the exact same streets to the exact same yoga class. I need to create something novel, I thought, as I considered my evening after class – pack lunches, put out breakfast things, check email, do my stretches. I need to do something radical!

Then, the universe did it for me, and there was nothingness.

“Habla espanol tambien?”

“Si. Hace seis meses que estudio en Espana,” (Yes, I studied in Spain for six months) I answer. What a strange setting. The lights are bright. Why am I staring up at the ceiling?

“I think she needs two more,” the speaker says to someone other than me.

“Agreed,” another responds.

Oh, there are more than just the Spanish-speaking guy and myself here.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, noticing that my voice sounds oddly under water.

“We're stitching you up, my dear,” the Spanish-speaking gent informs me.

“Stitches! What happened?”

“You were hit by a truck, sweetie,” the other guy answers. While his tone is gentle, the meaning of his words slap my being.

“The kids...where are they?” In my mind, I jump off the table, but in reality, I just manage to blink.

“They’re fine. Just relax, and we’ll get you all fixed up.”

Over the next few days in the ICU, my mysterious truck-meets-pedestrian history is revealed to me. It turns out that I never made it to yoga. Just yards shy of the rec center building in which my class was housed, the pick-up truck and me made our intimate acquaintance in the crosswalk. I flew through the air like Tinker Bell, but didn’t possess any magic dust for the landing.

I had many, many sedentary weeks to contemplate the direction and purpose of my life while my pelvis knit itself back together. It came to me, through all this thinking, that I had put my life on hold to raise these three lovely offspring of mine. Before their physical existence, I’d lived in Spain and Alaska, practiced karate and violin, sang in a women’s choir, written jaded poetry, and watched the X Files religiously. I’d served on community boards, worked full-time, studied massage therapy, and enjoyed a lot of ethnic food. Once the kiddos appeared, I only traveled to the neighborhood cooperative preschool, rec center, and occasionally drove three hours east with the whole gang to visit my parents. I practiced yoga, hummed in the shower, and picked up a violin to hand to my son so he could practice. I served on not a single board, ate too much spaghetti and pizza, wrote only to-do lists, and watched Clifford. I guess I was waiting for the kids to grow up.

As I sat erect at my dining room table one morning, dutifully performing 15 reps of knee curls to “wake up” my leg muscles, I realized that I would conceivably be waiting another seventeen years to pursue things that I love, as my youngest was not yet eighteen months old. “That’s just not okay,” I blurted out.

“What, does it hurt, Hon?” My concerned husband sat nearby, telecommuting from the desk in the corner.

“I’m not waiting anymore,” I declared, grabbing my walker and hopping down the hall on my better leg. I settled on my bed to make a list of my goals. As soon as possible, I would start running, eat ethnic food again (or at least generously sprinkle red pepper on my meals), travel farther than the neighborhood school, play my violin. I would find a writing group, go have coffee by myself once in a while, play my dusty violin. I felt giddy with the prospect of it all.

A year-and-a-half has passed since that revelation in my dining room. The wheelchair and walker have long since found useful homes, and I’m living my list of goals. My favorite is running. My husband and I took the kids to Disneyland last year and powered through three days, from dawn to dusk, without a nap break. Sometimes, one’s wake up call can just be a pick-up truck rather than a Mac truck.

Oh, and I even follow a different route to the rec center when the moon is full or I’m feeling rebellious.



Jennifer Hemmeyer's Bio: I practice staying present, embracing the moment, and avoiding pick-ups in Portland, Oregon. I am a mom, massage therapist, and writer who writes as often as the muse visits. I am in the final stages of self-publishing my first children's book, *Young Town*, and plan for it to be available within the month. I will happily respond to email at jhemmeyer@gmail.com, as I continue to contemplate blog creation.

Stacia Duvall

“Twenty Push-Ups”

There is a modern-day fairytale that begins like this:

Once upon a time in the midst of raising children, a lovely lady who had grown a bit complacent was surprised one day when her mate of many years said I don't love you anymore. When the last child went off to college, he was with someone who made him feel younger and she was alone.

It was the first time she had lived alone. She ate cereal for dinner on occasion. She let the house get messy. She played her kind of music loudly. She slept in the middle of her king-sized bed. She chose when and where and why and how without consulting anyone.

In the quiet of that empty nest she remembered being 22. She could not recall exactly why she thought he was the one. She could recollect that when college ended and careers began, marriage seemed like the next logical step. She remembered being caught up in a gale of love that had swept in on the wind of fear. Everyone was being selected, one by one. Would she be the person nobody picked?

And suddenly, years later, it had happened. She was not picked and now she was alone.

This was not what she expected when she was young and raising her family and being supportive and living on the assumption that the future would be spent with the person to whom she had vowed her forever.

After time spent wallowing, she decided one day to call upon her remaining strength. She decided that from now on, she needed to do a couple of push-ups and try something new each day. Before long, she could do twenty push-ups and she had traveled by herself to a place a thousand miles away.

She found herself doing things she had never done before, like asking for help and making people worry and undoing another button on her blouse. She felt amazingly strong.

After some time, she started liking the idea of spending the rest of her life with a person she had recently come to know.

Herself.

One day after she realized that how she felt about herself could be called love, a handsome man rode in and tried to “woo” her. He tried and tried but she doubted there was space in herself to love another now that she so loved herself. She was afraid she might go back to where she had been when she was left by her husband.

But the handsome man was patient. He treated her with kindness and consideration unlike anything she had known before, which caused her to consider him differently. She could see in him

quality and value. And she noticed that she smiled more and that her eyes seemed brighter when they were together.

One day as they danced, she told him she loved him. The words popped from her mouth before she had time to think of their meaning. And she knew for a fact there was space in herself to love another.

And the amazingly strong woman could see that whatever way the wind blew and whatever moment of the far-off future she was in, she would not be afraid. For she loved herself.

So she vowed that from that day forward she would be true and loving and faithful.

To herself.

And she felt happy, content, and at peace with that prospect.



Stacia Duvall's Bio: [Stacia Duvall's](http://winsomebella.wordpress.com) Gutsy story is not a story of extreme bravery or challenge but is instead the story of how an ordinary woman chose to become amazing and strong, albeit in her own way. She blogs at <http://winsomebella.wordpress.com> where she shares photographs of extraordinary views and writes about moments that give her pause, the joy of place, the growth of change and the beauty of the commonplace. When not writing or taking pictures, she is a granny who nannies, a yoga devotee, a far-flung traveler and always at the ready for a bike ride in the Rockies.

JoAnn Abraham

For as long as I can remember, my life was constrained by my fear of heights. I was paralyzed by escalators, and in a shopping center would regularly have to ask strangers if I could hold on to them as we went down. Open staircases were impossible. Boat ramps, even though I love to sail, were a horror.

Then I was invited to the wedding of a friend's child. Picture a large yacht floating in a pristine bay. That's where I was. The yacht had been hired by the bride's family for the afternoon. It was dream-like. People were swimming and generally having a wonderful time getting to know the other guests. I had the wonderful good fortune of finding a seat next to the groom's grandmother, Mary. Within minutes, it was clear that, although she had suffered her share of sorrow, she managed to see every glass 3/4 full. I was having such fun talking with her about her adventures that I didn't even notice that a small power boat had come along side. It was offering parasailing to the guests. For those who have never seen a parasail, a person is put in a harness that is attached to a long rope. The other end of the rope is on the speed boat. As soon as the person is secure in the harness the boat takes off, the parachute fills with air, and the person is flying high over the water.

People started to line up, and one after another, they flew. I sat with Mary, averting my eyes from the entire scene. Near the end of the afternoon, someone asked if I wanted a ride. I was about to say no when Mary said, "Why don't you, Dear. You'll love it. I did it for my 80th birthday."

I was stunned. I was sure she'd help me say no. Instead, she egged me on. And because I was more afraid of losing her respect than I was of parasailing, I did it.

I got into the harness, shaking like a leaf. I told the driver that I'd never done it before and that I was seriously afraid of heights. That's when he gunned the motor, and up I went.

In fairness, I must admit that the view was beautiful. But I was terrified. The boat driver had dunked the prior parasailers. They all came up laughing, but even the thought make me want to throw up. So I asked him not to. The good news is that he didn't. I also had a shorter ride than anyone else, because when the rope extended to its fullest, I said quite loudly, "Can I go home now?" Thank goodness, he heard me. I have no idea how, given the vroom of the motor and the whoosh of the wind. I only know I was extremely grateful to land safely back on the yacht.

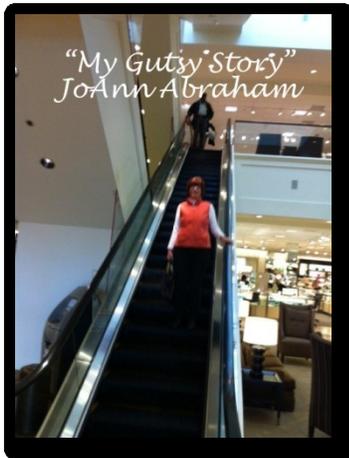
Upon my return, Mary congratulated me. It was small comfort. However, it convinced me that I had to find a way to manage my fear.

Several months later I was talking with a friend who is a psychiatrist. She said she had a patient with an issue so easy to resolve that my friend almost didn't want to charge her. The patient was afraid of driving over a bridge. Why is it so simple to fix, I asked. She said it only required simple phobia therapy, which, if done correctly, can remove the phobia in three sessions.

I almost stopped breathing. Three sessions and I no longer would be paralyzed by escalators, by ramps, by open staircases, by ladders?

I have no idea why I'd never heard of it before, but it worked. After my first session, my homework was to practice going up and down an empty escalator. After the second session, I had to find a boat ramp and negotiate that myself. After the third, I climbed a high ladder.

I'm not going to say I never give heights a thought. I do. Then I realize how relieved I am, and I thank Mary once again for pushing me to learn how to control my fear.



JoAnn Abraham's Bio: JoAnn Abraham has been writing since she was quite young. As an adult, she's edited a biweekly community newspaper, and wrote many of the articles in it. She has also written for business, bridal, and lifestyle magazines. For more than 15 years she was a marketing manager for one of the country's largest non-profits. She also is a motivational speaker. You can contact [JoAnn on Facebook](#).

Esther Goodman

“Holocaust Revelations”

Mom kept over sixty years of her private war locked up inside her.

Mom is a survivor.

On one of my winter visits to NY, Mom and I decided to go through her bedroom closet to organize it.

I worked the top shelf since I was taller. I found a shallow, dusty, box wedged in the back. I took the carton to her bed, where inside I found a brown, worn leather portfolio containing photographs.

“Mom, come over and sit down with me for a minute,” I said.

Mom came to the bed, and that minute turned into four hours. Inside the binder were the only photos she had after WW2. I decided then to write Mom’s story.

One particular photograph piqued my interest—a man, wearing a uniform with Royal Crests on his sleeves. On the back, he wrote,

“Meiner Lieben Rozi,

Als Erinnerung.

Ernest Finch

Eutin, Marz 1946”

“Mom, who is he?” I asked.

“He’s the soldier who saved me.” There was an awkward silence for what seemed like minutes but was only seconds.

“Ernest Finch,” she said, without turning the photo.

“Please tell me what you remember about him,” I said.

“The Germans put us on a train. I don’t know where we went. Above us, I heard the roar of planes. Suddenly, our train was bombed. My cousins and I ran toward the woods. I felt the warm, sticky feel of blood on my neck. I ran as far as I could, until I couldn’t go on. Weak and barely able to breathe, I fell to the ground. I don’t know for how long, but when I saw soldiers. I thought, ‘they’ll kill us for sure’. Next, I remember waking up in a hospital. In the corner, sitting in a chair, much like in the picture, I see him.” Mom pointed to the photo.

“He told me how his troops found us. The day was May 3, 1945. Red Cross came and took us to a hospital. He sent soldiers to stand guard daily for my safety and a few years later, he arranged for my new life in New York.”

‘I must write her story down,’ I promised myself. Living three thousand miles away, I knew this would be difficult. Over sixty years had passed. What will she want to talk about? In years past, the Spielberg Foundation approached Mom for her testimony. She declined them several times. I didn’t want to interrogate her either.

One thought gnawed at me. I must thank Ernest Finch. He deserved that much.

The story I'd like to tell you now is about my journey doing research to get mom's memoir written.

Once back in California, my research began. I posted a note to British Army Of The Rhine, and included Finch's photo. I posted notes and photos to the British War Museum links. I sent notes to Holocaust websites. Months passed, and I didn't hear back from anyone. Discouraged, I kept sending information to every website related to the war effort.

Finally, I received e-mail from someone in London, England. She told me Ernest Finch was her father. My heart raced: finally all these months of research paid off. The pieces fit until she mailed photographs. Clearly, he was not the same soldier. We bonded a friendship. Ms. Finch is still searching for information on her dad. I do what I can to help.

After many months, I found a book about Muna Lubberstedt, the slave labor camp Mom was in after Auschwitz. I contacted the author. He sent me his book, written in German. Rudy Kahrs has been invaluable. He sent me copies of letters, documents, pictures and interpretation of the book. Months later, I got a response from BAOR's website administrator. Phil wrote me, "The uniform Finch wears in the photo shows he was a Warrant Officer. He's someone very important in his Company. I'll do more research and get back to you." I heard nothing more for months.

Later, an Englishman named Alan emailed me with information and book recommendations. Alan confirmed what Phil wrote. Finch was a Warrant Officer, Second Class in the Royal Regiment of Artillery. Alan's months of research led to information that Finch was once 'Ernst Fink', a German who fled Hitler's Germany to go to England. After hearing this, my cousin who was with mom through the war, confirmed Finch spoke German and was Jewish.

After Australia, 'Ernst Fink' went to England. England sent him to France and Germany. He stayed until 1948, serving his Army as an interpreter in the Deportation Camp my mother was placed in.

For a while, information slowed down. How was I going to find him? I wanted to thank him for saving Mom. I tried "Googling" his name but came up short. Alan helped, but came up short too.

Later, Alan found ship registries showing Finch left England for the USA in 1948. The registry listed Ernest's wife. I decided to "Google", and the first listing was an obituary. Mrs. Finch died in 2007. The obituary named two nieces living in San Diego. I used social media to send messages. Two days later, I got a response back. Ernest Finch was her Uncle. He lived in San Diego till 1972, where he died. I did what I set out to do and thank Finch's family for saving Mom on May 3, 1945.

To think; Ernest Finch, the Officer who saved my mothers life lived an hour from me. Imagine, if Finch lived and I found him after 1989, the year I moved to California? Mom came every year to visit for six weeks. Imagine if Ernest Finch and Mom reunited? I wonder to this day if it would have been wonderful, awkward or uneventful given the fact that Mom buried her secrets for so long.

I thank everyone involved for helping me connect the dots to mothers past.

Hopefully one day I can 'Pay it Forward'.



Esther Goodman Bio: Holocaust Revelations is about the journey I took gathering and researching information world wide, and the relationships I formed trying to connect the dots to my mothers past. Because Mom kept her secret from us, her children, I knew very little about what Mom went through in WW2. Writing and researching her story brought me closer to her and helped Mom face her past. Personally, I've never attempted to write let alone finish anything I've ever started. Seeing the photos that first time, prompted me to take a course in Creative Writing. There I was, a 54 year old woman with 17-year-old's goals to write the next graphic or fantasy novel.

Fearing I would bore them with historical non-fiction, I was amazed at how quickly they ate up the information they were getting from Mom's story. I recently finished the first draft of the book tentatively called: *Because of Sergeant Finch*.

You can read [Esther Goodman's blog](#) and join her on her [Facebook page](#). You can also find her on LinkedIn under Es Goodman.

Keren-Niccole Bunnell

“The Guardianship Mission”

“Sunny skies and fair weather today,” reported the Weather Channel app on my iPhone. Indeed, it was a beautiful day with the soft breeze wafting in salt air from the ocean less than a mile away. But today, my brother, three younger sisters and I barely noticed the lovely weather. We were on a mission. I squeezed our white sedan into the last downtown parking space available and chattering in nervous anticipation, we strode down the bustling city streets to arrive at the San Diego Family Claims courthouse. We had received a summons to appear in court per my petition to become the legal guardian of my four siblings who ranged in age from 15 to 19. At 21 I was just barely old enough to do so, and, despite having prepared this with my lawyer for several weeks, I was struggling to keep up an outwardly cool composure.

Standing in a huddle before the imposing, red brick building, I realized that for the past month, the five of us had wandered like sheep without shepherds, confused and bewildered. After years of living in a safe, secure, homeschooled environment, we suddenly found ourselves quite alone in the world. Our father had died in 2007 after a devastating battle with melanoma that had penetrated his brain, changing his personality and slowly robbing him of his memory. One year after our father died, our mother was diagnosed with colon cancer. Month by month we watched her painfully slip away. We had buried her besides Dad only a few weeks before. As the oldest, it was now time for me to step up to the plate and fill the role of head of our little household.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled open the heavy glass door and we walked in. Two security officers, each fully equipped with guns, a radio and a club were on hand to greet us, cheerfully confiscating our bags and dumping them into plastic bins, which were rolled down the conveyor belt into a security checking system.

In the lobby it was hot and crowded with people. An almost tangible presence of problems permeated the room. On a bench against the wall slumped a dejected lady with tangled gray hair, wearing a dirty pink dress. She sat motionless, holding her head in her hands. In one corner, a black man argued loudly with a city employee while in another corner, a haggard mother filled out paperwork with two small boys clinging to her skirt. It seemed that there were sad stories to be read in the eyes of the many troubled individuals we saw there.

We waited anxiously in a noisy hall until a sheriff opened the courtroom door with a flourish. The actual courtroom was quite small and every chair was soon filled as all awaited the appearance of the judge. A hush settled over the room; wisps of muted conversation rose and fell. A baby began to wail; the sheriff scowled. I sat rigidly in my seat, gripping the armrests with sweaty palms as waves of apprehension swept over me. Butterflies fluttered uncomfortably in my stomach. The courtroom officials were busy in their own familiar little world: the stenographer, with her tidy hair and efficient

fingers set up her miniature typing machine; the bailiff in her police uniform, her hair coiled into a smooth bun, was quite pretty; the interpreter, an older, professional-looking Spanish woman, sifted through stacks of papers and gazed around the room with a sigh.

At last, the judge strode in, his long black robe flowing behind him. I watched him with uneasy curiosity as he organized his desk then called up the first case. He looked to be in his fifties and had a definitive air of authority about him. As each group stood to plead their case before him my apprehension deepened. He was neither kind, nor sympathetic. His responses were blunt and impartial, and most of the people went away rejected, rescheduled and frustrated. I quickly discovered that I was right about the sad stories; there was not a happy one among them. Bitterness, anger, even hatred was rife in their voices and gestures.

Standing before the judge was even more intimidating than I had expected. He carefully scrutinized my face as he listened to our lawyer justify my appeal. How grateful I was not to say anything! I would probably have choked up or scrambled my words as I usually do when I'm nervous. When the lawyer finished explaining our situation and pleading our case, the judge sat silent for a long moment. His response shocked everyone in the audience. My breath caught in my throat and stayed there as the judge praised our strength and courage in the face of our circumstances and complimented my siblings for their support and submission. I blushed beet red and my heart flip-flopped wildly. There was a profound hush in the room; even the baby had ceased to wail. "I grant your petition and I whole-heartedly wish you good fortune in your lives," the judge finished. I breathed out a tremendous sigh of relief. With the eyes of everyone upon us, we walked out wreathed in smiles. Notwithstanding our calm and happy exterior, we were really skipping and dancing, singing and shouting in pure delight.

Walking back through the lobby I found that the aura of troubles and heartaches no longer seemed so oppressive. There were brighter and happier days ahead for the careworn people gathered here, just as I knew there would be for us. Leaving the courthouse, we were entering a new phase of our lives in which five, very young adults would be the supreme law-inventors and decision-makers in our childhood home. As we merrily crammed back into our little car, bubbling over with laughter and pride, we did not yet know of the lessons, hardships, sorrows and joys that were in the road ahead.



About Keren-Niccole Bunnell and her family: My dad was a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy and my mom was a stay-at-home mom. She home schooled my four younger siblings and me all the way through high school. Unfortunately, my parents died within three years of each other after devastating battles with cancer. I became the legal guardian of my minor siblings at the age of 21 and now, two years later, the five of us are attending the same university together on full music scholarships.

Besides performing in Southern California as a string quintet, my three sisters, our little brother and I love to backpack and we have section hiked the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to the Anza Borrego desert. For the next four months we are training as a team to run in the Rock & Roll marathon which is held in San Diego (it will be our second marathon). In late spring, we will board an airplane for the very first time and tour the east coast, performing in concerts with our college choir and orchestra. The past two years have been a time of healing and growing together as a family and the future ahead is so exciting!

My website is: <http://bunnellstrings.com/> and you can follow me on [Facebook](#).

Rebecca Hall

“Giving and Receiving Sets the Scene”

As I board the plane, my sister’s words echo in my ears: “Always running away, that’s your problem. Why can’t you settle down?” This had always been my problem, never conventional and at 30, still with no intention to settle down and have kids—instead I was off to the ‘teardrop’ island of Sri Lanka to teach them.

Eager eyes stared and small mouths smiled at me, white teeth gleaming from grubby faces. The weariness of ten travel hours faded as my “Hello!” was answered by a chorus of giggles that erupted from behind cupped hands. Tropical heat simmered in the windowless classroom, yet the children focused with rapt attention on my English lesson. Street sounds assailed, but tiny ears ignored the symphony of horns, vendors’ shouts and temple chanting.

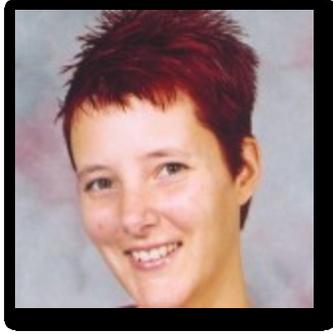
That night, supine in bed I thought once again about my sister’s comments. As the days progressed, I realized I loved being ‘unconventional’, there was nothing ‘wrong’ with me! I loved these kids and everything they taught me about humanity, humility and pureness.

This process of going abroad to a culture severely different to my own helped set precedence. My time in Sri Lanka dulled that nagging voice in the back of my head—that it was wrong for a woman in her 30’s to not be ‘settled’ in a conventional, socially acceptable way. This paved the way for me to then undertake my first degree in my mid-30’s, and receive a very good grade for my International Relations study. What followed was yet more travelling, yet this time settling (of sorts) in the beautiful country of Greece.

Being from Europe, ‘travel’ for me was not ‘travel’ unless it entailed a plane journey of over 4 hours, and CERTAINLY it wasn’t really ‘travel’ if it was in Europe. But who would’ve thought this country on the cusp of Europe could offer such diversity in culture, food and mentality? I LOVE it here and have found myself ‘settling’ for the time being (at least the last 3.5 years), albeit still not with the pre-requisite husband and kids, but I am HAPPY. For the first time in my life, I can honestly say that I LOVE my life...that nagging voice that questions if I am always running away knows the answer: only I know myself, no-one has the right to squash other people’s dreams because they’re perceived out of the ‘norm’ or that person is unconventional.

I hope others have the strength to follow their gut instincts and do what they know is best for them because ultimately, you will be doing everyone else a favor too: a happier and more content ‘you’ benefits everyone else around you. Remember: it’s the unconventional amongst us that help make the biggest changes.

Good luck!



Rebecca Hall's Bio: At 30 years old, Rebecca decided she'd had enough of trying to fit into everybody else's view of how to live life: a long term job (never mind that it bored her, literally, to tears) and now time to find a man to settle down with. So, she sold her apartment, used the money to help fund a 4 month volunteer program teaching English in a rural, provincial school in Sri Lanka before continuing on her worldwide travels to New Zealand, the South Pacific and coast to coast across the USA.

Upon her return, she undertook her first degree and gained a high score for her studies in International Relations & Sociology, proceeded to further study of how to teach English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and is settled for the time being in Athens, Greece teaching English, voiceover work and maintaining a blog about her adventures in this beautiful, historical, misrepresented European country. She has also taught in Cambodia, Cairo Egypt and found herself teaching dour, Russian and Eastern European sailors on board a container ship across the Atlantic Ocean!

Join Rebecca's Website: www.leavingcairo.blogspot.com

Rebecca is on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/LeavingCairo>

Rebecca on Twitter: [@AdventureGreece](https://twitter.com/AdventureGreece)

Rebecca on LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/rebecca-hall/27/871/428>

Teresa Wendel

“Not too many women drive cars like this,” my husband Kurt noted as I admired the vehicle from a distance.

The classic '68 Nova with a hand-lettered “For Sale” sign in the window sported a custom paint job. It came equipped with wide tires and shiny wheels. Sidling up to the car, I opened the driver’s door. The interior was upholstered in slippery black vinyl. It had a new headliner. I slid into the driver’s seat, ran my hand across the dash, and fingered the radio dial. There aren’t many gadgets on the dashboard of a '68 Nova, and I liked that. Cruise control makes me feel out-of-control. So do windshield wipers with three different speeds. Ditto for warning lights that start flashing when any little thing goes wrong. Buttons and switches make me nervous.

Kurt opened the passenger door and took a seat. Feigning indifference but barely hiding his excitement nonetheless, he reached into the glove box and handed me the title. That brawny car belonged to me! I immediately turned the key, clicked on the blinker, and merged into traffic. Four smoking tires left skid marks across the intersection when I gunned the engine and popped the clutch after stalling at the light. Despite that humiliation, the Nova gave me a feeling of complete emancipation. I quickly scanned the street ahead for law enforcement, then exceeded the speed limit for the first time in my life.

The Nova had been in my possession for less than a week when I grazed the garbage can in our driveway and broke the driver’s side mirror. As the tinkle of broken glass assailed my eardrums, I beat my fists on the steering wheel. It wasn’t the damage to my exquisite car that had provoked such anguish. It was the broken mirror that made me moan. At my age, I didn’t need seven years of bad luck.

Hoping to avoid further mishaps, I drove with exaggerated caution along untrafficked back streets and alleys when I headed out to the auto parts store. Despite my safe arrival, I pushed open the door with shaking hands. As I entered the daunting domain of male mechanics, the manly aroma of car care products, gadgets, and tools tickled my nose. Although totally out of my realm, I commenced to cruise the aisles.

When a clerk at last approached me, I bewailed the events of my ill-omened day and bemoaned the adverse vibes provoked by my broken side mirror. “Do you suppose those seven years of bad luck will be revoked once the car mirror’s fixed?” I asked.

He looked at me through his grimy eyeglasses. “Lady, I’m a parts clerk—not a fortuneteller.” After glancing out the window and surveying my pretty car, he shook his head, plucked a mirror from a rack, and plunked it on the counter. He regarded the “designed for a woman” tool kit that I had snagged from a display near the till with disdain before passing it over the scanner.

The surly clerk's attitude left me feeling like a car with four flat tires. When he slammed the till's drawer closed with a flick of a grease-smudged thumb, I snatched up my bag and hurried out the door.

I stared at the side mirror for three days before I opened the box that enclosed it. The instructions, printed in "male-speak," left me muddled and confused. Still, the feminine tool kit that I had purchased begged to be handled. The grips on the screwdrivers, wrenches, and pliers were pastel pink.

Pulling on a pair of Kurt's dirty coveralls to give me inspiration, I jabbed and poked at the broken mirror with a screwdriver for an hour before successfully removing it and fastening on the new one. As long as I was at it, I detached a door panel and tinkered with a sticky latch. I even figured out how to open the hood. Mindful that metal parts and wires had the potential to jolt me, I cautiously pulled out the dipstick. The oil was low, so I added a quart. That simple act gave me a feeling of pride. In all the years that I had driven, I'd never once had the courage to check the fluids in the family car.

Feeling cocky and reckless, I smudged a dab of grease across my left cheek to give me credibility, finger-combed my hair, applied a fresh layer of lipstick, then roared down to the library to check out a book on car repair. The bulky manual weighed at least five hundred pounds. I tucked it under my arm and staggered to the check-out counter.

By the time Kurt had arrived home from work some hours later, I had replaced a few cracked hoses and cleaned up the battery cables. Owning a vehicle is so empowering! I wiped the grease off my cheek with a grimy shop rag before giving my man a hug.

"Not bad for a woman who won't push the buttons on a TV clicker, use a cell phone, or connect to the Internet," Kurt acknowledged after I detailed the events of my day.

"You better watch out, buster. I'm just getting started." I patted the hood of my '68 Nova, then polished off a grease mark with the cuff of my coveralls. "This car's getting a brake job tomorrow."

Kurt raised his eyebrows skeptically, but I gave him a wicked smile.

"Haven't you heard that a woman doesn't reach her mechanical peak until she's over forty?"



Teresa Wendel's Bio: Teresa Wendel's essays and short stories have appeared in national, regional, and local magazines and newspapers. Her collection of 44 interconnected humor essays, *Belly Button Blues—Reflections*, is now [available at amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). She lives in Wenatchee, Washington with her husband Kurt. Follow Teresa on her website: www.bellybuttonblues.wordpress.com, and like her [Bellybuttonblues page](https://www.facebook.com/Bellybuttonblues). You can also join her on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com).

Kathleen Pooler

“Choices and Chances”

Sitting by the bay window on that sunny September day in 1989 soon after we moved from Missouri to Cobleskill, New York, I stared out into the afternoon. I was suspended in a state of pain and worry as I dutifully watched and waited for my fourteen-year old son, Brian, hoping that my anxiety was unjustified. Being a single parent of two teenagers heightened my sense of loneliness and helplessness. I recalled the times I spent waiting for Jim at the dining room window when I was pregnant with Brian. The painful memory repeated itself in brazen detail. I wanted to turn the channel and make it go away. The flashback held me hostage as I sat motionless and scared waiting for the movie I didn't want to watch.

Jolted from my trance by the rattling at the back door, I walked into the kitchen to find Brian opening the door with more caution than seemed necessary.

“Hey, Mom, what's up?” he said, staring at me through glassy eyes as he swayed on unsteady feet. It was painfully reminiscent of his father's look thirteen years before which had precipitated my flight from the marriage. Brian was eighteen months old and his older sister, Leigh Ann, was three when I began my life as a single parent.

He stumbled, reeled and fell on the floor at my feet as I looked on in horror and disbelief. His dark eyes, flashing and blazing from some unknown odorless substance, were fixed somewhere beyond me while I was locked in the reality of the moment. A searing pain in its rawest form pierced me, sending my heavy heart crashing down onto my churning stomach. The panic tried to escape as I struggled to find my next breath.

“No, Brian, please no, not this,” I cried, deep, wracking sobs that left me weak and shattered.

My handsome and sensitive young son, developing and growing into manhood, was slipping away.

Those eyes. That moment. Those eyes that drew me in and captured my heart all those years ago.

I flashed back to a happier day when he was four years old. Intense and thoughtful, he was always concerned about the little things in his world, like his little neighborhood playmates. One summer day after giving him a Popsicle, I snapped a picture of him at the end of the driveway sharing it with his three year old playmate, Becky. Two tykes taking turns licking the dripping orange frozen treat became a precious moment in time etched in my mind and heart.

But the scene before me in 1989 would signal the beginning of many episodic nights of terror as I waited and wondered where Brian was; wondered if he was dead or alive for nearly twenty years to come. I hung tightly to the reins of that young stallion on the first ride of spring. I was spiraling out of control as well, hanging on in nerve-wracking, futile attempts to maintain my own control. The

lessons came slowly as I opened up in Alanon meetings. Loving veterans of alcohol battles listened and consoled as I spewed out floods of tears and pleas of desperation. They helped me to learn to navigate the mine fields of an alcoholic loved one's life.

One snowy March night in 2002 at 2:00 AM a loud tapping at our front door awakened my new husband, Wayne and me from our sleep. We knew from recent phone calls that Brian had relapsed. Looking at each other through foggy eyes, we tried to focus while slowly arising to answer the door as a sense of dread hung over us. Through the glass panel at the side of the door, I saw Brian's tall, dark outline against the soft, fluffy flakes of snow that were coating the trees behind him.

Slowly opening the door, I looked into his dark eyes. They always told me the story. I watched him trying to act normal, shifting his position in awkward attempts to act sober. His breath was stale, but he was neatly groomed in jeans, a sweater and a navy pea coat. He smelled of Aramis cologne.

"Hey, Mom." He said, greeting me casually as if he had just run into me in the grocery store. I hadn't seen him since Christmas.

"Brian," I asked, shaking my head and closing the door as he stepped inside, "what are you doing here?"

"I just drive to Cobleskill. I stopped to see Coach Collins earlier at the school then just hung out with Justin." He paused briefly,

"Mom, I need a place to stay tonight."

"You drove three hours from Connecticut to Cobleskill at this hour?"

"What's wrong with that?" he answered with an escalating edgy tone.

"You're not staying, Brian," Wayne said, as he stood behind me in the hallway.

Brian bristled in response, looking down at the floor with his hands in his jean pockets. Then he fixed his angry glare on me.

Sitting on the couch, I wrapped my arms together and leaned forward on my lap. I knew Wayne was right but how could I turn my only son back out into that snowy night without a place to stay?

Rocking back and forth in silence, I watched Brian stalling for time in the doorway.

After a few moments that felt endless, I walked over to him. Taking a deep breath, I put my arms around his waist and out came the words I knew I had to say: "If anyone knows how to get help, B, you do. I love you very much. Now go do what you know you need to do."

As I watched him walk out into that snowy night to his car, I wondered if I would ever see him alive again.

It was my darkest moment; my only choice and his only chance.

It got worse before it got better but I often think of that night as the time I truly let go. Ten years later, Brian is sober. I believe with all my heart that this decision saved his life.



Kathleen Pooler's Bio: Kathleen Pooler is a writer and a recently retired Family Nurse Practitioner who is working on a memoir about how the power of hope through her faith in God has helped her to transform, heal and transcend life's obstacles and disappointments: divorce, single parenting, loving and letting go of an alcoholic son, cancer and heart failure to live a life of joy and contentment. She believes that hope matters and that we are all strengthened and enlightened when we share our stories. She lives with her husband, Wayne on the 130-acre farm at the foothills of the Adirondacks in Eastern New York State where his grandfather used to have a dairy farm. Wayne grows organic vegetables on four of those acres and sells them at the local farmer's market. Their seven grandsons (3-9) are a constant source of joy to them. She blogs weekly at her Memoir Writer's Journey blog: <http://krpooler.com>, and can be found on [Twitter](#), on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) and [Google+](#) at Kathleen Pooler.

Siv Maria Ottem

My story starts 35 years ago after I had given my son up for adoption. The years in between then and now have left me searching for part of an empty hole in my heart. I tried to fill this empty hole with something else or someone else over and over again. The pain of such loss never goes away no matter how hard you try to replace or ignore it. It is true that the heart can be broken and the soul can be ripped in two and torn. When I left my newborn son in the arms of a stranger I could only hope that the choices others made for me were the right ones. His tiny fingers curled around mine for one last time and holding my breath, I tried to hold back the tears and failed. I learned then that common sense can be cruel. I tried not to look back as I left the hospital but I realize now that I have never stopped.

Years went by and time healed many scars. Yet, every now and then a small blond-haired boy, a certain song, or a faint smell of something familiar would open that scar causing me to bleed again. That is when I would climb into that empty hole and realize just how alone I was. Lucky for me there has always been someone there to help pull me out again.

Fate had been kind to me. I have three beautiful and healthy children as well as a loving husband. The little blond-haired boy had become a man. The song was all but forgotten, yet there was still a faint smell of something familiar that hung in the air. I tried not to dwell on this. I stopped myself whenever I started to wonder where he was, what he was doing and if he was happy.

On the other side of the world there was a young man who also felt a missing part of his life. His search for me began years ago while his parents were still alive. He never gave up hope, and he never stopped trying. Armed with just the name of an Adoption Agency and a helpful social worker his search was made easier because of Facebook. One year ago on May 10th, 2011, that social worker found me, contacted me and put the two of us in touch with each other.

May happens to be an amazing month for me. Do you have a certain month where for some unexplained reason, life grabs you and makes you pay attention? May is that month for me. Maybe my mother, who was born in May, genetically imprinted this month for future events into my DNA. I married my husband in May, my youngest son was born in May, and two children who were lost to me found me once again, in the month of May. Two years ago on May 12th my daughter, who I lost through a messy divorce years ago, found me on Facebook. You cannot possibly imagine the effect this has had on my life and the life of my family. In one year, I gained two more children, two grandchildren, a son-in-law and various new friends, including the estranged father of my first son (who I found on Facebook). My husband became a step-father, my mother a great grandmother, and all my children gained more siblings. My son, who lost both his adoptive parents and had no siblings, suddenly had a huge family with grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins. I often think how overwhelming this must be for him, and how many more surprises are still in store for all of us.

My youngest daughter traveled to the states last summer from Norway to meet both her sister and older brother for the first time. I traveled there soon after and got to spend time with both of them; I also got to meet my grandchildren for the first time. There have been a lot of first times for everyone and this summer there will be even more. My son is coming to visit us and finally meet more members of his family.

We all connected through Facebook and keep in touch using Skype. My son learned a lot about me before we even had the chance to talk. He found my blog “Been There, Done That” on Facebook, went there and read all about me and my life. Questions he has asked himself his entire life were answered in one tiny corner of cyberspace called “Blogger”.

One year ago I got out of bed and started the day with ordinary expectations. When I went to bed the night he found me, I realized that my expectations would never be ordinary again. How could they be? In one year I had given birth to two grown children, and the funny thing is ... No matter how grown up they may be, they still feel like— my babies to me.

All of us can get lost, but thankfully we can also be found.



Siv Maria Ottem's Bio: After living abroad for over 20 years I still feel American, and although I am over 50 I still feel like a teen-ager. What started out as a messy divorce, led to a vacation and turned into a new life. After my vacation, I returned to Minnesota, packed my bags and moved to Norway. Working mostly in the travel or health industry, my passion has always been writing. Living here among Trolls has inspired me to write about them, and the culture surrounding them. Currently I am working on a fantasy novel about a young woman who discovers a

secret that throws her into a world of “Gods and Fairy tales.” One of my short stories should be published in a fantasy anthology this fall.

Marcia Sargent

“The Magic in Doing the Right Thing”

For me, living a gutsy life involved not one turning point, but rather a series of choices that led me on a more difficult path. Some people want to be liked, or rich, or powerful or famous. I’ve always wanted to do the right thing.

Life as a child gave me very little power in a house of an ogre of a father and a ghostlike mother. I learned to lie from my mother as a way to survive my father’s anger and watched her avoid consequences as long as possible.

At the same time I read voraciously all fairytales and myths. Heroes in fairytales are brave and kind, intelligent and honest. They go forth in life and find the magic to slay the dragons, trick the evil witch, and find the golden apples to save the ones they love. Love colored the landscape of my internal world. Finding the magic in the world around me brightened the colors. Recognizing the good in people and avoiding evil ones remains essential to this day. A liar and a procrastinator were not who I wanted to be. I knew I was meant to be a hero.

School offered me an escape from the ogre’s world and eventually I escaped to college, not the expected University of California, but rather a private college half a day away from home. There I learned truth was a gift. The sky did not fall when I told my professors the real story behind my late work or told my friends I didn’t have the money to go to a party or told them what I felt about life. The truth gave them an opportunity to make an informed decision about consequences and friendships.

After graduation, University of the Pacific offered two choices for student teaching: five months in Stockton/Lodi schools or the Collegio Americano in Mexico City. I spoke French but chose Mexico.

I didn’t believe in marriage, but found my Prince Charming and chose to marry in spite of my fears. He wanted children. I feared becoming an ogre or a ghost. I loved him and chose to believe we could raise kids together who would make the world a better place. We had three children. Children do not understand procrastination. It is counter-productive to say to a baby, “Wait another hour or so and I’ll feed you—or change you—or put you down—or pick you up.”

My mother raised six children, cooked meals regularly for fifteen to twenty people, was President of the National Assistance League and Junior Women’s Club, but did not want to work. Watching my ogre dad work for 37 years for a schizophrenic boss reinforced work as a bad thing. I joked about being a kept woman, not realizing the expectations of my parents kept me in prison.

After thirteen years of marriage, I was offered a job teaching at my children’s private school in Hawaii. Work? Me? I didn’t know how. I couldn’t. I shouldn’t. They’ll discover I don’t know what I’m doing.

I said yes.

That yes changed my life. I loved making my own money. I loved going to school everyday. I loved the kids. I still worried they'd discover I wasn't smart, capable, or competent. I did my best to make each day magic. I read teaching books and tried different techniques on my students. I gathered my cohorts of good and learned how to slay the monsters of ignorance. And somewhere along the way I discovered I had the power to change lives, to show the children how to believe in their own magic, and how to slay their own dragons.

We moved back to California. After fifteen years out of college, to continue teaching I needed to pass the California Test of Basic Skills and the National Teacher's Exam. I knew I'd flunk them and I knew I couldn't flunk if I wanted to work as a teacher. Girding my loins, I studied the practice exams. I studied what I didn't know. I passed the CTBS with a perfect score and a 99% on the NTE.

Did I know how to teach Early Age Kindergarten? No. I learned how from books and other teachers. I can dance my sillies out with the best of them. Did I know how to teach third grade? No. I leapt in and learned. Did I know how to teach sixth grade? Could I handle thirty-five twelve-year-olds? No. But I listened to other teachers and took classes on classroom discipline. I made the students work and be responsible and to challenge themselves.

Being the fun teacher, the nice teacher would have been easy. That would not help the students on their hero's journey. Parents said to me, "My student is an A student. If you were a good teacher she would get A's." I told them I didn't give A's. They had to earn them. They'd complain to my principal. I'd defend myself, and my right to expect excellence. My students learned they could earn A's, they could get their work in on time and they could have fun working hard. We lived history—we ate, drank, sang ancient Greece and China.

After almost twenty years as a teacher, an errant soccer ball, a broken neck, two surgeries and constant migraines challenged my life. My choice seemed clear: keep on teaching and die early, or quit and find something else to do.

I quit. Since then I have written and published three books, been to nine major writing conferences, learned about the publishing industry, had an agent, decided to leave my agent, kept learning how to revise, learned how to market my books and myself.

My gutsy life has been in little decisions on a hero's journey. I am brave even when frightened; I am honest even when lies would be easier; I am kind because life is full of witches and demons. I believe in magic—especially the magic of doing the right thing.



Marcia Sargent Bio: A Marine fighter pilot's wife from 1975 until 1987, Marcia observed and interacted with military aviators and their spouses when they still had a great time and damned the consequences. When her husband "Snatch" retired back to Southern California, she issued imperatives in her elementary school classrooms and worked as a social studies and language arts mentor for Saddleback Unified School District. A University of California-Irvine Writing Fellow, she wrote the Interact (Social Studies School Service) simulations *China and Egypt*,

Wing Wife: How to Be Married to a Marine Fighter Pilot, and two YA fantasy/adventure books: *Night Monsters* and *Day Monsters*.

She is the mother of three grown girls and Nana to five children all living in Colorado. She never worries when babysitting, only wishes they lived closer. When not writing, she now walks the sand in Laguna Beach with her husband and a golden retriever named Sir Lancelot. Her cat named Snicklefritz waits at home since he does not like immersion in salt water. You can view Marcia's [website](#) and her [blog](#). Join her on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

Doug Edwards

“Travel... Embrace It Enthusiastically At Any Age”

Medical professionals tell us that our most impressionable learning years are between the ages of one and three years. It is in that early period of our lives that we absorb experiences and teachings without fear, or of any thought or contradiction. We accept with great enthusiasm things that we have been shown or taught.

The reason we don't show any fear, or question, is of course, we don't have any life experience at that early age to compare and question. Our young brain simply cannot “work it out”. It has nothing stored... it has no life experience.

So what goes wrong...where does the enthusiasm go? Nothing goes “wrong”. We just “grow up”. We all have personalities that start developing in our infant years and continue through to the adult stages of our lives.

A slow start. A true story. I was born into a poor working class environment in a town close to London, England. At the age of two, due to my mother becoming ill and unable to care for me, I was put into the care of a “Legal Guardian”, a form of adoption. I can remember the day I was “handed over” as if it were yesterday. At two I had no real idea of what was going on, except to say, a lot of new faces appeared and people paid me attention. It was some years later that I met my mother and father again, but never lived with them.

Things didn't start falling into place until a few years later when I realized that my situation was different, my background was different. I would hear comments such as “it's a pity, he's such a nice boy” and “what will become of him.”

At the age of eleven, I decided that I was not going to stay in England. As loving and caring as my new family was, my young gut feeling told me I needed to make a change. Yes, at eleven, I already didn't like what was becoming my life.

I began looking at world maps and wondered what it would be like to visit Asia, Africa, South America. At school, my favorite class was geography and as luck would have it, an Australian geography teacher from Brisbane took up a post at my school. Little did I know... that a teacher with his black and white home-made movies which he'd brought with him from Oz, showing the fantastic scale and lifestyle of his country, laid the foundation of my dream to live in Australia. Even though I wasn't happy, my enthusiasm to change my situation and see the world never wavered. At age fifteen I knew I wanted to live in Australia and by age twenty-two, here I was.

So what is the point of my life story; the point is that nothing was ever achieved without enthusiasm and determination. When I said to that wonderful Australian teacher, “I think I would like to live in Australia,” in true Aussie style, he remarked, “Don't just think about it, sport...just bloody do it.”

That teacher taught me something else (apart from swear words). The three words that control our growth not only in world travel but in life in general are: fear, doubt and worry. As he pointed out, “it’s not easy but if you can control those three emotions with enthusiasm, the world’s your bloody oyster..mate!”

As I have matured, I have come to the realization; it doesn’t matter where you start in life, it’s where you finish, and along the way adding value to the lives of others without personal gain. In retrospect I can thank a poor start for giving me the strength to move forward, as the founder of AIV Group Travel and the many contacts that I make.

It’s clear we all have a story.



Doug Edwards Bio: In the 80s and 90s I ran a Singles Adventure Club in Melbourne, taking the members around a variety of interstate and intrastate getaways. Lots of friends were made over the years. I organized regular cocktail parties, dinner parties, and exciting sailing and hot-air ballooning trips, to name a few. I am a travelling man. I have vacationed as a family unit, as a couple, in a group, and alone. Ending up in a hotel alone is the main reason I no longer wish to go solo. Now I am the Owner and Operator of All Inclusive Vacations, a global travel club arranging functions and group travel for people over the ages of 45 or 50. You can find Doug Edward’s [all inclusive travel vacations here](#) and join his [Facebook page](#).

Marla Cerise

“Fight, Pray, Love, Laugh, and Cry (Not Always In That Order!)”

My second husband passed away when I was 38. My two youngest boys aged 4 and 6 were the only ones with him the night he died in his sleep of cardiac arrest. I wanted to die then, but my 5 children were my strength and I resolved to make sure I would be there for them in their time of grief. I put my mourning on the back burner and made it my quest for them to mature into strong, capable young adults.

Four years later we suffered another tragedy when my precious stepdaughter Rene (who was 18 and lived with us), was taken from us in a vehicular accident along with the driver, a close friend, just 9 days after we buried my father. I prayed for guidance to continue on with my four remaining children, especially my 19 year old daughter Josette, whom was very close to her sister.

Not long after, Josette came to me and told me Rene came to her in a dream with her long shiny dark hair pulled back in a ponytail wearing a glistening long, white dress. Renee told her it was beautiful where she was and she was very happy!

Josette missed her sister so much! I tried everything including doctors, antidepressants, and therapy but she was inconsolable. I travelled to Chicago three months later to help my mother bury my Nona (who died on November 17th) and soon after coming home, just before Christmas we lost our beloved Josette. She put a pistol to her head in our back yard and again my two youngest boys, George and Geno found her body and called me at work wailing uncontrollably!

It was all I could do to cross over the yellow tape surrounding my house with the help of my loved ones, and walk through my front door that felt like the door to hell! I held out my arms to my boys and we cried in a big heap standing in front of a Christmas tree yet to be decorated. Josette's note begged forgiveness and asked us to pray that she find Rene!

Within days of her death I dreamed I was in a large crowded room and Josette told me she could not find Rene. I saw Rene in the crowd behind her and told Josette to turn around and look. When she saw Rene she smiled and hugged me telling me “Thanks Mom” and ran to her sister as I woke up. I knew then that they were together as they had always been!

After burying our beloved Josette we reluctantly decorated the tree. In past years I would buy the most special ornament for my husband and wrap it for the children to open on Christmas Eve to hang on the tree. It was a very special time for us! This year, sadly we had two more ornaments to add to the collection. Christmas that year was somber as Josette had already bought us gifts. We hung their ornaments tearfully as we prayed for strength.

Four years passed and by the hardest we adjusted to our involuntary fate and learned to laugh again. Then I had a dream in which Josette told me we would all be together again for November 17th, which was my oldest son Christopher's birthday. I interpreted it that they would be there in spirit and looked forward to his birthday with jubilee! I shared my dream with my closest friends for

their interpretations and they agreed with me. My dream was March 19th 2005 and on April 19th 2005 my Christopher was diagnosed with Stage 4 Non Hodgkin's Lymphoma. We were devastated!

Josette always told me she wanted to be my angel and she was now forewarning me of more trials and tribulations to come but also instilling in my faith that there truly was a hereafter despite my silent and sometimes angry objections.

Christopher was tended to by a highly respected oncologist and I took to the health food stores for alternative aid in keeping my son alive. By August of 2005 after intense treatments of chemotherapy and vitamin regimen, the Dr. was amazed at Christopher's progress and felt he would go into remission. We were elated!

Then, August 29th, Hurricane Katrina wielded her evil intent upon New Orleans and all our dreams were dashed. Christopher was in the hospital to receive possibly his last chemotherapy but Katrina had other intentions as she swept across our city and surrounding suburbs bringing normal life as we knew it to a swift halt! There was but a skeleton crew of nurses and Dr.'s and an influx of patients from surrounding hospitals that were rendered uninhabitable. There were no sterile fields for Christopher's infected portable catheter to be replaced and he succumbed after the cancer had time to become immune to the treatments.

I wrestled with the agonizing decision to remove him from the ventilator as advised by the doctors. Watching him suffer ripped my heart apart. My mother was angry with me and in denial when his organs began to shut down and there was nothing else I could do but relieve him of his inevitable pain. He could not talk but I had to ask him one important question and that was had he seen his sisters and Daddy. Although in a coma he nodded his head vehemently and I believed his every last ounce of strength that it took him to reassure me!

My November 17th passed away quietly with his loved ones surrounding him on October 17th, 2005 at the tender young age of 24 as the room grew brighter than normal for a brief moment. I knew then that angels surrounded us in a love that was and is INDESCRIBABLE!

My two remaining sons have grown up wise beyond their age and our Christmas tree is now the TRUE meaning of Christmas!

There is so much more to tell but is difficult to explain in compact form.

How the events changed my life: My children, both alive and deceased have given me strength in more ways than one and the courage to look at life with the wine glass half full! I hope to inspire those who are dealing with tragedies in a positive light so they know that our loved ones are never far away from us...Love is what it's all about!



Marla Cerise Bio: I was born in Rockford, Illinois, and my family moved to New Orleans when I was five. My mother is from Sicily and my father's parents are from Stockholm. I was a medical office manager for 22 years for an ambulatory surgical unit until Hurricane Katrina forced me into retirement. I sometimes work on our shrimp boat with my (Knight in Shining Armor) husband, Will, who has been my rock of Gibraltar throughout the years. I am in the process of writing a book about my family which includes "Our memories of a Haunting." I just finished my first novel, *The Dark Side of New Orleans*, and hope it will soon be published! I am very blessed to have a loving and supporting family and hope to live happily ever after in our 107 year old house in Kentwood, Louisiana!

Marla can be reached via e-mail: ceriseam@bellsouth.net

Jeffrey Crimmel

Mazari Sharif is a much smaller town than the capital of Kabul. Farming and the production of hash and opium remained the source of income in the region. Fields surrounded the town but the cool spring weather kept any planting in limbo.

All that remained of the city were the tall mud walls slowly eroding away. While walking around this ancient ruin I looked from a section of the clay barrier down into the non-existent remains of the city. A camel caravan, with ten or fifteen beasts of burden, used the city barriers as a windbreak while camping overnight. Nothing remained indicating any life ever existed at one time in the enclosed compound.

On one of my photo outings I discovered how dangerous being a foreigner could be in Afghanistan. The event unfolded while returning to the hotel after a walk outside the village. When a traveler finds him or herself in a situation, with the potential to become ugly, remember to maintain a cool head and take the path of least resistance.

I happened to be turning a corner on a rutted road on the outskirts of a residential part of the city. Approaching me were two women, surrounded by their children, after a day of shopping. The Burqa or outer garment worn by the Afghan women hung, pulled back over their heads, revealing their faces. The tent like garb covers the entire body of a woman in Afghanistan and is never removed until she returns to her home.

The women must have been near their houses and were not expecting a foreigner to be coming around the corner. They quickly pulled the Burqas back over their faces and were again hidden from the outsider approaching them. Only a small net in the Burqa, around the eye sockets, remained as an opening. The small breach enabled the women to see and breathe while walking.

The mothers seemed angry with me for having observed their exposed head and face. I could tell by the tone in their voice, when they passed, the event was a major taboo. I kept walking.

Twenty feet separated me from the group of shoppers when rocks began hitting the ground near my body. The young boys, accompanying their mothers, prepared to defend the family honor by stoning the infidel. These boys were not much older than eight or nine. Lucky for me their aim sucked. I turned around to face them and thought about making a charge.

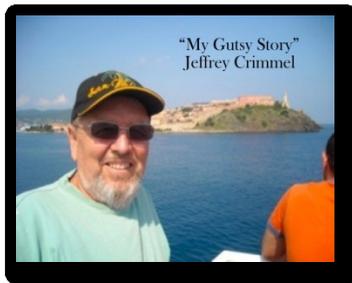
It is times like this one must realize, "I am in a foreign country and I better be sure I make good decisions."

Instead of rushing at the children like a crazed Oakland Raider fan hoping to scare the crap out of them, I kept walking away, doing so while increasing my pace. I needed to lengthen my distance from the young boys. Eight-year-olds attempting to make their first honor killing could become quite nasty.

The children did not follow nor did an incensed adult male come running around the corner trying to complete the stoning attempt made by the young rock throwers. I still needed fifteen

minutes before reaching the safety of the hotel. Once inside the hotel wall I relaxed. I left the next day on the bus back to Kabul, feeling lucky to tell the tale.

The lesson here is for all of us who travel to foreign countries. Just because a culture has customs different than ours, we are only in their country as visitors. If a country needs to change then it will have to come from their people to be real change, not some judgmental visitor wondering why the rest of the world cannot be just like their country. I have visited over 30 countries in my travels and this lesson alone has allowed me to enjoy different cultures to their fullest and still come out unscathed.



Jeff Crimmel Bio: Jeff Crimmel is a retired teacher who has been teaching Special Needs students in California and Arizona for 23 years. He moved to Arizona with his wife Suzanne from Sebastopol, CA, in 2000 after they visited the Southwest in 1998. In the summer of 2009, after retiring from teaching, Jeff decided to write down his nine years around-the-world journey from 1970-1979, after his two daughters kept asking about how he met their mother in India and what happened during that time. After *Living Beneath the Radar* was published, Jeff and his wife moved to Phoenix in 2010 for a year and finally in the summer of 2011 made their way to the small community of San Felipe in Baja where the author wrote two books, *Learning to Love the Peso*, and *Centavo, a Dog From Mexico*. The fourth book, *The 60's; If You Remember It You Didn't Live It* is in the process of being written. (If I can remember anything.)

You can find Jeffrey on Twitter [@Livingbeneath](#), on his [website](#) and connect with him on [Facebook](#).