

"The Hard Path"

By Sharon Murphy

It had been three days since I had gotten out of bed in any meaningful way. Used tissues lay strewn about my bed, floor, and nightstand because the effort of getting out of bed to throw them into a wastebasket was more effort than I could muster. My eyes were puffy from the uncontrollable, marathon crying jags that were so deeply wrought they caused my body to ache. This is the state that I was in when my mind began to gain clarity, emerging from the trauma and subsequent daze which began three days earlier when my husband told me he wanted a divorce. The 'D' word, a four letter word to someone who was ostensibly the model suburban wife of a high achieving executive. We had it all; the big house, nice cars, vacations, 3 wonderful children, and two dogs. By all appearances we were the perfect couple, but appearances can be deceiving and behind closed doors we were far from perfect. So I lied. I lied to myself about the state of my marriage and I lied to other people through omission, never revealing the unhappiness that was manifest behind closed doors. Here I lay brokenhearted and betrayed; I had no higher education, no money of my own, no work history, no family nearby, and no self-confidence.

Following my husbands declaration that he wanted a divorce and my subsequent three day crying jag, I knew

with absolute clarity that I had two paths forward; one took me down the path of bitterness, hostility, self-pity, and victimhood, while the other took me down a path of self-sufficiency, pride, and growth. One path was a very easy, low friction path but it had a very heavy price in that I would become a person that I did not want to be. I did not want to be a bitter person. This was the status quo path where I would stay in my suburban bubble, keep my familiar social circles, and maybe find a job in retail. The other path would be much harder, a full-friction journey with numerous barriers to success thrown in, but if I succeeded then the payoff would be huge and I would be financially and emotionally self-sufficient. The decision was easy to make. I got out of bed, showered and dressed, then I sat down at my computer and began the process of applying to study full-time at Georgia State University.

The day my acceptance letter arrived I burst into tears, overcome with happiness and relief as the fears of the consequences of rejection dissipated. I was on my way, though I wasn't sure where, but at least I was moving forward. I was going to leave my upper middle-class, suburban enclave that was familiar and comfortable, to enter into an urban environment full of people who challenged my beliefs and life assumptions in ways that I had never before experienced. Importantly, for the

first time in my life I was an outlier, I was a much older person expected to function in an environment filled with and geared towards youth.

Two and a half years later I graduated summa cum laud with a Bachelors degree, and I followed this up by earning 2 Master's degrees. I had discovered my voice and began writing my own story, one where I was competent, intelligent, and likable.

This is not the story of an exceptional person overcoming due to innate ability or talent. This journey was not easy, not for a single moment. There were many tears shed, moments of self-doubt, a lot of anger at my life situation, grief at the loss of my former life and identity, fear of the consequences of failure, and overwhelming mental fatigue. I was buoyed by my new college friends who were wonderfully diverse by all measures; race, age, lifestyle, and background. They were people who I would have never had the opportunity to meet had I remained ensconced in the suburban bubble that I had always known. These people were hip, urban, fun, tattooed, funky, LGBTQ, young and old, who opened their hearts to my older, white, suburban, 99%-er, mom-ness self without hesitation or judgement.

As a geographical construct, 'place' embodies all those variables that define and influence the behaviors and

cultural norms of the people who live there. My former 'place' created a suite of unconscious biases that influenced my world view in ways that I had been blind to. Not until I was forced out of my comfortable and familiar 'place' and into a new 'place' could I recognize just how many of the assumptions that I based my world view on were wrong. Similar to when I was prescribed glasses when I was 13 and I was astonished at all the details that were revealed to me that I had previously not known existed even though I stared at them daily. Trees were not supposed to be nebulous blobs of green and brown as I had always experienced them, but in reality were full of definition, individual movement and color. I now view the world through a new lens that allows me to finally 'see' and appreciate the life experiences that inform the world view of people very different from myself. My new 'place' has become home, and I wouldn't go back for all the McMansions in the world.