



The Orange Chair
Life from where I sit.

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Ciao!



I've been in more of a pondering than a proclaiming mood recently. ~ a friend

Thanks to everyone (all 18 of you) who subscribed to and actually read The Orange Chair. I hope it gave you something worthwhile. As for me, it's time to write less and live more. It's time to expand.

In other words, it's time to get my ass outta the chair!

Blue Sky Crazy



According to [Megan](#) (according to [Genie](#)), to blue sky is “to float big ideas around, like brainstorming with no limits.” It’s “thinking an idea that’s not subject to limits” or “to play suppose.”

The truth is, I am not much of a blue sky kind of person. I like to think I am, I try to fool you into thinking I am, but honestly, I am way more rigid and stay-between-the-lines than I really want to admit.

The bottom line is, I am, at my core, not a highly imaginative thinker or creator. At least not one who naturally allows herself to think outside her own tight-fitting box. Right now, less than two paragraphs into this, and I’ve gone back and read and re-read, corrected punctuation and spelling and word choice, not giving over to chance that I can spit out what needs to be said.

When it comes to writing, I realize, I put way too much emphasis on the finished project. Way too much worry that I won’t be able to express what I’m trying to say, and not enough freedom to allow it to go the places it might want to go on its own. That keeps me from starting (can you say finishing?) a lot of writing projects. (But I’ve not written in I don’t know how many months and I don’t care if this sucks or not. The bitch is getting done.)

I remember in college, trying to write a paper about something particularly emotional. One weekend, an entire refrigerator’s worth of food, and about 40 handwritten pages later, I went to my professor and admitted defeat. The problem was, though, I never took that project from beginning to end because I couldn’t just let go and do it, quality be damned. And I’m like that with my photography, too. And my clothes. And my makeup. And my, well, you get the point.

And I don't know if it's choosing to stay within the comfort level that causes such stagnation, but I do know that it is *Boring*.

I don't know if it's choosing to stay within the comfort level that causes such stagnation.

Well that thought came out of the Blue Skies! And yep. At least for me, that's it. I'm choosing to stay in the comfort level. Blue skies don't exist in the comfort level. Clouds don't turn into puppy dogs in the comfort level. And puppy dogs don't become books. That doesn't make sense, but you get my point. You can't create if you ain't a little crazy and you can't be crazy if you're comfortable and bored.

An artist finds her place in the world by creating, by allowing her crazy to flow. I know that I come alive when I jump out of my comfort zone and head west. That's when I feel closest to who I am, a little bit of freedom and crazy. That's a Blue Sky that is somehow part of my juice. I don't think that an artist ~ whether the art is photography or writing, or quilting or the art of designing a life ~ can afford to let rigidity or doubt or fear of the not-good-enough-monster stifle the creative process. This is the very process that we know, when we are creating, allows us to learn about ourselves and expand that self we're learning about.

A confident creator (and how I strive to be that) gets out of the self-imposed comfort zone. She tosses into the air whatever keeps poking at her, no matter how stupid it sounds, no matter how long it takes, and she knocks that freaking doubt outta her way and she writes and writes and writes until she's got it all down and she's said what she needs to say. Until she finds her voice.

And believe me, baby, we all have a voice.

Message from a Dead Rose



Tomorrow is Candlemas. Midway between the winter solstice and the sprint equinox, this is considered the beginning of spring in many traditions. The promise of new light and renewal of life after a dark winter. Today, February 1st, is the feast day of St. Brigid, who began her life as a pagan goddess of fire and fertility and ended up a Christian saint (that happened a lot). She is also the goddess of creative inspiration.

In the spirit of the season, this is a good time to sit and reflect on where you've been and where you want to go in the coming year. What makes you passionate? What do you want to accomplish? What can you do to unleash your creative side? What brings forth your light from the darkness? What makes you feel *alive*?

About 7 months ago I bought myself a bouquet of miniature roses as a housewarming present. My thumb is not green and they quickly died, but I couldn't bring myself to throw them away. This past Sunday, I photographed the flower that should have been thrown out months ago, and I kept thinking of the words to Bette Midler's song, *The Rose*:

It's the heart, afraid of breaking

that never learns to dance.

It's the dream, afraid of waking

that never takes the chance.

It's the one who won't be taken

who cannot seem to give.

And the soul, afraid of dying

that never learns to live.

I've been told I tend to hold on to the past. But I've discovered over the last several months that while other people may easily move forward without looking back, that peek into the rear view mirror is essential to seeing where I'm going up ahead. I can't bury the pivotal moments of my life under a rug, which is evident by the bookshelf full of journals I've accumulated over the past 31 years. I want to soak it all in ~ the pleasure, the pain, the mistakes and the magic, and I want to know that I am who I am because of it, not in spite of it. I am, at my essence, one who must find meaning in order to find forward movement. I simply know no other way. And I simply don't want to be one of those people afraid to live.

The Dream is For Sale



Is there something that you've always wanted to do?

Have you, for whatever reason, pushed it to the back of your mind?

To the bottom of your list?

Does it still call to you?

When you wake in the morning, are you filled with anticipation and joy?

Or fear and dread?

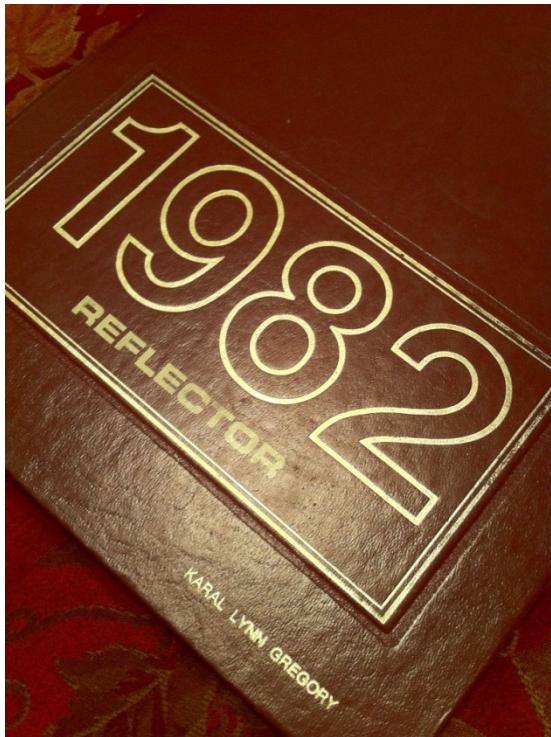
Is that fear holding you back?

What if fear is just a feeling?

Designed to hold you back?

Is your dream for sale?

Reflections of Acceptance



A Living Out Loud entry. (v21.) Back to School.

It's hard to believe that over 28 years have passed since the LCHS class of '82 stood together, all of us, for the last time, in the same place. Diplomas in hand, futures in sight, we stepped out of that high school gym and walked away, each in our own direction.

I graduated with a 2.5 gpa ~ a slightly better than mediocre student, if numbers are any indication. Personally I don't believe they are, as several years later I was accepted into JMU (though because I had a prime job in the Oceanography Department, I chose to continue at ODU). And those Gifted and Talented programs? Seemed to be more about who your parents were than anything else. But the truth is, in high school, I really didn't "apply" myself. I studied the boys more than I studied the books, I gabbed on the phone more than I grabbed at knowledge. As my former junior and senior year English instructor (now Facebook friend) describes it, I was "other-minded." I got my one *F* from him and was in his class when the seat of my pants decided to split, so I guess he's as good a judge as any since I showed my butt in his presence more than once.

In actuality, I'd have to stay that fitting in was more important to me than my academic or adult future. I was born in Louisa, but moved away after 3rd grade. So when we came back in the 8th, I had the background of a local, but I didn't have the history of a native. Nelson County, where we'd lived for those in-between years, never felt like home to me, so I dove full-speed ahead into returning to Louisa and being one of the "in" people, the cool people ~ whatever that was supposed to be.

In actuality, I was not cool and I never really felt “in”. I wore goofy glasses. I didn’t own a pair of Levi jeans or Nike running shoes till my senior year, and the pair I owned was the only pair. My mom was a single working parent, and I was the girl who went shopping with her friends and brought 10\$ along while they spent the day in the mall with mama’s credit card. I was also the girl who felt the shame when one of those friend’s older sisters thought that was funny. Back then, I had no voice, and I kept a lot of things to myself.

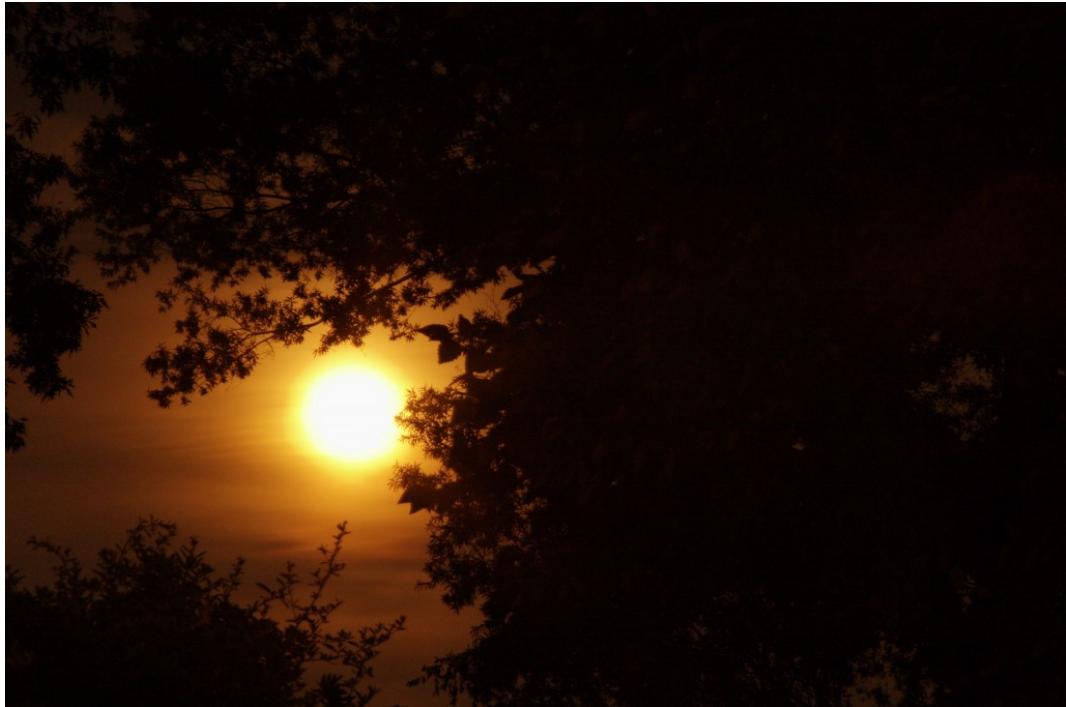
Truthfully, back then, I just wanted to be accepted. I had no confidence. Not really. And no clear idea of who I was or what I believed in. Maybe all of us felt like that. Maybe some of us were just better at covering it up than others. I’ve always worn my heart on my sleeve and my emotions on my face, so if I did pull off something that looked like confidence, it’s probably because most everybody else was feeling just like me. As *The Breakfast Club* clearly pointed out, what you saw, if you bothered to look, wasn’t even close to what was there. But how many of us bothered to look? I know I didn’t, and I’ve since learned, by talking with several people, that things were not at all what they seemed.

In the years since we graduated, we’ve taken the bumps and the bruises, the challenges and the changes, the love and the loss. The ride, we hope, I believe, has shaped us into older and better, versions of the kids we were back then. For most of those 28 years, I kept in touch with a few people off and on, but through my late 30s the need to reconnect grew stronger. I now have a core group of women from high school that I talk to if not daily, weekly. Thanks to Facebook, plans to reconnect at a football game last October grew into an impromptu 27th year mini-reunion that was well attended. And, since then, I’ve become reacquainted with many of the people I knew before, but didn’t really *know*.

As for myself, I don’t really know who other people saw when they looked at me, back then, and now, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is here, today, and where tomorrow leads. I know who I am, I know what I believe in, and I know that things change quickly enough that I could redefine it all tomorrow, and that’s alright. Who I am today doesn’t eat meat, believes in God but not religion, will stand by and defend her friends till the end, and can’t imagine wasting tons of money on new clothes in a store when thrift stores *so* rock. It’s still about acceptance, only now it comes from me.

Now, about that \$10. . . . I bought the cutest little purple shirt with gold thread (we’re talking 1979 here) and wore it to the sock hops. Oh ~ and if anyone out there knows anything about the postcard with the chorus lyrics from [*Dear Abby*](#) by John Prine, . . . the one that was stuck to my windshield our junior year . . . I’d love to solve that little mystery . . . you definitely saw my tendency to see the world through a glass half empty. To the Class of 82: I look forward to seeing you in 2012, if not before. Until then, don’t stop believin’ . . . and roll with the changes.

Letting Go



When it hurts so bad, it's because I am hanging on so tight.

The Fabric Of Your Life

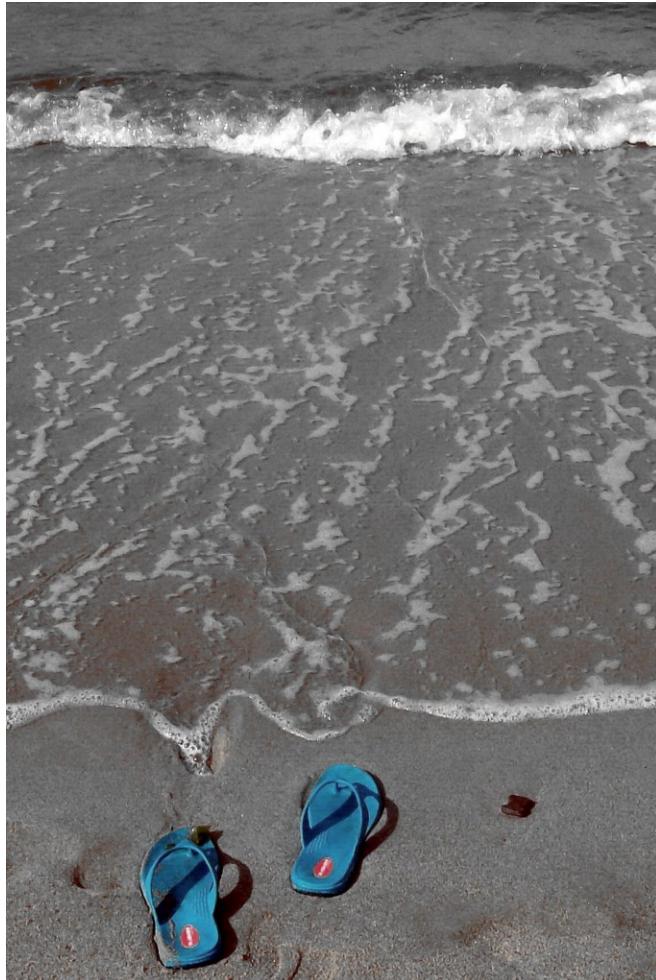


That colorful, vibrant, beautiful thing passing by . . .

That's your life.

Go get it!

On Silence



Buddha's silence was the result of a profound harmony with himself and with the world outside.

Hippies Use Backdoor



I reckon there's a whole different view and probably a lot more fun back there.

ASSuming You Know Me



I put this bumper

sticker on my truck last winter.

I was driving out to California alone with my two dogs.

I wanted something visible that said independent, tough, courageous, strong.

Kick Ass.

So I threw the sticker in my back window and never gave it another thought.

Occasionally someone would ask me about it and I'd explain why it was there.

Then, on my last day in Cali, my very dear friend told me a funny story.

We'd met when I looked at the cottage she had for rent, eventually choosing something else.

Her tenants, next door to where I would have lived, were minimalists.

I was endeared to them immediately.

Free spirits and travelers, not encumbered with the weight of society's convention.

Things and bills and ideas and such.

But I always thought it odd that they would seem to avoid me when we saw each other at Von's.

And I figured it must be my own imagination and self-confidence.

Turns out they were wary of me.

“You can tell a lot about a person by the car they drive.”

Can you, really, now?

I spent over an hour in the Washington National Cathedral on Saturday.

I even sat and said a prayer for some spirit friends.

If you saw me, you probably would have assumed I am a Christian.

Until you saw me get in my truck.

If, that is, you make assumptions based on things like that.

And now I can’t help but wonder, when I chose that bumper sticker . . .

did I?

Still in Sight of the Shore



Solitude is a good thing.

You are never, ever, truly alone.

Reflections of You



Art and life are reflections of creativity and possibility.
What we create is up to us.

The One I Answer To



I can honestly say I like who I see, when I see my shadow looking back at me.

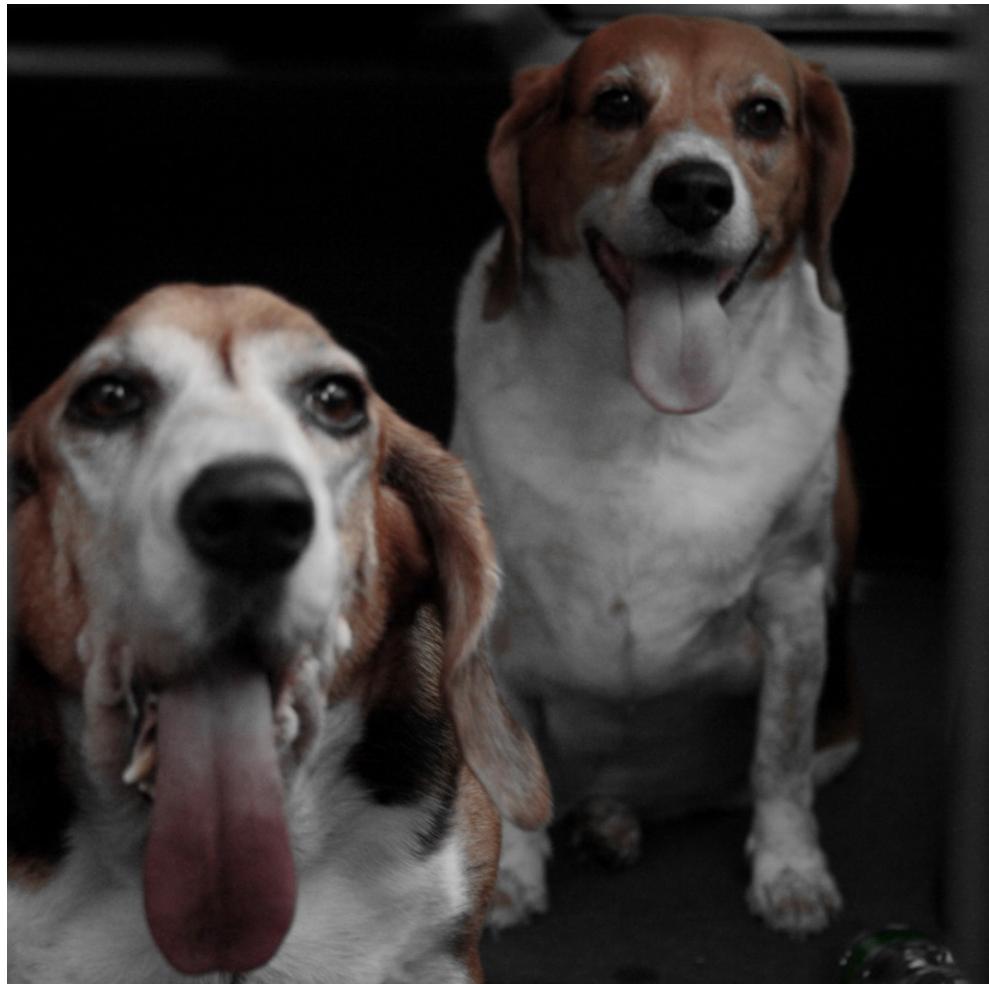
Shouldn't Be That Hard ...



Be still and listen.

~ *A Course in Miracles* (T.31.II.7.2)

West Hollywood Wisdom



“Never Stop Smiling!”

~ Elderly gentleman to me in passing, while walking around the
historic and eclectic Fairfax Avenue area of Los Angeles.

April 3, 2010

(What he actually said was, “You have a beautiful smile. Never stop smiling!”)

solitary seaside sunday

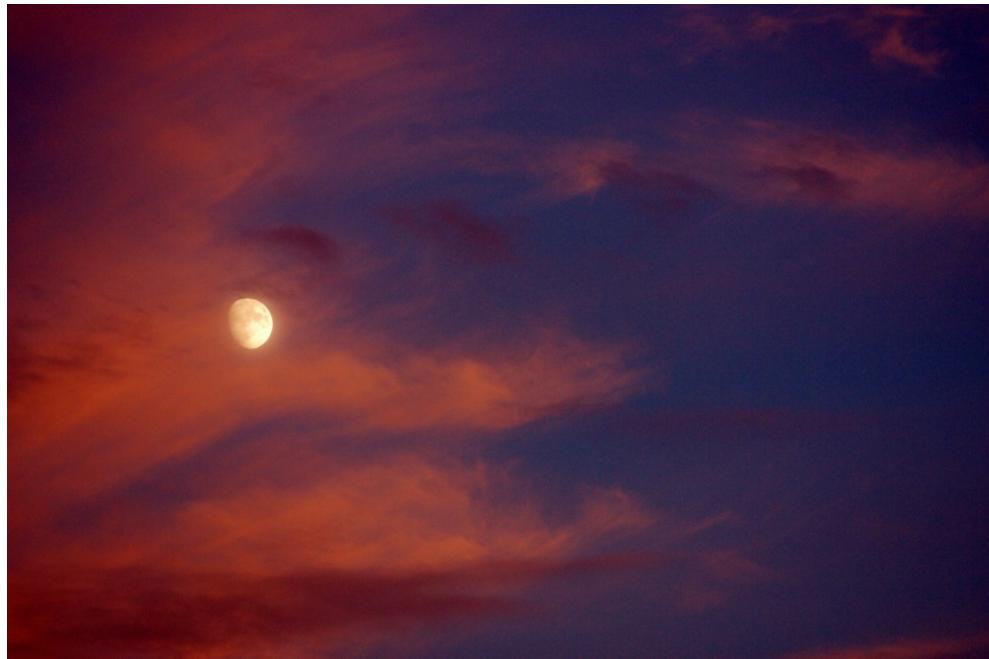


“I know what I’m doing, Karal.”

A very loud voice “in my head” in response to a heartfelt but still rather
obligatory *thank you* while out walking the dogs this morning.

Irony isn’t lost on the Universe.

Time to Breathe



I write because all my life I've felt I had some indescribable connection to something beyond what I can see, hear, taste, feel and know. Writing ~ creativity, actually, is often an outlet for reaching toward that connection in an attempt to gain understanding. Writing is the avenue I travel as I seek to know myself intently and intimately, a way to place my faults and fears and mistakes and accomplishments on paper ~ a self-portrait with words. Seeing those fears and mistakes and things that hold me back give me the courage to move forward. Writing is my way to pass along what I've learned, what I've gained, to someone else: hope, encouragement, dreams, stumbles and missteps and climbs and back and forths toward something I sense is there for me but am still learning to obtain, accept and welcome with open arms. I thought I was on course, in tune with the Universe, and had something to say. Then something happened and it didn't mesh with my illusion of that beautiful, simple, spiritual connection. And I realize that for all the things I know and believe in and am so enthusiastically wanting to share, I know nothing. And right now, I've simply got nothing to say.

Seals & Crofts Said It Best



Summer Breeze . . . Makes Me Feel FINE!

I Believe

To my 2 beautiful angels on July 10th.

Then, today and every day . . .

You touched my life with your magic and you taught me to believe.

Love, and thinking of you always.

Because My Tea Bag Says So



Posted by Karal June 21st, 2010 |

Good Morning, Sunshine.



*Something in the mists of the morning suggest
that it is going to be a magical weekend . . .*

~ [John Aaron](#)

June 18th, 2010 |

Breaking the Hermit Habit

I'd become a hermit.

I work from home, and that made it easy. I spent my days in pajamas and my nights in front of the TV. I didn't shave anything anywhere in weeks, my unwashed hair was streaked with grey. I had my meals delivered and stole from my landlord's garden. I began to peer out the windows suspiciously whenever I heard someone pull into the yard.

Okay it wasn't that bad, but close. I've not written in my blog, not shared what's going on with me, not cared what's going on with you, not been at all outgoing or social, a genuine part of my nature. And that's been ok. Over the past few months, I've need this time to myself. And I truly like my Alone Time.

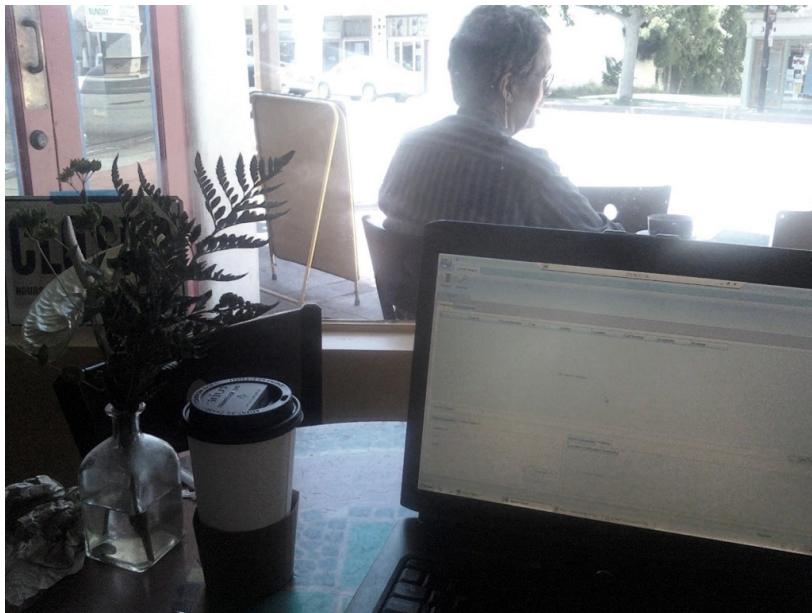
But after awhile, it started to get depressingly comfortable. Going out felt like too much work and even getting showered and dressed to go for groceries took several hours. Except for the occasional coffee break and a couple of planned ahead dates on the town, it was just easier to do yoga with iTunes than go to class, easier to be quiet than talk out loud. Most of my time I occupied with work, email and browsing Facebook. Seriously, I probably checked my email no less than 100 times a day. I'd wander over to the computer between feeding the dogs and pouring a cup of coffee, hit the refresh button on my way past to the bathroom, head down to check the mail and glance back out the corner of my eye.

Then the wireless router died. And it became immediately obvious how much these activities filled my space and occupied my time. Suddenly, like the calm before the storm, my world got strangely, eerily but beautifully, quiet. Just me, the wind whistling through the trees, those Ojai mountains sitting silent under blue skies. And a computer screen screaming that it can't connect to the server. I couldn't get my fix. I was addicted, only instead of wine or caffeine or food, it was the internet and that false sense of belonging that comes with a *new mail* message or a friend request, the illusion that I was being productive when I'd spent two hours reading about whatever happened to the cast of [What's Happening!!](#) The anxious security of need-based attachment. Having that *thing* at my fingertips and thinking that I'm going to miss something big if I walk away.

Based on my own experiences, I believe we use addictions to hide from truths about ourselves, to remove ourselves from what's maybe painful or scary, to drown out or stuff down the voice of God talking to our divine spiritual self. We shut out our creativity, our flexibility, our potential. And we essentially become detached. Since it's my story, I believe too that breaking my router was the way the Universe chose to get me off my rear and out of the house. I hit the *refresh* again, and showered, *refresh* and dressed, *refresh* and breakfast. Finally I drove down into Ojai and settled myself into a corner of [Ojai Coffee Roasting](#) with my laptop, a view of the street, and a large cup of dark black coffee. Yes, I worked and yes, I checked my email. But I also watched the world going by outside on the street. I listened to the people around me, engaged and enthusiastic conversations.

Turns out it was one of the best days I've had in the four months I've lived here. And I didn't really even speak to anyone. Just the act of getting outside and into the sunlight and into the world was enough. To hear life going on around me, was enough. To feel that I am a part of something that is larger than me, and that I am connected to that energy, was enough. To escape self-inflicted boundaries and addicted mindsets and embrace life, was enough. To know that I am alive ~ that alone promises possibility. That alone is enough. In fact, it is everything.

And just so ya know. The coffee's not bad, either.



My corner view of the world in Ojai Coffee Roasting



Outside Ojai Coffee Roasting Posted by Karal June 16th, 2010 |

Possibility . . .

I've been a little out of touch because I've been a lot out of sorts.

Since I spent 3 hours trying to write about that with minimal progress, I'll save it for later. What I want to talk about is the orange chair. Several people have asked me about the chair in the photograph on my blog. Was it really on the beach? Did I haul it there? Was it actually orange? Even more than that, I've had a few of you tell me how much you like it. As [Rebecca at Altered Spaces](#) said, "Something inside me just went "Ahhh" when I saw it." Thanks, Rebecca! The Orange Chair was essentially my first attempt at creativity as an adult ~ you know, after you've had all the spontaneity and freedom beat out of you. For several reasons, it holds a special place with me.

My niece Carrie and I stumbled on the chair during a morning beach walk back in July 2006. Apparently, late in the middle of a hot summer night, somebody had a bonfire on the sand and needed a place to plop. Not having a lounge chair or a towel, they decided it would be a good thing to drag their living room furniture down to water's edge. If that chair could talk, I'm sure it would have some stories to tell about the night it spent on the sand next to a big roaring fire. I'm not quite sure I'd really want to know *all* of its secrets because I may be sorry I sat on it, but it survived the night, didn't get washed out with the tide and was beached like a shipwreck just waiting for us to find it.

The coastline was full of people that morning but oddly enough, no one else seemed to notice the chair. Everybody was walking by like it wasn't even there. We decided to go back with my camera that evening and after asking the woman in a lounger to the left of the chair, "Is this seat taken?" (we couldn't resist) we spent the next few minutes posing for posterity. This picture is one of my favorites. Carrie was visiting, [Pearl](#) was still happy and healthy and it was one of those hot summer evenings where everything was right with our world.



Carrie, Pearl and me in the orange chair.

I printed out the original shot and one of my friends saw the picture. She's always been a big believer in everything I do, so I decided to take the original and get a little creative with it. The idea was simple: keep the chair orange while converting the background to black and white. This was my first attempt at post-processing digital prints and the process for me was nothing but easy. If you know anything about Photoshop, this can be done in about 5 minutes. I however, have no less than 30 drafts and probably hundreds of hours invested in the finished product. In the first version I actually clicked my way painfully around the chair, deleted it out, changed the background tones, and pasted the chair back into place. I venture to say here that art often imitates life: I do tend to do things numerous times and the hard way before I figure out the easiest, best way for me. But I'm not going to get heavy here so we will leave it at that.

Several people got the print for Christmas that year and from there, the whole photography creativity thing was born. It's been slow-growing, but I'm a big believer in synchronicity and I know there are no accidents. From my orange painted walls to [Orange the doll](#) to [Orange Drive](#), I've learned to open myself up to the orange, so to speak. The print is actually titled *Possibility* . . . Because of this chair, I've had a couple of small shows, made a few sales, started my photography website and met one of my best friends when she saw the print hanging on the wall of the gym. And I finally took the chance to start writing a bit more than just what hides in my journal. When it came time to name my blog, *The Orange Chair* was really the only option. It is from here I celebrate synchronicity, creativity and possibility. And it is from there that I learn who I am.



The original photograph.



The Orange Chair, aka Possibility . . .

May 30th, 2010 |

Just one of the porch hors.

Living Out Loud. (v16). The people in your neighborhood.

Tell about your neighborhood, past, present or future.

Yep, I think I'll just go home, take a nap, go over to Thelma Lou's later, and watch a little tv.

Yep go home, take a nap, over to Thelma Lou's, watch a little tv.

Yeah I think I'll go home, take a nap, go over to Thelma Lou's and watch a little tv.

~ Barney Fife talking on Andy's Porch. ***The Andy Griffith Show***

I started to make a list of all the neighborhoods I've lived in during my life, but I don't have all day. A quick mental count puts it somewhere around twenty-six. I think I've missed a couple in there somewhere. One day I'm going to sit down and make two lists: one that references every job I've ever had and one that lists every place I've ever lived. At first glance, it's a truly mind-boggling, staggering use of ink. And on one level, definitely kind of funny. I mean, seriously. Before I moved across country last December, one of my friends apologized for not making it to my going-away party: "But look at it this way, I made it to the last three out of four. . ." On a deeper note, those places I've lived and the journey between them represent my life. It may seem a little neurotic, scattered, or confused from the outside but well, it is my life. I make no apologies and I strive for no regrets.

Over the past 5 months I've gone from a wooded beach community on the east coast to Los Angeles, arguably one of the biggest neighborhoods in the world, to residing in an above-garage apartment at the top of a quarter-mile driveway shared with three other houses, situated 2.5 miles outside a Southern California mountain town with a population of about 8200. What I've come to realize is that while I'm not necessarily destined to be a metropolitan city girl, I'm not quite ready for the country life, either. As much as I love me some solitude, a little bit of MeTime goes a long way, and too much of my own company is about to drive me crazy.

I'm not new to the country, having lived both in the the mountains and the farmlands of Virginia while growing up. I have fond memories of playing at the creek (or to be entirely honesty, *in* the creek) with my sisters and the one or two friends that lived nearby, but even then I preferred the small town atmosphere of our hometown. That is where I felt connected, and that is where I felt I belonged. Neighbors close but not on top of you, your friends and the general store for a Coke in walking distance. People who know you. Hey, if I could live in Mayberry, I would.

So it should come as no surprise to me that over the past couple of months I've begun to miss my 'hood, nestled between the inlets and marshes of a state park and the Chesapeake Bay. Walking distance to the beach, the gym, grocery store, coffee shop and restaurants. Fourth of July festivals, oyster festivals, the Santa parade, Halloween parties, courtesy of the neighborhood civic association. A bike path travels the length of the community, winds through the state park, continues to the oceanfront several miles away, connects one street to the next and makes walking to your friends' houses or any of the above destinations a breeze.

And then there are my neighbors. These people, before they even knew me well, spent a better portion of the middle of a Saturday night, while I was out of town, chasing down my two escaped hound dogs. They quickly became so much more than just neighbors. Any given night, you could walk out the door and invariably end up at a bonfire, on the beach, or just sitting on the porch across the street. If you hung on the porch often enough, you were dubbed a Porch Hor. We [celebrated the November Nor'Easter by candlelight](#) and had wine and s'mores and bongo drums around the fire pit more nights than I can count. Several times I walked across the street to say hi, only to be invited to stay for dinner, and there would always be something for me, the resident vegetarian. They even threw me my very own goodbye Christmas party, complete with snow. I love my neighbors.

Which is one of the reasons that I've realized I don't want to continue this LA adventure anymore. I keep looking for home and I keep wanting to belong, but I've continually held myself at a distance from the people and circumstances that make up exactly what it is I profess to seek: I've held myself at a distance from my *life*. I'm so glad I did this, but I am ready to go home.

With luck I'll end up back in the same neighborhood. Hey, if I could live in Mayberry, I would.



May 9th, 2010 |

Graffiti.



La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California. April 8, 2010.

April 27th, 2010

Wonderful Women Wednesday



Today I honor all the wonderful women in my life.

The one I was born to and the ones I was born with, who get me for who I am and encourage with love and honesty though I don't always make sense.

The one who recognizes me most of the time, but is most intimately connected when she is confused by reality and speaks in metaphor.

The one who yesterday took one look at my face, figured I was having a bad day and offered me a healing session on the spot. I don't even know her name.

And the ones who have traveled with me through the years, whether it be two or twenty or twenty times two. Through the good and the bad and the silly and the just plain stupid, your love keeps the flame of friendship alive through time and distance and things that just happen. Because that's what friends do, and that's what life does sometimes. It just happens.

Thank you all. I love you dearly, and I wish you a beautiful day.

Ya'll are just so cool, you deserve it.

April 14th, 2010

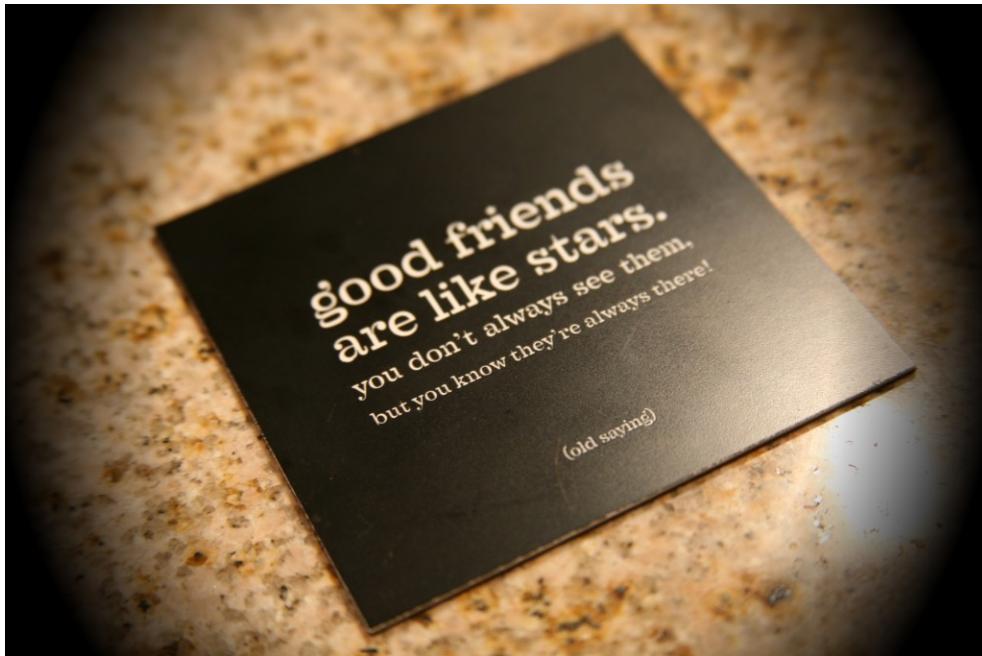
A Bright Sun Shiny Day



Winter is finally over. The cold and dreary days fade away as though a dream. Flowers, trees and fields are alive with the colors and scents and sounds of inevitable spring. My parent's backyard in Virginia is a little spot of heaven where you can sit on the porch, have a Margarita and watch the hummingbirds in flight. Lightning bugs glow softly as the sun sets to the west, its brilliance and warmth caressing your face. It is a safe and comforting place. The sunflowers there grow to tall heights, eager to embrace the life energy around them. My favorite flower, they represent warmth, happiness, strength and adoration. A symbol of God's love, the sunflower knowingly turns and lifts its luminous face to the radiant light.

April 10th, 2010 |

Perceptions. A guest post.



Today I'm posting a poem written by SuziCate at [The Water Witch's Daughter](#). She is a fantastic writer and a dear friend and she's got a pretty good view of her world and her place in it. At one time or another we all can benefit from remembering that so much of our life, and especially the bad things in it, are based on our perceptions and have little to do with reality. So feel the sunshine on your face, see the love in someone's eyes reflected back at you and know that you are going to be okay. Yes, I'd like it to be that simple and I believe it ultimately really is.

The following poem was written when I thought about how much my life changed when I simply chose to look at things in a new way. The only thing that really stood between myself and inner peace all those years was my perception of life. ~ SuziCate

She says
Monsters lurk in the darkness
I say
Peace comes in the night
She sees
Worries and heart aches
I see
Things will be alright

She tastes
bitterness in days gone by
I taste
The sweetness of this day
She waits

For her world to fall apart
I wait
For whatever comes my way

She feels
The pounding of the storm
I feel
The dancing of the falling rain
She learns
Dreams can be crushed
I learn
Experience comes through pain

She smells
The stench of her past
I smell
The roses all year long
She hears
The critic in her head
I hear
The beauty of my song

April 8th, 2010

Laissez les bons temps rouler!

Living Out Loud. (v15). Prêt-à-porter.

Talk about an item of clothing that has special meaning for you.



I am a collector of memories. Pictures, letters, and dates of significant events, I keep them all. At one time I had over 20 t-shirts with special meaning ~ shirts I couldn't just clear out at the end of the year because I hadn't worn them once in the past 365 days. Among them was the 1985 Madonna concert, the Solomon's Island sailboat race in 1991 (an overnight race up the Intracoastal Waterway) and the first fundraising shirt of the then non-existent ODU football team back in 1988. We won't talk about the countless tees that were special simply because I'd "worn them when . . . "

All the subsequent moves to LA and back and to LA eventually resulted in a hardening of the sentimental heart for saving every single moment of my life (though I have a chunk of the porch off my childhood home . . . but that's another story). Light travel and space became the priority, and it always feels good to give something to charity when I am so blessed, anyway.

Somehow, one t-shirt has managed to hang in there ~ a vintage Tabasco tee, circa 1988, brought back by my parents from their first trip to New Orleans and Mardi Gras. *Laissez les bons temps rouler* on the front, *Let the good time roll* on the back. For some reason I cannot get rid of this shirt. I was actually offered \$50 for it at the Cajun Festival in Town Point Park, Norfolk, good money for a college student, and I turned the guy down.



The pictures and letters I keep represent meaningful, pivotal times in my life. They hold the hearts and the memories of people I've loved, places I've been, like a journal, another record of a life hopefully well-lived, and definitely well-loved. I think I keep the shirt because when my stepdad came along, life took a turn for the better, and though of course, hindsight is always 20/20, this little piece of clothing sends a message for the present and the future as well. Enjoy life. Celebrate the miracle that it is, embrace all the people who love you, and go for your dreams.

Laissez les bons temps rouler!

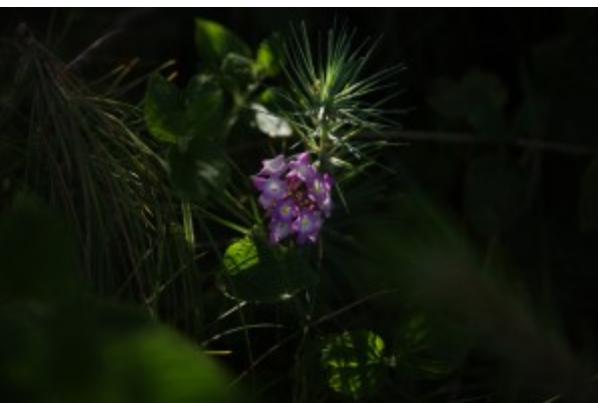
April 4th, 2010

My Neighbor's Garden

Attitude shapes thought. Thought shapes words. Lately I've just not had a lot to say, which is something I *never* thought I'd say.

This morning I grabbed three of my favorite things: my dogs, coffee and camera, and headed down the hill to my neighbor's garden. Here, rustic trails wind their course, shored strong, anchored, by sturdy river rock. Colorful flowers and lush trees, vibrant and alive, take root, bloom where they are planted. Tangible and lasting evidence of insight and commitment and planning and patience and love. Necessary tools of the creator's dream. Where there is a vision, words are not always necessary.







March 27th, 2010

I'm Giving Myself Some Sunshine



SuzeCate at [The Water Witch's Daughter](#) is giving away Sunshine Awards, so I went right over there and took mine. I figure I deserve it, if for nothing else, because I'm not going to sit here and complain in a long drawn and out boring post how pissed off I am at my stomach right now.

It's enough to know that 3 years ago it immediately and without reason developed its own homeostatic balance, but not one that agrees with this human body. The cause could be physiological, psychological, or spiritual ~ I really don't know, but all obvious physical reasons have been ruled out, so that leaves psychological and spiritual. I'm good with that, because well, there's a lot of truth to those phrases about butterflies in your stomach and your gut reaction. Maybe there's something to the fact that for the 3 weeks I was in LA, it all but disappeared. Either way, if there's one thing I do know about me, it's that I have a list of things I've been working on, and tuning into intuition is one of them. I just find it really hard to hear a damn thing when there's a beast in my belly.

I'm complaining. So I'll stop. My point is, today came close to being a really.bad.day. But it wasn't.

Thanks to the encouragement that only the best of friends can give, I got my work done ~ maybe not a 100% effort, but I'm willing to bet a good 90% ~ and I took that aching, bloated belly, and the rest of my body, out for a good hour hike up the mountain behind our house. Yeah, I still feel like crap, but little miss sunshine showered and got her butt down to the local health food store, too, and there's nothing like feeling the warm air turn cool driving around this little mountain town with the windows down and beagles ears blowing in the breeze.

I'm symbolically passing along the Sunshine Award to everyone who goes through this with me on an almost daily basis. It's my goal not to become one of those women who lives exclusively on exercise and wine. Though I doubt that would ever happen because I love food too much, there are times when it seems like a quick and easy and painless solution to an otherwise downright frustrating dilemma. I mean, a girl's gotta eat.

March 15, 2010

trust



some place

some time

some one

some thing

always searching

always trying

always reaching

always striving.

did nothing today

except be

did not fade

maybe even actually was.

March 14th, 2010

Playing for Change. Check it out!

The next time you get one of those little sparks of a great idea and you feel yourself bursting with enthusiasm, only to notice moments later that the flame has been extinguished by that thing called logic, take a look at this video from [Playing for Change](#).

This is just one segment of a film created because an idea ignited in Mark Johnson one day while watching a crowd gather to listen to street musicians: What if music could unite and bring peace? He began the project in Santa Monica, CA with the filming of legendary street blues singer Roger Ridley, and fanned across the world shooting musicians playing their own music in their native countries and connecting them by editing their performances into a “universal song.”

The finished project, **Playing for Change: Peace through Music**, has evolved into a foundation that seeks to unite musicians and bring people together while promoting peace. They work to build music and art schools in communities that are in need of inspiration and hope, the first in South Africa and the latest in Kirini, Mali, described on their website as “an ancient village with about 1,000 people, all of whom are descendants of musicians, many of them over 75 generations of musicians. They have no electricity, but enough soul to brighten all of us as we share this journey together. It is also the home of the newest Playing For Change Music School.”

I was able to view a screening of the entire movie last night with about 30 other people. It's obvious that music links us, whether two people or two thousand or twenty thousand. So enjoy the video, the emotion and the soul, and check out their website. And when you feel those inspirations come, like a quiet passing thought out of thin air that flames up like a match in the dark, maybe don't let it disappear into nowhere.

What if you actually acted on it?

March 12th, 2010

Likin' the Local Flavor



Something I love about moving to a new town is getting to discover all of the hidden treasures here. I have never been much of a shopper ~ haven't been in a mall since something like 2005 ~ but this is not your usual town. There are no chain stores or restaurants within the city limits. I mean, none. And not many at all until you get to Ventura.

What is here is an eclectic and unique mix of art galleries, a couple of natural food stores, a fair share of metaphysical shops (I just discovered my new favorite, [Soul Centered](#)), a number of fantastic restaurants and a farmer's market every Sunday morning. I am in sheer orgasmic bliss over the number of fantastic restaurants, the yoga classes, the spiritual centers, the spas. I cook daily with my sea salts and olive oil and shower with, well, sea salts and olive oil. You can't get too much of a good thing.

But what really has my heart are the thrift stores, coffee houses and [Bart's Books](#), *the world's greatest outdoor bookstore*. It's almost like someone designed a town just for me, where I can spend the next few months of my life taste-testing coffee *and* homemade desserts, searching for new old junk, and cozying up in a bookstore that is as welcoming as your old worn bathrobe and slippers after a long day.

All this without the hassle of traffic and the claustrophobia of a mall. I may just stay awhile.

March 7th, 2010

This Little Dream

Living Out Loud. (v14). Gone Fishin'.



Retirement? Are you kidding me?

I've had no less than 43 jobs in my 45 years of life.

I can't really even begin to think about something as conventional as retirement.

I've always felt that a job should be synonymous with life's purpose.

Only I haven't figured out that purpose yet.

Figuring Out.

That has been my career.

Researching, excavating, discovering.

What brings me joy? Fulfills my passion? And pays my bills all at the same time?

I'm so much closer to knowing that now than I ever was before.

Which is good, because time is running out.

So maybe retirement is a feasible concept after all.

Irregardless, let's pretend.

Retirement would be like, job number 45 or 46.

I'll own a small shop.

Maybe a restaurant, maybe a storefront that sells chocolate and wine and music and coffee.

Something nurturing.

Off the back of the store will be a yoga studio.

On every wall of the shop will be space to hang photography and other creative work by local artists.

Exactly where *local* is, is yet to be determined.

Just one more thing I'm working to figure out.

March 7th, 2010

Remains the Cure



Exactly two months ago today I landed in LA, and exactly one month ago today, I left LA. Happy anniversary to me.

Before I'd even given notice at work, informed the landlord I was moving, or packed the first box, I told myself that I'd look at this as a sort of experiment, that nothing needs to be taken too seriously and that there are no right or wrong choices here. All I knew then was that I was certain I had to move back to Los Angeles.

Well, right now I can say with certainty that I can't say a damn thing with certainty. LA was the plan, the obsession, for the past 16 years and now here I am, plopped 80 miles north in a small Southern California town nestled in the mountains at the base of the Los Padres National Forest where I came knowing pretty much exactly no one.

Instead of falling asleep to the sound of helicopters, buses and late night neighbors, I crack the window so I can hear owls, and frogs, and coyotes. Instead of fulfilling an obsession that's as old as most of my friends' children, (and just as nurtured through the years I might add) I've somehow veered off course toward something that is a little bit more out of my control than I am used to acknowledging.

And you know what? I think I like it. I've tried so hard for so long to control things, to keep them in order, to put them where I want them to be, and it really hasn't worked very well. Because I'm increasingly of the belief that we are spiritual beings here on earth to have a human experience ~ not the other way around, I've decided to tweak the experiment ~ sort of hand the reins over and give in to this natural flow. I'm going to continue to watch as one road leads to another, leads to another, leads to another . . . and see where it goes.

It's a bit of a different mindset for me because it's the first time that my heart and my soul have been a little at odds: my heart misses the ease of meeting people in LA, the feeling that I'm comfortable in my own skin there, the idea that LA is where I belong. At times I want to bolt. My soul, on the other hand, keeps whispering, no. Stay here. You will see. When you know about the history and beliefs of this valley, it's not hard to believe that in some psychic sense, I've come home.

It's not all been easy, though I am finding it difficult explain. What I can say is this: There is an undercurrent of energy that runs through me like a river, and if I have to name, it, I call it fear. I am fearful. I have felt it for years. And it has held me back. And I have totally screwed up.

I've lived in fear's house, worn its clothes, slept in its bed, and raised its babies. I've drunk it, eaten it, bathed in its waters, soaked in its rays, and buried myself in its soil. I realized yesterday just how easy it has been to let it manipulate me. I realized today just how well I've been able to use it to protect myself. From what?

From LIFE.

I know full well that you can't live out loud if you're scared to live, and I don't mean moving across country and taking risks and being independent. Those are important too, but what I'm talking about is being courageous enough to stop all the psychic, intellectual and physical movement and really be in the moment with yourself ~ just yourself . . . no food, no alcohol, no blankie, no exercise, no work. No excuses. Alone. In the moment. Psychically raw, spiritually naked. And like it.

And from there, to be in the moment with someone else.

For me, doing that means giving up some ghosts, so to speak. It means I've got to finally quite waiting for the other shoe to drop, I've got to allow myself to be vulnerable and unguarded, I've got to forget what I learned as a kid over 40 years ago ~ that nothing is permanent ~ and embrace people into my life as though they will be there forever, fate be damned.

Because if I don't, I'll keep them just far enough away that I'll continue to live as though I am alone.

And while I can't say much right now, I can finally say one thing with certainty.

I no longer want that.

March 5th, 2010

Things You Might Not Want to Know About Me

Reading GregoryJ over at [living my life, whatever](#) yesterday, I got completely tickled at his frustrations over what he perceives as a failed attempt to write light and upbeat posts. Though I disagree with him because I thought his entry was hilarious, I empathize because I feel the same way.

Pretty much every conscious effort I have made to draft something funny, silly or lighthearted comes out having some profound meaning (or implied, at least, if I sort of miss the mark). So here's another go. And if you don't think it funny, that's ok, because you surely won't think it profound.

Three things you probably don't know about me:

1. **My first waterskiing venture resulted in unplanned public skinny-dipping.** Numerous failed attempts to get up on the skis, my legs are tired. Last try, I awkwardly jump out of the boat and graze the metal ladder ~ with my crotch. One piece bathing suit, slices neatly from left side of hoo-hoo to right, puddles around my neck as I, shy 18-year-old that I am, swim over to grab the handle *like I think I'm gonna really do this*. Stuck between a rope and a wet place, I have no choice but to admit to my boyfriend, his best friend, and his best friend's girlfriend and parents, that I am, indeed, butt-naked in the water.
2. **I missed the Grand Canyon.** LA move 1996 started off on the northern route. After stopping to visit my friend in Grand Junction and realizing she wasn't home (lesson: call first!) we proceeded to detour down through Colorado to new Arizona specifically to see the Grand Canyon. Fires on the North Rim resulted in a long but nightmarishly exciting drive around the Canyon as the flames, visible miles away in the dark wilderness night, seemed to be coming straight from hell. Next morning: Left [Cliff Dwellers Lodge](#), drove to convenience store at intersection of two 2-lane highways, and bought lunch. Left convenience store, turned left. Drove. And drove. And drove. And hit Interstate 40. Are you kidding me? The Grand Canyon is now 50 miles behind us. I've never had the best sense of direction, or obviously, distance, either. But it was one of the best laughs of my life.
3. **I have peed my pants on the streets of LA. Twice.** Take one incredibly weak bladder and place it in a city that does not believe in public restrooms in its parks and it is a no-brain recipe for disaster. 2005. Boot camp class in Mandeville Canyon. Absolutely breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean and LA. One of the reasons I love this city. But running and kicking ass on hills for over an hour leaves my bladder like an overfilled water balloon, and this is Brentwood and there are no ... **NO...** restrooms or even fast food places located between that canyon and the 10. All the positive mental imagery in the world cannot stop that glass from appearing too full. And the pain, oh my god, the pain. I almost made it but for that burning, cramping pain. I had a black sweatshirt in the car. One hand on the wheel, one shoving that sweatshirt under my toosh. The handle by then turned so tightly in the off position I thought my bladder had died altogether until ... *oh, thank you, thank you thank you*. I cannot believe I am peeing on an LA freeway. *Oh*

thank you thank you, thankyou thankyouhthankyouthankyou. Roommate: How was class?
Me, running through to bathroom shower: It was great! I peed my pants!

You would think I'd learn. But I drink coffee in the morning and water when I hike and flash forward 5 years, neither LA nor I has changed all that much. I do now know that Petco and Trader Joe's have restrooms. Runyon Canyon, however, does not. Tennis courts, walking trails, water fountains. No porta-potty. I walked the dogs. I walked me. I realized I had done it *again* and there was no way I was gonna make it to Trader Joe's or Petco or even The Beanery on Sunset. You cannot pee in the bushes at Runyon ~ the entire trail is comprised of hills and switchbacks so anyone at anytime has a clear 360 view. I mean, you could, but. . . better to sit in your car and grab the thrift store fleece you bought as a snow coat for your dog on the way out here. Yes. I did. Again. Only this time, I wasn't about to pee my pants, too, because I had errands to run and a long way to go home. Thankfully I was wearing a long shirt so I could cop a squat, so to speak, on the front seat and still smile pleasantly at the hikers and workmen passing by.



Anybody see a restroom down there?

March 3rd, 2010

What If?



March 2nd, 2010

Blame it on Monday



Today I am just not feelin' the love.

Nothing major in the overall scheme of life. Of that I am aware.

Just a lot of little things that add up to a huge desire to bag it and go back to bed.

I shouldn't be surprised that I found these on my morning walk.

Surely someone is trying to tell me something.

March 1st, 2010

Full Moon Rising



Tonight's full moon is the Gathering Moon.

Time to celebrate all we have accomplished.

Set intentions for the coming spring.

And recognize our own personal achievements and advancements.

This is good for me.

Because I find too often that my own inner guide still bends to the other, my own worst critic.

Time for that to stop.

The bitch needs to go.

Surrounded by mountains and sky and hoot owls and coyotes, I think I know, maybe, why I am here.

I thought the big city landscape was the territory I needed to brave.

Survive that, conquer that, and I am whole. I thought.

Turns out it is the still uncharted territory inside that calls to be explored.

February 28th, 2010

My Piney Hill Retreat



Front Porch of Piney Hill B&B

Way back when, in about 1969 or so, my Cousin Wiley and I went to play in the woods and he got us lost. He was older and he was in charge, so yes, by default, he got us lost. We were missing most of the day and my mom had her friends and the local police out looking for us. Toward the end of the afternoon, we found our own way home and sat on the porch waiting for everyone else to come back from their search. I think it was my younger sister, Janet's, birthday. I know we had hot dogs for a late lunch, because I'll never forget how good that pig-face-cow-bowels-lips-butt-and-other-uck tasted on that Wonder Bread bun. Needless to say it was the last time I set out for the wilderness with Cousin Wiley.

Sitting *in* the wilderness with him is a different story. Wiley and his partner Hank own and manage one of the top B&B's in Virginia. [Piney Hill Bed & Breakfast](#) sits nestled between Skyline Drive and Massanutton. The wraparound porch is the place to sit for spectacular views of both. I could go on and on about their place, but I'd sound biased because he's family, and there are so many great reviews out there that do a fine job of saying all that.

What matters to me is how being there makes me feel. When I cancelled my 2008 move to LA at the last minute, I made two phone calls, one to the friend I was not coming to work with, and one to Wiley and Hank. I needed to get away from everything that had brought me to making that decision and everyone who knew me and step back to reassess where I would go from there. I arrived at their place in a heap of exhausted tears, and within 10 minutes was sitting around the kitchen table hanging with my innkeepers and a bunch of other guys I'd never met. Wiley got tickled about something he'd said and couldn't stop giggling and before long the lot of us were swept away into that uncontrollable laughter. That's just the kind of guy he is ~ down to earth, no pretense, real, and with a sense of humor that reflects his outlook on life. I like to think I'm like him, but I don't know. He comes by it all so naturally. Hank, as the author of this Sunday's [AssociatedContent.com Travel article](#) says, is a riot. He's also a fantastic cook and well, just a love. I know the lawnmower story is true as I have seen him on it and have photos as proof.

Real was what I needed when I stepped off my own planned course of reality and flipped it inside itself. Real. Comfortable. Accepting. Safe. Cared for. Yes, this, from the little boy who got

us lost in the woods and then threatened to leave me there when I cried. I yearn to be there still when I am feeling lost or lonely or like the world is too big or too mean. To be where laughter sits on the other side of the table and to hear the summer sounds of the country: crickets, cicadas, frogs blending together in the darkness of a land illuminated only by the fireflies that glow throughout the night.



Hank and me and Wiley



Piney Hill Haven



Lazy Susans at Piney Hill B&B



Morning Coffee with the Cows

February 26th, 2010

Does This Thing Have an Expiration Date?

By nature I am not ungrateful. I am, however, prone to feeling overwhelmed at the sheer cliff of my own mental task list. And I can also procrastinate with the best of them. Which is why it has taken me from November 11th until today to pass along the **Best Blogger Award** I received from SuziCate at [The Water Witch's Daughter](#). It should not take 3 months to acknowledge the honor and pass along the love, and I am slightly embarrassed but I'm going to pull out the "I was moving" card and play that because I deserve to use it at least once.



SuziCate, thank you! It has been a huge gift just watching your blog and writing blossom over this past year. Because of you, I've been compelled to get out of my own pages and into everyone else's and it's opened up a whole new world of fellow writers, bloggers and friends. That's pretty good for someone who moved to a town where she basically knows – um – nobody – and realized yesterday that the only person she could list on her yoga class emergency contact sheet was her landlord, don't you think!? (My landlord is awesome, by the way!)

I'll get into why I write and how it all started at another time. For now, I want to pass along the Best Blog Award to the five writers listed below. I'm just starting to move though the labyrinth of creative, funny, serious, mundane, thoughtful and consistently passionate bunch of writers out there. These are 5 I've grown to love.

Becky Blanton at [BeckyBlanton.com](#). This woman rocks. She's currently living out of her van, traveling across country with her Rottie to interview people for her latest book project. Becky sees a story in every person she meets and she meets every type of person imaginable. Her desire to live free from the constraints of the 4 walls and a desk and her ability to convey the universal oneness that we all share keeps me coming back again and again.

Dlloyd at [20milesfromnowhere](#). New to the blogging world but oh my GOD what a talented writer and artist. His comment on my blog, Definitely Someday, Just Not Today, in regards to all the tears I was shedding that day, ahh, wow, hand me another tissue. Dude has insight, humor and eloquence. Please write more.

Genie Alisa at [... in a Bottle](#). Aside from the fact that if it weren't for her I probably wouldn't be blogging at all, GenieAlisa has the ability to write about her crotch mishaps and other bodily experiences while pregnant and not bat an eyelash. She has served as entertainment, sounding board and encouragement as I get braver at throwing whatever it is out there. The [Living Out Loud Project](#) is worthy of an award all its own for the barriers and inhibitions and pigeon-holes it sweeps away on a monthly basis.

Jimmy at [Just My Opinion](#). A writer with true Southern style and a knack for tellin' it like it is, (at least in his opinion), Jimmy is the breath of Southern sunshine in my new So Cal digs. He's like a cool glass of lemonade on a hot summer day.

Rachel from [Crunchy Turtle](#) describes herself as a "crunchy aka hippy-type individual" and yes, she's another Southerner. I am not trying to be biased, really. But her blog covers a range of topics and interests, and in particular I enjoy her posts on paganism and her relationship to nature and the universe. It speaks to my hippy-dippy side, which is starting, I happily think, to comfortably overtake the rest of me. I also love her food and travel entries, and guess what? I found her through the aforementioned Living Out Loud project.

February 24th, 2010

Daisy in the Window



This is one of my favorite pictures of Daisy.

Back in Virginia Beach, Daisy had a habit of sitting on the her end table and looking out the window. She'd watch the birds, the squirrels and the neighbors come and go, but mostly she'd sit at her perch and wait for me.

Daisy knows that when I tell her something, I mean it. So when I tell her that I'm leaving, but I'll be back, she knows I'm true to my word.

She knows she can trust me.

Sure, she's just a dog, but it's important to me that my dogs, as well as my friends, know where they stand with me. If I say I'm going to do something, I will do it. If I find I can't do it, I will tell you.

Why? Because the bottom line is this ~ I've learned I have to live in a way that allows me to look in the mirror at myself and like who I see.

Each step I take through life lands me squarely where I place my feet. If my legs are shaky and my footing is weak, then I can't stand rooted within myself and I surely won't give much grounding to you.

Better that I tell you I'm slipping than to leave you sitting in the window, waiting. Old dog or old friend, it's all the same.

So when I hold out my hand to you, or make a promise to you, and I tell you that you can trust me, you can.

The question is, can you trust yourself?

February 22nd, 2010

Definitely someday. Just not today.

It's a cleaning house kind of weekend.

Yesterday I felt compelled to spend the better part of a beautiful Saturday washing the hardwood floors and windows, dusting mini blinds, sweeping the deck and doing laundry. Today I think my spirit is doing a bit of cobweb clearing too. I've pretty much given in to a silly little crying jag that started in a dream and shows no signs of stopping anytime soon. In the center of my chest is a stabbing feeling ~ like something is gone and is ripping my heart out with it. A couple of times it's had me doubled over, gut-wrenching, wracked, a good kind of cry. From down deep somewhere, whatever has left or is on its way out is leaving because the time has come for it to go.

A friend asked me over coffee a few days ago what I wanted to do with my photography now that I'm in Southern California. The answer I gave is that I really don't know. As an artist or creator or whatever, shouldn't I have an answer for that? It would be sweet to be in a gallery or two, and heck, I'd love to sell more of my prints online, but I'm not sure those two things alone completely fuel the fire. I once didn't take a job as a photographer's assistant because the woman told me she wasn't in to make "pretty pictures" and did it strictly for the money. Eh, I kinda need more than that.

His simple and honest question haunts me. There is more to my answer than that I just don't know. The truth is, I'm kinda winging it right now. I mean, I did move to LA, and then Ojai, more on a whim than a plan, right? I'm figuring out stuff all the time. I don't know exactly where I'm going with this but I do know that I don't need to beat myself up for not having it all laid out on paper just yet. Something is swirling around and taking shape and building form and in its present stages already is something I could not have come up with on my own. So whatever's going on inside today, this little bit of cleansing and making space, I'm going to just go with it.

So no big blog today, ok? Just a really cool little ditty that's my new fav song from the all too awesome Rob Thomas. Now excuse me, because this song today, makes me wanna cry.

February 21st, 2010

Hey Gloria!

Hey Gloria!

Girl, I need your *help*!

I pet a vicious dog . . . and it turned and bit me. I want an apology!

I drove my car through flood waters . . . and it up and sank! I want an apology!

I drank a bottle of wine . . . and I got a HANGOVER! I want an APOLOGY!

I beat my head up against the wall! And it got bruised! I want an apology!

I slept with a married man and he didn't leave his wife for me . . .

I want an apology!

I left my good sense at the door and it went home without me. I want an apology.

I played with fire . . . and, uh-huh! I got burned!

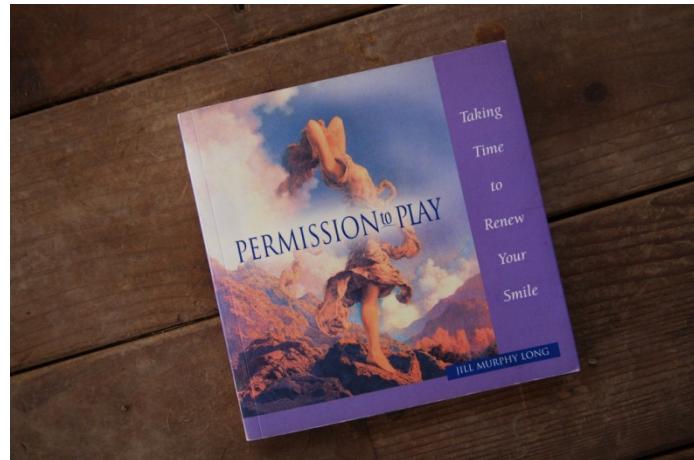
I want an apology.

Call me girlfriend ~ *we can get on TV!*

(For ya'll that don't live in LA, you may not understand. [Here is something for you!](#))

February 19th, 2010

Coyotes, Creating and Coffee, oh my . . .



It's still very much my goal to be like my dear friend [SuziCate](#) and post a blog a day. So far, I've not done well with that.

Right now I'm blaming it on the fact that it's all I can do to keep my head above water while getting settled into a new location. It seems like everything lately has been about navigating my way around town, learning who's who, working to earn the living, and taking the dogs out for walks and to pee while keeping one vigilant eye on the ever-threatening evil coyotes.

Add to that an hour of yoga and walking a day ~ cuz that's for the sanity and the gut ~ and you start to get the picture, and even those are rushed. There's just been no good quality MeTime for sitting down and writing a blog. Because unfortunately I can't yet pop them out and hit "publish" without at least a couple of hours of time invested. This is my heart and soul here, after all.

I'm trying to be kind to myself and not beat my own head with a stick for all the days I've missed and all the great ideas I've let slip away, ~ not to mention all the blogs I haven't taken the time to read ~ but sometimes I feel like I'm running uphill against my own personal stopwatch and I can practically hear the seconds ticking away. Life . *tick* . Is . *tick* . Going . *tick* . By . *tick* . And . *tick* . You . *tick* . Are . *tick* . Missing . *tick* . It.

What suffers along with my good nature and my attitude tends to be the things I love most. Shooting pictures, writing, reading, meditating. Hell, just sitting on the back deck with a cup of coffee and a breeze. In sort, all the things that feed and fuel my soul. All the things that are *creative*. You may not think that plopping your butt on the patio is creative, but you'd be surprised at what runs through my head in those moments of downtime.

Creative energy. I need that. Like a fish needs water and a dog needs a bone, I need to have my hands and my being immersed in those creative juices. When they aren't flowing, this baby withers.

Due to car space, very few books made the trip to LA with me. Most ended up going to friends or donated. So it took me by surprise this morning when my eye fell on a book I'd bought when I came to LA on vacation back in 2004. Jill Murphy Long's *Permission to Play* is a beautiful little book full of reminders on why and how to make time for this essential part of any creative and happy life.

Random flipping of pages landed me in the chapter called *Creative Expression* and a cool little entry called The Top Ten List for Creating. I'm gonna start right now with number one, and see about working my way up. During a particularly whiny bitch episode a couple of days ago, someone pointed out to me that photography is like my therapy. Well, I miss my camera, and I miss my blog, and I am coming back.

The Top Ten List for Creating

10. Learn something new.
9. Perfect a skill.
8. Play in colors.
7. Experiment with textures.
6. Savor the five senses.
5. Be in a happy mood.
4. Alleviate stress.
3. Create with your hands.
2. Develop commitment.
1. Smile more!

*As a footnote, the coyotes honestly haven't been that bad. I've yet to see them, though I've made a habit of sitting at the window at dawn and dusk and listening to them come out to hunt. Their howls and yelps are bone-chilling and other worldly, especially at 1am, and I'm afraid I've created my own version of the BoogeyMan. So I read about coyote totems, and this is what I found:

If coyote has come into your life perhaps it is time to loosen up and have some fun. While coyote stands for a lot more than just a trickster, sometimes humor and fun are necessary in life when under a great deal of stress. Coyote will teach you how to embrace your inner child and have fun again like you did when you were a child. He will teach you how important it is not to only have fun, but to be able to laugh at yourself in the process. Individuals with coyote as a totem are in for a very fun ride so hold on tight, go with the flow, and enjoy the adventure.

February 18th, 2010

Mud Puppy



I have always called LolliPop my little Mud Puppy. Just like [Pearl](#) was my Baked Potato, there's no rhyme or reason for the name. Until now. Until Ojai.

Thrilled to have a yard again, she can't just go out in the back and just do her business. Oh no. She's got to climb up the hill behind the house and investigate every corner of the property, every single time she goes outside.

Dense in vegetation and ripe with the scent of coyote that pass in the early morning hours, there's lots to entertain her. The dirt on the slope is more clay than dust, and because it's rained several times in the past couple of weeks, right now it is a thick and slick and sticky paste.

Sometimes she calmly walks along the length of the ramp and plods back to the deck. More likely, though, she'll take off from the top of the hill, ears and tongue flapping as she comes crashing down at top speed, energized, I like to think, by a sense of adventure. Freedom. Reckless abandon. Probably, she's just having a damn good time.

She shuffles to the door, mud caked to her feet like sasquatch slippers. The first time she walked in, at 6:30 in the morning, I thought she'd stepped in poo. It took me by surprise and it took me 20 minutes to clean the muck from between her pads. Last night I pulled off the chunky clumps and stuck her little feet in the sink. This afternoon, I just carried a big bowl outside and plunked those paws, one at a time, in the warm water. Complimentary Puppy Paw Scrub and Drying Massage.

With all this trouble, it makes more sense to just take her outside on the leash and stand there with her while she pees, confined to one clean and pristine spot.

Invariably the rains will stop and the mud will dry. It is Southern California, after all.

She's a country girl, and and she's happy. She can run, and play. And breathe.

Think about it.

When was the last time you walked barefoot in the rain, jumped with both feet in puddles or bared your naked puppies to the mud?

February 9th, 2010

To retch or not to wretch . . . that is the question.

Living Out Loud Project winner. (v13). Drinkin' Buddies.

The [Living Out Loud project](#) is designed to bring writers out of their box by writing about things that are either new, personal, uncomfortable ~ or all of the above. This month's topic, way out of my comfort zone, is about my relationship with alcohol. The Living Out Loud project is a monthly writing exercise open to all writers with a willingness and desire to Live Out Loud.

While not quite the same volatile intensity as my [past relationship with food](#), beer and wine and a little Crown Royal have been my teddy bear, my blankie, my pseudo-strength and my downfall at one time or another. I was pretty innocent and sheltered, and except for one can of beer down Party Road before school my senior year, I really wasn't much of a drinking kid. So I have very few experiences to share.

I really don't recall the first time I drank. It could have been with four friends on New Years' Eve 1980, or it may have been the night of my first real "car date" several months later. The guy I was with brought out a bottle of sloe gin, drank enough to make himself sick, looked over at me and said, "I've gotta retch" and proceeded to puke his guts out the car door. I was so naive and so self-conscious that I went to school and told my best friend he'd called me names (as in, wretch) and gotten drunk because he didn't enjoy the date.

I vaguely remember getting drunk at a party and spending the night at my best friend's house so she could drive me home the next morning (though she can remember that better than me, of course) and I recall quite clearly my first encounter with grain alcohol in the form of Purple Passion the year after graduation: watching the world spin, getting sick, the hangover and headache that lasted for two days.

I'd like to say that never happened again but I'd be lying. During my 30s, the pace picked up a bit. Ironically it centered around my time as a personal trainer in our local gym. We had lots of parties and Margarita Wednesday and because I was in a funky relationship at the time, the gym people became my escape and my extended family. But my tolerance level is low: I'm short and small and there just isn't much space for a glass or two of wine or a shot or two of liquor. So there isn't much wiggle room between a few giggles and doing the stupid things. Yes, I've drunk and dialed, but that's harmless enough if you can get past your own embarrassment and humiliation.

What I'm talking about are the judgment calls that have as their basis no judgment. For instance, driving home late at night, plastered on wine, with one hand on the wheel and one over an eye so you can see the road. I almost wiped out some poor guy that I recognized from the gym turning left at an intersection that way. I can't recall which hand I used to roll down the window, wave and yell, "HEY! I know you!" Maybe funny at the time, but seriously. *Seriously*. I could have killed someone, if not myself. And I was an *adult*.

Along with a low tolerance lies the propensity within my family gene pool to turn to something other than our own good sense or innate spiritual perfection as a compass. It's so easy to turn off

the GPS of good sense after the good feeling starts to hit and it's so easy to navigate the same course over and over and say you'll learn the lesson next time. But that's just plain bullshit. Fortunately I didn't have to physically maim or murder another human being to realize that there needs to be some buffer between the booze and me. I was lucky enough to just lie to and majorly disappointed my best friend about something I'd done when tipsy.

The act itself was silly and innocent enough ~ sending an email to someone I'd professed to put behind me, waking up the next morning knowing that was a stupid thing to do, and throwing on the veil of denial that it ever happened. But while I wore the veil to hide from myself, I was also letting her think I'd passed a milestone, and we had numerous conversations over the next two weeks that, as she rightly pointed out, were based on circumstances that didn't exist and were a waste of her time, energy, direction and friendship. I merely didn't want to deal with myself in the mirror but honestly, that's a pathetic excuse. Bottom line is, my relationships, whether they are with myself or another person, deserve nothing less than to be based on and balanced upon respect and trust and what's real. If I can't give that after all the work I like to think I've done, well then, I'm an idiot and I'm here to say it *out loud*.

She was honest and brutal and it was a kick in the gut I deserved and needed and it hit, square on, the target. Bulls eye. I never, ever again want to hear someone I love tell me that I hurt them because I *chose to*. What I choose is to pretty much consistently keep in touch with me, stay on solid ground, be in at least sober, if not intellectual, control, of my own choices. So while I do like a good glass of wine or a cocktail, I won't be the life of the party or the one in the corner texting uncontrollably. Nope, I'll be standing right there, glass in hand, cutting off the refills. I count because I'm accountable to me. And you'll know right where I stand.

February 7th, 2010

All signs point to Ojai



The Topa Topa Mountains in the Ojai Valley

I've been in LA exactly one month today, and I'm leaving. Yep, that's right. Packing it up, loading the dogs back into the car, and watching the Santa Monica pier fade from view in my rear view mirror. I'm going up to Ojai.

If someone had told me a couple of months ago that I'd get to LA and leave within 30 days I would have called them crazy, and if I had known the things I know now and still come, I'd have called me crazy. But I am and I would have done it anyway. LA has had a pull on me for over 16 years and when I am here, I tend to better fall into and flow in life's grand design. Instead of feeling stuck in sameness, my life sort of blossoms open and I go along for the ride. People come into my life quicker here, opportunities pop up faster here, things move forward. Life expands.

So when Daisy started her BarkFest in our new apartment, it freaked me out. She's a social dog, and in Virginia Beach, she'd run down the street stopping at all the neighbor's front doors to say hi. I'd go to work for 8 to 10 hours a day; the neighbor in our duplex never heard a sound. But being in a small space with no view out the window, no open spaces to romp and play, and no real people or doggy friends to see, she kind of went nuts. And then I went nuts because I stayed at home with her for the next two weeks, pretty much 24 hours a day, so she wouldn't disturb our neighbors. I came to live out loud and ended up living house-bound.

We did a week of severe Cesar-style training and my Daisy worked hard and began to fall in line behind me, her Alpha dog. Instead of waking up joyful and bounding to the door to go potty,

she'd walk over and stand there waiting for me. Instead of doing the beagle-dance for breakfast and dinner, she'd lie on the kitchen floor and wait to be fed. Instead of spending her days with her head propped up on the window ledge and watching the world go by, she'd bury it under her pillow and sleep the day away. Instead of greeting me at the door like I was absolutely the best friend she would ever, ever, have, excited and running back and forth with her bone in her mouth, she'd look at me, grab her bone and go lay down with her tail wagging. She tried so hard, good dog.

And that's when we went to Ojai. I'd heard about it from an acquaintance several months before and, like LA, felt a strong connection for a city I'd never seen. I'm from a small town and crave that slower, community feel. But there's more. It's surrounded by mountains. It's artistic and spiritual and outdoorsy. It's eclectic and quirky. And it sounds a whole lot like the type of place [the astrologer](#) described to me almost 3 years ago.

One road trip and one apartment hunting expedition later, I find myself in a totally different yet not so completely unexpected direction from the one I'd spent a year planning. I think I'd have ended up in Ojai eventually, but the Universe says *why wait?* [I asked it to lead me where was best](#) and turned the key. Life revved up its engine, buckled my seat belt, tossed me onto Orange Drive. Then it slammed on the brakes, did a donut in the parking lot, threw on some tunes, rolled back the soft top, hit the gas, and cruised on up the PCH.

February 5th, 2010

Call me crazy, call me cuz you miss me, just don't call me brave.

I walked out my front door at least 20 times today and went absolutely nowhere. Daisy's separation anxiety has basically trapped me at home while I figure out which method and combination of training works best for her. It isn't just about correcting the problem that she barks like a broken record when I leave her and Lolli alone; she's going through some pretty traumatic and real emotions too, and those can't be ignored.

So in between crate training and working on the computer, I stand up, grab my keys, and exit, then stand there for 5 to 10 seconds, walk back in, put the keys down, ignore the dog, and sit back down to work. The idea is to make leaving no big deal. By the third time I'd gone out, Daisy got smart and positioned herself in nap mode in front of the door.

I don't blame her for how she's feeling. She's a rescue and was literally scooped up one day by her former owners and dumped off at Animal Control with the order to "just kill her." This after they'd never let her go outside and fed her up to an enormous 85 pounds. The ride across country and a few days of kenneling and a new environment has no doubt had an effect on her. No wonder she's reacting to my own emotional circus right now, too.

The dogs and I have a definite psychic connection. I found out just how strong it is when I left them with a friend to attend [Marianne Williamson's latest lecture](#) here in LA. Five minutes before I returned, both of them started jumping up and down, barking and getting excited like they do when I come home. It wouldn't have seemed nearly so strange except for the fact that I didn't drive my car ~ it's obvious they weren't reacting to hearing that familiar sound from 2 or 3 miles away.

Daisy's clearly responding to whatever separation anxiety I'm feeling. And here I thought I had that whipped. I mean, this isn't my first move out here and it was that detached, lonely and disconnected mindset, real or imagined, that always did me in. That combined with very tangible logistics of starting over, including everything from changing jobs and making ends meet to becoming adept at navigating a city where it can take 20 minutes to go one mile, left turn green lights barely exist, banks don't have drive-through ATMs and every single intersection requires the ability to observe pedestrians from one side of your peripheral vision to the other. Don't even get me started on the fact that you just can't do a quick stop at a fast food restaurant if you need to go to the bathroom. If you do find a place, there won't be any parking. After being forced to pee myself ~ twice ~ I've learned to ration my fluid intake. That, however, is another story for another time.

My point is that the same emotions and upheavals that affected me back then are still present now. Though tempered by experience and maturity and trust that all really will be fine, they are partying their ass off at 4 and 5 am when I wake, when I check the bank account, when I sit here too long in my own little space. I've had a lot of people tell me that I'm brave or bold for coming out here, leaving what I know behind, coming to a city that is known for being a difficult place to meet people, starting over.

No. I am not these things. I am not brave, or strong, or bold or courageous. I think those words belong to those people who sacrifice something of themselves for the good of others, even in the midst of their own terror. Brave is fighting against drug or alcohol addiction. Courageous is giving everything you've got up against cancer. Bold might be walking half a block in sight of a starving, deranged looking stray pitbull, which I did earlier tonight. But I think that's probably more like stupid. What I am is more difficult to define than those honorable adjectives and not nearly so admirable. I came out here because I got tired of being scared. I got tired of being depressed and feeling hopeless and hating myself for being all of those things. I came out here because I got tired of ignoring the nagging pull on my soul that tells me there's some sort of path I'm supposed to be following. I came out here because I knew in the core of my being that if I continued to live a life that in my eyes felt like I was playing it safe and practical and therefore cheating myself out of whatever unknown wonders lay ahead, then I might as well be dead.

There is nothing practical about this move and that is the first thing I tell people when they ask me why I came. It wasn't for a job, it wasn't for the weather, it wasn't for a guy (though I don't seriously know if I call that practical either). I'm here because I decided to throw logic to the wind and listen to intuition and meditation and all the illogical, unexplainable miracles and forces at work in my life. I came, ultimately, because for over 16 years I've lived with one foot on each side of the threshold, watching myself go in and out the door of yearning. It was simply time to make a choice before all doors closed and there were no choices left to make. I came because I was tired of hearing myself bark. It was time to start believing in myself, logic and practical, straight and narrow be damned. The truth is, we can do anything if the yearning is strong enough.



Turn On Yor Light.

January 27th, 2010

Sunday Is Feel Good Music Day. At least for today.

I heard the song *Fireflies* yesterday while driving up the PCH. My friend Scott back in Virginia sent me the YouTube video several months ago, but this was the first time I'd heard it played on the radio. It's just one of the darned cutest songs to come along, and there's nothing like good music when you're driving up the coastline on a blue-sky, sun filled day (though some Kid Rock can go a long way there too). If the link doesn't work for you, you can listen to it on [YouTube](#). Happy Sunday!

January 24th, 2010

Meet MarkCarlos



The new addition to the household.

MarkCarlos is my latest thrift store find. At \$50, he was such a bargain that I couldn't pass him up. Short on space in a studio apartment, but with plenty of overhead real estate, I knew MarkCarlos would fit well in a 13 x 13 living area. The shelves and drawers ~ and even a hamper too! ~ provide invaluable storage space. I couldn't wait to get that baby home along with a "new" 3-piece sectional sleeper sofa.

The thrift store people delivered MarkCarlos but wouldn't carry him up to the second floor. He sat in the downstairs hallway waiting for my resident manager to help me heave him up the stairs. He's big and he's heavy. And he wouldn't go through the front door. In my rush to create a comfortable home it never occurred to me to measure the furniture for the doorway. And that's one of my flaws ~ overlooking the details to get to the end result.

A few years back, I visited a renowned and well-respected astrologer, mainly because I wanted to understand the psychic, spiritual pull Los Angeles has held on me for close to 16 years. It was the best \$240 I've ever spent. Over the course of 90 minutes he answered that question, outlined upcoming changes and life events, and dissected my personality too, explaining who I am and why I think, feel, act as I do. I transcribed his words into six typed, single spaced pages of transcription that I've read over and over again. It serves as a roadmap of where I've been and where I'm going and it is almost spooky in its accuracy.

Two things he said were dead-on. One was that I find it hard to relax in any environment that I'm in ~ that I'm always doing, learning, searching, unable to just *be*. The other thing he said was that I look around and see what's wrong with my life instead of noticing how innately perfect it, and I, am. And he's so right. It always about the to-do list, the house that needs furniture, the

bills that need paying, the website that needs updating, the computer that needs backing up, the clothes that needs folding, the roots that need coloring. Its about Getting Things Done. Checking off the list, crossing the finish line. I feel like I'm always in a rush and I often find myself feeling agitated, pushed by the clock and skipping over the details. Which obviously came back to bite me in the ass.

But it's not the clock. It's me. Living like that keeps that innate perfection from shining through, and it keeps me from doing the things I really want to be doing, like writing my blog and taking pictures. Maybe it's my way of being fearful, locking that creativity inside behind those walls of useless stuff. I dunno, but I came to LA to do those things, not keep doing what I've been doing in the same old pathetic way.

Most of all, this mindframe keeps me cloistered in my own little world. It keeps me from enjoying the spontaneity and synchronicity of life. It keeps me from meeting all the really cool, fascinating, and innately perfect people out there. It keeps me from being one of them.

Last night about 7pm I heard an awful screeching noise outside in the hallway. I opened my door to see Carlos, the maintenance supervisor, on the front lawn with my cupboard and a circular saw. He trimmed an inch of wood off the frame in the back, and he and his assistant proceeded to lug, heave and ho the monstrosity up 15 stairs to my studio. When the thing still wouldn't go through the front door, he patiently went back downstairs, got the circular saw, and shaved off a bit more wood right there in the hallway. After removing the handles and a piece of moulding and some very slow and accurate maneuvering, MarkCarlos was sitting quietly in the corner liked he'd lived there all his life. Carlos refused to take any payment.

A couple of hours later I took the dogs out for a walk around our block. It was dark, but we usually don't see anyone else except for a neighbor or two; this time we ran into no less than 3 homeless people before we got to the second corner. A one-eyed young guy asking for a cigarette and money for the bus, another panhandling cars at the intersection, another digging through the trash. All day I'd been concerned with and thrilled by getting the new cupboard in my house and writing a cute little blog about it. Now I didn't want to do the blog at all because it seems such a trivial thing in light of what goes on right outside my windows.



The guys who made it possible!

And I'm not sure why I'm writing it even now, except that I think it's time I make a commitment to this innately perfect soul that I am and this innately perfect life that I have to give it the chance to blossom and grow. I look at the people I've met in just the past week and the things that have begun to flow and I know that there's a lot more going on around me than my narrow-minded, spoiled view of my world would have me believe. I'll be damned if I will choose to let a tiny bank account and lack of a kitchen table, television, or broom create my world. Uh-huh. Nope.

January 23rd, 2010

Ruff Around the Edges



Helping the cable guy install internet.

Daisy is a barker. Fine in our old neighborhood, not so cool in the close quarters of this Los Angeles sprawl. Now that I've moved into a building with 19 other apartments on two floors, it's become the problem of the day. Talk about shaking up that status quo.

We've lived here for almost a week and I've left her and Lollipop alone only once, for an hour or so, long enough to run with M., the resident manager, to pick up a chair and a bookcase. We could hear her howls halfway around the block ~ she is a Beagle, after all.

M. took an ass-chewing from [Jazzman](#) next door, and I took to realizing that I inadvertently created this mess by always allowing her to do what she does naturally when I'm not at home to hear it. Consequently, when I go out anywhere I've been taking them with me. They've been to Trader Joe's, the 99cent store, and PetCo. They've ridden across town on the freeway in pouring rain to the thrift store. They've been to Runyon Canyon and on the plus side, they've begun to *hike* Runyon Canyon. I tend to underestimate my dogs and I didn't think they could do either the hills or the city atmosphere.

I've always treated my dogs like cute, slightly pitiful little people. They are spoiled and loved and indulged. They greet me at the door like I've been gone for weeks, jumping and barking and running back and forth like they're on crack. They tell me when they want to go outside. They sleep where they want on the furniture and I'm normally relegated to a corner of my bed. They are rescues and they've been through hell so it's natural I'd want to make their life easier, comfort them, and give them the world. Pearl was quiet and it seemed to work fine. The same with Lollipop. Unfortunately, with Daisy I've created a brat. An insecure, obsessed, whiney pain

in the ass brat. And unless I plan to live my live within the confines of those 8 foot walls, somebody's gotta change.

According to Cesar Millan, the [Dog Whisperer](#), that somebody's gotta be me. Dogs need structure and discipline and order and lots and lots of exercise to feel secure and well-balanced, but until now all Daisy and Lolli have had is the lovin' and touchin' and squeezin'. Cesar compares raising a healthy dog with our human interactions and relationships; if you've ever tried to love, coddle and protect someone through their issues you know firsthand that they don't grow and they don't change. Dogs, like people, innately don't want to be somebody's victim. They react best when they have your strength to emulate and when they're made to wear their big-dog panties.

In the midst of starting over with an empty house, dwindling funds, waiting on the internet so I can get back to work and well, the overall stress of moving across country, not to mention the heavy rains LA is experiencing right now, this bump in the road has the potential to throw me into a ditch. Hiding indoors with my dog just isn't feasible and it isn't desirable either. Though I normally go without, right now, I've got to wear my panties front and center too, because it's my energy and state of mind that matter most and ultimately affect Daisy.

The sonic collar she's currently wearing around her neck has helped squelch the barking a bit, but I have to let her know that staying home without me is okay. Likewise I have to acknowledge that living life in a big, basically new, city is ok too, and put aside any trepidations I have both about leaving her home and venturing out. Daisy barks less with the collar on, but she still whines and scratches at the door, and when she does bark it's a muffled howl followed by an ear-piercing screech: Bark BEEP! *Bark BEEP!* I'm just not sure that's an improvement in the ears of my neighbors.

That's a shame because Daisy is a great little dog. She's sweet and she's smart and she's lovable. She carries her stuffed "babies" around with her and flops her fat body over for belly rubs and plays dead and rolls over . . . after several attempts. She's also a major social butterfly ~ and right now that's our downfall. While I don't care much for Jazzman's attitude or his way of handling the situation, the reality is that my neighbors in the building deserve the quiet, Daisy deserves to feel safe and secure, and I deserve a relaxed and happy home. Daisy's gotta learn to be alone because as much as I love this new place, there's a whole big ol' world out there, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life here with only my dogs and the internet for company. Now where'd I put those Big Girl Panties?

January 20th, 2010

It's a Great Day in the Neighborhood

The dogs and I arrived in LA in one piece (or three separate but intact pieces) on the evening of January 5th. After 10 days on the road and more potty stops than I can count ~ not all of them for the dogs ~ our entrance into the city could have easily come straight out of a movie. The snow, which accompanied us all the way to Utah, finally gave way to sunshine and temperatures in the seventies. Rush hour traffic, incredibly heavy but also unbelievably fast, revved up the energy while the setting sun, falling steadily over the Pacific now only a few miles away, cast a golden glow on the buildings and the palm trees. Windows down, breeze in hair. Off the freeway and onto Fairfax Avenue . . . the hills of Hollywood beckoning ahead . . . Orange smiling serenely on the dashboard, her job now done . . . fade to black.

That feel-good ending lasted only as long as the parking lot, though. Real life, suspended in mid-air during the almost 3000 miles between Virginia and California, came bounding back in, happy and loveable and goofy as it is, in the form of Daisy heaving herself onto my friend's clean white sofa. It became apparent within the first 10 minutes that living arrangements would need to be reconsidered. The plan was to stay with a girlfriend for a few months and get my crap together at a leisurely pace, but with my two dogs, her sweet but bladderly-stressed out Italian Greyhound and no closet, drawer or cabinet space to speak of, that just wasn't going to work. Lollipop took a drink of water from the Greyhound's bowl, left her tongue-smutz floating behind, and that pretty much sealed the deal.

Over the next three days I looked at four apartments in the West Hollywood, Mid-Wilshire and Los Feliz areas. I thought I had Apartment Number One but it rented without the resident manager's knowledge before I came along. Number Two was just gross like, well, number two. Feeling slightly desperate for a room of my own, I put down a "nonrefundable deposit" on Apartment Number Three. I came to my senses a day later and realized that a bottom floor apartment with no sunlight only steps away from Sunset Boulevard and my favorite hiking spot really isn't an ideal location for either my sanity or walking dogs 4 or 5 times a day and night when you stop to consider that the next door neighbors are 7-11, a liquor store and various and sundry homeless sleeping on the corner.

My search continued and on Saturday afternoon I found an absolutely adorable second-floor studio with large windows looking out over the hills in a 1920s Spanish Revival building in West Hollywood within one block of the Farmer's Market, the Grove, Whole Foods, Melrose Avenue and a gazillion trendy thrift stores. . . . all utilities included. I really wanted this place. But it was in a busy area of town and I wasn't sure the dogs could handle that. I really wanted it awfully bad, though. I wanted that open vista view.

I still had to wait for Monday and reference and credit checks. I made that time hell, losing two night's sleep obsessing, worrying and willing something good to happen, bouncing pros and cons off friends and practically casting spells and writing "my" new address over and over in an attempt to make it so. After informing Apartment Number Three I would not be taking their place and expected my deposit to be returned (and not hearing anything back), I decided I'd lost enough sleep, sanity and quite possibly enough money to be painfully aware that I was trying incredibly hard to manipulate and control the situation. I did my part, and now I needed to trust it

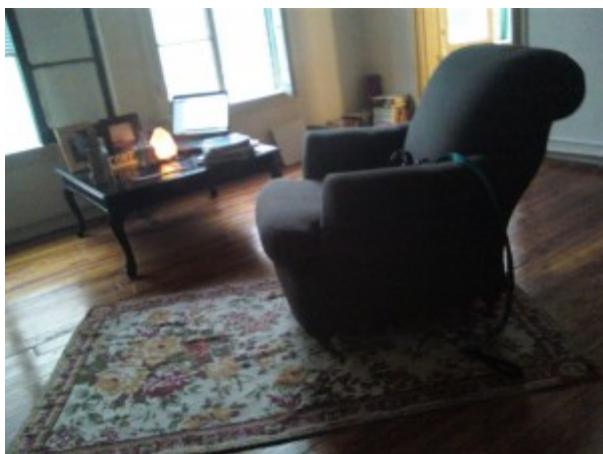
was enough and believe it would unfold as it was all meant to be. So during my hike in the Canyon, I sucked it up and simply asked the Universe to choose the place that would be best for my dogs. That would be best for me. The cell phone rang on the way home; Apartment Number One was mine.

Now two week's here and I'm in a second-floor studio with hardwood floors and 8 foot ceilings in a stately old brick 1920s building in the mid-Wilshire area of Los Angeles. There are 19 other apartments here occupied by an eclectic mix of professionals and artists of varying ethnicity, sexual preference and age. The resident manager, M., is a love and has gone out of his way to welcome me and help out. In addition, there are at least six other dogs on the property and a fenced backyard. My view of the hills has been replaced with the side of the adjacent apartment building, but the rooftop is accessible and affords a 360 degree panorama both day and night. The downstairs neighbor across the alley is a jazz musician, and most nights I sit in the living room windows and listen to the sweet sounds of sax wafting up through the air.

If I had more time and the foresight to plan, . . . I mean control . . . the situation, I probably would not have ended up here. I would have researched neighborhoods and limited my options to places within its walls. To be honest, my instincts told me months ago that the roommate situation would not work, but I didn't want to hear that. My instincts also told me (as did common sense) that Daisy's love of barking would be a problem in the city. Mr. Jazzman (also known as Dick, because that is his name) is not a fan of barking dogs and has already confronted M., shut all his windows tight, and given me the Evil Eye. And she's only been alone once.

I did ask for the place that would be the best, but the best doesn't always mean the easiest or the most comfortable or familiar. The best might just be designed to shake the status quo. So I'll face the challenges as they come and give the Universe a big thumbs up for plopping us where it did . . . on a little street coincidentally called Orange Drive, with a view of the Hollywood Hills from the roof and my own private jazz club.

Maybe [Orange really is all I need](#). Well, that and some furniture!



A room of my own, and a chair, too.

January 19th, 2010

A Borrowed Resolution

I don't make New Year's resolutions. Instead, I spend an hour or so writing up two lists: one recording all the accomplishments and personal goals that were reached in the passing year, and one that's more of a stream of consciousness brain-belch of things I'd like to do, be or become throughout the evolving new year.

Because I was traveling, it never even occurred to me to create my 2009/2010 lists. And because I'm moving and everything is changing and up for re-creation, I am excusing myself from that for now. The to-do list takes precedence: find an apartment. hike the canyon. take the dogs to the dog park. fix the computer. change the phone number. You get the picture.

Big Mama is in her 80s, has fairly severe dementia, and resides in assisted living. On her bad days she's sassy, spiteful, beligerent, sad and confused. She wants to go home, and has walked out once or twice. The home she wants to return to is long gone, and so are the people she misses and asks about often. On her good days, she knows your name, maybe a little bit about you. But even more than that, she's beyond lucid in the sense that she's aware her mind moves in and out of reality.

When she's clear-minded, she has an almost sage-like air about her. Two or three times, she's spoken to me in words that eerily allude to things in my life she couldn't possibly know about. She hands me straightforward knowledge and insight that I'm inclined to believe comes to her from that other reality. She's peaceful and seems content, and it is those times with her lately I have enjoyed most.

As part of the New Year's celebrations at her home, each resident wrote their 2010 resolution on a piece of paper. Big Mama, Edith Jane Holcomb, sometimes here, and sometimes there, posted a resolution that I'm inclined to borrow and use for my own this year:

I'd like to know who I am, and then be that person.

She once told me that she's not sure if it's those long dead people in her dreams who are real, or if the rather lonely day to day life she lives is the reality. I tend to think there's a good chance that it is both.

January 7th, 2010

You are now leaving colorful Colorado. :(

**Days 6 through 10, December 31 to January 4
Grand Junction, Colorado to Mesquite, Utah.**



Driving through Utah

It's 2010. Happy New Year! I landed in Grand Junction, Colorado on the afternoon of December 31st, and spent the next four days with Lee Lee and kids. I even got to see Debra and her daughter, Jessica, before they headed back to Virginia New Years' Day. Our eve of the new year was incredibly wild and fun-filled and I can't repeat any of it here. Right!? Well, the kids went out but the three of us stayed home, watched movies, talked, laughed and had a blast.

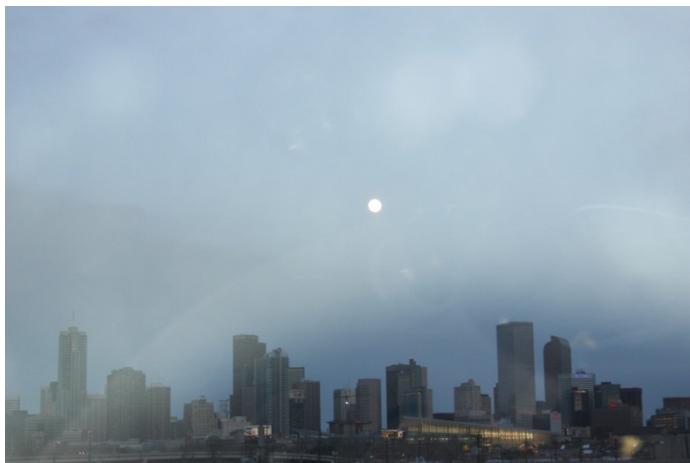
Yesterday I had a little bit of a meltdown. Lee Lee was there to catch the pieces and quickly put them back together again. I think it was a mixture of being without the dogs for a few days (they stayed in the puppy spa up the road) and feeling the distance between family and me after so many hours on the road. Really, you can drive to LA from VA in 4 days, but I've spread it out over a little over a week. Being in Colorado with Jen and Alexa and then Lee Lee was the highlight of the whole traveling experience and well worth the detour. I can't wait to go back now that I'll be so much closer.

It's easy to feel alone when you have so much change in front of you, and traveling is a discombobulating experience at times. The people that love you, I've found, are there to ground you and remind you that you are not alone. At it's best, the freedom that comes with travel gives you many opportunities to experience who you are when you are alone to do things by yourself. It wasn't until Colorado that I began to relax and enjoy the spontaneity that goes along with being on the road, and I don't know if that was due to the change in altitude and atmosphere, or because I spent time with the women that know me well. I just know that I feel like I have more air around me now, and I'm almost sad to see the journey come to an end. I have 350.52 miles to go (5 hours and 19 minutes) before arriving in LA. I guess that's when the journey really begins.

January 4th, 2010

Rocky Mountain Hi!

**Days Four and Five, December 29 and 30.
Denver, Colorado.**



Moon over downtown Denver

After 4 days on the road, I landed in Denver around 6pm and am staying with my friend Jen and her husband, daughter and 2 dogs. I am in *awe* of the Rockies, enough that I found myself holding the camera with one hand and the wheel with the other, snapping pictures as I drove into the city last night. I did keep my eyes on the road, and not in the viewfinder, though, so nothing really turned out. The picture above I took from Jen's car this afternoon.

Sleep ~ in a real bed in a real room in a real house ~ was good! The dogs are happy happy to have other dogs to socialize with, but every time we leave the house we return to find them sitting on the back of the chair in the window watching and waiting. Last night was dinner at [Sushi Sasa](#) in downtown Denver. Try saying Sushi Sasa fast 3 times ~ I can't! But dinner was excellent and Jen and her family go there enough that her 20 month old daughter knows each sushi chef by name. I think there is one in LA too, at least I hope so. Ah, nope. There's only one Sushi Sasa ~ and that's in Denver.

Today started with the dogs waking me at 4:30 to go outside ~ because they are an hour or so ahead of themselves. I stood on the back porch under an almost full moon and took a deep breath of crisp Rocky Mountain air, let them do their business, then jumped back into bed under a down comforter and tons of pillows for another two hours. After a big ol' cup of French press coffee, we took the dogs for a walk around Sloan's Lake, which is right down from Jen's house. There's a great view of the Rockies from the lake, though today was a little overcast.

The highlight of the day was driving down to Littleton to have a late lunch with our friend Alexa at her Melting Pot restaurant. It's in a beautiful historic building that served as a police station and library back in the old west days. Alexa, Jen and I all met when we worked at Inlet Fitness, a health club back in Virginia Beach, about 10 years ago and we picked up right where we left off

~ and wow how life has changed for us all. I'm blessed to have these two women and their true, lasting friendships.

Tomorrow we're off to Grand Junction to bring in the New Year with Lee Lee and Debra and their kids. I don't know what we've got planned, but it doesn't really even matter. We have fun no matter what we do. And what a great way to say goodbye to 2009 and helloooooo to 2010. There's a little snow predicted for the drive through the Rockies, but everyone says that if the roads are bad, pull over for a cup of coffee, give the snow plow about an hour to go through, and you'll be fine. Now that, I can do. And I promise, no pictures while driving!



Jen, Alexa and Karal at The Melting Pot, Littleton, Colorado

December 30th, 2009

Five On-the-Road Observations

Day 4. December 29

Colby, Kansas

“The Oasis on the Plain” according to the sign at the visitor’s center.

... where I’m stealing internet service.

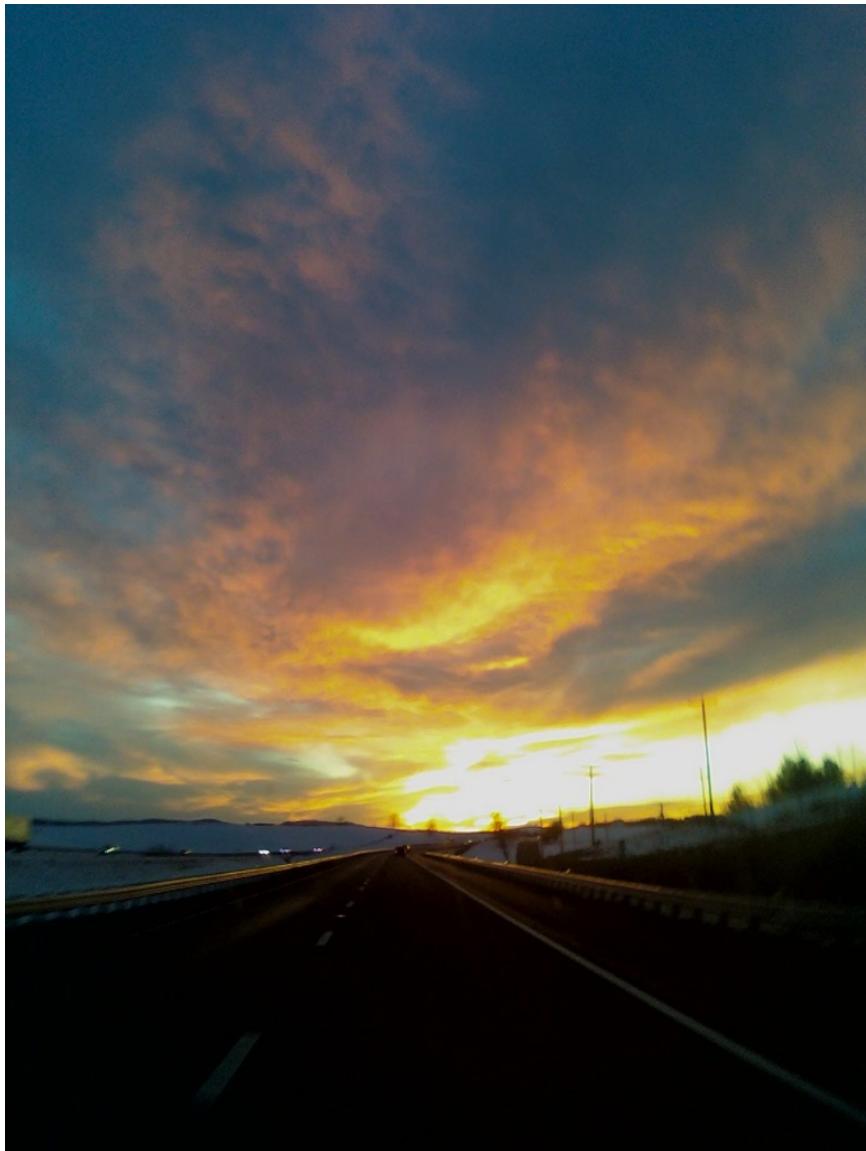
I’ve gone through Virginia and Tennessee, Arkansas and Oklahoma. Days two and three were spent overnight in Maumelle, Arkansas and Salina, Kansas. The weather forecast for Texas and New Mexico called for major snowstorms in addition to the usual unpredictable blizzards in Albuquerque and Flagstaff, so I turned right in Oklahoma City back up to I-70 and the Northern Route. I’m heading to Colorado after all! This trip wouldn’t be the same without that, and New Years Eve alone in Barstow would have simply just sucked. Now that I’m past familiar territory, I’ve found my attitude and excitement level picking up. It’s freezing cold here and cloudy, but I’m already wondering where I packed my flops.

Driving across country gives you lots of time to think. Between the coffee and the extended “me time” I’ve come up with a few insights, both personal and universal.

1. Tailgaters are worse in Virginia than anywhere in the South. Seriously, I had more grills shoved up my ass between Louisa and Bristol than anywhere since. And Hampton Roads drivers are the worst. Lighten up people, you make my home state look bad.
2. Americans love their religion, particularly their Christianity. Jesus has more billboard space than cigarette ads. I sort of feel sorry for him, because he never wanted to be a SuperStar but here he is, plastered all over America reminding us to trust, have faith, believe, adopt not abort. He wants me to smile, because my mom chose life, which of course, I do, because the smiley faced ad is so darn happy. I’m all for spirituality, but I keep wondering why the need to shove religion in my face. Where are the Buddhist billboards? Personally I think the sun sparkling off all those ice covered trees in Kansas makes the same point, and in a better way.
3. We also love our sex, if the number of ads for the *Adult SuperStore!* is any indication. Every state has at least one. A billboard out in Oklahoma teaches us that “God Creates.” I guess the ads for the Adult SuperStore are there to serve as our reminder.
4. My dogs rock. I thought they’d hate this trip, hate giving up their home. Aside from one growling match a few minutes ago, they’ve been the best of travel companions. Sleep in the kennel, romp around rest stops, play in the hotel room and then sleep next to me all night. We don’t argue about the speed limit or where to get gas. They are gypsies at heart.
5. In the winter, there is nothing green southwest of Charlottesville. The trees are brown. The grass is yellow. Daisy found one green something sprouting up through the mud at our Maumelle hotel but she promptly plucked and ate it so I don’t have a clue what it could have been.

And a bonus. At least it is for me!

- After driving 1952.3 miles in less than 4 days, I have come to the conclusion that yes, I absolutely *can* go more than 40 minutes without needing to stop and pee!



Virginia Sunset. December 26.

December 30th, 2009

All You Need Is Orange

Day 1. December 26
Knoxville, Tennessee
The Motel 6.



Orange keeps track of mileage.

Almost 600 miles in and the dogs and I have had dinner and are sitting on the bed watching tv, but only after a quick thumping of the mattress and a rumpling of the pillows failed to reveal any creatures other than the three that have paid to stay here for the night. The bed is huge so there's plenty of room for me and the girls ~ I can actually sleep in a straight line if I choose. My mom and I each light a candle at night and mine is glowing softly on the desk/dresser next to the television, which is turned to the weather channel and not showing good news on my Northern/Colorado route.

Right now I'm concentrating on the logistics of transporting two beagles across country and my mind is a little preoccupied with making sure they both pee and that I keep up with the leashes and my keys and schedule gas and coffee and potty stops all at the same time, but now that I'm in the hotel room there's a sense of anticipation tinged slightly with the discombobulation that goes with being (self)-uprooted. [Genie Alisa](#) says I'm going to LA to be with my people. Lee Lee says what I feel is normal because I just left my people. They are both right.

This little experience started out today after a great Christmas with my mom and Hosa, the sisters and the rest of the family. Combining their two poodles with my two beagles, always a little hectic, was slightly more this time thanks to one recent spay and Daisy's all-you-can-eat-buffet trashcan party. Still, it was one of my best and most memorable visits. I had hoped to see a few people but in the end really just wanted to spend it close to the clan.

Everything got done for the move but I'm a little disappointed because my car is packed to the gills and I wanted to keep it simple, holding onto only those items that are clothing or photography or dog-oriented. Yet I still managed to bring along a box of impractical things (that's right ~ like getting rid of everything you own is *practical* . . .) There's an espresso maker

that belonged to my mom circa 1970s, my Black & Decker blender, and the antique waffle iron my grandparents got at a yard sale for my birthday many years ago. I'm not sure what this says about me that I kept kitchen items.

Anyway, Tuesday, in the midst of a house-emptying panic attack made worse by a pulled wisdom tooth the day before, I texted Maggie that I was feeling overwhelmed. She replied simply.

All you need is Orange.

The little naked doll with the bright orange hair has been around since I was five. A gift from a relative ~ I can't remember who, she's a constant and a trooper, somehow managing to hang on through a gazillion life changes. She's spent most of her naked little existence packed away but on this trip she's riding shotgun, a reminder that I've got people.



The truck before Hosa took charge. Thank you Hosa!

December 28th, 2009

Christmas Cactus and Grillswitch

For my Mama and Hosa. Merry Christmas 2009.

Last night my family sat down to watch *The Homecoming*. Everyone was in town for Christmas Dinner a night early, and it was kind of cool to be watching the original Walton's movie with my sisters and mom, since we actually lived right there in Walton Country back when the tv show was so popular. A lot of you know that [SuziCate](#) and I went to elementary school together up in Nelson County, but you may not be aware that our school was right across the street from the original Walton home written about by Earl Hamner.

SuziCate can tell you some great stories about the people behind the characters in the series, so I'll leave that up to her. In my family we have our own reasons for wanting to watch the movie, namely, Maggie's favorite scene when Mama Walton exclaims over her "Chris-mas Cac-tus." I have to admit I get a little teary-eyed when Daddy Walton gives John Boy an Indian writing tablet because though John Boy wasn't doing exactly what was expected of him, especially as the eldest son during the Depression, he was following his heart and they were supporting that.

Between watching the movie and all the talking and laughing we were doing, I got to thinking about homecomings. Over the past 18 months I've enjoyed a serendipitous string of reunions, reconnections and homecomings with people and places meaningful to my life. Some connections proved precious still, maybe even more so than before; others are what they maybe always have been ~ simply bittersweet place cards in time, with no obvious purpose and yet no definitive end.

Next I started thinking about Homecoming ~ as in, the high school dances ~ and it surprises me that I really don't remember not only the dances but who I went with to the dances. I remember my sophomore year only because I went with the boy who always got away. Though he'd asked me to the dance three weeks earlier, by the time it came around, he'd already come . . . and gone. He spent the evening singing *Heartache Tonight* and I spent it wishing we were as much in love as another couple there appeared to be. Quite frankly, it was not what I expected and I was majorly disappointed.

My junior year, I wasn't even invited to the dance. Back then, girls didn't much go alone or in groups and I'd broken up with my boyfriend at the end of the summer (yep, for the boy who always got away). We'd also moved 10 miles from town and outside the local calling area. Like Bad Luck Schleprock, I was wowzy-wowzy wo-wo-wo-ing my way through my days and my friends eventually became annoyed and distant. I was a pretty pathetic teenager.

Normally I'd spend my time sulking in my room, listening to the radio and crying myself to sleep and on the night of the dance I'm sure I was doing just that because of course, my life was over: no friends, no date, no dance. Loser! And this is the way I'd have remembered the night, if I had remembered it at all, if I hadn't stumbled on my 1980 diary a few years back.

My mom and stepdad weren't overly involved in my life ~ not counting the time my date and I went to the drive-in movie and looked over to see them waving at us two cars away. I could

normally keep my drama to myself (or so I thought), but on this night my parents decided that I wasn't going to be allowed to drown in my misery on their watch. They somehow planned an impromptu evening on the town and whisked my self-centered little butt up to Charlottesville's UVA Corner.

While my classmates drank down on party road, stood around the high school cafeteria, or necked in the parking lot, I sat in the historic downtown Paramount Theatre and watched Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*, had drinks ~ at 16! ~ in the hot spot bar, The Mousetrap, and was treated to dinner at The Virginian, an iconic UVA Corner dining locale and, I was fascinated to learn at the time, a gay bar back when Hosa was in college. The evening ended, hours later, over Grillswiths at the legendary and long-gone University Diner.

Forgetting that night and recalling only my teenage dramatic angst says something about me that I'm not pleased to acknowledge but feel the obligation to admit. Too often I had expectations of the way I wanted things to go in my life and when they didn't flow according to my wishes, I'd basically shut down and brood over what wasn't going to be. I think a lot of girls, and women, do that by nature, and I personally believe that the depression I'd felt most of my life was essentially the result of choosing to stay in my box and then, when it proved to be empty, shut the lid and lie down in the dark.

Going out to Charlottesville took a little bit of creative initiative on my parent's part, not to mention a whole lot of patience to deal with an ungrateful adolescent. I don't recall much of our conversations or if we really even had any but I remember how I felt, being in the city at night, equal parts anonymous spectator and virgin participant, alone in my sadness but also so absolutely not. Though it took me years to appreciate exactly what they did, they should know they unknowingly poked a tiny hole in my box. That hole let through not only a little ray of sunshine but a view of what's out there and who you can venture to be if you set your expectations aside and let yourself enjoy your life ~ simply, creatively, actively.

At the end of the movie, Daddy Walton, feared dead in a bus accident, walks miles through the snowy mountains to arrive home late on Christmas Eve. The family gathers around while he doles out the gifts he brags he wrangled from Santa. While my parents haven't exactly stolen from the Fat Man for me, I've had my share of surprises. After a much needed but emotional visit to my childhood home this past October, I walked into my parent's kitchen to find Hosa slaving over not only his special homemade spaghetti sauce recipe, but a separate vegetarian version just for me. And my mom, usually happier to let others do the public speaking, made a fantastic toast after Thanksgiving this year and publicly awarded me with [The Pocketbook](#) to take along on my upcoming travels. So sorry Mama Walton, but I'd say that pretty much tops even your beautiful Christmas Cactus.



The Virginian at the UVA Corner

[Hey, what's a Grillswitch?](#) A divine dessert of grilled Donuts, vanilla ice cream & chocolate sauce.

December 24th, 2009

Celebrate Me Home!

Last night I slept my final sleep in Virginia Beach. For 10 months now I've thought about what it's going to feel like to drive over the Lesner Bridge for the last time and in a few hours I'll already know and I can move on to the next thing.

I watch for good signs from the universe, and I'm always listening to what songs are playing at critical moments of my life. Wednesday I drove a cargo van up to my sister's house to drop off a load of furniture, and as I pulled off from the U-Haul lot, it was *Life is a Highway*. When I left my first load of belongings at the thrift store Friday, Darius Rucker was practically smiling through the speakers singing *Alright*:

"I've got a roof over my head . . . shoes under my feet."

And moments after I started writing this post, it was Kenny Loggins' [*Celebrate Me Home*](#).

It's early but the donation truck has come and gone and I'm still in my blue flannel jammies. Daisy and Lolli have known something is changing for days but really started to get the big picture when the two big men came in and carted their furniture out. But they're ok, I think. Daisy was her usual happy bouncy "hi, how-you-are-you-play-with-me!" tail wagging self so I held her while they worked, and Lolli was a little shy but couldn't help peeking out from under Daisy's legs to see what was happening to her stuff. I think she's known something all along whereas Daisy "got it" when I tossed her one of her toys and she ran her usual play route into the bedroom to jump on the bed and back to the living room to jump on the sofa I hope both of them know as long as they are with me, all is gonna be ok.

I know that too, but I still have some things to load into the car and I don't think its all going to fit. I'm a little like Lolli because I found it a bit harder to let go of some things than I counted on it to be. If I give it much more thought though, I'm going to sit here in my jammies all day and have a meltdown, and I really I want to be at my mom's way before dinner. Its stuff, after all. Stuff! And unlike LA 2008, I'm not freaking or panicking. I have no plans to back out, call it off or duck and run for cover at the last minute. It all just sorta feels right, an even-keel with maybe just a tinge of something slightly anxious sitting underneath, but I can live with and use that energy to propel onward.

Be talking to you guys from the road.



December 22nd, 2009

Simply Having a Wonderful Christmas Time

Living Out Loud. (v11). Tis the gift to be simple.



The 2009 Christmas season has been an unusual one. Instead of the traditional parties, getting together with friends, and full-on house decorating, most of my time has been spent going through everything I own and weeding it down to the 4 or 5 plastic tubs that will fit in my car. You would think after having moved so many times this would not be an issue for me but somehow, like everyone else, I manage to clutter up my house and my life with more things and more clothes than I can ever use or even need.

This cleaning out of the house has lead to a little cleaning out of the head, too, and that's a cool thing. Aside from my clothes, my camera, my journals, some music and my dogs, there isn't much more I'm inclined to keep right now. It's disturbing to notice how attached I've become to things, simply because they were given to me by or belonged to someone special, and I realize that I am a packrat of memories and a hoarder of my past. All that holding onto what's over, what isn't and what sometimes never was, has left me feeling weighted down and a little suffocated. Don't get me wrong ~ I honestly envy those friends of mine who are settled in their homes, surrounded by stuff, and comfortable in their lives and content with their families, and I want that too. It's just that instinct has been telling me for a long time now to let go and follow this direction, this move to LA, and I know in my heart that what I want within my life waits out there for me. I know that in a way I cannot explain. And I know these things can be replaced.

Yet even without the usual Christmas festivities, this holiday season has been more memorable than most. It snowed the first weekend of the month, and I'd driven up to Louisa to sell my photographs at the local Christmas festival and parade. Though the exhibit turned out to be a bust, the afternoon that I spent with the [OBX gang](#) over lunch and coffee was a blast. After

driving to my parent's house in the falling snow, I was greeted with a lighted Christmas tree waiting for decorations, and the evening was spent with wine, dinner, great music, a roaring fire, and my mom and dad. That felt like Christmas to me.

Back at the beach, I've had 3 or 4 small goodbye parties and our annual work Christmas dinner. In the past two days I've seen three dear friends I haven't been able to connect with in over a year. And today, while mom and stepdad enjoy another snowstorm 150 miles to the west, it's pouring rain here and I'm home filling boxes for donation to the women's shelter and sorting out which framed photographs to give to which friends ~ because they aren't going with me.

On the day after Christmas, after spending the holiday with my mom and Hosa and their two dogs, LolliPop and Daisy and I will have breakfast and head west. But before that, we'll have Christmas dinner on the 23rd, and our usual oyster breakfast at my sister Janet's house Christmas morning. If I'm lucky all of my nieces and nephews will make it home and my grandmother, affectionately known as Big Mama, will be on the good side of her Alzheimer's, meaning that even though she'll forget six times that it's Christmas, she'll be happy and smiling instead of belligerent and nasty and enjoying every minute of *that*.

Janet and I can share a glass of her Evan Williams egg nog before bed and maybe visit our friends the Chaney's. Suzanne and I practically grew up together, as her dad and mine, before he died, were state troopers together. Every Christmas Eve, Jerry would go running outside with his gun and pretend he was shooting Santa. Yes, it sounds horrible, but it was truly funny, once you were old enough to know he wasn't *really* shooting poor Santa. And I'm from the country, so if the skies are clear, I'll get to see a billion stars shining overhead before moving to a city that has it's share of stars, but doesn't quite enjoy the same view.

My neighbors are having another dinner party tonight, but right now, I have candles lit, a glass of mulled wine, and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* playing on the stereo, and I'm listening to the dogs snoring in their sleep. Last Saturday evening, after Lolli injured her back, I took all the covers off my bed and curled up on the floor in the living room next to her and fell asleep to the tune of *Christmas Time is Here*. I had the best nap of my life. It's been a busy day, but I'm pretty content as I sit here for a few moments, doing absolutely nothing. Right now I'm between here and there ~ and that's a peaceful place to be.

December 19th, 2009

The 'mates of '82 hullabaloo . . . a follow up

What happens when 5 girls in their mid-40s get together at an OBX cottage for a mini high-school reunion?

[The question, answered 7 months later. . .](#)

December 15th, 2009

Let It Flow, Let It Flow, Let It Flow

Moving day is less than two weeks away and just about everything is going smoothly. I've rented a cargo van to cart some furniture to my sister's for safe keeping tomorrow after work, arranged to have new tires put on my truck and scheduled Samaritan House to come get whatever is left in the house the morning of the 22nd before leaving Virginia Beach to spend Christmas with my family in Louisa and then head out to Los Angeles on the 26th.

Between now and then I have one full day left of work, 3 chiropractic appointments, one hair appointment and a date with the dentist to remove the only existing wisdom tooth in my head. I'd like to set aside some time to get together with friends but I just don't know if that is going to happen. The last few months seemed like they would last forever and I figured I had all the time in the world but now I have a house full of furniture and boxes that need to find a home, fast. I placed a few things on Craigslist but up till now I've only managed to sell a couple of rugs.

Fortunately I spent yesterday with two of my best friends from my college days at the ODU Oceanography Department. Julie and Carole have been with me since LA trip number one in 1995. They have always supported my dreams, even when logic was not a deciding factor. Saturday I had dinner with [SuzeCate](#), my long-lost elementary school chum brought back via FaceBook, who it turns out has been less than 10 miles from me for most of the past 20 years. Friday night the best neighbors on the planet cooked me a vegetarian dinner and we whooped it up in our usual fashion of unusual entertainment like reading *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, playing the piano and dancing swing (or attempting to) by the fire to Christmas tunes while banging on bongos that only one of us truly knows how to play.

And a couple of weeks ago I spent a brief but oh so magical afternoon in Louisa with three of the [OBX Skanks](#), Debra, Pam and Steff. We were blessed with a pretty cool snowstorm that dropped some cozy Christmas cheer into our quick but memorable day and took a few pictures for Lee Lee out in Colorado. My friend Brenda is coming all the way from Lynchburg to spend this weekend helping me pack and keep my sanity, and last night's work party provided a great last chance to be merry with the colleagues. Christmas I'll be staying with my mom and Hosa and having the annual oyster breakfast with my sister (both of them, I hope) and it's the one time of the year I eat oysters, even though I still only eat them fried. New Year's Eve I'll be in Colorado with my best-est longtime friend Lee Lee. But there are still people I want badly to see before I go.

It would be easy enough to schedule a couple of hours this weekend to meet in one of the local pubs if it weren't for the one snag in these perfectly flowing plans, and that is LolliPop. My baby seems to be suffering from some sort of spinal problem for a few days now and both a trip to the chiropractor and strong doses of drugs have helped only slightly. We spent last night sleeping in the living room floor, her head curled against a pillow between me and the sofa, Daisy above us keeping a watchful eye on her while I slept.

I've massaged, held, and sung *Unchained Melody* to this dog, but despite muscle relaxers and pain killers she's shaking and whining, and when I went to check on her at lunch today she hobbled over to me like a little old woman, scooted her head into my lap on the floor and tried to

curl up into my body as much as she could. I'm wearing my big girl panties because I'm the mama and I'm not the one hurting, but it's brought me close to tears more than once already today and the Christmas songs, bittersweet as they are, are not helping. Logically I know she will be fine but with me logic is usually lost to emotion, and hearing *O Holy Night* back to back with Dan Fogelberg's *Same Old Lang Syne* sends my thoughts to the summer of 2008 when I lost Pearl just weeks before the last scheduled move and synchronicity swirled in like a mist over the full moon to change my plans for awhile. Quite frankly I'm not willing to go there again.

So Lolli and I head into visit Dave, another dear friend and in my opinion absolutely the best veterinarian in Virginia Beach. He thinks Lolli's got a bad disk in her back and takes x-rays and amazingly, her back is fine, perfect bone from top to bottom. But she's also full of crap, from tip to tail, so much so that it's clearly visible on the x-ray screen. Turns out, my dog is constipated. Her back hurts because the muscles around her spine are going into spasms made worse by the fact that she's packed full of poop. The irony of this revelation isn't lost on me at all ~ not after all I've been through here. The thing is, my instincts were telling me this was the problem but I jumped to the worst conclusion, even thinking she had a tumor, instead of trusting what I already knew.

Lolli got an enema and I got a reminder to give myself a break and trust what I know, which is that things are going to be just fine. Now it's 9:30 at night and I'm eating a late dinner while standing outside in the freezing cold encouraging my dog to relax and just let it flow. Change is good, especially when it's change you've put in motion yourself. Times like these, when there seems to be so much to do and the memories are swirling and the friends are saying goodbye and you feel one door closing and the other one opening, it's just good to remember that selling the rugs is not the same as having them pulled out from under you.



December 14th, 2009

Half a Horse Club

Several months back I found my dear friend Susan on Facebook. We went to elementary school and junior high together but hadn't seen each other since 1978, when I moved back to my hometown from the mountains. Over the course of the summer and fall we've managed to get together quite a bit and share memories, books and our love of writing. SuzeCate bravely began to blog and has turned into a prolific and wildly entertaining writer at [The Water Witch's Daughter](#). She runs the gamut of emotions and shares the simplest things in a unique and engaging way. I'm getting ready to head out to LA and as SuzeCate says, I'm really going to miss our wine and life-gab sessions. Last night after a few glasses of vino, we attempted to co-write a blog together. This is about three friends who've kept in touch (throughout the years and throughout life's twists and turns and moves etc. . .) since elementary school. Only two were available for the pic.



Susan and I co-writing our blog.

Karal. Nan. Susan.

Half of the Schuyler Horse Club. The wanna-be horse owners.

All wanted a horse. None ever owned a horse. None any longer desire a horse. In fact none care too much for horses any more.

This leads to the question of what have they had in common through the years and what connects them now.

They all like wine.

All have been married. Two are divorced. Two have kids.

Two have dogs. One has cats.

They all like wine.

One can sorta sing. One thinks she can sing after two shots of tequila. One can't sing at all and won't inflict that pain on her worst enemy.

All agree that the meal worm experiments and pendulum studies in elementary school were way stupid.

They all like wine.

All were afraid of the old woman ghost with long fingernails that Regina told them killed herself in the school bathroom. None want to go back to elementary school girls bathroom. All are still afraid.

Two write blogs. One reads blogs.

They all like wine. (Karal wants to know red or white, Susan says it doesn't really matter at this point!)

All agree that Miss Hunter was the coolest elementary school teacher EVER.

All disliked the same girl from those school days – what? She was MEAN!

All three love the ocean.

All three are glad to have stayed in touch through the years.

They all love wine!

December 14th, 2009

I'll Have What She's Having



boldness, depth & character, invigorating any time ...

Everything you read about caffeine will tell you, it's the *devil*. Like the orgasm that almost was, caffeine gives you a false energy boost, then knocks the wind right out of your sails and leaves you flat, exhausted and crying for more. Along with that, it slows your intestinal flow to a crawl and turns your teeth a lovely shade of brown.

So going off the medical diagnosis that the bitch that inhabited my body for close to three years was irritable bowel syndrome and learning that coffee is on the IBS 'no' list, I decided to limit my intake from 6 cups a day to a mere two.

I'm a huge advocate of holistic health and to be honest, my own interpretation of the label IBS is, quite frankly, a doctor's discreet way of saying, baby, *I Be Stumped*. After months of agony, clearing a 1200\$ deductible and going for every test imaginable and coming up with nothing, being handed the diagnosis of IBS, a prescription for laxatives, and a wave goodbye just isn't my idea of an effective course of action.

Ready to just give up and give in to a life in pajamas on the couch, I took a friend's advice and tried the *Activa Challenge*. And what do you know . . . almost immediately, things improved. So I dumped meat from my diet, kicked up the yoga, started probiotics and digestive enzymes. Monday, November 2nd, on my way into work, I realized that, for the first time in *almost 1092 days*, my stomach was flat ~ as in, not bloated to the size of a bowling ball. It brought me to tears so intense I almost had to pull the truck over to get it together.

Just lately, I've added visits to the chiropractor and an electromagnetic wave-producing contraption called the *the zapper*, which is supposed to kill anything that doesn't belong to me. This morning, at Daisy's 5:15am wake up nudge, I opened my eyes feeling awake, alert and alive. Whatever alien invaded my body seems to be on it's way out and there's room in there now for me. I stood out in the dark of my backyard, under a full moon's glow, and said a big thank you, but what I really wanted to do was let out a big howl and dance around naked.

Positively energized, and with enough stamina to manage a 40- minute prana yoga workout *and* spend the evening loading the truck for a trip to Salvation Army, I think I may have finally crawled out from under the rock.

In the past month or so, I've switched my coffee habit to tea. While it's not as thick, creamy or comforting as coffee, a little Chai in the morning does a body good ~ or at least doesn't do it quite as bad, especially when you use the same tea bag throughout the course of the day. And though I'm not going to get the 'oh baby' rush I could get from the coffee, it's hard to resist a hot liquid beverage with a tagline that rivals those I've seen in the "About Me" section of eHarmony. Honestly. I don't know whether to drink it or take it to bed.

But at least I have the stamina.

December 3rd, 2009

Holiday Happiness

Living Out Loud. (v11). Tis the gift to be simple. ~ by Janet

My four year old daughter, Maggie, hums herself to sleep. She says she hums because it keeps her bad dreams away. I find this pretty amazing. She was born in China, thousands of miles between us and I too hum myself to sleep. (Must be that red thread . . .) I hum the same song winter, spring, summer, or fall, every night, and it works. . . .

I'll let you in on a little secret, I'm a Christmas-a-holic. I love everything about it. When I hear people complaining about last minute shopping (mine's not finished, either) I laugh. When they say they've gained weight over the holidays, I look down at my own little pooched out belly, and I smile. When they stress over not finding that perfect gift for that certain someone, I sympathize, but not much.

You see, I am a worrier, and from January through September, it's chronic. But then October arrives, and all of my problems and worries are miraculously put on the back burner by Christmas magic. It's only October. My kids say I'm a Christmas nut. They tell me to stop flying my holiday "freak flag". They look at me wearily if they need to ask me for a ride because they know they will be listening to Elvis singing "Blue Christmas". And each CD after will be playing more holiday tunes. Changing the station isn't up for debate. You need a ride, you listen to Christmas carols . . . They laugh, they roll their eyes, they huff and puff. Maggie and I ignore this and count how many houses we see with Christmas lights until we reach our destination. I can't explain it, but the music brings me comfort. . . . and joy? Yep, and joy. LOL.

My house smells delicious like apples and cinnamon. I smile at the tacky holiday cling-ons stuck on my windows. I say they are for Maggie's enjoyment, but I love them, too. The lights, the music, the decorations, I love it all. I try to instill my love for Christmas in my children. I hope it works.

The "25 Days of Christmas" on tv is reserved solely for me. The kids get the tv for 339 days of the year, and they think this is unfair! Why on Earth should Mom get to watch Christmas specials in gaudy holiday pajamas for 25 days?! Maggie's with me in this though; she's still wrapped up in the magic of Christmas, an innocent child untouched by the ugliness of the outside world.

I sit back with a cup of eggnog and watch "Santa Buddies" with Maggie. When it's over she states "I think they (the Santa Buddies) learned Christmas is about giving." And I think maybe that's what makes me feel so at peace. It's the one time of year when people do take the time to love, and listen, and give of themselves. I feel safe in this holiday happiness.

Kaylyn, my 20-year-old daughter, gave me a wonderful gift last month . . . (OCTOBER)!! Late for work, she was running out the door when she stopped, turned around, and said "Mom, can I borrow your Elvis' Christmas CD?" It's ONLY October I replied. You'll have to get it out of my car . . .

Tonight I will smile as I think of that, as I'm drifting off to sleep humming to myself the same ol' song I've hummed for years, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas. . ."

Merry Christmas Everyone and may your hearts be light!!

December 2nd, 2009

Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

I'm single. Or, if you want to get picky with the terminology, divorced. The point is, right now I live alone, except for the beagles. And that means I sleep alone. Except for the beagles.



Yes, my dogs sleep in my bed. In their defense, they don't know it's mine. They think it's ours. And I must make a pretty good bed warmer, because I normally wake to Daisy smashed against a hip and Lolli snuggled tightly in the space between my knees. Daisy occasionally snores and every so often when she's really tired, Lolli lets out a trill in her sleep that flutters her lips and scares the pee out of me, but the truth is, I like their company. They make me feel safe.

“If you ever want to get married again, don't tell a man you sleep with dogs.”

Sage advice from my stepdad, Hosa. Well-meant wise words spoken from a cringing male face, and I couldn't help but laugh. “Hi, my name is Karal and I sleep with dogs” isn't typically my opening line.

First there was Pearl. Then I found Lolli.

And then I heard from Sean, another caring and concerned friend. “You've already got one pitiful looking dog, Karal. Now you're going to adopt a dog with no bottom jaw and a tongue that hangs out of its mouth? You need to think about what kind of guys you'll attract when you're out walking those dogs. You'll make an impression. I'm just saying.”

Lolli and Daisy, my infamous 85-lb beagle rescue, definitely draw a lot of attention. Teenage boys on skateboards think Lolli's tongue dragging the ground or covered in sand is pretty awesome. Ditto for Daisy. Now down to a svelte 53.2, she's got a stripe of white hair running wildly down her back like her own radical rat tail, a turkey-breast sized chest of fat that wiggles and jiggles when she walks, and genuine bona fide butt cheeks. She's the neighborhood social butterball, and she's way cool.

Lolli's tongue almost always causes a little confusion, though. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone mutter under their breath *That Dog Needs Some Water!* when we walk on the beach. Once I explain that Lolli was horribly mistreated, had 17 surgeries to repair her face, and is now a very happy, hardware- and jawbone-free dog, and is in fact not suffering from heat stroke, they will usually jump up from their chair to hug both me and the girls.

At first, I considered having a t-shirt made saying My Dog Can't Hold Her Licker and just going about my own business. But people are drawn to them, and I've talked at length with numerous kids and their parents about rescued dogs, and injuries, and the healing power of a little happiness and love. But I'm only telling their story; they lived it. Now, they deserve to rest their heads on a comfy mattress or a cozy leg, and not be confined to the floor like dirty laundry.

Which leads me back to the bed-sleeping beagles.

About a month ago my next-door neighbor watched the dogs for the weekend and his 6-year-old daughter helped.

Meredith: "I've been inside your house."

Me: Yes, I know."

Meredith: "I fed your dogs."

Me: "Yes, I know."

Meredith: "I've been in your bedroom."

Me: "Yes, I know." (Ok, I didn't know. But I figure she's six and curious. No harm done).

Meredith: "Your bed is full of dog hair."

Woman to woman so to speak. No unsolicited advice, no dire words of warning, no judgment. Just the truth.

I came close to asking her if that's why her daddy hasn't asked me out, but I bought a really good dog brush and doubled up on the vacuuming instead.

My dogs still sleep in my bed, because that's just the way it is. I'm no longer oblivious to the dog hair, but changing my ways in anticipation of snagging some uptight none-dog-loving guy I wouldn't want to share my bed with anyway doesn't make any more sense to me than worrying that walking in public with them will somehow lure the weirdos and freaks out of the woodwork while all the good guys run for cover.

And for the record, sleeping with dogs had nothing to do with my divorce.

We had cats.



November 24th, 2009

Not Drowning In This Flood



I just came close to having a meltdown, but I cleaned the bathroom instead.

It's 1:31pm on the second full day of the November Nor'Easter. The dogs and I just got back from a walk up the street to check the water levels, and the neighborhood is still basically cut off from the rest of the world. Unless you have a truck as large as a Ford F350 or some sort of floating transportation, you aren't going anywhere. And I have neither.

Right now we're all three cozied up on the couch, me smushed up on the left side with my laptop, [LolliPop](#) cuddled in the middle and [Daisy](#) sprawled out snoring on the right. Daisy has the majority of space and I'd like to slide her over a bit, but you really just don't mess with Daisy when she sleeps. She's an adorable, loving and gentle beagle, but there's a part of her that will forever remain an obese 85-pound toss-off to animal control, and she gets a little wound up when she's pulled at or startled. She won't hurt me, but it's just not fair to her. So I'm crammed in the corner and my left elbow pokes into the pillow while I type, and I utilize the benefits of yoga every time I reach over to the table to grab my coffee, but all in all we're good.

Not so about 3 hours ago. Unable to go to work and stuck at home without power, I took a short nap to compensate for being up at 5am. I woke an hour or so later to the sound of rain and wind and the unmistakable dark cloud over my head that had nothing to do with the weather. I haven't felt that bitch, depression, since I decided back in 2006 that she was a habit that needed kicking. Sad, lonely, hopeless, overwhelmed at the little things, and completely without basis, she really is a bitch. If you've ever lived with her, you know you think so too. I don't know what made her think she could bebop on in here today and spend some time with me, but I guess the past few days without sun, a disorganized house, a list as long as my arm of things that need doing before I move, and the isolation permeating the air off Shore Drive today all spelled WELCOME on the emotional doormat.

There was a time I would have curled myself in a ball under my covers and spent the afternoon with her, maybe even offered her a few glasses of wine or an entire box of mac and cheese, let her put her feet up, make herself at home. But I made up my mind that this sort of feeling ~ not the everyday blues or frustrations or irritations rooted in a still confident sense of self ~ but this “oh I suck, none of this will ever work out, my dogs are neglected, I will never get everything done, my photos suck, my writing sucks” sort of feeling is no longer allowed to be my reality, and I meant it. So I cleaned the bathroom, which I hate. Because it such a cragmire of dog hair and me hair and makeup and grime and it seems, well, hopeless, and useless and futile. I cleaned it because I can no longer nap unless I’m really tired, and I cleaned it because I figured if I could kick some powder room ass of hopeless and useless and futile I’ll have a bright, shiny, sparkling bathroom and a bright, shiny sparkling attitude to go along with it.

I’ve enjoyed living alone and I would rather be by myself than to be living with a guy that isn’t emotionally available or on his game, but there are times, really, when a hug would do what Facebook and cell phones texts and emails just can’t. (To be honest, I’m not sure where that came from, but because it came out stream-of-consciousness style, I’ll let it stand. A little bitta pity at this party, maybe? Hey, there’s still plenty of time and plenty of opportunity). Truth is, I have close friends and a family who is always, always available when I need them, but since right now I’m a little burned out on technology and I’m feeling crabby as hell, cleaning that bathroom is going to have to do. I’m polishing the mirror when I stop and realize that I’m looking, really hard, deep down into my own eyes, and I feel something within them travel down through the inside of my body to the base of my feet, latch on, and come flying back up, pulling me erect and upright in the process. *Ground yourself*, it says. *Ground yourself*.

By nature, I am at my best in dry, arid places. Right here, right now, I’m surrounded by water, and I feel like I’m drowning. But I’m not. I’m not. And I’m not hopeless, or sad, or even lonely.

Last night the edges of our neighborhood began to flood. Several of us gathered over at the house across the street and spent the the next few hours hanging out by candlelight, and for a good portion of the evening we stood around the piano and sang old Elton John songs. At one point I looked out the window at the street below and all I could see was total darkness. Murky black emptiness. Nothingness. But I knew, even if I couldn’t see it, that there was something beyond that abyss. And where I was, there was warmth, and music, and laughter and smiles and candlelight.

[Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me.](#)

For sure.

November 13th, 2009

I'm Gonna Need a Bigger Truck



The packing has begun in earnest. I've been at it for about 20 minutes and I'm already overwhelmed. I have this idea that all I want to take with me to LA is me, my dogs, my clothes and of course, the cameras and computer. But when I start going through the boxes that sat hidden in the spare bedroom the past year, nostalgia and "oh gee I remember that" start building and the next thing you know I am sitting here staring at a bunch of junk that I can't throw away but can't possibly find reason to keep.

For instance. the hoop skirt that my mother wore under her wedding dress in 1959. Its cute, all crinoline and ruffles, but if I wear this, I will look like Madonna, and besides, the top 1/2 of it is sheer. If I actually had a sense of fashion style I could probably find a way to build an outfit around it. Maybe my friend Jan, the absolute queen of combining thrift and couture into "way cool", can help. Maybe I should give it to her, because she's got the artistic and free-spirit attitude I sort of only wish I had, and I know she could carry it off. Maybe if I keep it, that hippy-dippy classy look will somehow soak itself into my pores simply by association.

And then there's the [little plastic horse models](#) I bought with my birthday money when I was about 5 or 6, two stuffed animals I've carried around just as long, and a collection of wooden spoons and eggs given to me by a Ukrainian oceanographer years ago. It's unlikely I'll ever get to the Ukraine and those times at the ODU Oceanography Department were among the best in my life. But still. And here's the slinky my Mama bought me, an apology for something I can't even remember, styled after an episode of *Friends*. Mr. Square. My sister made him after the original one got lost. Rafiki from *The Lion King* (my favorite line, "Get over it, it's in da past!") And. Oh My GOSH. It's *Orange*. How I love Orange.

Ah, and I'm so glad for Evan Williams about now. Because at this moment I'm tackling the 4 boxes of Christmas decorations and all of the childhood Christmas albums I rescued from the garbage toss of my grandmother, Big Mama's, attic back in 2000, and I need to get loose, fast. Seriously, I don't think there's anything here from after 1968 or '69, bless Big Mama and Charlie for keeping them all. I've got Christmas with Glen Campbell, Andy Williams, and Pat Boone, heck, I've even got a special collector's edition of *Christmas with Colonel Sanders* and something called *Holiday Sing Along With Mitch*.

And then there is my family's all-time favorite Christmas album: [First Christmas Record for Children](#). On this album of Christmas classics sung by artists such as Doris Day, Rosemary

Clooney and Gene Autry, is the absolutely heartwarming story, told by Red Skelton, of *The Littlest Christmas Tree*. How many times have my sisters, my Mama and Hosa and I, lamented, though not nearly in as cute a voice as Red Skelton can do, “what is my purpose for being here?”

Do I really need to keep the “Good Times” garland my friend Julie and I hung in our apartment back in 1992? There’s the the 6 original [Elf on the Shelf dolls](#) that Big Mama would strategically place around her house every year. What about the antique mechanical Santa, who back before his batteries corroded used to ring his bell while his head turned from side to side and his eyes glowed bright red like some possessed Claus from the Netherworld. Don’t ask me; I don’t get it either.

So what I’ve managed to do after 2 hours of sitting in the middle of my living room floor is throw away about 4 or 5 broken Dollar Tree ornaments and a box of checks from LA trip 2005 and finish off a martini glass half-full of egg nog. I’ve packed the rest of the Christmas decorations, records and assorted paraphernalia into a plastic bin. This Christmas, since I’ll still be here, I’ll put out a few things, and in the meantime I’m going to have to see which sister is willing to hold onto some of this stuff for me till I can have it shipped. I’ve managed to clear myself out of practically every material good I have with these moves, and this should be easy, but I’m down to what I’ve held onto through each transition (minus the big ol’ box that ended up at the Salvation Army by mistake. . .) and I’m just not sure I can casually toss into a dumpster the yearbooks, letters, pictures, knickknacks, stuffed animals, and other basically useless junk I’ve accumulated. I’m all for change and moving and creating a new life, but this junk is my tie to the me I’m always gonna really be.

So here’s an early Christmas, or holiday, gift, if that suits better, for you. It’s a timeless, universal message, and it’s Red Skelton, and it’s cute. I’m giving you the YouTube production of the original classic, [The Littlest Christmas Tree](#). That’s one less thing I have to pack, and it’s going to a good home.

What? [Lolli claimed Rafiki](#), and you know darn well you aren’t gettin’ Orange.



Slinky, Mr. Square and my beloved Orange

November 11th, 2009

For Rent...



I came home from work this evening to see a “for rent” sign posted in my yard.

It was a surreal feeling, and I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. It’s easy to dream, and make big plans, and get hyped and giddy fantasizing about the future. Yet, it was a little bit odd to see such bold confirmation from the Universe planted firmly in my soil. The sign says, “for rent” but what it shouts to me is, “baby, your intention is now concrete reality. how’s that workin’ for ya?”

For about 5 seconds, the world wiggled. It was like that feeling you get when you stand up too fast or return to land after spending your day at sea. I felt myself glide through one of those dimensional portal things ~ wormholes, or blackholes ~ those doorways you see on the old Star Trek series that move you between time. Though I still sat in my car and the radio played the same song, that 5 second journey ever so slightly took my breath, stopped my heart and dropkicked me into my future. And then I laughed, got out the car, grabbed the camera, took a snapshot of my latest creation, and let the dogs out for a walk.

What surprises me most about this, the [4.5.0th exodus to L.A.](#), is the lack of strong emotion surrounding its evolution. Don’t get me wrong, I have yearned for, and want, this badly, and I’m electrified with positive energy in anticipation of heading out next month. I’ve had my “oh holy shit, yah!” moments. What’s missing is the emotional upheaval, the extreme highs and the extreme lows that have accompanied these transitions in the past.

While it may have appeared to some to be just another of Karal’s flighty mistakes, choosing not to go back out to L.A. last year has proven to be one of my wisest decisions. I’m still not entirely sure why I stayed. Things happened that were too coincidental and serendipitous to not have been part of the plan (not my plan, *the* plan) and though some of the lessons of the past 365 days have been a bit painful, the growing pains birthed a pretty crystal clear vision of just who this entity named Karal is, and that’s alright by me.

Along the way, some friendships I thought were solid crumbled, some I thought dead, revived, and some, suffering from neglect, I attempted to save. But if the hand extended finds only space and air, perhaps nothing needs saving after all.

Too, letting go of unrealistic expectations and unfulfilled promises, clung to like a life raft, has allowed me to fall into some rather choppy seas, and damn, surprise ~ I can swim. It's a whole lot easier to float yourself to shore under your own power than it is to waste your resources attempting to dislodge someone else's stuck anchor. If they wanted to go along for your ride, they'd happily leave the anchor behind, don't ya know.

On the lighter side, I landed a great job, and with that, a [very cool boss](#) who pretty much threatened to fire me if I didn't pursue this blog. Writing has always been my way to root, to ground, to vent, to attempt to see things in a different light; having this space and my 4 or 5 devoted readers just jazzes me beyond words. And after being sick for close to 30 months, a combination of yoga, vegetarianism, probiotics and digestive enzymes (and, I am convinced, finally coming to peace with some things), has returned my belly to its almost normal state of mind. I'm healthy, and that I so do not take lightly.

Which leads me back to that lack of emotion, or maybe better said, a lack of drama. Possibly, I think, because for the first time in many years things are exactly where they are supposed to be and I am right where I am supposed to be within them. There's no push and pull, no tug or fight, no resistance, no need to control. There's just this flow, this stream, this place of belonging in my own life that I don't remember feeling since I was a kid in junior high. I've lived the last 12 months in the absolutely most dog-friendly, laid back and cool neighborhood in Virginia Beach, and I'm still willing to give away most everything I own to pack my dogs and me in the truck and get my butt to the west coast. This reality thing is working pretty darn okay.

Oh, and there's a great apartment for rent off Shore Drive. It's just waiting for somebody ready to move into their future.

November 7th, 2009

Loved To Pieces



I'm known as a nice person in the neighborhood, but there are body parts strewn all over my house.

Chester Cheetah has been dismembered. One arm is under the sofa, another is in my bed. His leg is buried somewhere out in the yard. I picked his eyeballs from the living room carpet two nights ago. But Chester Cheetah isn't ready for the trash heap just yet. Because he's Daisy's baby, and she loves him to pieces.

Lolli found Chester this past May on our [trip to Nag's Head with the other OBX Skanks](#). He was resting peacefully in Pam's house, upstairs under a bed, just waiting for two crazy beagles to come along, sniff him out, and bring him home.

Lolli found him but Daisy claimed him, and he's been her constant companion ever since. When I come home at the end of the day, Daisy greets me at the door, runs to the bedroom, grabs Chester and bounds back, first to the sofa and then to the back door. Chester goes with her outside. Chester goes with her potty. Chester sleeps next to her at night. In short, he is her baby. He is also her toy, her prey, and her her conquest, all things that Lolli will never pretend to be.

It doesn't matter to her that his arms and one leg are gone, or that what used to be his eyes are now two gaping holes of white spongy blankness. Like the old Wendy's commercial used to say, parts is parts, and Daisy loves Chester's parts just as much as she loves his whole. Space is limited on our drive to LA, but Chester Cheetah, or what's left of him, will be going along for the ride.

After all, this is love.



Lolli with a new Chester in the OBX. Daisy and Chester last night.

November 5th, 2009

Pictures

(November 3rd, 2009) **A guest post written by my friend, D.**

Life is a picture. Whether a photo, or a painting, a sketch or a collage, each is a product of its own unique constitution and circumstance. While we generally have an idea of where it comes from, rarely can we fathom where it will come to. As with the picture, the manufacture is often as interesting as the image and when viewed in the context of its narration, takes on more depth and meaning.

Some are composed, painfully set with the utmost care to insure the proper aperture and focal length or carefully laid on the canvas in layers of shades that have no appeal on their own but together bring life where there was none. Others are the result of a feeling, or happenstance, the luck of the draw or a moment of opportunity. Some of the most interesting are the result of mistakes, or at least what were thought to be mistakes at the time or the results of a frustration that, cast in anger, somehow births a calming panorama.

Each has its own life to live and is endowed with character and intricacies that belong to it alone. Each is subjected to interpretation, often judged by those that do not understand it, as less than beautiful. Or it might be gauged against another, which unjustly disappoints the observer and the subject alike as neither can live to or in the other's standard.

Each has its layers, its colors or lack thereof. The harder lines of its structure and shadows that bring it depth often mask the feelings and emotions that are the true geneses of its form.

The picture must be seen in its own light. It must live in its own light. It cannot take the place of another. It cannot be cast out of its element for the sake of the eclectic and it should not be detained for the sake of conformity. It must be set in a place that accepts it, even if that placement brings discomfort to its fellows. There is a light somewhere that is suited to it and when that light is found, the true depths of its beauty can emerge.

Each must find the proper frame. A picture can be beautiful but if a proper frame cannot be found, it can never be complete. Attaining the proper frame can be frustrating. Often we must try several before we find the one. Sometimes we hold it in our hands as we cast our eyes abroad. We shop the boutiques when what we need is in an old trunk in our attic. One can have and reject it, only to come back later with a clear eye that finally sees the connection. It may require a quest that we feel is beyond us, not realizing that the metal must endure the flame before it can be forged to form. Regardless, it must be found. When it is found, we must be able to see it and be willing to clinch it and to allow it to digest us. When it is right, we will know. And when we know, we can embrace it and see the picture for all that it is. Its glory and beauty can then be properly appreciated and we can be pleased with what has been created. Once we find that pleasure we can rest, and accept the adulation that our picture deserves.

Find your frame. Unfurl your beautiful picture and set it in its proper light. Then display it to the world. They will love it.

Somebody

Living Out Loud. (v10). When I grow up.

When I was in elementary school I wanted badly to be an astronaut or an archeologist. By day I dug for fossils and dinosaur bones and at night I'd pull the telescope out under the stairs and aim it for the moon.

By the time I hit high school I really sort of lost all hint of aspiration and I entered the college years with no clue of what I really wanted to do. Winning the award for Most Jobs Held Since Graduation at my high school reunion wasn't exactly an honor as much as a joke. But I've never lived a linear life, and having practically as many jobs as I have years is proof of that.

I went back to college because I felt the need to be a "somebody." I busted my ass through fulltime coursework and a fulltime job and graduated with a high GPA. But I still didn't know what I wanted to "be" and I still wasn't a "somebody."

For awhile I thought being somebody meant fitting into the corporate mold, having a high-powered career. And for some people, that may be true. But I felt like a kid playing dress-up in my suits and pantyhose. I was in someone else's skin. I wasn't good at being a "somebody."

So I decided to do what I liked: movement, physical exercise, fitness. I always went back to them when I needed to be in touch with myself. I wasn't making much money, and lots of my clients were "somebody", but I found I was a lot more comfortable in workout clothes than career-apparel, much more at home in a weight room than a board room.

That realization freed me to lighten up, take a chance and rediscover the things I'd loved when I was a kid, mainly writing and photography. I've pulled those things together, fitness, photos and words, and now, in one way or another, I do what I love and I love what I do.

Am I what I want to be when I grow up? Not by a long shot. But, I'm still growing up. And its who I am that matters more than what I am. And I'm definitely a somebody. And I'm still digging. And I'm still aiming for the moon.

November 1st, 2009

Reckless Abandonment

Living Out Loud. (v10). When I grow up. ~ by Kaylyn Pippin

I wanted to be happy. I used lots of things to try and make believe I was happy. In these ventures I didn't succeed. I guess I didn't really want to because I saw people who had many accomplishments and still were not the definition of the word happy. I then found the greatest way to pretend I was happy.

The greatest way to pretend I was happy happened to be reckless abandonment. I drank, did drugs and stayed out all night. I did this until everything I had was gone. Then, I moved back home, with my mother. When I had a job, a car, and money, I did it all over again.

The last and final time I moved back home was different. I got a job, a car and a boyfriend. I managed to keep them for months without my loved ones seeing my addiction. I did drugs at work, at home, just about everywhere. Of course, it eventually caught up with me. I couldn't function without the drugs. And eventually I knew I couldn't keep masking the truth: I didn't want to be numb anymore; I wanted to care about my reality.

I don't have a job anymore. I can barely pay my bills. I live with my mother. I stayed a short time in a detox facility, and I learned about so many people who were similar to myself. Now it may seem that I should be extremely saddened at this point in my life. However, my life is the complete opposite. You see, I found something better than drugs and possessions. I found the will to live; and that, makes me very happy.

November 1st, 2009

Unconditional

Living Out Loud. (v10). When I grow up. ~ by JBarbie

When I grow up I want to be a mommie. I want to experience the undeniable love of a child, to see pure innocence, and hear uncontrollable giggles. I want to watch my babies grow and learn, and go off to college and become doctors and lawyers. I want the whole “mommie” experience. I want to see them in the Christmas pageant, help them catch lightning bugs, and watch them reach for the stars. I want to watch them when they win the spelling bee and make their favorite desserts. These are all the things I want to experience when I become a mommie.

I am 42 years old. I have raised 5 children. Number 6 is four. I have changed millions of diapers, cleaned up vomit, made numerous visits to the ER. I have heard uncontrollable crying and seen pure innocence lost, never to return. I have seen college days end before they began. I have seen the disappointment of a child lose her spelling bee. I have seen them heartbroken and heard their obscenities muttered under their breath when they were angry with me. I've watched them reach for stairs, and I've seen their stars fall. Being a mom, I've learned hard lessons. It's the hardest job in the world. Yes, you're loved unconditionally but you love them unconditionally as well, and sometimes that hurts. You make lots of mistakes, and you share in not only the good, but also the bad. You have high expectations and you have dreams for them. But your dreams aren't always theirs. Your expectations aren't always met, and you realize instead of making your mistakes, they made their own, and when you think they're not listening, they are, and when you're so fed up you swear you'll never help them again, they crawl back into your heart asking for help and you do help – to an extent. Because you watched them learn to crawl, to walk, and to run. Now you guide them to fly. But unconditionally, you still love them. No matter what.

So, when I grow up – I think I want to be a grandma.

November 1st, 2009

The Road Well Traveled

You can fly from Virginia to California in about 5 hours.

You can drive the same distance in a little under 2 days.

The pioneers traveled for almost 7 months to reach the West Coast from the East.

It has taken me 16 years to make the journey.

To be honest, my upcoming move to Los Angeles isn't my first. It isn't my second, either. To be precise and for the record, it's the 4.5.0th time I've relocated to the City of Angels.

Confused by the numbers? Let me explain. My first excursion was in 1995. I lived there again in 1996 and 2005. Between that, in 1998, I ventured as far as Knoxville before turning my car around and strolling back to Virginia. In July of 2008, just days before I was due to leave, I canceled the trip. That makes this the fourth and a half and zeroth time.

The first time I left, I knew exactly one person in Los Angeles. I quit my job, gave up my apartment, loaded everything I had in a U-Haul and drove cross-country with my cat, a friend, and my car on a tow dolly. We hit LA on April Fool's Day and by the first of June I'd landed a good job with the top venture capital firm in the city and a very cool place off Sunset Strip. But come October I was back in Virginia, unemployed and living with my parents. Repeat with the crash and burn endings of the 1996 and 2005 migrations. Six months seemed to be the magic number for the length of time I'd make it there.

I know it seems crazy when you're looking in from the outside and I'm aware that it's worried my family and my friends that I'll so willingly dump my life to pick up and move 3000 miles away, when I've done it before and by conventional standards it obviously didn't work. What's the definition of insanity? According to my mom and Albert Einstein it's "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

But I venture to say that the definition of insanity is denying what calls to you, attempting to shut out that yearning that tells you that you want something different than what you have. And LA has called to me, over and over again. The first mention in my journals back in 1993, that maybe it'd be a cool place to live. The vacation in 1994, two weeks spent mostly alone discovering a city that was a stranger to me, yet oddly familiar. And the night shortly after, when I woke with a start, alone in the darkness and drenched in sweat, realizing that the decision to leave had somehow already been made by my soul, without my consent, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Believe me, I tried. My name shoulda been Karal DepressionGuilt Gregory. Depression, the anger-turned-inward bitch that she is, I grew up feeling and thought was a natural part of me. Guilt because I really honestly believed I should want, and *want* to want, what other people seemed to want for me. Scraping the 2008 move was a turning point, because it was a last-ditch effort to make Virginia, the state in which I was born and bred, home. But I learned, through the

past year, that I have a vision of home that hasn't yet been answered with the reality that I find here and it has nothing to do with the job or the family and friends that I love. It has to do with me.

So why did I turn around in 1998? I was barely a day into my journey when I stopped for the night at a little motel outside of Knoxville. I was watching Oprah and trying to fall asleep. I don't remember the guest or the topic, but I do remember what she said. *If you're not comfortable in your own skin, it doesn't matter where you are.* I drove back to Virginia the next morning.

I've spent these last months digging and excavating every thought, feeling, journal, event, in my life, turning it over, examining it, summarizing it, sorting what works and what doesn't into two separate piles, one for the trash and one for me. I've drafted lists of my values and my beliefs, my mistakes and my accomplishments, my vices and my virtues. Mostly, I've listened to me, a lot. Quite simply, I shut out reason and I listened to that other voice. The one that talks to you at night. The crazy one. And it told me what I already knew: I want to go back.

Because in reality, LA is so very good to me. There's the real and the surreal. I've hiked the hills high above Hollywood, overlooking the city, shopped Rodeo Drive barefoot, and drove a Lexus sports car on the weekends ~ my boss's way of keeping it in shape. I've worked among ~ and been inspired by ~ creative and talented actors and artists, was a personal trainer in Pacific Palisades, and dropped 10 pounds in two months without even trying. I've spent an evening out at sea on the Quiksilver surf boat with world class surfers, been surrounded by a firehouse full of firemen wanting to chat at Mel's Diner on Sunset (my roommate is hot) and watched classic movies on the side of the mausoleum wall of the Hollywood Forever Cemetery while sitting below, and above, the stars. I've fallen in love and had my heart broken at the Santa Monica Pier. I've built incredible and lasting friendships. Each move, each experience, has given me something. In essence, I awaken and I live, and incredible things happen in LA, because I feel whole in LA. I feel like me, in LA.

In late December I'm loading up my beagles and I'm rambling out to Los Angeles, again. I'm taking only what fits in my car: a few clothes, my camera, my laptop, some books. I've learned to travel light. I'll be staying with the hot roommate, in my room that looks out on the Hollywood sign and the hills I can't wait to hike. I have some things I want to do, and I feel them falling together. I'm grounded, if not in logic, in the balance and the harmony that come from knowing my feet are firmly planted on ground that I have tilled and turned and cultivated if only because I have refused to believe in failure or the reality of a linear life path. I am comfortable in my own skin.

The morning I hit the road in 1995, my then six-year-old niece Kaylyn offered her unadulterated view of why I was leaving. *Aunt Karal's going to have adventures and meet a man.* I love that.

So yes, if someone asks me, I will tell them I've been to California 4.5.0 times.

4.5.0 is just a number. And my soul soars higher than that.



Los Angeles panorama with the Hollywood Hills in the distance.

October 23rd, 2009

I'm Alive, and Well

A guest writer post from Lee Lee.

Four years ago right now, I was sittin on the patio at the St. Mary's Pavilion, hooked up to my very last bag of poison, surrounded by caring friends and celebratory nurses. It was a beautiful day, much like today, and I was so happy to be there, ending my chemical fight against cancer, beginning the end of my bout with baldness and other even-more-fun side effects, and movin on to a little recovery period before phase two of the fight (radiation). For such a hateful time of my life, I sure came out of it heaped up with blessings.

For some, it's cliche. "Don't take a single day for granted." "Life is a gift." "Live like you were dying." "Let those you love know you love them." "Gitter done." For me, its the gospel. Lance Armstrong said now he only has good days, or great days. Its a very real, tangible, almost touchable feeling. While I don't wish cancer on anyone, I do wish everyone could feel that sense of what is truly important and what is truly worthwhile, in their lives, and live according to that. I wish everyone could realize the positivity of life, the potential of life, the bright side, of life. It truly IS a gift. Make someone smile today. Make someone feel good. Help someone. And don't waste a second. Got something you've always wanted to do? For Pete's sakes – DO IT. Enjoy Every Day. Laugh; oh my gosh, LAUGH. Let go of the bygones. Yes, this is the Gospel Accordin to Lee Lee.

I am about to turn 45. When I turned 40, I knew I was going to have the crappiest year of my life. Not even halfway into the year, I was diagnosed. Self-fulfilling prophecy? I dunno. I'm pretty sure I already had cancer when I hit the big 4-0, so I don't really think I jinxed myself, BUT – this year, I'm going to have one of the best of my life. I'll be headin into my five-years post cancer year (YAY!). My kids are smart and happy and healthy and fun. My friends – my friends – my friends are the best people I know. This year it was my privilege to vacation with some of my besties, reconnect with long-lost but much-loved friends, form new important and meaningful friendships, and nurture and build on present ones. And, I am happy that I got to see my family this year, and reconnect, share in life's joys, and reaffirm that familial, deep-rooted unwavering love and devotion. I have had one of my best, most fun years ever, in many respects. And I, cliche or not, am grateful, and am sooo excited about whats to come that I can barely STAND it. Bring it bring it bring it BRING IT!!! Have a good day, everyone. And if you haven't heard Kenny Chesney's new song "[I'm Alive,](#)" here are the words to it – give it a listen, when ya can. It's definitely an anthem.

Live it up! Lee Lee

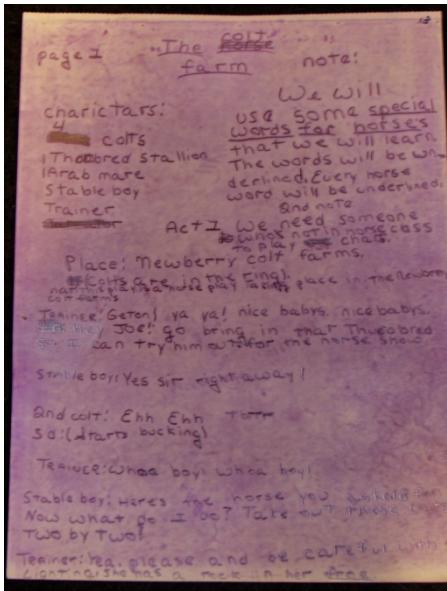


Happy Happy Happy. Happy to be, Happy to be. Just flat-out HAPPY.

October 22nd, 2009

The Horse ...er... Colt Farm. A Self-Published Work.

Way back in my [first post](#) I dangled the threat of publishing my first screenplay on my blog.



The Colt Farm.

I wrote it in the 4th or 5th grade for the members of my 4-H Horse Club to perform in front of our school. Why in the world I was handed the responsibility of leading a 4-H club when I was 11 is beyond me, but SuzeCate at [The Water Witch's Daughter](#) went to school with me and was in my club, and she seems to think it had something to do with the teachers making sure we were occupied so they could maximize their time in that teacher's lounge they had hiding behind the auditorium stage. Personally I think it was because I was a depressed kid and somebody got the bright idea that I needed special privilege, special handling, an activity, a challenge. I mean, really. I have no idea.

Whatever the reason, I was the leader of this club and I wrote this play. I read it once, it went over like a lead balloon, and the production closed before it even reached opening night. Yes, SuzeCate, I remember it clearly: "This is dumb and I'm not doing it." Oh, the pain of that first rejection, as necessary as it is! I can still remember sitting in my parent's living room, drafting these pages while watching episodes of *Charlie's Angels* and *Little House on the Prairie*. I recall quite clearly writing and then scratching through the word "god" in the phrase, "Oh my god, my god" because, well, I was a preacher's stepdaughter and that just wasn't *right*.

For a first effort it really wasn't bad. It included a diverse cast, varied locations, stage direction, set design and even educational horse words. But at its best it serves as a source of guaranteed gut-wrenching belly laughs each and every time my parents and I pull out the mimeographed pages. And SuzeCate thinks it's mity mity funny, too. It's not the first thing I ever wrote, though. That honor goes to the funeral I wrote for my doll, SuSu, when I was eight. That masterpiece, like the little rubber doll herself, did not survive.

So without further adieu, I present to you, The **Horse** Colt Farm.

The Horse Colt Farm

Charictars:

- 4 colts
- 1 Thorbred Stallion
- 1 Arab mare
- Stable boy
- Trainer

Note: We will use some special words for horses that we will learn. The words will be underlined. Every horse word will be underlined.

2nd note: We need someone who's not in horse class to play chars.

Act 1

Place: Newberry colt farms. (Colts are in the ring).

Narrator: This play is a horse play taking place in the Newberry Colt Farms.

Trainer: Geton! Ya! Ya! nice babys. nice babys. Hey Joey! go bring in that Thurobred so I can try him out for the horse show.

Stable boy: Yes sir right away!

2nd colt: Ehh Ehh Tbrrrrrr

3rd: (Starts bucking)

Trainer: Whoa boy! Whoa boy!

Stable boy: Here's the horse you asked for. Now what do I do? Take out these colts Two by Two?

Trainer: Yea. please. and be care with Lighting. She has a rock in her frog.

(All colts go off stage. Trainer starts walking horse around ring when curtains close).

Act 2

(No Narrator)

Narrator: This is the exiting part! You'll agree when you see!

Place: At the stables.

Time: Early in the morning.

Trainer: Quick Joe! Go get that horse and put him in the trailer so we won't be late.

Stable boy: yes sir!

Trainer: and hurry!

Stable boy: yes sir!

Trainer: Shut up! (sigh)

(Min later in comes Joe with horses).

Trainer: Put him in the truck. (Puts him in). (Gets in himself).

Trainer: off we go!

(They drive off stage and curtains close).

Act 3

Place: Horse Show

(There horse is trotting).

Judge: Snowball & Thrust to the ring please.

(Horses go forward. The Judges mumble.)

Judge: The winner is(waits a few seconds)... (Curtains close).

Act 4

Trainer: I'm so glad we won. And now we go to the champions.

Stable boy: yes sirree. Just think the championship, the Kentucky derby, the . . .

Trainer: We're home finally. Take thrust back and take care of him while I get the colts.

Stable boy: ok. and I check his withers too.

Trainer: Fine Joe Fine

Curtains close

Act 5

Place: Riding Ring

Stable boy: Quick! Sir lady bell is sick

Trainer: How sick?

Stable boy: I don't know, but mity mity sick.

Trainer: Oh my god my god. Let's hurry and go to her.

Stable boy: I'm sorta scared to.

Trainer: Oh come on.

(They run off stage. Curtains close).

Act 5

Stable boy: Is she gonna die?

Trainer: I'm not sure. When it comes to swamp fever there's hardly a hope. best thing to do is Just wait. Common. Let go get some sleep.

Act 6

Time: Early morning

Place: on the ground asleep

Stable boy: Sir! Sir! Somethings wrong with the horse! She's neighing.

Trainer: Ok! Lets go!

(They rush to her. Trainer checks horse. Minites later.)

Stable boy: Is she gonna be ok.

Trainer: Joe I'm sorry butshe's dead. died 5 minits ago I just couldn't get enough nerve to tell you.

(Sounds sad).

Stable boy: Oh, well I feel so sad. (He leaves).

Trainer: Wait I'll go with you.

(They both go off stage). (Curtains close).

Act 7

Karal: THATS ALL OFF OUR PLAY. We put a lot of work into it to make it just right for you. Now each of us will tell you the car we played.

THE END

October 14th, 2009

Learn To Be Still.

Living Out Loud. (V9). Your Theme Music.

Listen to the headphones on my office computer, and you'll usually hear one of two things: the Eagles, or 70s music. If I could have been a "grown up" (whatever that means) in any time other than my own, I would have been an adult in the late sixties and early seventies. The now-classic rock, disco and pop ~ a combination of evolution, revolution, funky, sappy tunes ~ are the soundtrack mix of my formative years.

Julie Do You Love Me supplied me with my first taste of longing and heartbreak and an almost pathological crush on Bobby Sherman at the tender age of six. *Ricki Don't Lose That Number* (Steely Dan) put music to real life in the form of the first man I ever loved from afar, a fellow 4-H camper named, of course, Ricky. And the Doobie Brothers' *Black Water* will forever place me in the backyard of our Nelson County home, pumping the handles and pedals of the whirly-bird with Janet, spinning in circles to the beat of a purely southern tune from a cheap radio on a gorgeous southern mountain summer morning.

In the eighth grade, Nick Childs would sing *Brick House* every time I walked into English class, and though I was embarrassed then, to this day I think of that and smile. I mean, really . . . I was short, had tortoiseshell glasses that were bent from a horseback ride in the woods gone awry, and my hair . . . let's not even go there. Nick was probably the first person that pointed out something I didn't see, and wherever ya are, Nick, I thank you. *We Are Family* conjours sitting on the porch with Margaret while she writes in my yearbook the usual blahblah along with hilarious and insightful comments on our classmates. And Queens' *You're My Best Friend* is musical affirmation of a 35 year friendship that has not only lasted but gotten stronger over time.

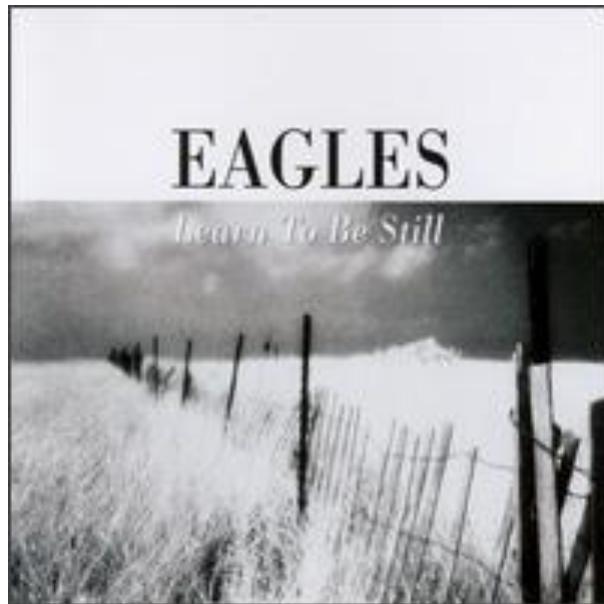
And of course, there's *Hotel California*. That mysterious tune with the haunting, symbolic and often misunderstood lyrics has seeped itself into my blood, thought it wasn't until 1993 that I first heard its music with my heart. *You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.* Yes, how true that has proven to be for me. The first time I realized I was actually heading to LA . . . understand I did not so much make the decision as it made me . . . I awoke in the middle of the night drenched in sweat, pulled out of dreams by one thought: oh. my. god. I'm. moving. to. Los. Angeles.

It is in the early hours of the morning that fear finds me the most. That time when all is dark and quiet and still is the time when my soul speaks the loudest, when dreams and desires mix with doubts, when who I am joins with who I wanna be ~ I used to avoid listening to avoid the confusion it created. [That didn't work.](#)

So I began rising early and sitting in the dark. Just sitting and breathing, and listening, letting all that fear and all those thoughts come up, come out, be ghosts in the room, swirl around, electric-charged energy, this part of me that had to be released, allowed to flow, reclaimed again. Over time I become aware of and in tune with the me behind the emotion, and I trust her.

This morning I sit in the dark, coffee in hand and sleeping dogs at my side, wondering what in the world I'm going to choose as *my song*. I glance at the little rose quartz buddha on my coffee table, quietly staring back at me, and I hear, softly, *learn to be still*.

I travel from the east coast to the west, in search of me. This confuses the people who love me most. It is not a path I choose lightly to tread, well-worn as it may seem to be. It is, however, what I feel in my heart is my course, and I have come to this place of acceptance that will no longer let me deny it with attempts to just *be*. I [Learn To Be Still](#) so I can learn to be me.



October 4th, 2009

Rock On.

Living Out Loud. (V8) winner. Little Treasures.

On a [recent trip to Nags Head](#), I got the crazy idea that I wanted to, no, ~ had to ~ sing karaoke. I'm not much of a limelight type gal, so this whole strong urge thing kinda confused me. I was going with its flow, though ~ I'd been practicing in the car, and I sounded gooo-oooo.

So after a great seafood dinner and two shots of tequila, my girlfriends and I moved to the bar, and Jose Cuervo and I got up and sang our little hearts out to *Born to Be Wild*. Quite honestly, I sucked. And there's a video to prove it.

Then my friend Pam goes up and nonchalantly belts out these heartfelt, gusty, soulful renditions of *I Will Survive* and other disco-era hits. We were floored. She shrugged off the compliments and explained that she'd done a lot of public speaking in her job.

I can do it, she said, because I've learned to listen to my own voice.

Huh.

And here I am at 45, having spent the better part of my life looking for ways to keep a gag on it.

Somewhere along the way, a long time ago, I picked up the notion that thinking what I want to think and doing what I want to do were somehow hurtful to someone else and therefore wrong.

Somewhere along the way I decided it was easier to try to stifle the voice that screamed to be heard than to deal with the change and chaos and guilt and *fear* that came whenever it managed to whisper its dreams to me.

Somewhere along the way I tried to pretend there was no voice and I was happy being settled and safe in the familiar like everybody else.

Somewhere along the way, I really tried to just kill that damn voice.

But somewhere along the way the voice decided it was stronger than me and it wasn't giving up without a fight.

It didn't care that at 21 I'd married someone I knew I'd divorce later.

It didn't care that it took me three tries to get through college.

It didn't care how many times I dropped my life and moved out west.

It didn't care that I tried to beat it, suffocate it and drown it to death with shitty relationships, food and wine.

It just kept right on talking, and it made damn sure I listened.

The first time it spoke was at the end of a week-long bulimic binge.

In the middle of dinner with friends I was hit with a massive wave of nausea and spent the night on my bathroom floor vomiting exorcist-style. Every eight minutes for the first hour, then every 15, then every 30, until dawn. I was alone, wracked, dehydrated, painful and filthy. And I hate being nauseous more than anything.

I laid my head against the wall and truly wanted to die.

From a far corner of my mind I heard someone say, *You like throwing up? You wanna do it again? And again?*

So I did what anybody would do, right? I answered it.

If I live through this, I will never throw up again.

That was February 6, 2004. I can't explain it and I don't take credit for it.

All I know for sure is, after 17 years, the urge to eat and vomit my guts out simply, quietly, vanished.

Even in the midst of a stomach illness that kept me feeling bloated and miserable for months ~ a bulimic's worst nightmare, a little black, ironic humor ~ it just wasn't an option.

The second time I heard the voice, in the fall of 2005, it spoke loud and clear.

I was just back from 6 months in LA. One of the things I loved about the city was that I tended more toward hiking boots than wine bottles. I'd become quite the little vino connoisseur before I left Virginia Beach.

When I came back, I fell into old habits, and one Friday night, fell out of a local bar. I told my friends that things were gonna change. Or rather, I was gonna change.

And that night, as I was walking up the stairs to my bedroom, I heard it.

You need to sleep with a rock.

Yep.

Just an unassuming thought like the ones that pass through your brain about a 1000 times a day:

I should stop at the store and get coffee.

It's time to feed the dogs.

I think I'll go to New York on vacation.

You need to sleep with a rock.

So I looked around and picked up a little rock that sits on my shelf.

I picked up the rock and I climbed into bed to read and I put it on my chest, which was as good a place as any.

I was reading James Frey's controversial recovery memoir, [*A Million Little Pieces*](#). After about 10 minutes in, at around page 99, he described a recovery graduation ceremony for two of his friends.

They have done their time they are ready to rejoin the outside World.

They both received a Medal and a Rock.

The Medal signifies their current term of sobriety,

the Rock their resolve to stay sober.

For as long as I can remember, I've felt connected to rocks, stones and crystals. I study their healing qualities and will keep certain ones with me at times. I found this rock in the mountains a few years back. One of three that form a larger stone that somehow divided neatly, I keep it now because of what it represents.

However, I tend to move a lot and I lean toward light travel. I can give away and throw away and work with whatever fits in my car. Things are replaceable. And to be honest, it isn't the rock that I value, it's the message. The rock was simply the conduit. It holds no special power.

So call it intuition, call it a message from the universe, or call it crazy.

But finding your voice isn't about throwing back shots of tequila so you can sing out loud.

It isn't about doing things you're ashamed to tell yourself, let alone your best friend.

And it isn't about spending 30 years depressed because you're hiding from life and using every mechanism and every excuse in the book to do it.

It's about believing in yourself, your creativity, your writing, your photography, your smile, your laughter ~ whatever it is.

It's about believing in what you want to do and what you have to say even if the folks in your audience are laughing and boozing and walking out the door.

It's about being authentic and grounded and real.

It's about trust.

Mostly, it's about listening.

Dropping the last of my defenses leaves me feeling raw, exposed and a little bit vulnerable sometimes.

So what?

You get to choose the road you follow.

Welcome to your life.

It's that simple.



The Rock.

September 6th, 2009

Hikin' the trail. (a guest writer entry.)

I'm giving up my space for the day to Lee Lee Schmalz, my dear friend from Colorado. I've know her forEVER and I can tell you, this girl LIVES – out loud and to the fullest. And she's a truly talented writer, too. There aren't many people that can dive into a writing project, swim around in it for less than 10 minutes, and burst triumphantly back to the surface with a great piece of writing. LeeLee can do it, and she knows I envy her for that. But I love her writing.

After two nites and a day and a half or so of roughin' it and elk-watchin' in the great outdoors of south-western Calla Rada, it was decided that not enuff outdoors, not enuff hikin', not enuff scoutin', had been had. There's more to do, more to see, only 3 hours away! So, after breakfast, we pack (some people take waay to much stuff), head home, unpack (did I mention some people take waaaaay too much stuff?), shower (omg, its never felt so good!), fight off the (big, strong, all-encompassing) urge to nap, and head up on the Mesa. "It's just a short hike," I'm told.

Wull, I never knew there were fourteeners on the Mesa, but I swear to the Lord above I was climbin up one. And across one, which was the "quicker, less strenuous" route, I'm told, from Point A to Point B. At about Point A-anna-half, I was thinkin' I was just... about...done, but then "The hard part's over," I'm told. At that point, I'm too elated in this haze of giddy jubilation that I choose not to dwell on the fact that if "its all downhill from here," that its all gonna be UPhill on the way back. That admittance woulda crumpled me right on the trail.

Oh yeah, the "trail." Really? Itza TRAIL? Once, we lost the "trail" and my guide was so happy to find the "trail" again. I saw NO difference. Scrub- and oakbrush, butt-tall grass, hidden rocks and downed trees. What, just because there's bear poop on it makes it a trail? Like they don't poop on un-trails? Just cuz there's mountain lion tracks (on top of our boot-prints) makes it a trail? And wait wait wait a minute, back up, bear poop? WE'RE out HERE, there BEARS go POOP? If a bear sees me huffin and puffin, he'll know he has an easy score. Even if he ain't hungry, he'll do it – you know – for fun. For practice. For sport.

And I notice, and I wonder, "Hmmm, my guide never turns around to look behind us, to make sure nuthin's back there. Huh. THAT'S funny." Then BAM! I realize, its cuz I'M back there. When the bear or the lion decides to attack, from behind, which is what they do, I'm told, so they can break your neck, I'm told, it'll be ME they get! The guide doesn't hafta worry about what's back there! The guide has ME back there! ME – his protection. When I point this out, that he never turns to look behind us, "I don't HAVE too look. I LISTEN," I'm told. Wull what if the bear puts his mammoth paw over my mouth to squelch my scream, and whispers sumthin like "You make a sound, little girl, and I'll hunt down and eat your whole family!?" The only thing you may notice is NOT hearin my huffin and puffin and mutterin under my breath "What kind of an effin a**hole would call this a 'little,' 'quick' and 'less strenuous' hike?! M-er f-er! Do you KNOW how many birds are gonna build their nests with strands of my hair they pluck from a branch that yanked it from my head and then you make me sit down and be all still and quiet, seemingly in or on a gnat nest, so that you can do your cow-callin, frickin a sumbeech..." anymore.

Anyway, all that aside (and said in jest, really), what a fabulous time. Nature's beauty like you don't often see. Well, like I don't often see, anyway. My guide sees it alllllll the time, is ate up with it, and is happier than – well, than a bear in a berry patch – when he sees bear and lions and elk and deer and moose and turkeys and sheep and daggome sharks and tigers and Bigfoot and wolves and rabid dogs and feral cats and thugs with guns or ANYTHING on the pix from his "trail" cam. And, actually, there were no lion prints, I only added that to escalate the drama and maybe help you to feel sorry for me – but there WAS bear poop, lots of it, and there were lots of spots where cow elk and calves had bedded down (trust me, I was thinkin of playin' Goldilocks and nappin in one of 'em, but that "three bears" part of the story was all too real and convinced me otherwise), and there were elk and there were grouse and fabulous wildflowers and a gorgeous creek and a nice view of my, shall we say, "able-bodied" (mmm hmmm gurls, you KNOW what I'm talkin aBOUT!) impressive guide's backside (hey it wasn't intentional, that just how it works when you're a follower) and just that balance – that balance that nature provides, lettin you know that you're just a speck, and extreeeemely lucky to be right here, right now. Some people grasp it, some people bypass it. Its my privilege (to at least try) to grasp it, and I appreciate how the same scrub- and oakbrush, butt-tall grass, hidden rocks and downed trees that can trip me up and make me fall are also there to hold up to my reach, givin me sumthin to pull myself up that "trail" with.



Lee Lee soakin' up the sun and fun.

August 11th, 2009

It rhymes with Meryl. It rhymes with Jeryl.

Living Out Loud Volume 7: By Any Other Name

My name is Karal. It rhymes with Meryl. It rhymes with Jeryl. Heck, it even rhymes with barrel.

When I feel the need to make things simple or if I know it's going to be butchered when screamed over a loud speaker, I spell it Carol. It's only 5 letters and I personally don't see what's difficult about it. Only five letters shouldn't be hard to screw up. But it's a proven fact that if there's a way to mispronounce it, somebody's gonna go there.

If personality, attitude, and all around life destiny are determined by the name we're given at birth, life as I know it – or would have known it – was radically altered by a last minute decision and the stroke of a pen. I was supposed to be Kara, but my mom decided that seemed too blunt and "softened it" by adding the L at the last split second.

I know of only 3 other Karal's. One I met while working in the bath department of a shop in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, (where? . . . exactly.) One was a losing contestant on Jeopardy, and the other is writer and well-known specialist in American culture [Karal Ann Marling](#). She's good company.

I never even gave thought to it's uniqueness until I was 8 and the choir director at my stepdad's new church greeted me with an overly enthusiastic smile and a "... you must be *Corral*." With images of penned horses swirling through my mind, I surely didn't know about WTF back then, but I'm confident the look I gave her conveyed that message loud and clear.

Since then I've answered to Carl, Karen, Karla, Kuh-Rall. I answer to the pause and questioning look, and yes, I even answer to Corral. During a rebellious stage, if it wasn't pronounced right, I wouldn't answer at all. I didn't think so, but some part of me, obviously, identified with Karal, and defended her, too. Terms of endearment are Kurl, started years ago and continued still by my best high school friend LeeLee; K.K., my childhood name (it goes with a song, "little K.K., woo-woo of the world" . . .) and K-RAL, bestowed by a boss everyone else considered a crotchety old man, but who had a fondness for me, and continued by my friend, Jen.

I have a [deep emotional bond](#) with my last name, but when I say the two together, it tends to sound like a growling dog, or a person talking with a mouthful of mashed potatoes. So I place a pause between my first and last name, letting it lilt and flow smoothly: *karal . . . gregory*.

When I was 5, I wanted to be Sally — but I think I wanted to be Charlie Brown's little sister more than I wanted to actually take her name. I like my name. I like it precisely because of the way it's spelled. I like it because it's different, unique, almost exotic in a Russian spy sort of way. It's feminine, it's creative. And it's not typecast. You won't buy an off the rack key chain, and you won't find it in any baby name lists. At least not human babies. I did find it on a list for dog's names once.

Karal doesn't show up easily in those history of names websites either, but I did find an indirect link. Karal supposedly derives from the German name Karel, and means "free man." That, however, is considered a man's name. On the other hand, Kara, a variant of the Latin name Cara, means "beloved" or "friend."

The name Carol is also listed as meaning "free man" depending on where you look. But I don't identify with Carol or Carole as being my name, even though other people have often labeled me as part of a duo when there was a(nother) Carol(e) in the office. I was always happy to be "little Karal", though honestly, "big Carole" was only just a little taller. I have friends who are Carol and Carole, but I do not feel that Carol is me (and Carol in San Diego actually identifies best with her nickname, Stella).

Whoever she is, I identify with Karal. Searching, sensitive, life is passion, to hell with convention "free man" Karal. But ironically, I identify with Kara too. My inclination is to express too bluntly my thoughts and emotions, but I've learned to move to a softer place before I speak.

LeeLee told me recently that she showed a picture of us to her sister-in-law. Joy wrote back to her an emotional and honest message:

What I see in Karal's eyes is truly a pure love that doesn't judge, and a faithfulness to those she loves that is immovable.

God I love that. Yeah, Kara's in there too.



August 2nd, 2009

Buy Some Art, Help a Beagle

Anyone who knows me knows I love my Beagles. From Pearl, my first dog and the inspiration behind my [first photograph](#), to [LolliPop](#) and [Daisy](#), I think Beagles just *rock*.

Pearl was a shy, starved little Beagle that showed up in my parents' yard several years ago and refused to leave. She and I were a lot alike and that little dog literally taught me that you create your own joy. LolliPop has no bottom jaw because her owners waited a month after it was cracked away from her face like a wishbone to take her to the humane society. By that time infection was horrendous and the remaining jawbone was disintegrating from her mouth. Daisy was brought to animal control weighing over 80 pounds and dumped off with instructions to kill her. When she appeared on an evening news show as the "fat dog" in a doggy weight loss segment, her owners came and demanded their little celebrity back, so she was taken to a sanctuary and protected by the big dogs. Sometimes people suck.

And sometimes they don't! That's why **I've decided to donate 5% of all sales from [Karal Gregory Photography](#) to Buddies & Beagles**, a shelter and sanctuary for purebred and mixed Beagles, other hounds and small dogs, located in Southern California. Beagles & Buddies is a non-profit shelter actively involved in pet adoption and dog rescue. And, they are a no-kill sanctuary. I'm so sold.

Even more, they have a fantastic community education program, offer services such as microchipping and pet CPR classes, and they hold tons of adoption events and parties that reunite quite a few of the dogs and their new families with their best buddies still living at the shelter. Started in 1992 as the official breed rescue for Beagles and other hound dogs, Beagles & Buddies volunteers work tirelessly to find secure, happy new homes for as many of the resident dogs as possible and are completely dependent on donations and volunteers.

Regular donations are relied upon to pay for the property rental, shelter fees for rescues, food, medical supplies, vet bills, grounds maintenance and much more. Click on the link below to visit the Beagles & Buddies site, and check out their [Gallery](#) for photos of some of the most adorable Beagles ever.



July 14th, 2009

Poolside

Today marks the 40th anniversary of the day my Daddy died. As much as I love summer, the month of July is always bittersweet. It somehow seems wrong that in this season of long lazy days and hot forever nights, of fireflies and full moons, of cricket songs and bullfrog lullabies, of loving and living and soaking up the sun, there was the sadness of letting go. Each year on this day, if only for a little while, I invite the 5-year-old me to come out and take a look around, catch her breath, and try to understand. She's come a long way. What was once a day to dread has proven it can just as easily be a day of unexpected magic, serendipity and possibility. And really, for the most part, aren't they all?

I wrote the essay below in 1994. It was the first piece I wrote for myself that wasn't a journal entry or a college paper. I submitted it to Glamour magazine and received in response my first rejection letter. Handwritten below the letter was a note from the rejector's secretary telling me that she'd lost her dad young too, was deeply affected by my story, and hoped I'd continue writing.

The woman who wrote this 15 years ago isn't the woman I am today, however, I'm printing this as I wrote it then, in honor of my Daddy, who I know for a fact is always around; for my sisters and my mom and stepdad, because we know how far we've all come; for my friends, who have loved and laughed with me through even the shitty times, who always saw more in me than I saw in myself and made sure I saw it too; and for me, who really is probably more "hippie" than uptight mainstream professional these days. I earned it, I like it . . . yaaahhh! for that.

Poolside.

Lying by the pool, soaking up the summer sun, I am content. Languishing, relaxed, my eyes are closed, and I am captive to the sensation of the heat dancing on my skin. I am oblivious to everything going on around me except for the slap of the water on the sides of the pool and occasional bits of muted conversation and laughter.

Then I hear the little girl's cry: "Daddy, watch!" And even in the July heat, cold shivers run over my flesh. I look up to see a child about five years old playing in the water. She holds her nose, puts her head under, and comes up laughing, pleased with herself and eagerly looking to her father for approval. He smiles and turns back to his friends, barely acknowledging her, leaving her with only herself for company. I see a look of sadness, embarrassment, and shame slip across her face. Or maybe I only imagined it as I've felt that way myself so often over the past 25 years.

The summer of '69. The summer of love, Woodstock, Hurricane Camille, man's landing on the moon, and Charles Manson's helter skelter. "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In" was the top tune, "Easy Rider" was the number one movie and the Vietnam war was at its tumultuous peak. Tune in, turn on and drop out was the nation's anthem. At five, I was much too young to be involved

in flower power and protests to give peace a chance. My world revolved around Barbie, Mr. Bubble, and Bobby Sherman.

I suppose I loved my father, too, but I don't really remember much about that. When you are a child, life centers on, and is no longer than, each individual day to which you wake. There is no comprehension of time or of its passing, no comprehension of disease, no comprehension of death, no comprehension of forever. So when daddy died July 10, 1969, after a two-year battle with leukemia, it meant little or nothing to me that he was "gone to heaven" and "wouldn't be back." As I lay beside my older sister sobbing herself to sleep that night, I was ashamed that I felt no urging to cry. It took years for me to realize the depths to which I was affected by a man I hardly even know.

More than anything, the loss of my father was an impediment I tried to ignore. I watched my friends with their dads and wondered what I was missing. Early on I learned to bury my embarrassment when classmates and friends discovered I was fatherless. Going to high school in the late seventies, I felt an underlying stigma attached to living in a house that was glaringly empty of a man's strong presence—it was "One Day at a Time" too close to home.

From the beginning, my sisters and my mom and I never discussed daddy's death. To mention it would have shown the weakness and vulnerability to emotion that seemed to be forbidden. The presence of the absence was there, though, and we lived in an atmosphere of uneasiness, bitterness and distrust. My older sister yelled and screamed her frustrations, my younger sister was more of a silent rebel. I somehow assumed responsibility for calming the storms that arose in the way of temper tantrums, rebellions and outright fights. My ability to turn it all inside and keep it to myself invariably helped me to develop a keen sense of self-awareness, but I have had to fight hard against the depression that accompanies such intense introspection.

If there is confidence and attitude within me, I have fought to put them there, and they are the reward of my own doing. Still, they share a space with the resentment that my five-year-old self has not yet been able to resolve: my daddy didn't love me enough to stay alive. Now, at 30, I know this isn't true, that his life was taken by a disease he was determined to beat. Yet even after 25 years, time does not heal. I do not look easily into people's eyes because I do not want to reveal the sadness that hides within my own. I do not feel like I belong in any particular place, do not feel like I fit any particular mold of personality.

I no longer blame my mother for these circumstances, though I did for quite a long time. She was widowed, at 27, with three daughters to raise in a small town where she had lost the safe, traditional role of wife and homemaker. She was forced to handle the confusion and chaos alone, and she did her best while attempting to deal with her own pain. We as her children were dragged through years of innumerable changes of which we had no understanding or control. By the time I reached 16 and my mom remarried I was too old for a "daddy." Consequently, I bury deep within myself a woman who never knew the love of that first all-important male, the stability of a solid family or the self-esteem that comes with knowing you are valued.

I barely know this man I cry for, yet I can no longer attempt to deny my father's existence any more than I can continue to anticipate his return. He has become a juxtaposition of a few faded

memories transposed on the gruesome image I hold of his body rotting away in the ground. I still see my father being loaded into the ambulance pulled up to our porch, its red lights flashing off the walls of our living room where I stood and watched. From time to time I am haunted by the dream of an evil presence looming over that house. It shuts me inside and I cannot escape, no matter how hard I try.

I have been cheated; I know there was more to him than this. He played along with me when I told him I wanted to go to “princess school” and marry a prince. He convinced me to eat frog legs by telling me it was chicken. He bought us a dachshund for Christmas and named him Max. He made me angry when he forced me to stop sucking my thumbs. He used to drive me around the yard on the riding lawn mower. He knew how to get us to behave without saying a word by snapping his thick policeman’s belt. The night my little sister was born he picked me up in a blanket and carried me to the car for the drive to the hospital. I do not remember much, but I remember this.

He was a Virginia state trooper and dedicated to making something of himself. He was a man devoted to his family. He was a husband, and he was a father. He was my father. His name was Kenny, and he was my father. I can say it a thousand times and none of them will change a thing. He was barely 30 and knew he was dying. He knew he would never see his girls graduate, pursue careers, marry, have children. He knew he would not see us grow up. How did he cope?

I’m not sure in his absence that we became the women he would have expected us to be. All three of us married, all three divorced. I suspect that my sisters have experienced the same problems with their personal and professional lives as I, but I speak only for myself when I say that his death nearly succeeded in robbing me of a sense of purpose or direction. It is as though permanence never existed and stability somehow eludes.

Years before he became ill, my father commented that when he died, he wanted to be remembered for never having done anything to hurt anyone. He could not have known then that it was his death that would hurt us most of all. I am angry; angry that he is gone when there are so many people worse than him still living, angry that life goes on and that my generation is now his age, angry that the whole world lives like he never even existed. His life, like the story in a book, only exists when someone cares enough to open the pages and read what is inside. I will not let him sit on a shelf, dusty and forgotten.

It is growing late, and a full moon lingers overhead. Its yellow light glows brightly in contrast to the craters on its surface. It is luminous, and it washes over me as I sit in the midst of the darkness. Though the little girl and her father have gone I do not feel alone.

“Daddy, watch.” I never had the chance to say those words to him or show him how I could swim, run, play. I never told him how much I loved him or how much I have missed his presence in my life. He was gone before I even realized how much I needed him here.

I am leaving soon and moving to Los Angeles, and I am terrified. But maybe, if there is anything at all to be gleaned from daddy's dying, perhaps it is the solace that I have become so determined to make my own life worth living. I know I can trust my own strength, seek my own challenges, and face the choices and changes ahead. I have seen the darkness, and I prefer the sun.

Daddy, watch.

Summer 1994



Daddy Was Around carved in bench. 1995

July 10th, 2009

Secret's in the sauce!

One of the nicest things about visiting my parents in the summertime is being able to sit in their backyard and bask in the best of the season. They live in an old farmhouse and the backyard is secluded, surrounded on 3 sides by fields that are alternately filled with corn, soybeans or hay. Geese fly in on the early morning breeze to fish and nest and deer regularly leave the safety of the woods to feast on the farmer's bounty. Nothing beats sitting on the deck with one of my dad's killer margaritas in hand, shootin' the breeze, and watching day turn into night.

The only thing that makes it better is if it's Saturday or Sunday. Because that's when the succulent smells of barbequed pork ribs and barbequed chicken waft over the hill and through the dale, causing mouths to water and bellies to rumble.

Lisa and Leo's Chicken & Ribs sits on the corner of Rts 250 and 208 in Louisa County just off the Ferncliff exit of I-64 – but only on the weekends. Armed with a big ol' barrel barbecue grill, a hand-lettered sign, a tent to provide shade, and a homemade rub recipe and marinade unlike anything *I've* had before, Leo and Lisa drive from their home in Waynesboro and set up shop outside the Exxon each weekend and have managed to create a growing little business out of a big passion for grilling.

Former residents of Kents Store, with relatives still in the area, they admit it would be easier to keep a location closer to home, but it's back to the the Louisa/Fluvanna area they come each weekend, and each weekend they find themselves close to selling out of both ribs and chicken. And once they do, and the grill is shut for the evening, they're off to visit the family and spend a few hours in their own backyard . . . probably with the mouth-watering smell of the best ribs & chicken *I've* ever eaten still wafting through the trees, carrying a reminder of what's best about summer.



Lisa & Leo's Ribs & Chicken!



Leo shares his passion for the grill & a few ingredients, too.

If you're passing through Louisa on I-64, or you're in Louisa or Fluvanna or anywhere within 100 miles, I'm telling ya, . . . go see Lisa and Leo!

July 6th, 2009

Home is where . . .

Living Out Loud Volume 6: Going Home

I don't know if I can answer the question, "Where are you from?" by taking a mental trip "home." Because I'm still sorting out for myself what I think home actually is, and whether I believe the mainstream ideal of home ultimately exists, and because I'm still sorting out for myself *where* I think home ultimately exists if it does in fact exist, I'm afraid this could be a bit of a bumpy journey.

I always wanted to be one of those people who lived in one place their whole life. A part of me envies the friends I have who grew up in my small town and stayed. I envy the sense of belonging I imagine you must feel in order to remain satisfied there. I envy the contentment, the feeling of being settled, of being in the center of your universe. I know I couldn't have done it, but still I wonder . . . is that home?

Geographically, I am from Louisa, a little southern county about halfway between Charlottesville and Richmond, VA. The house I most consider "home" – we moved there when I was several months old from a rental down the road – was probably the third house built on what was then a dirt road in the town of Mineral, surrounded on all sides by a thick forest of trees. The town of Louisa, where I was born in the local hospital in 1964, was a sidewalked lane of old-west type buildings and a courthouse in an area about two blocks long. It had one grocery store, two drive-in movie theaters, and one drug store. Mineral wasn't much different, only smaller, and as kids we could travel a path through the woods to visit a friend or walk up the road to the one store in town for a brown bag of penny candy and a Yoo-hoo in a matter of minutes.

When my dad died in 1969 and my mom remarried, we moved, first to another area of Louisa and then up to Nelson County (I went to John Boy Walton's elementary school!). For the next fours years I was a mountain kid and did what mountain kids do: played in the creek behind our house, joined 4-H, and reveled in telling the tourists who stopped at the apple packing shed across from our house that there really was no such place as Walton's Mountain and they should just pack it up and go home. After 4 years my mom and two sisters minus the stepdad and the dog did just that, moving back into our house in Mineral. Though it now sat on a paved street called St. Frances Avenue and was surrounded by other houses, it held memories of my childhood and memories of my dad, few though they were. We spent the summer cleaning and restoring it back from the disaster our renters had left.

It was 1977, I was 13 years old, and it was the first time I felt connected . . . rooted . . . grounded . . . like I belonged. It wasn't just the house, though. I'd left a place that pretty much required you to have either a horse or an orchard to fit in and returned to an environment and friends that were familiar to me in an almost nostalgic way; in my short lifespan the years we were gone seemed a lot longer than they actually were, and reconnecting with my past was reconnecting with me, with my dad, and was somehow sort of setting things back on course.

The day we moved from the house permanently, in 1980, I developed a headache and nausea so bad I couldn't raise my head and was in bed for 3 days. From there my mom and new stepdad

moved to an old house in the western end of the county and then to the old farmhouse where they've lived in for the past 27 years. I graduated high school while there, moved briefly to Tennessee and Kentucky, then to Norfolk for college. I've lived in Los Angeles. I live in Virginia Beach.

When I think about that house in Mineral, I find myself thinking of the front porch. This is the front porch my dad stands in front of in the photo below. It's the porch where my mom and my sisters Margaret and Janet and I sat talking late one hot summer night in 1979, a rare occurrence ended all too soon when Janet interrupted the peace of crickets and fireflies to innocently ask, "What's a period?" This is the porch I painted brown while listening to Charlie Daniel's sing, "Devil Went Down to Georgia" on a hot summer morning. This porch is the first place I sat and talked with one high school love and it's the last place I sat to break up with another.

It's also the same porch that the ambulance backed up against to take my dad to the hospital when he lost a battle with leukemia, and that house has given me my share of nightmares. My first vivid dream left me no doubt that I dream in technicolor. A big black and white wolf stands on his hindlegs outside my parent's closed door, and he's going in, but before he does he turns and looks at me. His teeth are white and bared, his lips, bright red.

The second was of my sister and I being chased though the house by an old man. I try to crawl down the hallway and get away from him, but he grabs me by the back of my pants. I struggle free and make it to the living room where his old wife is sitting on a footstool between me and the door, ready to snag me as I pass. I find myself outside in the backyard climbing the clothesline pole to get away but the old man is once again pulling at me from below and I can't get loose.

For a long time I had a repetitive dream of being locked inside the house at night, its doors and windows slamming shut and refusing to let me out. Now I dream that I visit the house, and each time I walk through it has been remodeled, barely showing evidence of its former self. In an attempt to stop the dreams I once went by to ask the current owner if I could walk through, but no one answered.

As someone who spent a good portion of her life moving past being the kid who's dad died, and as someone who spend a lot of time moving and looking for home, I haven't quite decided if I believe that where I'm from determines who I am. I think we choose unconsciously to hold onto some pieces of our experiences and to let go of others. I think if we're lucky we realize that where we come from and what we experience don't have to be who we are and at any point we can consciously pick and choose what we want to pack in those boxes and take forward. I think we form perceptions of events and places from our past based on our own point of view, but that point of view may not be based in actual reality . . . so I think we get to write the book, so to speak and can rewrite it if we so choose.

I don't know quite yet what, or where, I consider home or if I even think that home as a geological, physical place exists. It just keeps going back to that porch, and from it there are two directions: Going back in the house isn't an option, as I know that as much as I envy others the comfort of familiarity, I'm not feeling those warm snugglies. As it stands the places that have

served to provide the stability, peace or sense of belonging for me are varied and may or may not include the actual presence of the family and friends I love: my parents backyard on a summer morning before anyone else has gotten up; driving cross country on old back roads with nothing familiar in sight and the unknown up ahead; a friend's backyard at nightfall, surrounded by trees and silence; a bench high atop the hills, overlooking Los Angeles clear out to the Pacific Ocean, and knowing almost no one, well, . . . except for me. As porches go, the view ain't so bad.



My dad standing next to his porch.



The house in Mineral as it looks now.



My parents' backyard in the morning.



My bench atop the Hollywood Hills.

July 5th, 2009

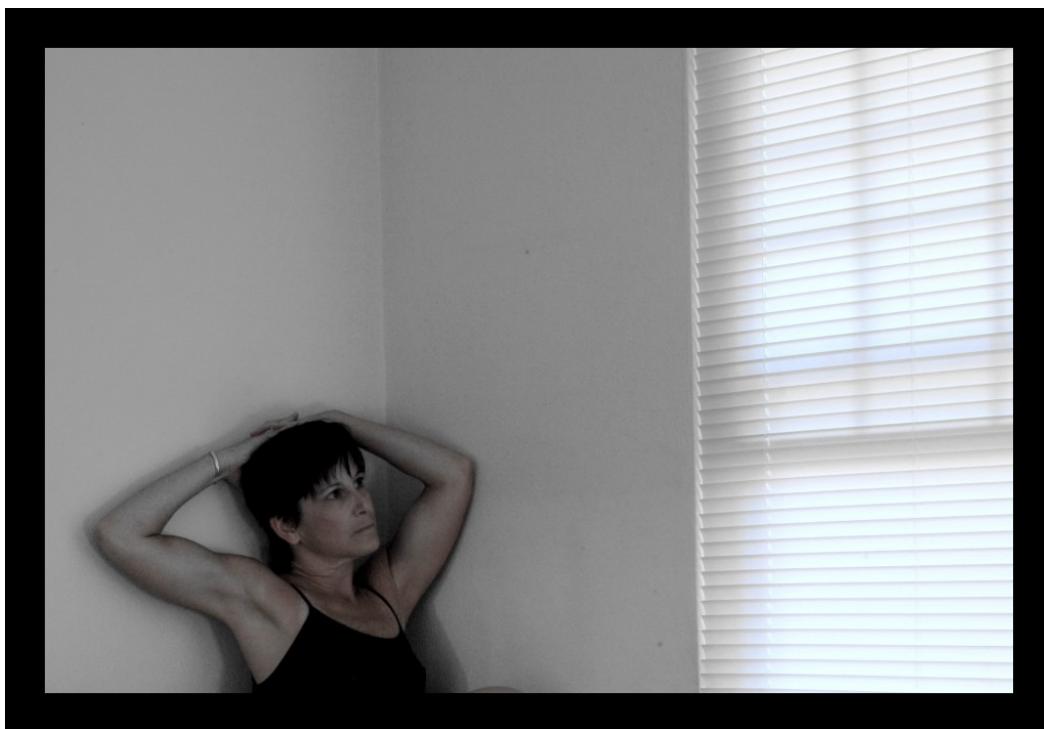
A self portrait project.

Inspired by some of the great photographers on Flickr, along with turning 45 last month and finding myself looking backward and forward and thinking that I've finally got a handle on just who the person inside this lump of flesh is, I decided to start a self portrait project.

I spent about 3 hours this morning taking almost 200 photos of myself, most of which were blurry and none of which I really liked. That's where it got fun, though, because the nature of photography or any art and creativity is that reality isn't necessarily the goal. Which leads me to thinking, who's reality would I be depicting, anyway? What I see in the mirror isn't even the same as what my friends see, as they are looking through a lens of personality, mine and theirs – even so-called reality is open to interpretation.

The Self Portrait Project is an attempt to capture the “me” I feel most comfortable being, even if it isn't necessarily a “reality” in my eyes all the time, or the eyes of those who think they know me best. It's a celebration of creativity, of seeing outside the box, of *living out loud*, of not taking things so seriously and remembering that life really is (really!) supposed to be fun. It's my way of putting to rest the person who looked to everyone else for approval, and celebrating the woman that listens to the voice within, whether it's telling her to sleep with a rock (blog forthcoming), dance naked in the moonlight (I haven't done that yet, but I did do karaoke) or just sit quietly knowing that sometimes it doesn't necessarily seem so, but really, it's all good.

The image here is called “early morning quiet” . . . I'm sitting where my dog Daisy normally hangs to look out the window. I included the original shot to illustrate reality and interpretation.



Self Portrait. 3 July 2009



original image for self portrait.

*To view the Flickr gallery, click on the top photo.

* All photos copyright karal l gregory 2009.

July 3rd, 2009



Happy pocketbook day.

Me and The Pocketbook. 1990.

Living Out Loud Volume 5: Your Personal Folklore

Not too long ago my family collectively decided to defy convention and stand up in the face of consumerism, commercialism and card-company holidays. In other words – we quit buying each other gifts just because the calendar said we had to.

I can't speak for everyone else but I felt freed. I love getting presents just like the next gal, and I enjoy giving a good gift. I just want to give it on my terms, and not because I'm obligated. Never having been one of those people who had all their Christmas shopping done in August, and never planning to be, this works for me. And because I tend to move a lot and travel lightly (hello Salvation Army!) this works for me.

There is, however, one gift that has been grandfathered into the agreement, and that is The Pocketbook. The Pocketbook has been around since approximately 1977; back in the day when my mom would hand my two sisters and I \$5 to spend on each other and then set us loose in KMart. Janet, the youngest, found Margaret, the oldest, a beautiful burlap bag painted with the blue-light special interpretation of Balance, the zodiak sign for Libra. Holding the scales was the Greek Goddess of Justice, Themis. When Margaret, preppy, stylish, and 17, opened her package on Christmas morning and came face to face with Themis, she burst into a cackle of uncontrollable laughter, and Janet, shy, awkward and 10, burst into a cacophony of unstoppable tears. The Pocketbook became a makeup bag and was eventually demoted to clothespin holder, shoved in a corner of the laundry room, and forgotten.

Until the day I got married. Somebody, I think my mom, found The Pocketbook and thought it would be a fun thing to wrap up and give to me as a wedding present. Since we opened our gifts at our reception, it was hilarious. The Pocketbook went with me on our move to Tennessee. A couple of years later I unloaded the husband on the US Army and The Pocketbook on my stepdad, Hosa. And a tradition was born.

There are no rules for exchanging The Pocketbook, but there are suggested guidelines. My parents took The Pocketbook to Disney World and had their picture taken with it along with Goofy and Minnie, so we now try to include a picture of the bag in some “exotic locale.” She’s been to Florida, Colorado, Los Angeles and China. And it’s best not to give her to anyone under the age of 20 or so, because young kids have a tendency to actually like her, and we’re afraid we won’t get her back.

It doesn’t have to be a special occasion to be honored with The Pocketbook, though birthdays, anniversaries (my parents 25th), graduations and moves tend to rank high. She once ended up crammed in the bottom of an unsuspecting victim’s laundry basket waiting for wash day. I’ve been given to her at a wedding, a going away party to LA and at least one birthday. In the pictures here she was wrapped up and presented to me as a birthday gift from my boss, Denny.

The Pocketbook has even been to hell and back. Janet’s house burned to the ground in 1994, taking The Pocketbook with it and ending, we thought, our legacy. Thanks to Michael’s Crafts and a little artistic flair, she was resurrected a few years later and continues her journey around the family tree. I have a feeling she may very well outlive us all.

June 25th, 2009

This isn't fiction and I don't get to write it.

I like to think my inner being reflects to the outer world a karma-peace-live-and-let-live-balanced-yoga sort of persona — all ZenMama.

Then I look in the mirror and I see Veruka Salt.

She's the obnoxious kid in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* who goes around screaming, "Give it to me! *I want it now!*"

Because I have a writer's outlook on life, I tend to think all stories should have a beginning, a middle and an end – preferably one that has something worthwhile to say. So when life doesn't always write itself the way I think it should be written, I want to jump in and play editor.

I forget that the central character isn't necessarily me, the book may not be written in my voice. That what I want *now* might just end up slashed from the pages by the true writer's pen. I forget that I can create the cast in my imagination and assign the character flaws and the neuroses and the dramas . . . but I have absolutely no idea how closely my art imitates someone else's reality.

So, no *happy birthday* and I'm being all, *this book is supposed to be my memoir and it's not following my outline* about it when the truth, actually, is this:

I got the golden ticket. And I got to visit the Chocolate Factory. I went, if only for the blink of an eye, where childhood dreams and adult imagination blend, where fantasy and reality merge to produce a magical, whimsical place you truly wish you could stay. I got the gift of a lifetime, savored the Wonka bar, the fizzy pop, and an everlasting gobstopper too. How many people can say that?

Veruka wanted it all and wanted it now and she landed herself a very brief chapter and a disappointing ending.

Charlie recognized that we each create our own reality and we sometimes look at things from completely different perspectives and it isn't about just you and it doesn't matter what you want. He bathed in the now and appreciated every precious second, and then he let life flow. And ultimately, he got to live in the Chocolate Factory forever.

A story with no ending remains at its climax.

Let it be.

June 19th, 2009

Yeah, what he said.



You cannot live sheltered forever without ever being exposed,
and at the same time be a spiritual adventurer.
Be audacious.
Be crazy in your own way,
with that madness in the eyes of man that is wisdom in the eyes of God.
Take risks,
search and search again,
search everywhere,
in every way,
do not let a single opportunity or chance that life offers pass you by!
-Arnaud Desjardins

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Update to post. 6/18/09.

I read a bit about Arnaud Desjardins.

I like this guy.

He has a great little book called *The Jump Into Life: Moving Beyond Fear*.

He writes that daring to live is:

...daring to pass through important stages in life where the person you used to be dies, in order to make room for someone with a new view of the world.

You can read a few pages on [Amazon](#).

June 17th, 2009

Silent flowers of friendship.

I often feel like I don't belong on this planet. Things other people consider normal boggle my mind, and I notice it being boggled even more as I get older. Things like conformity, structure, closed-mindedness. Eating animals – which only really started to affect me a couple of years ago – and which I am vowing to discontinue (watch your dog have jaw surgery after someone has broken her face and see if you look at chicken legs the same again). Hating other people because their skin color, sexual orientation or nationality is different from yours. Thinking your religion is the one and only answer, like God (or whomever) would really be that exclusive. Walking away from someone without explanation or at least saying goodbye.

I had a little moment of sad because someone I want to believe in didn't care enough to wish me a happy birthday, and it was my 45th, and he's known me forever. I want to believe he forgot, but I know he didn't, and I want to believe his own life is in such a state of flux that the one or two sentences of email he has sent my way are the best he can do. But I know better. And both of those would be bullshit excuses anyway, and I'm too intuitive and realistic to buy that even when I'm selling it to myself. Sometimes the reality is that I take too long to let go, but I'm learning. Some people, sometimes, just don't have it to give.

Which is why I was caught totally off guard while out walking tonight, when the little girl on the corner opened her gate and came running across the street to see me. We've never met, though we've smiled at each other in passing, and I assumed she was coming to pet my dogs. Because I saw her steal a look or two back at her open front door, I knew she was sneaking out. I opened my mouth to play the adult and admonish her for leaving the yard without permission, but before I could say anything, she extended her hand and placed in my own two flowers from her garden. She smiled at me, ran back into her yard, shut the gate behind her, disappeared from view. She never said a word.

Some people, sometimes, have it to give.



Flowers From the Kid on the Corner

June 15th, 2009

The wild horses of Corolla.



Corolla Wild Horses

Like most little girls, I passionately loved horses. I'd gaze up in longing at the Breyer models in the old Mays Five and Dime, but the little plastic mare and foal that I bought with my own money on my 5th birthday and getting the 45 of the song, *Wildfire* for my 11th were about as close as I ever got to owning one.

All grown up now, I know absolutely that the best things in my life have nothing to do with ownership. It's changing – because you need to, facing the fear – because you want to – following a feeling without knowing the path of the journey and finding yourself on the other side – because you know you will. It's the laughter, the tears, a sky full of a million stars, a morning's rising sun. It's the people you meet along the way and the ones that are with you forever. It's the moments that don't last with the people you love the most.

These two gorgeous wild horses spent the better part of the day with my girlfriends and I on the beach in Corolla, NC, last weekend. My 45th birthday is Saturday, and I like to think they were there for me.

June 4th, 2009

The 'mates of '82 hullabaloo.

What happens when 5 girls in their mid-40s get together at an OBX cottage for a mini high-school reunion? The question, answered 7 months later...



The "Outer Banks Skanks" on their first reunion vacation.

Well, first they spend an entire evening talking and laughing and catching up on the last 27 years. Then they spend a long weekend talking and laughing and building some good time memories to look back on over the next 27.

Deep down we're still the same girls we were back in high school. Pam is still goofball hilarious, Steff can deadpan a one-liner that gets ya rollin' in laughter, Debra has a million dollar smile that would stop a train and a fierce loyalty that stops your heart, and Lee Lee carries a slightly shy demeanor that belies the fun-loving yet strong and confident woman within. They might disagree but I'd say I still tend to watch it all from the sidelines, move front and center, and then sideline again, more an observer than a leader most times.

But over the last 3 decades we've become so much more than those things that so obviously and maybe, erroneously defined us. Steff, who I thought was a definite party girl, never drank in high school, and really still doesn't. She's married to the love of her life. Together they've raised three awesome kids, and she keeps a pretty strict, and pretty fast-paced, regimen of walking. Lee Lee moved to Colorado for college and blossomed into a blonde-haired Harley-riding cancer fighting kool-aid mom to her three fantastic teenage kids and their friends, and has proven that she ain't skeered to take on whatever challenges her, but she's gonna enjoy life to the fullest while doing it, too. Pam took the higher education route to Hawaii, earned her master's degree in early childhood special education, then married an equally creative and endearing soul and is mom to two adorable toddlers who will probably also be voted Class Clown someday. And

Debra has a love of a husband and an absolutely sweetie of a daughter who shares that breathtaking smile, and she gets together every Sunday for dinner with her mom, stepdad and sister and her family. Four amazing women, four amazing lives.

One of the things that struck me about our weekend in the Outer Banks was the way that we all still connect as the friends and girls we were then, with the giggles and the goofiness and the comfortable fit. We can tear up on some group email time. But beyond that, there is so much more than there was back in the day. Maybe it comes from each of us knowing ourselves so much better than we did back then, or maybe it's just the knowledge that there is a tie that binds, and it's there because we want it to be. We make the effort to stay in touch because we truly are richer for having each other in our lives. We're each a connection to our own memories of the past, and familiarity but even more than that, I think we're each connected to the other by a silk strand of friendship that flows from one to the other and back again, invisible but intertwined and all the stronger because of it. I know that I have come to love having these women in my life.

May 28th, 2009

An (almost) crappy evening.

I am not a mean person. On the street, I smile at practically everyone I pass, at parties I worry way too much about other people's comfort, and I constantly remind my friends when they start road rage ranting that you never know where someone is coming from or going to when they do something stupid. That old man who pulled in front of you might have just left his dying wife in the hospital; give him a break. All told, I'm probably too nice, and I've thought about changing that, but for the most part, I like it that way and I actually expect people to be nice to me.



Which is why I was totally unprepared for the tongue-lashing I took today when I stopped to clean up after LolliPop on our evening walk. Daisy had already gone potty (*good girl!*), and being the ever-vigilant pooper-scooper, I picked up behind her and sealed the bag. Since that was the only bag I had, I diligently stood on the curb and patiently pulled the knot out of it for double-duty.

That consideration, apparently, gave Ms. MeanHouseOnTheCornerWoman just enough time to stew over the fact that I was standing outside her home, plan her offensive and attack through the bushes. I am not a pushover and I am nobody's victim, and I don't shy away from confrontation; in fact I prefer it to pent up anger, hostility and passive aggressive frustration, but I expect to be talked to with some amount of respect and intelligence. I really don't mind if you politely tell me you would rather I not let my dogs crap in your yard, (if, in fact my dogs are crapping in your yard). But when I'm standing on the side of the road wrestling a plastic bag so that I can clean up from the curb what little poop a dog with no jawbone and limited chewing power can produce, the last thing I want is to be subjected to your negative attitude and condescending tone.

I'm not 12, and I'm not an idiot. So please don't talk to me like I just pulled my own pants down and took a dump on your lawn or slept with your husband. And when I explain to you calmly that I am removing any remnants of doggy digestion and taking them home with me, that should be the end of it.

Maybe I just live in a dream world of my own creation. That would be the one in which people take a deep breath, reflect on what's important, and let the crap go. It's the one where the overly reactive territorial urge to protect what's yours and embarrass yourself doesn't exist. It's the one where you can sit on your porch in the evening, watch the day end and the sun setting with your

wine, or your beer, or your Coke in your hand and wave at your neighbor instead of screaming at her. It's the same one that Rodney King lives in, I guess. You know, *where everybody gets along*.

Forrest Gump's mama always said, "Stupid is as stupid does." I think it also says in the Bible somewhere, stupid begets stupid. And mean begets mean. So when you react in anger because you're afraid your yard is going to the dogs and you call me a bitch, that just might lead to me reacting like one and tossing my fresh bag of doo across your yard like a well placed bocce ball.

And if I was a mean person, I'd leave it at that. But I'm not, and I like it that way, and I refuse to let your actions affect my reactions and my evening. I've spent the last two hours burning the keyboard instead of calories and crunching words instead of abs, and now, its time to let you go. I don't meditate and do yoga for nothing, baby, and I believe in karma. (Thirty years ago I watched my sister run across the church yard, screaming to her friend that she'd toilet-papered the cemetery, and on the last word, which I believe was the "it" in "I did it!" she tripped over the bricks of the sermon marquee and dislocated her knee.) Yep, I believe in karma.

Which means quite simply that I'll find myself walking the two blocks back over to your house tonight in the dark to sneak across your lawn and retrieve my bag o' poo and toss it into my own trash can, thank you very much. Because in the end, I know the reality that matters *is* my reality. I didn't need your butt-wiping, and in the future, I only want to deal with my own crap.

May 26th, 2009

Honeysuckle, Magnolia and Pearl.



The first time I met Pearl she was standing at the edge of my parent's yard in the bitter February cold wearing nothing but a pink towel and a smile.

She'd shown up from nowhere about 2 weeks prior and stuck around despite my dad's refusal to feed her for the first three days, hoping, no doubt, she'd go back to wherever it was she belonged. Pearl had other ideas, and eventually he relented, fed the dog a piece of leftover chicken, and as he always likes to tell, cleaned out the refrigerator while she stood there, half-starved, waiting for more. My niece, 8 years old and thrilled to have a pet, promptly named the dog Pearl, claimed her as her own, and covered her with a towel to keep her warm while she slept in my parent's shed.

Two years later Pearl was digging holes in the backyard and my sister was threatening the pound. I'd just left a fairly messed up relationship, already had two cats, and was kinda-sorta subletting a converted garage apartment from a friend who kinda-sorta hadn't yet informed the landlord I was there. I wasn't exactly looking for a dog, but I've never been very good at passing up strays, — either the animal or people variety, — but Pearl wasn't much of a dog in the normal sense of the word.

She'd been so mistreated and abused that she'd literally had the personality beaten out of her. She was rigid and stiff and complacent, and you could lift her, bend her, shape her, pose her into any position and she would stay that way, afraid to move. Long before I realized I would be taking this tattered beagle home, I had teasingly nicknamed her Doorstop Pearl and Lawn Ornament Pearl because she was just so ... still. But I always sought her out when I visited my sister, and normally I'd find her smashed to the back of her doghouse, staying out of harm's way, just happy to have a place to sleep in relative safety and quiet. Everyone else thought she was a joke, but I liked her.

I liked her, in part, because I could identify with her. I'd just walked out the door and down the road from meanness, too, and I could relate to being too scared to move, and sleeping with your

back pressed against a wall and I could relate to wanting to be quiet and left alone. I could relate to her gentleness and I could relate to the scar on her right cheek, because I had one too.

Pearl, true to her Southern name, was a mixture of grace and grit. Her left ear was ripped and separated, the bottom few inches torn in two, but she had the sweetest face, and quiet, calm eyes. Fearful of the nightly summertime fireworks, she'd climb behind me on the couch and shiver and shake while I held her, calming her down, yet many nights I'd wake during a thunderstorm to find her standing on my chest, front legs planted firmly and head held high like a coyote on a cliff, guarding me from unseen evil. With a fierce determination and a faraway look in her eyes, using her paws to scrape at my hair and my head, she'd gather me safely from danger into a nice, neat, if not slightly scratched and annoyed, bundle.

She earned the nickname Lightning because she walked painfully slow under most circumstances, and normally I'd have to carry her back from our walks, but she'd frolic in the dunes when we went down to the beach. I often forgot that one of my first photographs was of [Pearl running through the sand](#). Pearl didn't know how to play, but toward the end of her life, she'd get frisky for a moment or two and bounce around with abandon. I think it surprised even her. She could sleep all day, but traveled with me all the way across country to California, and we'd play chase in the hotel hallways at night. One of her favorite things to do was walk the short walk to the corner, strolling along in true Pearl style. She'd do her business, sniff the telephone pole, then turn and look at me with her "spunky monkey" face and take off running back to the house. I'd have to quickly unhook her leash or she'd wiggle like a fish on the end of a pole. Off she'd go, galloping back to the house, weaving across the road, looking back to make sure I was in close pursuit. Sometimes she'd wait, then spring forward again. And then, she'd walk back in our house, slowly up the stairs, and into bed where she'd promptly fall asleep.

For six years, Pearl wasn't much of a dog, but she made me laugh, and she was my best friend, my fairy godmother and my guardian angel all rolled into one. Then, with little warning, her kidneys failed and she became sick and began to fade away and over a sunny, three day period last spring, I waited and watched while she got worse, got better, got worse, improved, and came home.

Pearl spoke a language that had nothing to do with words. The night before she died, she woke around 4am to go outside. I sat on the patio, under a sky full of stars, the air scented with magnolia and honeysuckle, while she slept in my arms. Listening to her breathe, smelling her neck, feeling her warmth, trying to take her in, remember it all. I sat there holding my dog, and I made a few promises, quietly, about the way I would live my life, without fear, without regret, with a little playfulness, a little bit of spunk, and a lot of love. With no more thunderstorms to fight, she woke, pushed her front feet against my chest, leaned her head back to look at me, and for the next several minutes just stared into my eyes, the faraway look replaced with something intense and genuine and strong. Then she laid her head back down and once again went to sleep.

Today, I see the first magnolia blossom of the year, and I remember Pearl. The honeysuckle has bloomed again. And yes, I get it. Sometimes, life just sucks. People leave. Dogs die. Things change. Life goes on. And that's just the way it is. But that day, after our vet left the room and all

that remained was to say goodbye, what I heard escape from my lips sounded an awful lot more like *please come back*.

May 22nd, 2009

Got a life.

Living Out Loud Volume 4: Don't Tell Me, Show Me

This month's [Living Out Loud Project](#) required us to make a video explaining, telling, describing, something about our lives. I pretty much haven't felt like I've had one, thanks to the belly. But then something happened that made me take a second look, get off my ass, and reclaim what is mine.

I almost didn't do the project, and for a month, came up with nothing. Then, at 12 in the afternoon of the day it was due, I came inside from where I'd been sitting on the patio, hunched over a box of old pictures I'm organizing for a reunion with 4 high school friends in Nags Head NC later this month. I walked through the kitchen, threw my coffee cup on the counter as I passed by the sink, and the beginning of the idea formed. One of the things I like best about writing is that it doesn't exactly come from me. I start it, and something else takes over. Of course, I'm the one that becomes obsessed for the next 7 or 8 hours till it's finished, but hey, that's creativity for ya.

I need to figure out what I'm doing for this LOL Project due Sunday.

Really, I need to get a life in the next 2 days so I can video it.

~me, the Friday before deadline.

May 3rd, 2009

Eating like the other half eats.

Living Out Loud Volume 3. You Are What You Eat

Ever since I was 12 years old and hit puberty I've had a love/hate relationship with food. I think it started when my sister called me fat. Even though I was a 4 foot 11 inch rail, she knew it would get to me and obviously it did, because from that point forward (or somewhere along the line) things changed. And maybe love/hate is too strong a phrase, because as much as I would like to blame food for the problems I've had with it over the years, let's be realistic ... is it really the food's fault?

Trying new foods has been something I've made a passion over the past several years, since I first tasted feta, crawdads, and calamari. As a country girl working for an international department like Oceanography in college, I was exposed to tastes from all over the world, and dining out became a discovery of not just unexplored tastes and flavors and textures, but of cultures and traditions and all new ways of life. It was a universal experience. Olive oil with bread; who'da thunk it.

But I'm not much of a cook, though I like to, when I'm in the mood. Last night, after a fantastic and filling hamburger, bun and french fries, I was not in the mood. To cook, or eat. After driving around aimlessly, I wandered into a new Mediterranean restaurant at Hilltop but walked out after realizing they served only sandwiches and salads. Not different, not new. Next I wandered over to Nawab, thinking I'd try out a new Indian dish, but they were incredibly busy, and I wasn't in for sitting around waiting for takeout. So off to the Fresh Market I go. Fresh Market is like a mini Whole Foods (now THAT is the store, and why we don't have one here in Virginia Beach is beyond me). Perusing the aisles for something to catch my eye, I'm overwhelmed with the exotic choices. I could try pate, or escargot, or rattlesnake (just kidding, this store is too fancy for that, but I'da tried that if they had it). I could go for some new sushi, (with my stomach lately, that's a hell no) or maybe a box of cookies titled, "the kitchen sink." That would be a first. Nothing inspires me. Nothing is a challenge. And then I see it, on the top shelf, next to the papergoods and spices. Its the ultimate dare to live like the other half. Not the rich, or famous, or better, or those that think they are, but MY other half. That would be Lollipop and Daisy, my two Beagles. Now, that's new. That's different. And its something that I wouldn't be inclined to do at any other time. But come on, haven't you wondered, (and I know you have) ... "does Alpo really taste liked corned beef hash?" Isn't that truly one of the mysteries of the world you'd like to have answered before you leave this great earth? Don't you think it's odd that they eat our leftovers but we never eat there's? (Ok, no, that's not odd).

Home we go then, (they rode with me) to fix their dinner and my ... snack. They eat Wellness brand, because it's "Natural Food for Natural Dogs." Daisy was an 84 pound Beagle Worthog, so she's on dry Healthy Weight. Lolli has no bottom jawbone and is handfed canned Duck and Sweet Potato. Now that sounds appetizing. And I have to be honest, it's a bit of a thrill to know I'm dreading this, because that makes it fun. One kibble. One nibble. That's all. Oh, the pleasures of living alone.

Well, I feel sorry for ol' Daisy. Ugh. "The optimal balance of nutrient-rich whole foods to fulfill the unique health needs of your less active or overweight dog" smells like hay, has the consistency of a stale cookie and tastes like – nothing. Gerbil food maybe. No wonder she's losing weight. No wonder she scarfs her bowl down and runs to eat Lolli's dribble. This is so bland there's no way she's getting any joy from it. Suddenly I feel like a bad mom.

Lolli's canned mixture "includes barley, carrots and flaxseed." Well, it'll provide fiber if nothing else. I usually dump her can in a bowl and then pick up a clump, squeeze it into a sausage-sized tube and guide it into her mouth like shoving a hotdog into an ATM machine – the gears inside (in this case, her enthusiasm) pulling it in without any effort on my part. I, however, am not gonna feed MYSELF that way, and besides, after that kibble thing, I'm thinking a little pinch'll do me. By this time both dogs (still unfeed) are looking up at me like I'm crazy, but I'm into it too far to stop now, so I pull off a sliver of the sloppy sticky gook with obvious sweet potato parts, and am hit with the nasty smell of ground meat stuff before it gets to my mouth. I think I heaved a bit but kept it on my tongue.

And really, it wasn't that bad. It does have the flavor, texture, aftertaste, of corned beef hash (which I will NEVER eat again) with a side order of SPAM (which I don't eat anyway) and a touch of potted meat (I was always scared of that devil on the wrapper). And its not something I'm going to crave or plan to eat again anytime soon, but its certainly not a valid explanation for why what comes out on the other end (of the dog! the other end of the DOG!) is so absolutely god-awful nasty.

That, however, is one mystery I'm not going to try and solve.

April 1st, 2009

On being “not unhappy”.

My thoughts after a discussion with a friend who answered my question, “Are you happy?”

Happiness comes from a place that isn’t so much defined by external factors as it is a certain knowing, from beneath the place that feels the fear, the sadness, the confusion and the indifference and knows that those are merely fleeting emotions. Happiness is the foundation. It is the sturdy base that allows us to trust that who we are is not the emotions that we feel but a magical, spiritual being with the ability to create life as we want it to be. To be happy doesn’t come from the outside. It comes from the inside. It is the balance, the grounding, the knowledge that all that we have is a direct result of the choices that we make, and if there is discontentment or a kink in the flow, we have the power to listen, envision, decode, and create the change from the messages our soul speaks to us. So if we choose to live our lives with the knowledge and acceptance that we are ‘not unhappy’ … what does that mean? Are we cheating ourselves out of the gift of intention and creation of what our soul desires and knows to be true? Are we closing ourselves off, locking ourselves behind closed doors only to sit in the window yearning for what lies outside the transparent pane of choice that we have created? Do we make this choice for ourselves or someone else? If we make it for someone else, is that our fear talking, rationalizing, making a choice to wither and fade? In the way that we then deny our soul the life we know we can have aren’t we doing the same to the soul of the person we fool ourselves into thinking we protect? Aren’t we choosing for them that ‘not unhappy’ existence as well? And aren’t we denying them the freedom to make their own choices based on their soul, their soul’s voice, too? We kid ourselves if we think that choosing to deny the call of the soul will lead us to where we long to go. We fool ourselves if we think that choosing to deny the call of the soul will lead us home.

March 26th, 2009

Forever on the hip.

Living Out Loud Volume 2: Your Body is a Wonderland

I just realized that it's March 1 and I have exactly 33 minutes to write an essay for Genie's second Living Out Loud project. I love these because it gives me something to write about without having to think too hard for my own topics, and so far, the subjects have been about things that hit home somehow.

My body however, has not been something I've been proud of lately so finding what I love about it is a bit of a challenge. It isn't that I don't like it, or that I don't have particular parts I like more than others. It's just that for the past few months my body has sort of turned against me and more often than not I feel horrible. Feeling horrible invariably, at least in my eyes, is starting to lead to looking horrible. And looking horrible, I'm afraid, leads me to feeling horrible. You get the picture.

As I sit here and write this, my stomach is bloated to 3 times its normal size. If I didn't actually know that I've eaten only a piece of gluten free toast and grapefruit I could be easily convinced that what's painfully coursing its way through my gut at this moment is broken, splintered glass. If I didn't know that my weight has dropped, I'd be easily swayed that the reason I can't fit in my pants is because I eat too much. If I didn't know those things that connect my legs to my feet were my ankles, I'd swear those swollen little things belonged to someone else. But then I look in the mirror and it is me. The same me I was two years ago before something deep within my abdomen twisted itself into a knot.

And to be honest, I'm frustrated and I'm mad. I've been in the health and fitness field since I was 18, and though I haven't always done things to the letter, I work hard to keep myself in shape, mind, body and soul. I like being fit, I like working out, I like having a body that looks and feels strong. One of the first things I realized when I began working with weights was how much more I felt the presence of my body as a living and integral part of me. Standing at my sink, I was acutely aware of my legs under me, holding me upright, supporting the weight of me, rooting me to the ground. That's what being fit and healthy does for me: it grounds me and keeps my soul (which has a tendency to wander) connected to my body.

I remember that now as I look in the mirror and I feel oddly defeated. This thing that makes me feel horrible is threatening to erase the me I've put all this hard work into becoming. The me who has finally found her own voice, own path, own journey on her own terms, feels like she might be losing a bit of that as it gets buried under this reality. But then I look at my left hip. The tattoo has been there so long I tend to forget about it. A sun and moon, designed by an artist on Melrose Avenue, a sort of trophy to commemorate a cross country move to a place I knew no one to find myself. But its what is next to it that catches my eye. Upon first glance it looks like a lowercase *h* or an upside down *4*, and it came about on a trip to Colorado in 2006. My friend's 15 years old son, who has only met me twice, looked me in the eye during a conversation over dinner and told me, "Karal, if I were you, from what I've seen, I'd get the Chinese symbol for strength."

And there it is. The Chinese symbol for strength. Right there on my left hip. To remind me that even a 15-year-old boy can see what is there. That, right now at this minute, is worth everything.



March 1st, 2009

It's Not As Easy As It Looks

Writing a blog, that is.

I've been a writer in one form or another since I was eight years old and wrote an elaborate funeral service for my doll Susu. That was followed 2 years later by my first screenplay about a horse farm in Kentucky, aptly titled, "The Horse Farm." I still have blue ink mimeographed copies of this manuscript. It comes out every few years during visits to my parents when we are in need or want of a good gut-busting laugh. I'm not going to embarrass myself with the contents of the dialog here, and besides, one day that original work could very well be worth a fortune or land in the special collections department of your local library. Suffice to say that if you utter the words, "mity, mity" in the vicinity of my mom and dad, they will break into outright giggles.

But blogs are different. They are supposed to say something, and I'm not sure yet that I have something worth saying. I have almost 30 years of journals stored in my office and a stack of notecards with clever ideas written in one line summaries across each page, all waiting to come to life in the short stories that sit like chapters in the book of my mind. But does anyone really want to read this stuff?

Maybe, maybe not. Maybe the point isn't whether anyone will want to read anything I write or not. Maybe the point is that having this blog gives me the outlet and therefore the motivation to take a long stewing idea or a passing thought and expand on it to see where it will go. And isn't that the basic point of creativity? To stretch it, bend it, reach it, push it, pull it, expand it, breath it, past preconceived limitations and predetermined outcomes? If there is truly no original idea, then what is there to lose?

Several years ago I moved across country and for many months sent my friends a morning email with a "quote of the day." I found out later that most of my friends were merely being polite and tolerated the email but normally threw it away. However two or three people made a point of telling me, after I'd stopped the ritual, how much they enjoyed reading whatever quote I'd discovered, because it gave them both insight into how I was doing at that particular time and allowed them to think about something they would not have considered otherwise. One of the last emails I sent was shortly after I returned back to Virginia Beach, and I'm including that here below. If you like it, maybe I'll share a little bit of "The Horse Farm" with you. Maybe.

*"By means of water we give life to everything."
The Koran (from "Permission to Play" by Jill Murphy Long)*

Since being back in Virginia Beach I have begun to walk every morning with a friend. We go 6.5 miles through the trails in the state park behind my house, where there is no traffic, only the trees, the sky, an occasional biker or runner (or snake), and us. We do a lot of talking. After the walk, which is quite longer than what I am used to doing, my legs and back ache. But my friend has introduced me to her daily ritual of rejuvenation: we run through the sand to the ocean's edge, strip down to our bathing suits and throw ourselves into the surf. For the next 1/2 hour or so, it is just me and the water, relaxing my body and invigorating my soul. I do not swim well. But I can paddle through the surf, and I can float, and lying there with my eyes closed, sun

shining through my lids, hearing the pounding of the surf and feeling the waves lift me as they pass, truly brings me back to myself and my connection with the earth and my place within it. It is a great way to start the day. Even if you do not have the ocean at your doorstep, there are ways to make the most of your morning before the world hits . . . go outside as the sun comes up, stand in your yard barefoot, and feel your feet in the wet grass. (You can take your coffee with you . . . it is a nice break from the newspaper). Listen to what you hear outside before you join the noise . . . listen to what you hear inside before you join the noise. 9.23.05



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Sometimes things don't turn out . . .

backyard paths as openings through forests
trees green with the summer evening sun setting behind them.
darkness closing in but safety and belonging whisper their touch through the leaves
through the trunks
through the years
through the memories that turn out not to be quite what they seemed.
in the passage of time true feeling resonates
much stronger than the illusion we have come to know
and carried like letters of unfulfilled dreams.
now those pages hold more than words spoken by a boy longing for what he did not have.
they hold his heart, and in them too is mine.

February 1st, 2009

