

Life Begins At 30

I always thought thirty years of age was “old.” At thirty, an individual is already older than 41% of the American population, numerous health risks increase, grays appear, wrinkles form, and for us females, the biological clock is almost done ticking. Most Americans fear aging, and for good reason; just look up the word in a thesaurus. You will find synonyms such as crumble, decline, deteriorate, fade, slump, stale, and wane.

It wasn't until I turned thirty myself that I realized life isn't almost over; it is really only beginning. From a very early age I dreamed of being a woman who stands up for what is just, who takes care of those in need, who surmounts any feat, who loves unconditionally, and who is genuinely happy. I have always wanted to lead, to heal, and, most fervently, to love. Throughout the varied experiences of my life I felt a sense of purpose, but not any clear sense of direction. I knew who and what I was supposed to be, without quite knowing how to get there. As I grew toward thirty, I began to wonder if I would ever become this person and started to concede the best of my life had already passed. And I had missed it. I spent a great deal of my first 29 years of life preparing and training for something; something big and wonderful and special...but *what?* I believe in learning from the past, and so I began to contemplate the aspects of my character and where and when they came from in an attempt to define this dream, this woman I wanted to be.

The first ten years of my life taught me that skinned knees and broken bones heal, but only if you don't jump off any more fences. Staying alive seems easy enough, but when I think about all the mishaps of my childhood, it is a small miracle that I am here today. Growing up in a single-parent home with a younger sister, I was forced to take on responsibilities I wasn't prepared for. I had to not only fend for myself a great deal of the time, I also had to keep an eye on my sister. My mother was either working one of two jobs or going to school, so when I creatively executed daredevil stunts off fences and ledges, or pushed my sister down the stairs, I was the one who had to clean the wounds and ease the pain. The nights when Mom was late getting home, I had to prepare the meal, which usually meant climbing on the counter tops to acquire the appropriate tools, and setting the microwave on fire or accidentally stabbing myself. I always wished my father had been around to help us out, but my mother, sister, and I are stronger, smarter women for having to go without the man of the house. I believe the most important lesson of my childhood was recognizing that some things, whether they are my responsibility or not, simply need to be taken care of. I didn't know at the time, but I was learning that when someone I love is alone or hurt, I have a duty to heal them, and that looking before I leap is the first step in overcoming obstacles. All these lessons also helped keep me alive and well, and provided a strong foundation for navigating the trials and tribulations of my teen years.

The vitality mixed with urgency I felt in my teens added up to a freight train of mistakes. I was surrounded by peers in school, pressures outside of school, and a *lot* of tempting trouble I couldn't wait to get into. I went to Catholic school for the majority of my education, where I learned to question everything. When a teacher told me that I would indeed go to hell if I wasn't baptized before I die, I realized that adults really don't know everything and some things need to be second-guessed. I also began to second-guess my mother more often, which led to many collisions of opinion. After I left Catholic school, I went to the public high school, where the flood gates opened and I was exposed to what can only be called freedom. I made friends quickly and was eager to learn their ways. I was introduced to parties and boys, and for the first time, had to carve out my own place because it was not already structured for me. I learned early I didn't want to be the party girl, but I didn't want to be the conservative “priss” either; or the jock, or the hippy kid, or the smart kid. I was very happy to be a little bit of each and saw there really wasn't a set label for me. So I who was I then? I recall a group of boys picking on a fellow student outside school because he was “gay.” I observed all the other students standing around the brouhaha in a circle, just watching. I didn't know any of the boys, but I felt a need to interject. I put my book bag down and went into the lion's den. I proceeded then to do what I think was the first brave thing I ever did -- I walked right up to the bullies and unleashed a verbal spanking, unlike anything I could have imagined, at the very top

of my lungs. "Where did they get off judging others? Haven't they better things to do? Which one of them is a 'better' human than the rest of us?" I took all their attention off the "gay" boy and put it on myself, so he could flee. The bullies did what I wanted; ignored the boy they were victimizing, and turned their hatred on me, calling me names I do not care to repeat. I finished my tirade and was mocked and teased for weeks to come. My friends had stuck by me and assured me I did the right thing, even when everyone else at school was spreading rumors about me. I always believed bravery meant making a stand, but that day I learned sometimes bravery is in taking the fall. Perhaps as importantly, I learned that labels, like "jock" and "hippy" and "homo," are meaningless; they exist only to help people measure themselves against others in hopes of coming up "better." Luckily for me, my friends and I were able to adequately ignore the judgments that accompany stigmas and stereotypes.

My friends are who taught me the most about myself in my teens. I believe friends are mirrors meant to reflect myself back onto me; showing me the bits and pieces of themselves that intrigue me and inspire me to be more like them. I developed a strong sense of self from my friends in my teens, but also developed a sense of which friends were reflecting poor images. I knew if I wanted to succeed in life, as a person, as a woman, I would need to avoid the people who only wanted to bring me down instead of lift me up. This lesson proved very timely as I left high school to go "out into the world."

I used to believe the twenties were supposed to be the "peak" or apex of life, during which all my dreams would come true because I already had the tools to become a successful and productive human. I was wrong. I now believe my twenties were the final stage of knowing myself before I could begin the journey to the life I dreamed of...at thirty. I was in a horrible car accident at 22, wherein I was "supposed" to have killed not only myself but the man I hit point-blank at 70 miles per hour. When I emerged from the wreckage with only a black eye and bloody nose, and realized the man I hit wasn't even being put in an ambulance because he only had a scratch on his arm, I learned that God does, indeed, exist. So, by the time I was 26 and my younger sister had a baby, I was prepared to give the most unconditional kind of love I have ever known. My life changed completely when my niece Haylee came into it. Here was this mini human made up of parts of the persons I have always loved most, and all I want is to protect and serve her. I love no human more than she, because I realize through her how important children are to the future and how *vital* love is to us all. By the time I reached 29, the fear of not having my own children had reached its pinnacle. I knew thirty was coming, and wanted to be prepared for whatever I was handed in my "mid-life." All those years of being in school and in the workforce, all the friends who had remained by my side in times of need, all my family who supported me through every failure, had to mean something. My dreams had not come true by 29 and I was not this woman I had always imagined I would one day be, but I felt her stirring beneath the surface. When would I get there and how? I spent all of my 29th year of life pondering the previous 28, and being fearful and apprehensive that 30 and beyond would bring me no closer to my dreams, but only to the destined declination of my physical and mental faculties.

I turned 30 on August 16. I believe there is a rubicon at thirty years of age: a giant flowing river that, once crossed, cannot be uncrossed, where pushing forward means *living*. It was like night and day. There is no more feeling weak or abandoned when I face aloneness because I am unmarried and single. There was instead a strength and faith that had been tested and proven true, because I am still here and happy. There were wrinkles and grays, but they disappear when I smile or laugh. I didn't feel frumpy or wasting, but instead sexy and empowered. There is no more wondering about my purpose in life because I realized the rewards of loving, and I believe there is no greater aim in all of life than to love unconditionally. There is no bitterness or anger at my age, but instead a deep sense of peace and hope. *I have learned all I needed to know to be the best me I could be!* I know my body, mind, and soul will be good to me if I am good to them. I know that being a good friend means making sacrifices and accepting constructive criticism, and when I realize this I see just how good my friends really are to me. I believe being open in the mind and honest in the mouth will bring enlightenment. I learned that loving someone who hates me might bring me a new friend, *and loving those who love me will bring me happiness*. I believe my twenties were no more than a reality check to let me know the road ahead would be whatever *I made it*. In these adventures and experiences of my first thirty years, I learned to overcome any

obstacles that were thrown at me and emerge a better person. It is only now, at thirty years old, that I can say I AM the woman I always dreamed of becoming. I was just under the surface all along, waiting to recognize my *self*. I believe the years ahead of me are going to be the greatest adventure yet.

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