



Courageous Communications

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Riding the Waves of Change – A Presentation to Awesome Women, January 10, 2007 by Sayre Darling

As a member of the Awesome Women Leadership Team, I am delighted to see such a great turnout after our holiday break. And now as your storyteller this evening, your presence is even more important to me as you are my “story holders”.

I've been trying to anticipate what it would feel like to show up in front of you this evening as a story teller and not with a prepared and polished PR person with the perfect PowerPoint. I could only imagine the feeling as taking my breath away, but now I feel...well, I believe it's been said best by another member of our Leadership Team: Sweet Jesus, Mary and Holy Joseph!

As a previously prepared and polished PR person of the past, I've found that pulling my story together for tonight to be somewhat of a torturous experience. I've had to slap my hands to not pull any number of books off the shelves to prove my story. And the story in my heart has taken a real beating by my mind as I edit, revise, edit, revise. So to remind me to stay in my heart this evening, I brought a couple of props with me: A hairbrush and my toothbrush. You see, my greatest inspiration come to me when I'm in the bathroom, usually brushing my teeth. So by bringing these objects tonight I hope to keep myself from jumping into my head and revising and editing, once again hoping to ultimately change the outcome of my story.

When I was a kid and life got too chaotic, or life had taken the air out of my sails, I would find refuge on the living room boat – known by us kids as the sofa. I would collect all of my homework, any books I was reading for fun, some tissues if I needed them, a cup of hot chocolate and a blanket and I would arrange everything just so and cuddle up on the “boat” and stay there until everything was once again alright with the world. The dog would sometimes sneak up there with me, and we would be self-sufficient, and safe from any strife or harm.

I was reminded by that memory this past summer when I was laying on another boat...that would be the sofa at Faith Ralston's house...while the Founding Mothers and new Awesome Women's Leadership Team pounded out the program line-up for 2006-2007.

Once again, I was snuggled in a small space and recovering from having the wind seriously knocked out of my sails after falling off of a treadmill and breaking one of my ribs. And I faintly remember, I think it was Susan Zimmerman saying, “Riding the Waves of Change...yeah, that fits her.” And as I lay their drooling on one of Faith's pillows, I remember thinking, “Yeah that fits me.”

So a quick side note before I begin: For any of you who are called to share your story I'd like to share one thought to make the preparation experience a little bit easier for you.

You know what happens when you create a new year's resolution...let's say to lose weight. And then all of a sudden you are overcome by incredible hunger – much more than you ever were before you declared to the world that you were on a diet and wanted to lose weight. Well, then I'd suggest that you pick a title for your program a little more gentle than, "Riding the Waves of Change!" It's as if you are declaring to the Universe – bring it on! I'd suggest make it more like, "I'm an easy rider – let me show you how."

My story begins eight years ago when, despite all outward appearances of satisfaction and success, I couldn't do any more of what I had been doing.

At that time I was "doing everything right" and by all earthly measures was "successful" in all my endeavors:

- I was married to my high school sweetheart for 17 years;
- I was in the 4th year of running my own successful marketing and PR freelance business;
- I had taken on several volunteer opportunities, successfully demonstrated my leadership abilities within my professional association, and demonstrated some mastery in communications issues within the health care industry.

I was ALWAYS doing something tied to achieving my "goals" and getting to that "place...over there...on the horizon", which was always some place in the future of where I thought I should be, achieving what I thought I should have achieved by some point in my life.

You would have recognized me then by how out of balance I was. I maintained a ridiculous level of multi-tasking. I pushed myself to do and achieve and accomplish beyond the point of civility.

And although I thought I was showing up as a happy person, given all that I had accomplished and all that I was doing, photos of me back then show something quite different. I looked stern, sharp, exhausted – I even walked differently by leaning forward as if I were going to fall out of a boat and moving quickly to...something.

Any feeling I had I chose not to feel. Instead, I remained focused on my goals...over there...at a place other than where I was in the moment...working even harder, and looking for more to achieve that would fill the gaping hole inside of me in order to feel better.

I was accustomed to setting a goal and barreling ahead through any conditions...until I just couldn't do it anymore.

The first storm that came crashing in was in the form of a divorce. Followed up quickly by the waves of grief that keep you constantly off balance as you experience the death of a dream that guided your life until that point, the extraction of yourself from a marital identity that is no longer valid, getting accustomed to being single again and creating a new home from the mis-matched pieces of furniture that represent your half of the possessions.

So how did I cope? Well, I spent more than a few days on “the boat”. But I quickly refocused on my professional goals – well of course you know I would. And I took on a new professional challenge. You know, running your business wasn’t a big enough challenge, I guess.

I went back “on the inside” as us freelancers like to say, and I took a job inside of an organization. But of course, it wasn’t “any” job – it had to be a big job to get me closer in the direction toward my goals of bigger, better, faster, more. And it was a BIG job. I took on the position of Marketing Communications Director, responsible for communications with the members of the Medica Health plan.

For the first nine months, I was in hog heaven! There was so much to do, so many goals to focus on – I didn’t need to feel anything...other than how good I was at achieving my goals, handling multiple projects at once and demonstrating how smart I thought I was.

I wasn’t just paddling a kayak anymore; I was driving a speed boat!

And then I had to throw the throttle wide open as Allina and Medica had a little run-in with our State Attorney General.

You may have heard of the difficulties. It was on the front page of the daily papers 3-4 times a week and was usually the story heading the local television news several times a week as well. It was a situation that was also covered by all of the health care industry publications, and even hit some national consumer publications.

After six months of being among those on the frontline of that situation, things even got worse. The tsunami that hit all of us was 9/11. Everyone’s confidence was shaken, and the mood in our country darkened. Allina/Medica and the Attorney General came to “an agreement”, resulting in the departure of key senior leaders and a layoff of 25 percent of the Medica staff – and all that only took three months. Oh yes, I also squeezed foot surgery in there, too.

After being laid off at Medica as there was virtually no marketing communications allowed, I once again set sail toward “my goals” and set my sights on an even bigger horizon! I decided that after both my personal life and professional life fell apart what I needed was a fresh start! Sounds good, doesn't it?

But of course, it wasn't just any kind of fresh start – I moved to Los Angeles, which is why I found myself at 44 years of age, divorced, without a job, living in an extra bedroom at my step-family's home with my two cats.

Okay, I agree that when I describe the situation now it sounds more like the Beverly Hillbillies. But to think that that's what I was willing to go through to make a fresh start gives you some idea of how bad I was feeling about things in Minnesota.

Being “a winner” and “goal-oriented”, like I expected of myself, and thought everyone expected of me, I found a job in 12 weeks as the Director of Public Relations at USC University Hospital. This is a prestigious, academic hospital operated by the physicians that were on staff in the USC's Keck School of Medicine and owned by a for-profit company, Tenet Health Care. At USC University Hospital we performed a number of one-of-a-kind surgeries and it was the site of a number of transplant programs.

At last, I thought, I am back on track and headed “over there” toward my goals of being successful and having a happy life.

In my first week on the new job, two different stories appeared in the paper: one was a story accusing physicians at a Tenet-owned hospital in Redding, California, of performing unnecessary heart procedures. The other story was about how a Wall Street analyst had downgraded Tenet's stock from a “buy recommendation” to a “hold” because of his concern about how much money Tenet was receiving from the Federal government in Medicare outlier payments, or reimbursements. In the first three weeks on the job, the company's stock devalued 70 percent.

I remained focused on my goals, because I believed a second storm...just like the first storm at Medica...couldn't possibly come around again.

Well, if you think the threat of earthquakes makes California a crazy place to live, try riding the waves of change. With the changes occurring just within the walls of my hospital every day you wanted to yell “Surf's up!” when you walked in the door.

As the Director of PR and Employee Communications, here's what I answered to in the first six months on the job:

- The Vice President of HR returns to his consulting practice,
- The third week I was on the job the CEO announced his departure,
- Two weeks later the COO announced his departure,
- Within two weeks the new Vice President of HR joins our hospital
- A few weeks later a new CEO comes on board and within that week fires the new Vice President of HR,
- A month and a half later, my boss, the VP Business Development is laid off,
- And finally the new team is in place when the new CEO hires a new Vice President of HR and a new Vice President of Business Development

In addition to the changes at USC University Hospital, here's what was going on within the corporation:

- The Corporate headquarters in Santa Barbara was folded into the Service Center in Dallas;
- There were multiple layoffs throughout the company;
- Tenet sold 30 of their 116 hospitals, 19 of which are located in Southern California;
- And the CEO and General Counsel resign.

I think the saying goes: "My odds would have been better in Vegas!"

And while all of that is happening, I remained focused over there...on my goal to make a fresh start living in West LA while driving to the hills of East LA everyday to work. My office was located in an old construction trailer that was set behind the hospital's latest expansion project. During the torrential California rains, the trailer leaked like a sieve, and drowned the resident rats, which I had to step over to get into the trailer on some mornings. The electricity was accidentally being cut by the construction workers several times a week, which shut down the computers and cut our heat supply with great regularity. So here I am, Christmas of 2002, a Minnesotan in Southern California, being given a space heater by hospital administration as a consolation/holiday gift for not having heat in our offices!

Now we all define rough waters differently, and I have definitely been through more personally tragic experiences. But when I was thinking of a fresh start, I had something different in mind!

And yes, to answer your question I was among those laid off during the staff cuts absorbed by our hospital. When there isn't anything positive to do PR on, why would they need a PR Director?

In the end, Tenet owed the federal government billions in Medicare fraud.

I did spend several months looking for another new position...but frankly, at this point on my journey I was exhausted. I didn't know what I was looking for, or whether I could really find it. I didn't know who to trust. And I didn't really know if I could trust my own abilities. I was still committed to moving toward my goals, but I felt I barely had a raft to hold on to in order to stay afloat.

At this point, the only waves of change I was looking for were in some shallow wading pool. Frankly, not knowing what to do, I packed up my boat, but this time, I tiptoed back to what I thought would at least be gentler waters of the Upper Midwest.

It is now January 2004. I am back in Minnesota – where I never thought I'd come back to – and I feel like I am starting over from a place that feels at least six feet lower than when I left. But, as you would guess, it is only from this deepest, darkest place where we call our heart forward and find our courage.

Over the next four years I began to change my story from one of a victim, to one of a sage advisor. I have mined my experiences and found the lessons for myself and turned it in to tools to help others.

However, one important lesson eluded me. In trying to move forward, time after time I would get organized, pull together a new idea, generate interest and enthusiasm, muster all my strength, and for a myriad of reasons it always fell flat.

I was in the process of doing that one more time last spring. May was my biggest month of business since starting up my new business. I was consulting, I was coaching. And gosh, well, I was just so stressed that I had to go to the gym. I mean all of the “successful people” do that.

So I went to the gym, got on the treadmill, pushed the speed up to about 3_ miles an hour at a decent incline, put on my headphones and was really grooving to the tunes. And in one split second I fell off the treadmill.

The good news is that I was sufficiently fit at the time so that I bounced on the ground – I was pretty proud of that fact. But when I bounced, I landed with the bottom of the treadmill machine jammed up into my rib cage underneath my arm, resulting in a broken rib, and bruised left lung.

Talk about the wind being knocked out of your sails. I didn't even have enough wind to pass gas. Not only that, three days after breaking my rib we had an electrical storm and it blew the motherboard on my computer!

I slept the entire month of June and most of July. Needless to say, my business went back to almost nothing. And my social life consisted of Awesome Women who brought me my groceries, provided me with week's worth of chicken pot pies, called me constantly, and shared their inner wisdom with me about what could become possible if I surrendered to this situation.

Surrendered? – What's that? And you know what – I finally did. The day I drove myself to get some DVDs and discovered that you can't really turn the steering wheel tight enough to not hit the side of the garage...or miss hitting the parking curb at Blockbuster...or come home and figure out that your DVD player is also broken...that's the day I surrendered.

I surrendered to the way the world is. To the way the world operates – whether we think it's working very well or not. I surrendered to different ways to do things. I surrendered to a little slower pace. I surrendered my thinking and the fears of my mind to the wisdom of my heart. I surrendered to the way of the waves. And I surrendered to my vulnerabilities – well, almost. I'm still working on that.

But by surrendering, here's what I have learned so far and can share with you:

1. To focus on what's "out there" means you can have only one picture of what "there" can look like. However, if you are focused on working with the water – however it is right in front of you at the moment, you have many more possibilities to create your desired outcome.
2. Secondly, if you are not satisfied with where you are right now – you not only have to do something different, you have to do it differently than you would approach it right now. You know, if you want a fresh start, you do not go out and tell people that the reason you moved to California was to get away from a company that imploded in Minnesota! Because more than likely, telling that same story attracts more of that same energy, allows you to recreate the same thing!

3. Set **intentions** for your future, rather than **goals**. An intention is defined as a purpose, design or state of mind that directs your actions, while a goal is a result or an achievement. For me, I can tell you that when I have a goal, I am a dog with a bone and my mind does not stop churning until I get the job done. But when I set an intention I engage my heart and it allows me to motivate myself and others rather than beats us down.
4. Sometimes you take a trip, and other times a trip takes you. When you sign up for an adventure you never really know what you are going to get. Yet one of the greatest gifts of any trip is a new state of mind you return with.
5. Start with yourself where ever you are at. Constantly pay attention to the water that's right in front of you. And I mean right in front of you this very minute. What do you need to do as you leave this program tonight and make your way home, to read the waters and live your life in the moment?
6. Show up with a little attitude and a lot of heart, everyday. You need a detached feeling of confidence that you have what it takes to navigate whatever waters lie ahead for you. If you clench the wheel everyday you will become exhausted and never last.
7. When the waves get big and crash against your boat, stay calm and do not label it as a "bad" thing. Or when things are going well, don't say "I'm riding a good wave right now." That sets you up to make over corrections. Events are not good or bad, but rather it is our interpretation of whether it is good or bad that can lead to an over-correction. From my experience, a decision made as a reaction to a "bad" event usually ends up to be another bad event. It's just a matter of turning your boat only a few degrees.
8. To enjoy riding the waves of change requires a new navigational course, not just new thinking about an old map.
9. Take faith again in the old adage that it isn't the destination, it's all about the journey. I know it can be scary to get off the treadmill. But staying on the treadmill isn't going to get you where you want to go in the first place. And with certainty I can tell you that it hurts a lot less than falling off the treadmill.
10. You will never get "over there" until you get it right "here". And to do that you need to tap into the wisdom of your heart – what information do your feelings give you as much as what your mind tell you?
11. And finally, eleven: I just couldn't help myself and had to throw in one outside reference. In completing this presentation, I found a fabulous article in the February issue of Yoga Journal about starting over – and for heaven's sake, they tell you that all you have to do is meditate.

But now, comes the scariest part for me. Good or bad, the story I have just shared with you about all of these disparate events is mostly what has held me together through these tumultuous waters. And by sharing it with you tonight it also means I have to let it go. So, dear story holders, I ask you to please hold it preciousy.

If your waters are smooth and there are no learnings in this for you right now, then know that when the waters are rough, you can always grab on to these ideas -- like the little balloons in a comic strip.

So now that I have laid down this story with you, I can begin a new chapter. Now, it's time for you to get on your own boats:

Take just a minute, and close your eyes for a moment. Get quiet. Stand solid in your own boat. Let go of the horizon for just a moment, and look down at the water just outside of your boat.

- Is it calm and pristine?
- Is it sparkling and gently rocking your boat?
- Is it stormy and unpredictable? Are there days when the taste of salt water fills your senses?
- Are there some serious white caps out there, or are you on a tsunami watch?

Whatever it is, just set your intentions, read the water, and keep on riding the waves of change. For each of you, I wish for you to row, row, row your boat gently down the stream...and merrily, merrily, merrily have your life be but a dream.

Thank you for listening.