

A Circular Life

by Candice L. Horgan

Long before I ever saw Disney's *The Lion King* or picked up a book about Native American culture and beliefs, I already suspected that life moves in circles. Some circles appeared in the areas I gravitate toward, like the spheres and orbits of astronomy, or those wonderful little round pieces in Lego sets that always seem to be just the piece you needed. Some circles appeared as patterns over time. My life has surely moved in circles, some enjoyable and some not-so-productive. I spent my 20s watching a lot of things disappear from my life, but now in my 30s, I can see some of those things slowly returning to me. I leap for joy at the thought that these patterns will keep happening--that things meant to be will eventually cycle around, and the rest will fall away, and that's ok. I can look back and see things I thought I lost, which are now parts of my life. Dreams I thought I'd tossed are now goals to pursue.

As a kid, I spent my days frolicking outside and my nights escaping into books. I loved all things arboreal, astronomical, and aeronautical. I was, and still am, chronically curious. This love of learning helped me to survive as a child. You see, I grew up in a home where all sorts of abuses, dysfunctions, and shenanigans were present. I often jokingly refer to my childhood as one of having been raised by wolves. School was a safe haven for me; there wasn't anybody yelling or hurting me there, and the learning was a welcome distraction. My success in academics was driven both by my love of learning and by my fear of the unsavory consequences that would occur when I came home with less than an "A."

During my freshman year in high school, things at home worsened to the point that not even school could provide respite for my hurting soul. I lost all interest in school and went from being a straight-A student to barely having enough passing credits to graduate with my class. My transcript was such a mess that one of the colleges I half-heartedly applied to in order to appease my mother's demands encouraged me to take math and English courses at a local community college. They wanted me to prove that I had the desire to go along with the brains suggested by my SAT scores. I registered for an Elementary Algebra class at North Shore Community College (NSCC) back in 2001 and barely scraped together a passing grade. Home life was continuing to wear on me, and I realized I had two options: stay at home and attempt to continue college or focus on working, moving out, and getting away from the abuse. I chose to drop out of college and entered the work force full-time. Eventually, I moved out on my own.

I fumbled my way into adulthood. I struggled with untreated emotional conditions and a descent into substance abuse. I used substances to self-medicate, to silence negative thoughts, to calm my fears, to numb the flashbacks, to simply get out of bed, and to tune myself out of my own mind and life. I was in abusive relationships--one of which resulted in one of the most painful times I've ever endured in my life. My life started out as a mess, and I only made it worse through my ignorance and my addictions. I had no self-esteem. I couldn't focus on

much beyond quelling the storm inside of me and doing just enough to survive.

The year 2009 saw me juggling a few options for moving forward. That summer, a friend brought me with her to an informational session on the Women In Transition Program (WIT) at NSCC. I had never heard of the program, but my friend was excited about returning to school and encouraged me to at least look into it. Despite my fears that I was too stupid, too fried, too old, and too damaged to ever return to a classroom, part of me wanted to return to college with her, and so I accompanied her to the information session. As that summer ended, my friend decided to enter the WIT Program and I headed off in a different direction while I took some time to get my life under control. With over five years of recovery under my belt now, hindsight has shown me that making the hard decision to delay my college education allowed me to lay a more solid foundation for my eventual return to the classroom.

With the support of caring folks from my church, understanding friends from near and far, and a kind and patient therapist, I was able to work through some tough things, learn how to manage my symptoms, and get back on my feet. In time, I felt ready to consider school again. The WIT Program instantly came to mind. After a successful meeting with the program's coordinator, I was accepted into the program and enrolled at NSCC in the fall of 2013. WIT provided a glimmer of hope through classes such as College Success Seminar and Assertiveness Training. My confidence was boosted by the built-in supports of the program, such as the cohort model it utilizes and the guest speakers who shared helpful tips for succeeding in college and beyond. After I survived the first semester, I felt unstoppable. I discovered that I could "do college" and, as my first year in college came to a close, I realized that not only could I do college, but that I could do it *well*.

Due to some of my mental health struggles and my own bad choices, my brain has changed. Even on a good day, it's really hard to focus at times. Upon returning to college, I had to learn to force myself to stay focused. This was a hard thing to learn, as it had never been an issue for me in the past. Re-learning how to study and going to classes amidst some of my symptoms has proven challenging at times, but I keep at it because I'm encouraged by the fact that it *is* achievable. I have also found help and support through Student Support and Disability Services, as well as former and current professors. On the days when my symptoms throw things off, I have learned to adapt so that I can succeed in my studies. I actually hate referring to any of my diagnoses as a "disability," as that word seems to imply an inability to do things that folks might consider "normal" in life. Yes, I have to do things differently and sometimes I have to adapt or take time to do a little self-care or decompress or simply calm down, but I am able.

As more time passes in my recovery, I realize that huge chunks of my life have completed their circles. Or at least they have completed one of their orbits in a much larger life circle. I once loved school and thrived there...then I lost it, gave it all up...and recently that has been redeemed for me. My faith has shown me that no matter how far life takes me away from the things that I hold dear, the doors are eventually opened for me to return to them.