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# Holding On While Letting Go

By: *Silken Laumann*

I am Silken. I am woven of the varied experiences of my life: alternately the wire that tangles together to create a steel cable or the fine threads that create the most exquisite of silk scarves. Each event, each fleeting observation, each subtle betrayal, crushing disappointment and incredible joy, has shaped me into the person I am today. For this, I am eternally grateful.

We may be able to selectively remember or forget experiences, we may choose our quality and level of engagement in the world; but we cannot change our past nor edit it for our own comfort. The story of my life so far, is both my greatest strength and my greatest obstacle.

To Canadians I represent strength and courage, two characteristics born out of being raised in a challenging household. My mother was beautiful and creative and vibrant. On Halloween she dressed up a life-sized sculpture with a spectacularly carved pumpkin, a hat, a broom and a cape; it was the talk of the neighbourhood. Sometimes our house was the talk of the neighbourhood in other ways; with police cars in the driveway and questions from the school principal. But, like most families, our investment in maintaining the appearances of “normal” ran deep, and so on it went.

My mother could enter a room and draw people in with her beauty and charm, only to leave two hours later with absolutely everybody angry with her. Her words could cut both ways; and they often did. Her creativity, intelligence and passion were inextricably connected with her inattention and unexpected cruelty. Darkness and light, switches so enmeshed, they were never fully “on” or “off”. What I did know, in all my childhood innocence, was that when it was “light” it glowed and it was lively and engaging. But when it was “dark”, it was the stuff of nightmares.

There are labels for the demons that haunted my mother; adult words like “mental illness” and “abuse”. But to me, these were things that happened to other people. Even the right labels will not change the experience I had as a child.

What I never lacked was imagination. I used my imagination to dream a different life, a life where I became an Olympic athlete, and an author like W.O Mitchell; in my dreams I helped the children of Africa that I saw on television in the Foster Parent commercials. In my dreams, I imagined living without my mother and I replayed my escape plan over and over.

The power to have a vision of where we want to be, how we want to feel, and what we want to accomplish is an awesome power; no one is too young, or too old to have dreams. The power to dream our lives into a new reality is not the same as controlling our lives. One has to do with imagination, belief and persistence, the other with fear and hyper-vigilance.





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I learned hyper-vigilance as a survival technique and it has served me well. Never letting my guard down made me an intensely competitive athlete, a strong student, and conscientious and dedicated worker. I have not left many stones unturned in pursuing excellence in sport, speaking, or parenting.

After a devastating accident weeks before the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games where I was favoured for the gold medal, doctors told me I would never row competitively again. My leg was torn open like a shark bite, I had a metal cage holding my ankle together, and a skin graft lay over my wound like a discoloured piece of cheesecloth. And still I kept going as if my wound were not much more than a skin irritation: the power of resiliency is awesome.

Being able to visualize myself racing at the Olympics paired with hyper-vigilance, allowed me to plough through the doctor's prognosis in ten weeks time. I pulled on a bungee cord to keep my upper body strong, I worked my cardiovascular system on a stationary bike positioned on the bed next to mine; with hand grips instead of pedals I learned to walk again.

"Resilience". -A Harvard study of their top 100 graduates named "resilience" as the defining characteristic for success. My childhood gave me this in spades, and it turns out it made me well suited for rowing, where resiliency is required to get back in the boat every time it tips. Rowing requires explosive power and absolute grace. To win a race you have to pull with all you've got, but you also have to find split seconds of relaxation and composure in the effort. A sport of seeming contradictions is fitting in the mental game of racing where fear and doubt, brush closely with strength and confidence.

I felt the doubt for what I lacked from the start, and fear and doubt have made achieving my dreams a slow and bumpy journey. I've often said that my desire to win and achieve is only slightly stronger than my fear and doubt; my desire to live my potential is huge, so you can imagine the size of my demons.

At the 1994 World Rowing Championships, where again I was favoured to win the gold medal, I doubled false started, and was eliminated from the competition. For a year afterward, racing was a nightmare of fear and doubt.

As much as our current culture aims to separate our personal lives from our work, we bring ourselves to our careers. What we believe about our abilities affects everything from our sales numbers, or collegial relationships, and our ability to take on leadership roles. Fear and doubt prevent many people from realizing the depths of their capabilities, and the joy of being at their best.

I have a reputation for unwavering intensity and focus in all that I do. One coach commented after observing me during practice, that he had never seen an athlete push their body as relentlessly and consistently as I did. Whether my coach's observation is true or not, this drive to achieve and control is something I know I share with many high achievers, and it's hard for anyone in this, "driven to achieve mode", to entertain the idea that loosening the reins will lead us closer to our true abilities. I wouldn't have come to this understanding had constant vigilance not made me slightly neurotic and pretty darn tired.

The illusion of "control" was split wide open when my marriage suddenly ended and I was forced to accept that, "happily ever after" was not how the script was written. The anguish and loss was followed by unexpected renewal and possibility. My great sadness became my greatest opportunity.

My real healing began when I connected to my own childhood through my unwaveringly, fierce love for my children. I saw my little girl, spirited, buoyant, and relentlessly curious. How could a little girl ever be to blame, how could a little girl be responsible for the world of adults? Seeing my own innocence in my daughter, set me on a path of self love and forgiveness. I found the courage to heal.

Making peace with my past and learning to forgive and let go has transformed every aspect of my life. It hasn't been easy, and there have been many times when I've stopped and wondered why I should keep going. It's this business of living, the full range of joy, disappointment, pain, and love that makes the journey of healing so worthwhile. Life can be felt more fully when the heart is healthy and open. Life is beautiful.

I've also learned that control is an illusion and loss and disappointment inevitable. We can't protect ourselves or our children from these realities; but we can give ourselves and our children endless amounts of love and support.

**Ironically, once the illusion of control is recognized, it opens the door for an entirely different life.**

I replaced the illusion of control with a deep gratitude for what actually is and I have greater courage to get out there and work my talents; while letting go of outcomes. I'm building a life on seeing things clearly, a life built on believing in miracles but not having to create them.

I'm doing my best in each moment with what I have; no more and no less. This means I accept my humanity that I make mistakes, that I don't always win, and sometimes I do the wrong thing. Other times, I amaze myself at my abilities.

I have been brought to my knees by life's losses, failures, and disappointments. In many ways, it seems that the more I stretch myself, the more I become who I am, the more conflict and losses I experience. When I first divorced, I was terrified about how it would hurt my kids. My parenting coach said to me, "You can't protect your kids from pain, you can only support them through it".

**Barring hiding under a rock, life is about taking risks, working through change and having the courage to live your potential. Hiding may not be as painful, but it's not nearly as much fun.**

My life is still driven by vision and passion, but tempered with the knowledge that I will put myself fully forward and let go of the outcome. I cannot control outcome, any more than I could control the boat that rammed into me so many years ago. If I've chosen anything in life I've chosen to live fully and deeply. I've pushed myself out of my comfort zone, wrestled with my past, and dared to fail. Having woken up to the miracle of life, is my daily reward.