

37days

What would you be doing today if you only had 37 days to live?

by Patti Digh

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Burn those jeans

“A lot of disappointed people have been left standing on the street corner waiting for the bus marked Perfection.” - Donald Kennedy



Since leaving Freedom High School on Independence Boulevard with its (subtle) school colors of red, white, and blue and its aptly named football team (The Patriots, of course), I've carried a certain pair of pants around with me everywhere I've gone, like a pet Chihuahua in a diamond collar, a dangly gold charm, a passport, a ball and chain.

They are Levi jeans, at that perfect stage of worn-in-ed-ness, that place where the knees know where to go when you put them on, the pockets reveal a pentimento of your hands, and the bottoms are adequately frayed.

Over the years (decades? really? how did *that* happen?) they've become a symbol, a talisman, a veritable icon of my perfect high school shape, that long and lean and strong teenaged body that ran and hiked and climbed and bicycled everywhere, that simpler shape before thesis defenses, tattered hearts, sexual harassments, dead parents, business suits, big promotions, missed deadlines, inane meetings, working with mean people, being mean myself, dead friends, terrorist attacks, hydraulic systems failing on planes I happened to be riding in at 37,000 feet, and just plain living the over-rated adult life.

These jeans are cosmopolitan, accompanying me to college, to live in Germany, to graduate school, to all my jobs, around the world on a ship, to Washington, DC, and recently back to North Carolina where, ironically, they reside in a closet only 54 miles from where I first wore them in high school. Full circle right round the globe, that denim, those rivets, that distinctive red tag.

It wasn't a conscious decision to carry them around with me, no. But there they were, everywhere I went, a reminder in denim that I don't have that body anymore and that I had a Big Goal: get back into those jeans.

Years passed.

I still couldn't fit into them. I continued to beat myself up when I failed to reach that goal. I joined fitness clubs, worked out with a trainer in DC who nearly killed me (I affectionately called him Thor, though not to his well-toned face), ate only raw foods, drank Master Cleanser Lemonade, joined Weight Watchers, and studied before and after pictures in *Shape* magazine as if I were consulting the hieroglyphic special edition of *Man's Search for Meaning*. But even with all those starts and stops and high expectations and successes, the jeans still hung in my closet, unworn, taunting me.

No matter how well I did in eating right (occasionally) and exercising (sometimes)—knowing how fantastic it feels when you finally do come into your own body—and no matter my other successes in life—that fantastic husband, those amazing children, those slightly insane and terribly fascinating friends, those published books, those impressive-sounding job titles—I still couldn't fit into those jeans, and so felt a failure all these years, an unconscious feeling that raised its little ugly head each time I came across them hanging judgmentally in my closet, taunting me with their utter hiplessness and unwearability.

A few months ago, my older daughter complained one morning that she had no pants to wear to school. Resisting Parental Lecture #17 on Household Laundry Procedures, when I heard her plea for help I was standing at my closet door and saw, in front of me, The Jeans. "Why not," I thought to myself. "It might be a while before I can get into these again."

"Try these," I said. "They're kind of retro and too big for you, but you can wear a belt to gather up the extra. And remember, I want them back so I can wear them!" "Awesome!" she said when she saw them.

I remember so many fun, carefree days in those jeans—marching band practice with my big bass clarinet, hanging out in the Hardees' parking lot (hey, it was a small town), watching "Tora! Tora! Tora!" at the Mimosa Theatre, driving my Dad's blue and white Oldsmobile 88, big as a tank—and I just knew through all those years, even though I had failed to fit back into them, that those jeans were still a worthy goal, a beacon of thinhood worthy of bony Calista Flockhart and all those despicable, heartless women who give birth and look like Kate Moss the following day. So, in my heart of hearts, I knew I was right to hold those jeans up as my Mount Everest, my Oscar, my Gold Medal, my dark journey to the heart of the Nile, my People's Choice Award, my Pulitzer, my Nobel Prize for Thinness.

Emma came back with them on her arm. "Thanks, but they're too small," she said, throwing them in my general direction and running back to her room to continue the clothing hunt.

Too small?

It hit me like a hair coat, a scratchy mantel of self-flagellation: for 30 years I've tried to get back into a pair of blue jeans that are too small for my thin, strong, athletic 12-year-old daughter.

And I've spent those 30 years beating myself about the head and face for failing to get back into them. Did I mention that she's only 12?

Now ain't *that* a kick in the pants, so to speak.

Just one more note about this in case it wasn't clear—and then I promise to move on: To get back into those jeans, I would have to be smaller than my 12-year-old daughter. I couldn't have done that in my 20s, much less in my...well, let's just say later than that.

Everything is a metaphor, isn't it? This isn't an essay about weight, is it? Replace the word "jeans" with that albatross hanging around your neck, following you around through your life, diverting your attention from the real goal, setting you up for certain failure. Is it the wrong goal? Is it an unworthy goal? Is it an unreachable and unreasonable goal, a goal that can only make you feel bad, not good and right and strong?

Why do we punish ourselves with such unreasonable expectations, putting life on hold until we reach those frostbitten pinnacles? And what is the real danger of such pressures? Perhaps they delay living, deferring the real life right in front of us. "I'll do that *when*," we say to ourselves. "I can't do that *now* because I haven't yet done *this*," we explain. It's like having an incomplete in your graduate Milton class that just keeps hanging over you, making it impossible for you to do anything else because your comprehensive exegesis of the two parallel falls of *Paradise Lost* looms ahead of you at every turn. Not that I have personal experience of this phenomenon.

Are the jeans even the real goal?



I worked with a man many years ago whose roommate died suddenly of what was reported to be spinal meningitis. It was, in fact, AIDS, and he wasn't a roommate, but a partner—but this was a time when such things weren't discussed. Steve was out of work for a while and when he returned, he had a big Rolex watch. "Patti," he said to me quietly and very carefully, "all my life I've wanted a Rolex watch. I thought if I could just have a big fat Rolex watch, it would mean I had arrived in this world, that I *was* somebody. So after Frank died, I decided that he would want me to have this watch and I went out and bought it. As I was driving in to work today, I kept looking over at my arm as I drove, looking at the road, then looking at my arm. Having this watch just doesn't feel like I thought it would."

Was the watch the real goal?

There were pieces of that Jeans Goal that were healthy and aspiration for me, indeed. What were they? And what part was destructive and belittling, minimizing all progress because it was never enough? Is our house ever big enough, our car ever new enough, our wardrobe ever cool enough, our watch ever big enough, our job title ever impressive enough. Are our jeans ever small enough?

Enough.

Are those jeans more than a symbol of a lost shape? Are they also perhaps a symbol of a carefree life, a simpler life, a more active life, a less stressful way of living, a life less encumbered by the weight of things? Perhaps those are the goals I should reach for, not the jeans themselves.

What if the goal is the problem?

~*~ **37 Days: Do it Now Challenge** ~*~



One evening this week, pour yourself a nice glass of a 2002 Pinot Noir from New Zealand's Mt. Difficulty vineyard, brush pollen (or snow, depending on where you live in the world) off a chair in your nicely manicured backyard, put some sweet Aimee Mann tunes on the CD player, grab the safety matches from the kitchen and a delicate bottle of lighter fluid, and go outside and **burn those old jeans**; torch that goal that limits and minimizes rather than frees you.

Liberate your Self by ensuring that your goals are challenging, not destructive. Look behind the goal to see what's really there, The Real Goal: is it the jeans, the watch, or is it something else altogether that you're really longing for?

Have I torched those jeans yet? Well, um, not quite yet.

~*~ **Why 37 days?** ~*~

This newsletter is created every Monday and is available to anyone who wants it; feel free to forward it to others. Why the name? In October 2003 my stepfather was diagnosed with lung cancer, dying just 37 days later. It prompted the question: what would I do with my 37 days if that were all the time I had? How do I know I have more time than that? Join me in the journey.

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