

In Search of a Village:
The Sherry McGarvie Story

by Arlene Kroeker

The Bushman storytellers talk about two kinds of hunger. They say there is physical hunger, then what they call the Great Hunger. That is the hunger for meaning. There is only one thing that is truly insufferable, and that is a life without meaning. There is nothing wrong with the search for happiness. But there is something great – meaning – which transfigures all. When you have meaning you are content, you belong.

- Sir Laurens van der Post,
in the documentary *Hasten Slowly*

The hum of voices from the foyer of the grand ballroom can be heard from the hotel lobby. At the top of the marbled stairs, vodka tonics, red and white wine hover and sway as throngs of writers, editors, publishers, photographers, and designers mingle, awaiting the signal to enter the ballroom and find their assigned table. Once seated, the lights dim and funny-man writer Ken Hegan takes the stage as master of ceremonies and the hush dins.

While guests pick at lettuce leaves, Ken preambles before announcing the winners of various categories. Best business writer, best science writer, best travel and leisure writer. At this point, Sherry McGarvie realizes he does not have the certificates to hand to the winners. Before he announces the best profile writer, she has slipped out of the room, ran silently in her black ballet-style shoes to the elevators, rode to the seventh floor, grabbed the stack of envelopes from her suite, and returned to place them on the podium in front of Ken, without anybody noticing. And she's noticeable, tall, lithe, short red hair

that curls around her face and frames her glasses. Her little black dress shows off her arms and legs and earlier she'd leaned over to Kristy and whispered, "I have gotten so much use out of this \$20.00 dress." And now, after delivering the stack of envelopes to Ken, she again takes her seat at table 21, with the volunteers, at the back of the room, and sips her wine.

This incident was just one of a hundred or so calamities that befell two days of seminars and a gala event. Sherry's job, as producer, is to maintain calm, solve problems, and generally avoid problems. Instead of complaining about the odious tasks, Sherry simply fixes what she can, as she did when a guest speaker misread his plane ticket and missed the flight. She simply booked him on the next available flight and had someone greet him at the airport so he got safely and surely to his hotel.

Not one person in the ballroom appreciates how she pulled the event off. When she landed the job in February, she had four months to do a year's work. Her garden suite became central headquarters: two computers, a fax machine, two telephones, papers strewn about in organized piles that only Sherry understood. Couriers delivered magazines, books, silent auction items. She never left the place for thirty days, maybe more. She did step outside to take a quick puff of a cigarette and on occasion she admired the roses as they bloomed, noticed the grapes vines as they spread, but the phone called her back inside her bunker.

She laughs along with everyone else at Ken Hegan's jokes, none of which anyone will remember, but she's not really listening, she's thinking about what's next. When the servers remove the dessert plates and Ken announces the winner for the Best Magazine in Western Canada, the silent auction bidders will have ten minutes to scrawl their name

and final bid. And then her crew of volunteers will gather the slips, collect money, pack up the items, in a timely and efficient manner. She hopes.

Hope. Until she reached her mid-thirties, Sherry never had hope. Everyday she thought that her life was useless, that the universe, the world, would be absolutely fine without her. That concept of her life began to form the day she was born, with twisted feet and endless, endless physical problems, bad eyes, bad teeth, fragile bones, all the result of the medication her mother took during pregnancy. Too near-sighted to see the door, she heard her parents say, “Go away, go away, you’re so clumsy and you’re just in the way.” The message that she didn’t exist continued during her formative years, school years, early adult years. Her parents, the community, and teachers told her that she didn’t know what she was talking about and thought her insane. After digesting the banter for years, there came a point when she believed it. She didn’t have the words to express how she felt about life, the universe, everything. An approach to life coursed through her mind but without the words to wrap around it, she did sound quite mad. She never read Douglas Adams’, but she always liked the name of his book, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. These were words she could relate to. If only she could find a community that understood.

Sherry grew up an outsider in a small town just outside of St. John’s, Newfoundland. It was the 60s, and although it may not seem that distant or remote a place for someone who grew up in a more urban environment, it was really the 18th century meeting the 20th century. Yes, her family was the first to have a color tv on the block, but when the well ran dry in summer, she carried buckets up the hill to somebody with tap water. Yes, they had paved roads, but it took twelve hours to get to granny’s

house whereas today the same journey takes an hour and fifteen minutes. The community debated the Catholic and Protestant issues as everybody was one or the other, but her family was neither. The community ostracized her because she didn't have the proper accent for a Newfoundlander and she used words that people didn't know or accept. She loved words. And yes, everyone in the community wanted their children to be bright and clever, but not too smart, not too scary smart, and if you were, even though they told you to reach for the stars, they'd cut you off at the ankles when you got above yourself. Today, Sherry knows she's scary smart, but for thirty years she thought she was scary Sherry.

One evening, when she was thirty-one, maybe thirty-two years old, and the board member of an art gallery at the corner of Hastings and Cambie in Vancouver, she showed up at 2 a.m. to check on a private party that had rented the gallery space. With everything in order, she climbed on her bike, pedaled up the alley, and headed home. That's when she saw the '74 Chevy with no headlights coming towards her. The car clipped the front wheel, knocked her over and proceeded to drive over her and the bike. The car's tires rolled over her head, crushed her right hand, sped off, and left her lying in the dark alley with a bicycle molded to her body. Half a block away, her boyfriend and best friend heard the wet plopping sound of a vehicle hitting a body and when they arrived at the scene they thought she was dead. But Sherry leapt up at that point, screaming, "I'm going to get that bastard," and then collapsed. When she thinks back, she believes their anxiety spoke to her subconscious and she had to show them that as long as she fought, she would be okay.

Many people in a near death experience say their life passes before their eyes, but Sherry didn't see any of her past. In fact, by this point in her life, Sherry had survived many near death experiences and not once did her life flash before her, not when she went over a cliff in a car or when she was declared dead three times in one day in a London hospital. Once, while foolishly climbing a wall in a church during girls' club, a board thirty-five feet above ground came loose and knocked her to the ground. Three weeks later the doctors were able to cast her leg. Her father said, "Yes, she never has to go back to a church again because even God rejected her." Although she knew, after the fact, that he had made a joke, his comment reinforced the idea that she just wasn't supposed to be around. Sherry had been knocked back so far in life that she could only look forward. She knew she still had life to live. "I have survived everything," she thought, "Nothing can get me."

The hospital doctors sent her home and told her there was nothing they could do; she could be declared physically disabled. At home, she saw spiders the size of yoga balls scurrying across walls, and certain tones in the winter's night sky set off a migraine. She lost 75% use of her right hand. She avoided bright lights and movie cinemas because of the loud volume. But she fought back. The knock to her head shook up all the dust bunnies in that grey matter and she invented the term "market your madness". She had a right to live, and once she chose life, she had to find a way to live it in a place that accepted her. And if she was, as her parents and the community had told her, insane, and if she did have brain damage from the accident, then why not embrace it and market it. Wasn't the fact that she was here on earth a responsibility? Until she positively impacted

herself and said “I have a right to be here,” how could she impact anyone else? Maybe she wasn’t an unnecessary blister on the surface of the planet after all.

A month after the accident she got a job working on a theatre production. The arts, it seemed to her, was the safest work place for someone with a loopy brain. The director gave her the book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* as a thank you gift, which she completely ignored because she didn’t need to find her wild side; she’d been trying to tame it for many years. But one day, lying in the tub, she flipped open the book and found Baubo, the belly goddess from ancient Greece, the so-called goddess of obscenity who makes you laugh at yourself. Sherry read the *cantadora*, the storytelling version, of how Baubo sat down with the depressed Demeter who had let the earth go fallow and the people starve because she was so involved with herself. Sherry heard Baubo’s words to Demeter in a Newfie vernacular, “Shud go on my dear, git off yer ass and do sumpin about it, come on, come on, ‘av a drink, ‘av a drink. What are ya doin? Are you doin’ anytin, go on, go on, go on, yur useless up here, make yerself useful my dear.” And Baubo made Demeter do something useful to beat the depression. Baubo became Sherry’s icon.

Sherry was twenty-two years old when she moved from Newfoundland to Vancouver where she spent years forcing herself to fit it. In an attempt to prove herself she became manic and friends labeled her “the party girl”, but that’s not who she really was. Angry and obnoxious because of her own anxieties and lack of self-worth, Sherry didn’t know how depressed she’d become. Her anger was fueled when someone she knew raped her. Her relationships suffered. One relationship ended abruptly when a boyfriend dragged her out of bed at four in the morning and because she wouldn’t drink

with him, decided to beat her head into the floor until he broke her face. She unfortunately lived in the same building as he did and while she waited for a new place to live, she became incredibly quiet. She slipped in and out of her now gilded cage, eyed his car out front, and walked across her creaky eighty-year-old wood floor so that even the dust didn't move. What mattered was that she was alive and while she understood why this guy behaved the way he did, she didn't have to empathize with him; she just rationalized the behavior and knew the assault had nothing to do with her. She waited too long to move out. Through her self-induced isolation, she became stagnant and depressed. She needed stimulation, new experiences, and a good laugh. With the inspiration of her icon Baubo, she avoided drugs, therapy, and self-help books, and instead took small steps towards good works. She felt the depression leave her body, much the way ailments work themselves from a crook in the neck to a crook in the toe and then – gone.

The accident cemented her beliefs that survival is what you make it and she was forced to slow down. The accident gave her a reason to back away from the punk rock scene, remove herself from the circle of acquaintances that had become another village in which she felt an outsider. She avoided situations that caused her stress and over-stimulation and instead of saying she won't or can't do those activities, she said, "That's not good for my head; it's not something I can comfortably do." She detached from people who moaned about their life and retold the victim stories of how they got ripped off and cut off and hurt. Instead, she listened to people who talked in a parable-like way about the things that hurt and affected them, those who found the humor and the continuum thread, because there will always be somebody ripping off someone else, there

will always be sour grapes, there will always be insecurities and people who want your picket fence when what they don't realize is that you are riding a barbed wire magic blanket. She adopted a favourite line: "Dirty laundry or dignity, which shall I wear today?" Sherry daily chose dignity; Sherry learned self-care.

Sherry received a \$35,000 settlement from the accident. This she perceived as luck, as it gave her a chance to move once again, to another city, to re-create or re-confirm the "real" post-accident Sherry. Using contacts, she found work in the publishing industry in San Francisco. Here, no one knew her history. To the Americans she was an interesting foreigner who spoke their language. She proved herself, stepped into herself and, no longer the angry young woman looking for a place to fit in, she finally said, "This is who I am."

Six years later she returned to Vancouver and once again re-established herself with new friends, new career, and new living quarters. She now appreciated the peaks and valleys of her life, and those moments on the plateau of happiness when she could glimpse the horizon and say, "See, there's my future."

Before taking her current production job, Sherry sat at a desk in an office of the Dominion Building at the corner of Hastings and Cambie Street. Every day, for three years she stared out at the entrance to the alley where the car ran her over. That one corner, in one large city, has been an integral part of her life for over twenty years. A number of years before the accident, she ran a vintage clothing store around the corner from the intersection. After the clothing store, she opened Continuum, a music, art, and book store on Cambie Street at Hastings, and later, on the other corner, an art gallery. Is there something this location, across from Victory Square, is trying to teach her? She

pondered that question many a day as she stared out the window onto the street. In the silence of listening for an answer she saw how she had re-created herself, constantly. She attained every one of her teenage goals except one – and that was only because she wasn't physically able to have a child. She had wanted to design clothes, host radio, sing in a band, own a music store, a book store, and an art gallery. She accomplished those goals and many, many more.

She doesn't expect herself to be anything more than just okay. She credits the diversity of writers that she's come across with giving her the insight that she happens to be okay with the universe. Every day she reads somebody different or something different and learns another way of seeing. She wishes people, whether Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist or a fan of *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, adhered to the basic tenet of any scripture – be excellent to each other. We need to wish us all a good life and ask each other, "What have you learned today?"

At the gala, Sherry enjoys a few minutes of peace while the Lifetime Achievement winner finishes his speech after which Ken Hegan takes his place one last time at the podium. "A big thank you to Sherry McGarvie who did a fabulous job of putting together this event. Sherry?" The crowd claps as Sherry stands, bows her head in acknowledgement and waves to Ken. The show is over. She's done her job, for the moment. She knows she'll stay with this job for one more year, if the funding comes through, and then she doesn't know what she'll do. Work with Vancouver Foundation which monitors and allocates funds to a variety of interests? Continue to serve the voice of commonality and community? She'd like to work for Canada Council or the city arts or provincial arts, but she doesn't speak fluent French. She'd like to enter civic politics,

but she is a middle-aged woman without any degrees or experience in that field. A friend once told her that village community only needs sixty people, a blacksmith, a baker, a midwife, and accountant, one of this, one of that. When we live in cities, we constantly try to build our village around us. Sherry looks around and has more than one of some of the necessary skilled friends, and she considers them “her family”. But she’d like to find a small community outside the city, because it is the village reality that feeds her soul and she continues to look for that which she should have ostensibly had as a child. She should have felt like an insider in the tight knit Newfoundland community, but she didn’t. Now she has discovered that to be inside the community is to be insider yourself, and then bring yourself to the group and make a positive impact. Placed in a village, she would start a youth program, a non-profit organization, work with local artists, and volunteer with the theatre group. “The past is tense, the future doesn’t have to be,” she tells herself, but it’s hard to live in the now, when everything pushes us toward getting ahead and collecting icons of emotional and financial success. The striving takes the place of the concept of community within us.

At a barbecue a few months ago, a woman asked Sherry what she really wanted to do. “You know what I really want to do?” she answered, “I want to rebuild 60s car engines because it makes me happy.” She doesn’t *need* to be with anybody. She can do basic plumbing, carpentry, electrical, auto repairs, engine repairs, swab decks, fish, and cook, but if she’s honest with herself, really honest, she’d like to find a companion who doesn’t mind that she reads eight books a week. She’d cook him three meals a day, share his bed, listen to country western music, and fix his car. She really wants to marry a

lighthouse-keeper and one thing that these past forty-four years have taught her, is that whenever she's aimed for something, oddly, she's gotten it.