

Naturally Calamity Jane

Stumbling towards Serenity

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MAY 10, 2019 / 4 COMMENTS

Firmly on the Outside

What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything? ~ Vincent Van Gogh

It was my worst nightmare come true, every anxiety-ridden, fear-provoked, inability to fall back to sleep, nightmare, but I was awake and it was real and it was happening to me. There I was on Sunday afternoon, feet firmly planted on the ground, hands tightly formed into fists, gripping the clutch and the front brake, and thinking to myself, “*now what the fuck am I going to do?*” My first *real* ride on my brand new motorcycle, it was sunny and warm, a beautiful day for a long, slow ride. The perfect opportunity to get used to the feel of the bike, the controls, the clutch, and conquer some fears. My Breath of Fresh Air (BOFA) was riding ahead of me. An experienced rider, with a powerful bike, I heard him say through our helmet communication devices, “easy into the right turn, it’s clear” and he was gone. Accelerated up the hill, and I did not. The light had changed, a big truck was stepping on the gas, and I knew I needed to stop. I made the right call.

There I was stopped, feet on the ground, clutching my levers, in the right hand turn YIELD lane, facing up a steep hill, and of course, on a blind corner in Coquitlam. Mariner Drive to be exact. I wished I was travelling on two feet, sitting on a barstool at the Mariner Brewery instead, that was in my comfort zone, while this current reality was firmly on the outside. Thankfully, there were traffic lights. BOFA had no choice but to go on ahead, I assume looking for a place to pull over, but I wasn’t sure as he was out of range for our communications. I was alone. I was alone with my racing brain. On the hill, on a blind corner, with lots of traffic. I waited. The light turned red, the left turn arrow went green, and I waited for the left turners to go. Then it was my turn. I took a deep breath and recited, “*Soft, slow hands*”. My hand on the clutch, my foot on the rear brake, I gave my bike some throttle and eased off the clutch hand, soft and slow. I could tell the bike wanted to go. I pointed my chin where I wanted to go, gripped the bike tightly with my legs, relaxed my shoulders and let off the brake. Smooth. Simple. Practiced. I admit I went a wee bit wide, into the second lane, but I had waited for traffic to clear. Cancelling my turn indicator and giving more throttle (*cancel, cancel, cancel, go, go, go*), I sailed up and over the hill, feeling calm, feeling accomplished, feeling the anxiety drain away. Straight up ahead was BOFA on his bright red bike, waiting for me. Our communications kicked back in, “do you need to pull over for a breather?” he asked. “Nope” I said, “I got this.” And the crazy part was, I really did.

A mere week prior to this incident, on a Saturday morning, bright and early, I was in a parking lot. The sun shone down, the wind was blowing, and I was straddling a motorcycle. I looked around at the others in my training class, mostly male, all younger, and wondered what they thought? Did they see a middle aged woman with a midlife crisis? I certainly didn’t, I saw me, checking off my bucket list. I turned my attention to our instructor giving us directions. I had never started a motorcycle before. Motorcycle Riding 101. Created for complete beginners. I had all my own gear, and I was comfortable sitting on the back of a bike, especially when BOFA was in control, but now it was time to get in the cockpit. I was excited!

That excitement continued until shortly after lunch. Getting back in the saddle and doing some more slow speed drills, we had not touched the throttle yet, I not only stalled the bike, but dropped it on the ground with a resounding THUD. No big deal, it happens all the time, get back out there. But I was rattled. And the feeling continued as we learned to use the throttle and control our speed with the clutch. It continued as we attempted to make tight U-Turns. It continued all afternoon, the bike was riding me, not the other way around. I was disheartened, I was frustrated, and I just wanted to cry, kick the bike over and quit. I didn’t do any of those things. It had been a very long time since I’d put myself in a situation where I was so vulnerable, *so firmly outside of my comfort zone*, and had completely no fucking idea how to accomplish the task. I left the course on Saturday feeling low, humbled, terrified and disappointed. Sitting outside in the sun, helmet next to me on the bench, shop cat at my feet, I felt a sensation I hadn’t felt in quite some time. I had to admit to myself that I wasn’t very good at this. I wasn’t a natural, undiscovered, motorcycle riding talent. This was going to take some work, **IF** I decided to come back.

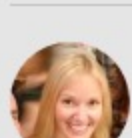
For many years, my fear of failure held me back from being adventurous. Also my fear of death, destruction, and being maimed or significantly injured. That aside, the truth was, at my core, I didn’t want to suck at anything. If I was going to do something, try something, learn something, I wanted to excel, to succeed right off the mark, to be perfect. I stuck to things I knew how to do. Academic studies, writing, photography, running, breathing. I have put immense pressure on myself to be exceptional or not do it at all. As a self-identified over-thinker, I am also more hard on myself, with more expectations than any reasonable person would put on anyone else, but I’m not reasonable with myself.

BOFA noticed my dejected face when he picked me up, my lack of enthusiasm, and significantly decreased energy level. “You’re learning something brand new, something not easy for you, something that is tricky and challenging. But you are in the right place, with the right people, just try to breathe, you can do this.” Some time during the evening, maybe during the second glass of wine, I made the decision. I decided to trust the process, to dig deep, to work hard and fight for this, and to channel the shop cat and chill the fuck out.

Sunday morning came and I was standing in that same parking lot. I had the same bike, the same gear, the same sun, minus the wind. But I had a new attitude and determination. I wasn’t going to be perfect, I wasn’t going to excel, but I was just fine with mediocre. Safe would be nice too. I trusted the process, trusted the instructors, trusted the bike, and trusted myself. And I made it through, and passed too!

The following weekend, stuck on that hill, there was no panic, I was amazed at the muscle memory that was instilled from an intensive 4-day training course, and by the calm instructions going through my mind. I didn’t kill it, I’m no prodigy, but I fought hard through my fear, fought against the negative, overthinking voices in my head, and got myself up that hill. My confidence is gaining every time I get in the cockpit, with every ride and small success. I have one foot in the excited zone and the other is still hanging out in the terrified territory. But I’m proud of myself, I’m proud that I’m learning, that I’m fighting through and I’m immensely proud of my completely average ability to ride a motorcycle.

Scare yourself every day, and do something that makes you feel totally excited and totally terrified ~ Jen Sincero




Published by Naturally Calamity

Jane

Retired (injured) Runner * New Cyclist * Writer * Nurse *
Just a girl in the city who’s determined to show up for herself and make the best damn life she can. I have fallen down, stood tall, felt joy and grief and the overwhelming humanness of this experience. Oh and I still believe in love.

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 Motorcycle Memoirs