

Milestones: Cause for Pause

By Sally E. Smith

In the 1994 movie of the same name, Forrest Gump quoted his mama as saying, “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” I’ve always thought that life is more like a river, and that our journey is one of navigating our raft down its waterways. Although we sometimes hit snags that keep us stuck, get caught in eddies of sorrow or tragedy, and paddle furiously to get ahead, most of the time we drift along, enjoying the scenery and not giving much thought to our destination.

The currents of the river – and where our journey takes us – are largely influenced by our life circumstances and daily routines. Our families, our friends, our jobs, and our pastimes act as the buoys that guide us and provide the air that keeps our raft afloat. As plus-size women, our life journeys are often deeply influenced by the backwaters of size discrimination and social stigma that trigger low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness.

Over the days, weeks, months, and years, we generally go with the flow, trying our best to fight the currents of plus-size stereotypes and finding our way without a compass to guide us. But, from time to time, the milestones in our lives provide us with an opportunity to stand on the river’s edge, assess our expedition, and glimpse new tributaries to explore.

Whether they’re birthdays, graduations, weddings, break-ups, or deaths, milestones can stir up our awareness of the passage of time and the realization that the paddles in our hands give us the power to adjust the course of our life’s journey – despite the obstacles in our path.

On August 25, I experienced two milestones: my fiftieth birthday and my son’s first day of middle school. In the months leading up to that day, my mindset began to shift. For the past dozen years, my time and energy have been predominantly devoted to activities relating to my son – his school, his hobbies, and his well-being. Now, as we both begin our transitions – his to adolescence and mine to middle age, it’s time for me to evaluate where I stand now and explore my options for the future.

I’ve found myself reviewing just about every aspect of my current life, comparing where I am with where I want to be. How could I make my work more fulfilling? What passions did I put on the back burner and am now ready to rekindle? To whom do I want to draw closer? What should be on my “bucket list”?

I’m still in the midst of the process, which has led to both concrete action and flights of fancy. I volunteered to join the board of directors of an organization I worked for when I was in my early twenties – something I’ve always wanted to do. I also spent several hours cruising my alma mater’s website to see what it would take to get that Ph.D. (about seven years and tens of thousands of dollars). That most likely won’t happen, but giving myself permission to dive in ask “What if?” was incredibly liberating.

It’s easy to get caught in the minutia of day-to-day living and to lose sight of the direction our raft is heading. It’s easy to feel like we’re drowning in the obstacles that society places before us, simply because we’re larger than average. But milestones give us the chance to cut that anchor and review our careers, relationships, and interests – helping us stay mindful of the paddles we hold and the course corrections we have the power to make.