

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

A true story by Marilyn Howard



Copyright 2019 by Marilyn Howard Hammond
All rights reserved

This book or parts thereof, may not be reproduced
in any form without permission

ISBN 1-7333196-0-7

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.TheWriteWall.com

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	The Beckoning Path
Chapter 2	Awakening
Chapter 3	Growing Pains
Chapter 4	Coming of Age in the Late 1950s
Chapter 5	Launch into Adulthood
Chapter 6	University Insights
Chapter 7	World View
Chapter 8	The Glass Ceiling
Chapter 9	The Call
Chapter 10	Aloha
Chapter 11	Lucky Break
Chapter 12	Twenty-something in Manhattan
Chapter 13	Cards That Were Dealt
Chapter 14	Friendly Chaos
Chapter 15	Biz Learning Curves
Chapter 16	Jumping Hurdles
Chapter 17	Having It All
Chapter 18	Biz is Booming
Chapter 19	Supermom
Chapter 20	Rethinking the Dream
Chapter 21	Realizing the Path
Chapter 22-	Four Fateful Months
Chapter 23	A Commuter Life
Chapter 24	The Precious Years
Chapter 25	The Ties That Bind
Chapter 26	A Resourceful Chameleon
Chapter 27	Fun at Fifty
Chapter 28	Teen Journeys
Chapter 29	The Dotcom Era
Chapter 30	2000 Surprises
Chapter 31	Today's View
Chapter 32	Sparks, Choices and Coincidences
Epilogue”	

Chapter 1

The Beckoning Path

Movers are arriving tomorrow. There are still many crucial things to do. As I leave this seven-office suite in midtown Manhattan, I find some items are too large to bring. Tom Gong, my internet guru and tenant, will take the large copier and some furniture to his new location. I didn't realize back in 1994 that he would become the catalyst for a vision, inspiring my later web business. An agreeable degree of excitement is in the air on this beautiful spring day.

I should be accustomed to changes, but moves always evoke a lot of nostalgia. The office comradeship and laughter will be missed. Physical items can be replaced—but not twenty years of memories. We worked well as a team. Some amazing talent walked through our doors. Now, major contracts are ending, and new technology continues to change business in unanticipated ways. The time to heed warnings has come, so I'm taking the winnings and making changes. Not all dreams turn out as we expect, but transformations always create new adventures.

I seemed born ready for adventure. A curiosity was ignited at birth, and as a youth, trails chosen at puzzling forks in the road gave the journey dimension. Images stuck in my mind and created a yearning. I sought excitement and later plunged into the wide ocean of business—naively unaware of sharks and other ominous threats that lurked there. Nevertheless, I grew into a thriving entrepreneur and mother. I learned that being an entrepreneur can be a survive-or-die adventure. A game-changing storm can come up suddenly, or a fork in the road can lead to a dead end.

Perhaps it was in my genes or destiny to explore new paths and take risks. My grandfather was an entrepreneurial small businessman, and my father created patents owned by his employer. My generation certainly never expected innovation or running a business as the pathway for a woman.

“Doing it all” became the hope of women in the 1960s and 70s. Many women, including myself, were determined to reinvent themselves and restructure the opportunities offered to them by society. In many ways they succeeded, but there continue to be unique issues for women in business. While growing up in the 1950s and 1960s is a different reality from today, women still face many of the same challenges. Their hurdles are very different than the experiences of their male counterparts. Fortunately, women of today have many more tools to work with and the experiences of earlier women entrepreneurs for guidance. Mixing motherhood with entrepreneurship requires a very reliable support system along with a good business plan, skill training, adequate start-up customers or investment capital, focus on priorities—and luck.

Determined that my destiny would not be the limited path predicted for most girls of my time, I wanted to imbibe life in big gulps and longed for exhilarating adventures. Looking back

over sixty years, I find that my life tells the story of the women's movement, and my entrepreneurial business is an example of a woman entering uncharted territory. Without any women career mentors or business models, I stumbled and fell, but I got up again. My heartbeat became part of the movement that followed. We thought we could have it all, and I certainly broke the conventions.

After twenty-five years as an entrepreneur in business, I've learned that adapting to market and office changes with flexibility determines results. Men and women need the skill of reinventing—both business and self. Interruptions in our plans wake us up to new chapters.

In the late 1980s, technology started to move at unprecedented rates. Even the giant Eastman Kodak never expected digital photography to take over so quickly. Today's entrepreneur is more alert to fluctuating markets. A small business has the advantage of adjusting quickly, and only those entrepreneurs with enough flexibility to keep up with change stay in the winner's circle. The shifting life of an entrepreneur can be a wild ride.

The stark truth about startups is that nobody knows clearly what they're doing. The ones who succeed learn quickly. Startups have to out-think and move faster than potential new competition—while keeping an eye on the horizon for new challenges. Through all the peaks and valleys, the goal is to keep moving forward in a winning direction. Play the game, and have fun.

There are critical moments of decision. Should I just pay the bill or put up the fight over a principle, as advised by my lawyer and accountant? Should I fire a nice guy who wasn't producing or give him more time? Should I take on a step-family or save myself a lot of work?

Events converge, and influential people appear. Voices from the past speak their opinions. Sometimes simple sparks from a facial expression transfer an idea, create a magnetic attraction to a long-term relationship or empower personalities—igniting a sequence of events.

I noticed the signs, which seemed to be “written on the wall.” As the vision for my future appears, important decisions become obvious. A street sign seems to point the way, or a light beckons—showing the road to a life that I seemed destined to live. The Biblical phrase seems to define the path for my destiny.

A self-aware mind appeared with incredibly early memories. Research done in the U.K. has affirmed that young infants can learn how to play with a toy without touching it, and half of those in the study remembered it four weeks later. It was concluded that even pre-verbal infants can encode, store and remember. What is generally thought of as “childhood amnesia” has remained a puzzle. The brain is growing rapidly during early years, and there is plenty of room for memories. After age 3 ½, however, a human's memory begins to forget. I remembered.

Deaf people have thoughts without language. Credible people have reported after-death and out-of-body experiences. My early awareness ignited a curiosity about the soul and how it interacts with the human body.

At eighteen, a Fulbright Scholar from India, who had palm reading in his family for centuries, foretold unlikely circumstances, which surprisingly came true. I tried to fight some of the predictions, knowing that no one can pick stocks or plan anything with absolute certainty. However, events converged in a way that was inescapable—influencing the major decisions.

Words and ideas reverberate for years. My childhood dreams and the voices of my deceased grandparents are still clear in my mind. Immediate family and friends played a foundational role in shaping growing questions and attitudes.

This book, like my life, is a hybrid of business and personal experiences. My aspirations resulted from various intertwining components, but they began in memory with my

grandparents' dreams and choices. The tales of romance and intrigue were enchanting to my young ears.

At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, as the century turned from 1899 to 1900, my grandparents married with the lights of press cameras flashing. The *New York Daily News* headlined it as the first wedding of the twentieth century with their picture and story on the first page. At the age of twenty-two, Annie Waddilove married Will Witten, a handsome six-foot first generation German man who was a year her junior and a sizeable contrast to her 5'2" height.

Loving dancing and smitten by silent films, Annie dreamed of being a part of them. But romance interfered with her ambitions for a movie career, so instead she translated those dreams into the dramatic timing of her wedding and a show business family. Her five children, one of which was my mom, were raised to be theatrical stars with music and dance lessons, while she handmade all their artistically-designed costumes. She dreamed that her daughters would have a career and not marry young.

It was fun exploring my grandparents' apartment years later. There was a storage room filled with exciting boxes of stage costumes, and all the rooms were filled with intriguing turn-of-the-century furniture—previously owned by an actress.

The family lived on the New Jersey shore, and life at the beach was fun for Anna, Edna, Bill, Margaret, and Len. Memories of their theatrical life and companionship were part of many late dinner conversations.

In the 1920's, Edna, my mom, and her two sisters, Anna and Margaret, were all thin, pretty flappers and professional dancers. Some of their performances were in Vaudeville chorus groups—before the chorus line costumes came to be scandalously skimpy. Mom's older sister, Anna, had an enchanting voice and was her show partner in stage performances. They claimed some fame by performing several times at the legendary Palace Theater at Broadway and 47th in Manhattan—the most desired booking in the country. The Marx Brothers, Fanny Brice and Ethel Waters were among its many stars. Margaret, the younger sister, was an incredible acrobat. A dramatic photo in a backbreaking pose is a family treasure. Since show biz gigs are spotty, they all had to have "bread and butter" careers to supplement income. Margaret worked part-time as a beautician, while Edna and Anna were secretaries.

At eighteen, Mom met Ed Howard, my dad, an aspiring architect who also loved to dance. Edna and Ed became a team. The young generation loved the freedom felt on the dance floor. Jazz bands played at dance halls, while radio stations and phonograph records carried their tunes to listeners across the nation. The "Charleston," "Cake Walk," "Black Bottom," and "Peabody" were popular. In later years, Mom taught me the "Charleston," and Dad demonstrated the "Peabody."

Dad made a good living working in an architect's firm. He first purchased a motorcycle and then a Model T Ford. As a wild young buck who liked to take risks, he would stand on the handlebars of his motorcycle and ride it between streetcars. Somehow, he managed to entice Mom to fly with him in an early model, open cockpit double-wing airplane, where he stood up without any harness to take pictures. Knowing him as a very conservative man later in life, these daredevil acts seem completely out of character. However, his driving often left us on the edge of the seat and was a clue to the thrills of his perilous past life.

Since Grandma wanted all her daughters to have a career and not marry young, she convinced my mother to break off their relationship in her early twenties. Mom sadly followed

her mother's wishes, but they would meet again when destiny brought them together during the Great Depression.

Everyone rode the economic bubble until the devastating 1929 stock market crash. The nation's total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929. After the Crash, however, Dad's few stocks went bust, and he was out of work. The future looked bleak.

No matter how hard one may work, changes in the economic and world environments create an underlying uncertainty. Stock market crashes, interest rates and regulation changes, wars, political elections, plus catastrophic disasters from storms, fires and flooding, are just a few of the many events that have far-reaching effects. Entrepreneurs are left to grapple with the consequences and decisions made by others.

Eight years after their break up, a funeral and a twist of fate brought my mom and dad together again. They exchanged glances, and the romantic chemistry fired up. Mom was working as a secretary and seriously dating another man, but soon Ed and Edna became a team once again. She helped Dad get a job with her company, and the wedding followed. At the new company, Dad worked his way into an unexpected career as a project engineer.

My parents felt lucky, since one quarter of all wage earners at the time were out of work from the market crash and the Great Depression. In 1937, their first child, Ed Jr., was born, and they purchased a home in the outer New York City borough of Queens, where some farmland was being developed for housing. My father chose the first house built on a dirt road—at the top of a small hill. The road led to a stone-front two-story bungalow, with a white picket fence. Finally, they had the home and family they had always wanted. A chicken coop was added to the garage—opening into a wired area in the yard for the chickens to roam. Dad planted berry bushes and fruit trees. He had known poverty and never wanted to go hungry again.

In 1905, when Dad was only five, his father had died—leaving Mary, his first-generation immigrant wife, to struggle on her own to support a five-year-old child in Manhattan as a cook and housekeeper. Work was limited for a woman without much education, but in a later generation she would have made a smart business woman. I have always admired strong women who can adapt to life's many challenges. That described both my grandmothers.

Dad remembered his mother as a bright woman who spoke several languages, including fluent German and some Yiddish. A shrewd negotiating “goy,” she knew the shopkeepers in the downtown Jewish markets would consider it bad luck to turn away their first customer on Sundays, so she arrived first, bargained in Yiddish and got the best price. She clearly understood the importance of timing in a business deal.

Strong women don't allow others to limit potential. They take challenges and turn them into opportunities. Traditionally, strong women were the support behind their men—often holding the pieces together while the man got the glory of success. As the mother of his children, as his social secretary, as cook and advisor, many women kept their husband's life organized and his image intact. When left on her own to make her way in a tough world, however, Mary had to bravely reinvent herself and not quit. Life was often a struggle—especially for women with children. Many powerhouse women today come from humble backgrounds where they were born or flung by fate.

Their tenement on Third Avenue, where the 59th Street Bridge now stands, held memories of difficult times. The early 1900s had no safety nets such as Social Security, unemployment insurance or Medicaid. Dad later told stories about a challenging life where he had to chip away the ice from the sink in the morning in order to get water. In another story, he shared having his tonsils pulled out with pliers and no anesthetic.

The Writing on the Wall by Marilyn Howard

Mary died of unknown causes in 1916, possibly at the beginning of the deadly flu epidemic of 1917. She was laid out on the couch in their apartment because funeral homes were too expensive. Dad was left to fend for himself on the streets of Manhattan at age sixteen, doing his best to avoid the local street gangs with their neighborhood rivalries. He had assorted small jobs—including lighting street lamps. Someone he had thought was a friend rented a room to him for a while, but then stole his few possessions.

Stories of perseverance and resilience help us believe in ourselves. Knowing that members of our family triumphed over obstacles can give us the faith and hope that we will too. Remembering we all face difficult things allows us to be better employees, managers, spouses, parents, children, siblings, and human beings.

Dad wisely chose survival over self-pity. Determined to pursue his dream of a family, he forged ahead with a career. While working during the day assisting in an architect's office, he went to night school at Cooper Union to study architecture. He also found time to enjoy himself at dance halls where he met my mother.

The intense building boom surrounding that original dirt road in Queens leading to my parent's new home was unimaginable. Lots were filled in, and the local golf course became St. John's University. The chickens in our backyard lasted until regulations changed. Suddenly, the backyard's fresh eggs and frequent chicken dinners stopped.

Mom was forty when I entered the world, six years after my brother.