





LEAPING INTO A LIFETIME OF FIRSTS

By Meredith Z. Avakian

For the past two years, I have done something new (a "First") every day to challenge, stretch and grow myself. "Firsts" can be as simple as trying a new restaurant or as challenging as intentionally facing your biggest fears. Firsts can be as stimulating as traveling to a country where you have never been and as rewarding as crossing off bucket list items. They can also be as exciting as meeting notable persons or less glamorous, like overcoming injury, trauma and other adversity. While this contrived adventure may sound like an impossible feat, I assure you this journey of intention and experiences is indeed possible. You just have to leap in, then take it one day at a time.

So, where does one begin a journey of Firsts? For me, it began with a motivational book and inspirational talk by Lu Ann Cahn, the eight-time Emmy Award-winning investigative journalist and special assignment reporter who spent nearly 30 years at NBC10. I had the pleasure of meeting her at the annual Temple Women's Network brunch where she was the keynote speaker. I obtained an

autographed copy of her book, "I Dare Me," in which she wrote about how she was feeling stuck in life - despite her accomplished career, loving family and being a cancer survivor - so she took her daughter's advice and dared herself to do something new every day to reboot and recharge her life.

In all honesty, as moving as Lu Ann's story was



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to me, her book sat next to my bed, unread, for several months. Perhaps it was just waiting in the wings until the moment - one night, when my husband and I got into a definitive argument - when I felt I needed a "restart" button of sorts, and decided to pick up the book and finished reading it in two days.

Shortly thereafter, on Dec. 1, 2015, I contacted Lu Ann to share how touched I was by her story and that a year of doing new things was something I felt I needed to do, as I too was feeling stuck in my life. Her response was, "I tell you what, Meredith, one month from today, I invite you to join me as my guest where my daily dares began, at the Polar Bear Plunge in Atlantic City." Most people would likely have gone running for a sauna, but I had already decided if I was going to commit to doing daily Firsts, there was absolutely no better way to start. How could I turn down a personal invite (and dare) from the woman whose story inspired me so much? Plus, I understood it was a unique opportunity to start a new chapter with this inspirational author exactly where her book began.

Despite my ultimate decision to start this journey with a splash, I still spent every day that December talking myself out of taking the plunge. Every time I tried to chicken out and convince myself it wasn't a good idea to jump into the Atlantic Ocean on New Year's Day (at least not this far from the equator), I would remind myself that I was named the "Most Adventurous" student of my grade school, and "Most Daring" student at my high school, for a reason. Challenge accepted.

When I got to the beach on New Year's Day, I linked up with several of Lu Ann's "dareista" buddies, women who, like me, also wanted to hit the "restart" button. We all grabbed hands and charged into the water...then almost immediately ran out. It was exhilarating. It was therapeutic. It was crazy; and I couldn't have asked for a better start to a new life.

From there, some random highlights from my first month of Firsts looked like this:

- Day 11 - Pay for the stranger behind me in line.
- Day 12 - Substantively compliment three strangers.
- Day 14 - Blow bubbles to greet speakers.
- Day 17 - Give relationship advice to a stranger.
- Day 21 - Attend a judicial swearing-in ceremony.
- Day 24 - Swing at the playground in the snow.
- Day 25 - Meet three moms and give them flowers.
- Day 27 - Attend a Turning Points for Children committee meeting.

On January 31, I ended the month where I started - in the water. I worked through fear of claustrophobia to complete a 90-minute sensory deprivation float. (If you have no idea what I am talking about, Google it.) It was as reinvigorating as the plunge was, though thankfully much warmer. Looking back, the month also kicked off the start of weekly marriage counseling.

As the Firsts became something my friends, family and colleagues quickly learned about and found intriguing, I knew I had to set some boundaries. This personal journey became somewhat of a communal experience, as I wholeheartedly welcomed suggestions, ideas and participation from loved ones or strangers alike. However, the criteria I set for myself were simple: the Firsts had to benefit my mind, body, soul and/or career and could not conflict with my faith, beliefs, morals or core values. If a First would cause me to compromise my beliefs, I would not do it. To some, that was more impressive than doing something new every day. Needless to say, having a good sense of self discipline and strong willpower helped me



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remain committed to the Firsts.

Only two months into my Firsts, I traveled to Ft. Lauderdale to visit a friend for a couple days. Hours before my return flight to Philadelphia, my friend convinced me to change my First of the day from a boring water taxi ride along the Intracoastal Waterway to an exciting "scooter" ride along the coastline. That was where the real adventure only began.

As we were returning the motorbikes, I "wiped out" on a steep decline, badly injuring my elbow, knee and ankle with road rash and bloodied contusions. Another First. Then, I made what proved to be a foolish decision in retrospect. I decided to "tough it out" and fly back to Philadelphia, where I ended up in the emergency room a few days later with a life-threatening blood clot. Two more Firsts. The injury ended up resulting in lots of other Firsts for me, including: double-sprain, X-ray, MRI, boot, crutches, blood thinners, physical therapy, and, truly, my first noteworthy personal injury ever.

Several months later, after my recovery and dozens more Firsts, the doctors and physical therapists gave me the "green light" to travel by flight again and get back to my active physical Firsts again, including aerial and acroyoga, acupuncture, spin class, a new Zumba class, SkyZone trampoline park, and beyond. Although my ability to fly anywhere was stifled for a while, I did manage to travel to New Mexico, Czech Republic, Ft. Myers, North Dakota and Missouri all for the first time.

Naturally, every day as a visitor in these places provided fruitful opportunities for Firsts ripe for the picking; enough to fill a book.

While my travel Firsts were certainly some of my most notable highlights, my favorites were ones where I felt the most alive. Such occasions typically included random acts of kindness, speaking engagements, conquering fears, making true connections (including with animals and nature) and discovering new passions (like storytelling). I also cherish the times spent doing things with a childish and carefree manner. I ran through the fountains at Dilworth Park next to City Hall, rode the 6ABC Zooballoon, picked and ate dandelions and, one of my most notable Firsts, gave out hundreds of free hugs to strangers in the heart of Center City with my friend Dr. Ai Zhang and later with my students. I also became an adjunct professor at my alma mater, Temple University, another one of my favorite Firsts.

Live entertainment, a staple in my childhood (as the daughter of professional singers and musicians), had been absent in my adulthood. After almost 16 years in Philadelphia, there were still a lot of venues I hadn't been to. In addition to the dozens of restaurants and other special event venues (like my first Flyers game), many of my Firsts took place at live entertainment venues. I went to Boardwalk Hall, The Mann Center for Performing Arts, Theater of the Living Arts and The Trocadero



Theatre, where I saw some of my favorite entertainers perform, all for the first time. These too were some of my favorite Firsts.

My scooter accident was, unfortunately, not the worst of the Firsts. During this time, my husband and I separated. Our front door was kicked in, and we were robbed during the move from our home. He then was in two accidents eight days apart, thankfully only tragic for the vehicles. That said, these experiences were all Firsts and helped make me more resilient as well as resourceful.

While this journey was accompanied by such adversity, most of the hardships remained private, despite my public-facing roles at the time, including serving as president of the Philadelphia Public Relations Association. Although I was transparent about everything I was going through, most of the time I kept a smile on my face, as my Firsts were keeping me alive and helping me find myself again. Unless someone noticed I was wearing a boot, or no longer wore a wedding band, or that my last name was no longer hyphenated, some of the heartbreaking Firsts flew under the radar. Publicly, people saw me winning awards, doing

more writing, speaking, teaching and following my passions. I was aligning with my purpose, so everything else seemed secondary, and people were noticing the change.

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On reflection, my Firsts certainly have challenged and stretched me. I feel they helped me grow personally, professionally, spiritually, mentally and physically. What started with a day and a dare turned into a transformative lifestyle, filled with appreciation, gratitude and humility. What is more amazing to me than all of the actual Firsts are the countless people and stories behind them, especially when one phenomenal new experience led to an even greater one. When these Firsts are compounded, they become life-changing in a majestic, mystical and synchronistic kind of way. Some of my most beloved Firsts were serendipitous and some of my favorite people in the world are those who I met as part of my Firsts. While this journey has had its share of challenges, I do not regret

any of the choices I made (except perhaps that whole motorbike situation), as I followed my intuition and my parameters to make adventurous yet wise decisions.



Today's #first: DJ MZA spinnin' on the 1's and 2's at #Dilworth @CCDSips, courtesy of @kevinthedj. S/O @NinaScim 🎧🎤👏



What the new-and-improved me realized was not that I had lost love for my husband, but that I had grown out of the person I was – someone who did not fully love and embrace myself and put myself first before taking care of others.

After two consecutive years of doing something new every day, I spent a third consecutive New Year's Day back where it all began, with Lu Ann Cahn. (Our fearless selves went back to the Jersey Shore to take the plunge again on Jan. 1, 2017.) Thankfully, this time we were warm indoors, as it was too cold to plunge this year. She gathered some of her "dareista" friends and asked us to share what our biggest First was in 2017. While I had hundreds of Firsts, I answered with "divorce." While ending a 13-year relationship is painful, challenging and life-changing, sometimes it is necessary, and is a new beginning. What the new-and-improved me realized was not that I had lost love for my husband, but that I had grown out of the person I was – someone who did not fully love and embrace myself and put myself first before taking care of others.

Gradually throughout my marriage, I began saying "no" much more frequently – even with some of my favorite things – and the Firsts helped me incorporate "yes" back into my

vocabulary (again, while keeping within my set boundaries). After having a couple years to discover myself and life on my own again, I then said "yes" to attending a restaurant opening where I said "yes" to free concert tickets, where I said "yes" to going to the show, and then "yes" to giving someone my phone number, who I then said "yes" to dating. Long story short, those hundreds if not thousands of Firsts were all in due time, I suppose, as they have probably been the best thing to help me prepare for my biggest First, arriving this spring – motherhood; a whole new journey and lifetime of Firsts to experience. ■

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