

By Lori Pankonin

It's amazing how you can live for five decades and still get that gratifying feeling once in awhile when you sit back and think, I did it all by myself. And then you realize how much help you really had.

I had registered for a conference more than four months before it was to happen, however I knew there was plenty of time to get a plane ticket. I sought my husband's help in that department since he's our travel planner.

It's amazing how time flies and I didn't act quickly enough when he told me about an almost-too-good-to-be-true rate. He was awaiting my final decision for a departure day. Within hours, that rate had quadrupled and it continued to go up. Darn! We finally reached the moment of desperation and had to get something booked. I traded some convenience for \$\$ and agreed on a 6:30 a.m. flight. Believe it or not, it was cheaper to get a flight with a rental car included than it was to get the flight alone. I wasn't crazy about driving in an unfamiliar city by myself, but surely I could cancel the rental and still be \$\$ ahead. All was well and then the big "snow" word came into the picture.

Had I been more organized, I'd have been ahead of the storm. As usual, I had a long list of must do's before leaving town. Then I ran into online issues and computer problems, extending the time to get the tax reports filed that were on deadline. Not good. I was leaving town at midnight, which would allow just a few brief hours of shuteye before heading to the airport.

I was pumped and ready for the trip so I didn't worry about being too tired to drive. But I was unaware of how much snow had accumulated in the last couple hours. I began my journey west only to find that I couldn't even tell where I was on the road. There wasn't anyone else around to compete with road space, but that was an eerie thought when I began to slide around and knew I was in an area without cell phone service.

Fifty miles per hour. 40 miles per hour. 30 miles per hour. No way. I could never make it at that rate and I decided it wasn't worth it anyway. It was painful to think that my plane ticket wasn't refundable since we went for the better rate. Same with the hotel room. But it still wasn't worth the danger. I was turning back.

Wait. Where's the road? What if someone comes? I can't see. Better keep creeping along until I get to Holyoke. I'll decide whether to stay there at my sister's or turn around and go back home so that I won't be snowed in.

About that time, Russ called to say he was checking online and it should get better. But I had already decided to throw in the towel. Well wait. Would it get better? Keep going? Stop? Turn back? I called the hotel near the airport and they weren't having any snow. No snow? Well there might be hope if I don't have to face this much longer. Onward.

It did get better. Alas, the snow subsided, but I could still hardly see. Aha. The headlights must be covered. A stop at a well-lit truck stop to clear off the heavy snow took care of that. Plus I welcomed the chance for a pit stop. Are you kidding? They're closed? No open bathrooms? This is not a good sign!!

I did eventually arrive at the hotel. Whew. What a victory that I found it. Despite specific map quest directions and that GPS voice, I so often still manage to take wrong turns. But I made it

and I could let go of some tension. Did I check into the hotel? No. There was no time. But did I have to get back in my vehicle to go to the airport? No. Finally!!! Some good news. There was a shuttle leaving shortly for the airport and they would allow me to park at the hotel at no charge. I think it was sympathy.

Upon arrival at the right airline, the friendly guy took my bag out of the back of the shuttle. I'd attempted to pack lightly so that I wouldn't have to check luggage but the contents were bulging a bit. Wait. Is that my bag? The gentleman mentioned that mine had orange on the handle. Bless his heart for noticing! And bless my husband's heart for adding the florescent tape at the last minute. Another lady's bag bulged just like mine and we needed to switch. Whew. Something else went right.

Inside the airport. Now what? I didn't have to check luggage. Gees. I realized how much I'm a tag along when traveling and I usually just follow my husband. I had to think and even asked someone in order to make sure I was headed in the right direction. Then I got pulled aside for a bag check. What? It's my husband who always takes forever in security. What could be in my bag that showed potential danger? Well I took my mom up on the offer for one of her carry-on bags and I didn't realize there were some little hotel shampoos and lotion in one of the zippers. Sorry, guy. I'll be more careful next time.

The sun did come up before my slumber time began, but starting a trip short of sleep is nothing new for me. I felt proud that I could find my way all by myself when needing to switch planes after our first landing and alas, I'd reached my destination. So now I need to get to my hotel downtown. Do I call and cancel the rental car and just take a shuttle or taxi? I'll have to pay for parking if I have a car, and I certainly don't need any more stress.

Whoa! Look at the long line for taxis. Look at those ladies. I wonder if they're going to the same conference I am? Yes? Well do you want to go with me to get my rental car? I suddenly had some New York friends and they no longer had to wait in line. Boy was I glad for extra eyes!

It was pouring rain and even though the GPS voice told me where to turn, it was hard to see the signs to find the right exit. But my new friend in the seat beside me helped navigate, and the backseat eyes could confirm when it was clear on either side. We did it. We found their hotel in our little PT Cruiser. They pitched in to help cover my parking and I relied on the GPS to guide me a few more blocks to my hotel.

I was on my own when it was time to return to the airport, but I knew I could do it. I'll admit I did take a wrong turn and panicked as I got out of the Cruiser and rushed up to a ticket lady in a parking garage. She guided me with her kind southern drawl on how to get back on track. And I did it . . . all by myself. Well I guess I wasn't alone. I had asked for help and I cleared the spot on the seat beside me as I prayed for the Lord to buckle up and be my navigator.

I did it. I got buckled in and was settled on my final non-stop flight. Or so I thought. Rather than preparing for takeoff, the flight crew announced that we'd be changing planes as there was a mechanical problem that couldn't easily be fixed. It had been such a full flight that rather than having us put our carry-on suitcases above, they had packed them below. No problem. Those would be transferred to the other plane. But there was a problem. I had put my boarding pass in that bag when I should have been done with it. But now I needed it to board the substitute plane.

Panic!! No problem. I just had to move to the end of the line and prove that I am who I am one more time. Thank heavens my I.D. wasn't in that bag. I made a new friend on the plane and have talked to her several times since. I got really inspired about whole food nutrition at the conference and had a great time dancing with Elvis and friends in downtown Memphis, Tenn.

My vehicle awaited me in fine shape and the reports of sleet and poor travel weather earlier that day had subsided. Onward. All was well for smooth sailing ahead.

Yes, there were bumps in the road. But with others to guide me and the fortitude to keep moving forward, I did it! Isn't that what life's all about? You don't have to do it alone.

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