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Personal Essay: "Sparta tour brings memories, realization that her hometown has changed"

By Kim Seidel

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For the first time since I left my hometown nearly 25 years ago, I've realized how much Sparta has changed through those decades. What is it about one's hometown that sticks in our hearts even when we've grown up, moved away, and we want to believe that place doesn't matter anymore?

I didn't put down new roots too far away. My family and I live in Onalaska, Wis., a community we truly enjoy. That's just about 30 miles from where I was raised, but it seems like worlds away, as I focus on two active daughters, a busy husband, and an energetic Lab. Along with a home and a writing career to maintain, my carefree childhood memories become more distant each year. As I enter deeper into my 40s, realities of adulthood have settled in, making meeting deadlines and goals seem more urgent than taking time to relish past times and friends.

Even when I visit my parents, I don't actually go into town, as they've long since sold my childhood home and built a country home on the city's edge. Finally, after all of these years, I took my Dad up on his offer to give me a tour of Sparta, with all of its additions and improvements.

Just like when I was a kid, I sat in the backseat behind my Dad, my Mother to his right, directing his way even when he didn't ask her. This time, though, my daughters were sitting there with me, symbolic of

the past and future coming together that day. I couldn't have possibly imagined that I would feel as if Sparta was no longer the same small town I grew up in. But that's what happened that beautiful fall afternoon, when everything was changing with vibrant autumnal colors, and I realized I had changed too but that I was still the same in many ways.

Don't we all go through those feelings of letting go and hanging on, as we continue to grow and go through our lives whether we've stayed in our hometown or moved just down the road? It feels like a dance as I waltz, some days more graceful than others, into middle age now, and eventually I'll become a senior citizen. It will happen sooner than I expect, and because how fast time moves today, I strive to treasure each precious, present moment. Without a doubt, I'll wonder where the years went, and how it all began for me in Sparta. That's where my story starts. Those chapters can't be rewritten.

What's a tour—or anything—without ice cream? We went to Dairy Queen, and that stop alone evoked many memories because we were surrounded by some of the latest developments. Was it really that long ago that I rode my bicycle behind DQ, over a dirt path, circling a wide open, empty field? Now it's filled with office and apartment buildings with nothing near a remote place to bike.

Moving on, we toured the Circle Drive neighborhood where I grew up with my twin sisters. I felt strangely relieved when many of the houses remained familiar to me. Dad slowed the car down by our old home. It was like watching an instant replay, looking out the car window at the split-foyer, tidy house we shared together for many years as a young family. That house still brings many different emotions, from sadness to wonder to happiness of having the privilege to dwell and dream there. We weren't a model of perfection, but I had it good in a home of love and took it for granted, as we all do as kids.

Yet, it was the area surrounding the neighborhood, once all woods where I liked to hike and write in my journal that made me long for simpler times. My Mom packed me a peanut butter sandwich and sent me on my way for a few long hours. Time ticked by slowly; I miss that. The tall, tree-covered hills where I first began appreciating my need for quiet and solitude, and writing out my thoughts and feelings on blank pages, is paved over now with large, modern homes stretching into the skies of my childhood day dreams and schemes I once enjoyed alone at that place.

Dad drove on to show me more new neighborhoods built up behind the high school, where I graduated in 1985. These areas were once farm fields stretching out as far as I could see. I ran for exercise along

the road past rows of corn and wondered what was next for me after I left home at 18. Who knew?

Water and Montgomery, streets you need to take to get anywhere and everywhere in Sparta, have been widened and repaired through a project that required a commitment of dollars and time. I understand that it was an inconvenience for a while, but that's part of getting things done. It looks great.

The downtown, the hub of any progressive community, appears renewed and revitalized. I want to spend more time there someday soon.

I also felt a sense of admiration when we drove through Sparta's two business parks filled with thriving companies, most of which I've never heard about before this year. All of the new and improved parks where my parents, now as grandparents, enjoy spending time with their grandchildren must bring a sense of pride for Sparta. Most impressive is the park on 100 acres along the La Crosse River with walking trails and a band shell.

The tour continued with new elementary schools and the new middle school passing by out of my window. The municipal swimming pool and the ballparks remained oddly the same. That pool, where I "lived" with friends during my summers, is one area that surprisingly hasn't changed yet. I didn't feel so old, as I looked at the

high dive. Again, I thought about my bicycle. How I rode it across town from Circle Drive to the pool, and safely back again day after day. I don't even allow my daughters to walk a couple of blocks by themselves, let alone bike across town. Times have changed, but I haven't in the most important ways. I still value family, faith, and hard work, all instilled in me as I grew up in Sparta.

Beyond that tour with Dad and Mom, I spent time in the new St. Patrick's School this fall. I took my fifth-grader there to play a volleyball match. I was amazed at all of the "luxuries" these current St. Pat's students enjoy, from a large gymnasium to spacious, bright classrooms. The modern school stands in stark contrast to the older building across the street, where I attended from third through eighth grades. I posed my youngest daughter in front of my former grade school and snapped a picture of her with my digital camera. I'm told the school will be torn down soon, and I wanted a photograph to remember it. As I've learned from my tour, the town will keep changing and growing each year. I need to keep a piece of yesterday a while longer, even if it's in my photo album.

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