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Emotional Eclipses and Pilgrimages

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Emotional Eclipses and Pilgrimages

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Wednesday May 1, 2024

By Pam Sherman

"A journey becomes a pilgrimage as we discover, day by day, that the distance traveled is less important than the experience gained." - Ernest Kurtz

April was an incredible month for eclipses and pilgrimages that captivated the world and changed me personally.

I will always remember the feeling of awe and wonder that came over me as darkness descended upon our home the day of the solar eclipse. Standing in the front yard with my neighbors dotting the lawns around us as the atmosphere turned cold, the birds went silent, and the solar-powered evening lights blinked on, was truly magical. It felt like the whole world stopped to look up.

Thousands had made the pilgrimage to Rochester, New York, where we live because of our prime placement along the eclipse path. And yes, many were disappointed by the cloud cover obscuring the eclipse as it moved along its path (I mean Rochester in April, come on).

But in that moment of the total eclipse I realized, as with all things in life, it is all about perspective. It can be cloudy with a chance of nothing, or beautiful with a chance of everything. You can focus on the disappointment, or you can bask in the glow of a unique

moment for the world. I was so happy to be standing in my own front yard, right at home even with the cloud cover gaining a new perspective about the power of a moment of quiet in a world that is full of noise.

And while most of North America was making pilgrimages to cities within the path, I'd also just returned from my own pilgrimage to Dayton, Ohio, the day before the eclipse where I attended the biennial Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop. Basking in the glow and light of a few days with hundreds of writers, experts and the Bombeck family left me with a feeling of awe similar to what I felt in the moments of darkness that descended upon the sky a few days later.

What prompted the pilgrimage was my deep connection to Erma Bombeck. When I was first asked to write my Suburban Outlaw® column, I researched other columnists for inspiration. I read Anna Quindlen, Anita Diamant, Cintra Wilson and even Tom Shales and Tony Kornheiser. But it was Erma Bombeck, the iconic humor columnist, who was my true inspiration. As I started to research her life and what she accomplished, I became incredibly moved by her life and her writing — often laughing and crying during the same column. She changed the world with her humor, storytelling and activism for women's equality. She taught us that words could make us laugh, cry and learn. And she did it prolifically for over 30 years, never missing a deadline.

I vowed to tell stories from my cornfield that would uplift, engage and connect to my audience. And inspired by Erma, I did it for 15 amazing years.

My own life was changed again by Erma when in 2018 I was asked to return to the stage after 13 years to perform in the one-woman show, "Erma Bombeck: At Wit's End," at Geva Theatre. Little did we know how beloved Erma Bombeck was until that production sold so well we ended up bringing it back the following year. We started traveling around the country performing to sold-out audiences before the pandemic shut us down, finally returning to the Cleveland Play House in the summer of 2023 to a hugely successful run a few hours from where Erma started her column in Dayton, Ohio.

Her work and legacy are so beloved that every two years for over 20 years the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop at the University of Dayton completely sells out in a few hours. This year when I read that the keynotes included my writing heroes Anna Quindlen, Zibby Owens and Jacquelyn Mitchard, I finally decided to go. Having retired the Suburban Outlaw® column in 2020, my mission was to soak up the love of Erma, meet her family and investigate why others feel so strongly about her work and legacy.

Upon landing in Dayton I drove directly to the University of Dayton library to see a special exhibition about the life of Erma Bombeck. Alone in the gallery, which included her handwritten notes, videos and her iconic typewriter, I started to cry as I realized I was standing on the campus where she first heard the words, "You can write." As the conference

kicked off with a dinner I was surprised when the video I had recorded late at night about what the workshop means to me was aired prompting everyone I met from that moment on to call me “Erma.”

I loved how Anna Quindlen eloquently spoke about Erma Bombeck, the trailblazer. Zibby Owens shared that Erma Bombeck’s writing got her through being a mom in the early days of motherhood. Jacquelyn Mitchard spoke beautifully about Erma and her own writing journey, sharing that the “act of writing is not complete until the reader takes your hand.”

I met so many writers who were there to hone their writing, learn about the business of writing, and who were inspired by Erma. I took classes about fearless writing with Bill Kenower and about how to get people to read your writing with Jane Friedman and Eva Lesko Natiello. And, best of all, I spent time with Jane Condon, a virtual friend from TheLi.st, a network we both belong to, though I'd never met her. She was leading the "Erma’s Got Talent" Comedy Show.

On the final morning of my pilgrimage, I decided to take a drive to see the historical landmark home where Erma Bombeck wrote her column. As I was taking pictures outside the house on a quiet leafy suburban street, the owner came out and asked me if I was a member of the Bombeck family. “Sort of...” I replied. She was lovely and ended up taking pictures of me in front of the house.

And then I drove directly to the cemetery where Bill and Erma are buried. I sat on a bench and thought about how much Erma had helped me grow. Reading her made me a better writer, and playing her has made me a better person.

I ended my pilgrimage to my own personal Erma Eclipse by spending time with the Bombeck family who have supported the the workshop since its inception. As I left for the airport, Betsy Bombeck yelled after me, “Goodbye Mom.”

— Pam Sherman

Pam Sherman is a writer, actor, leadership consultant and recovering lawyer whose story of ditching her day job as a lawyer to pursue her dream as an actress was featured in *People* magazine. Her portrayal of Erma Bombeck in the one-woman show "Erma Bombeck: At Wit’s End" has played to sold-out audiences and broke box-office records around the country.