



Transformation

By Tasha Walsh

Change is hard. And transformation is a 'change in form': a change in identity, in a way of thinking and behaving; a change in character with deep and far reaching effects. Often, we are presented with transformational opportunities that we might not "choose" to accept, but we can choose how we respond to them. Reminiscent of Darwin's theory, the saying "adapt or die", implies that to resist change is to threaten one's existence. At the same time, transformative change usually threatens existence as we know it. Yet, this type of change can allow for a richer existence in a new form when approached with a sense of willingness and curiosity. During the fall of 2006, the Rockbridge County High School Wildcats Football Team presented our community, and me, with a transformative opportunity.

I never imagined it would happen, and many of those who know me have been surprised, but I have transformed into a football mom that year. I've been a soccer mom for years. All my kids have played soccer with our local recreation organization, and my husband coached for several years. We really enjoyed those Saturday mornings; the sight of clumps of kids following a black & white moving orb was always entertaining, and watching the skill level develop as they grew was exciting to see. A soccer mom is one thing; I mean that makes me part of a bonafide voting block, but a football mom?

My oldest son was a sophomore at Rockbridge County High School that year, and the previous summer he told us that he wanted to try out for the football team, even though he's never played. He's been the goalie on the JV soccer team for the past two years, but football? My husband was all for it, he played football in high school, and watches college and NFL whenever he gets the chance. But, I have to admit, when our son came home with the summer practice schedule, I was a bit dismayed.

I wasn't very good at sports when I was young. I was one of those kids who was always the last one picked at recess, and as I got older the sports teams always seemed like exclusive clubs. I was definitely in the "out" group. I became one of those drama & music kids in high school, and had the experience of feeling looked down on by the all the 'jocks'. Don't get me wrong, some of my friends were jocks, and I've always enjoyed watching the Super Bowl and have been heard singing "Hail to the Redskins...". When I was in high school I went to all the home games and in college there were very few

tailgates I missed, and I usually ended up yelling in the stands for our team. But I found the game hard to keep up with and I still don't understand all the rules.

Wanting to be a supportive parent, and appreciating that this would be a learning experience for me, I backed it as much as I could. But I was really resistant to accepting this new thing in my life. I mean, why does football seem so all consuming? Isn't it dangerous? What about dinner time? What about our Friday nights? This could potentially change MY life in a way I'm not sure I'm ready for! My reaction seemed silly yet was typical of someone faced with a transformative opportunity. It was a combination of 'fear of the unknown' and 'protect the future' with a dose of 'resentment from the past' mixed in for good measure.

We often let a combination of fear, defensiveness and resentment stop us from embracing something new. It's a natural reaction to a threat – our brains are built that way. For men this is the "fight or flight" response, for women this shows up as the "gather and tend" effect. But in order to grow, we need to move beyond that initial fear response, checking out issues essential to our safety, and test out new ways of interaction and existence.

Rockbridge County, where I've lived all of my adult life, opened up a consolidated high school in 1992. On a personal level, I only had one 2 year old child at that time, so I didn't have a strong emotional investment in the issues and opinions being expressed. My focus was more on getting used to diapers, daycare, and balancing the working mom role. Professionally, however, I worked with the schools, and remember well the dialogue and debate that went on.

Rockbridge County is a rural county in the mountains of Virginia. Prior to the 1990s there were three high schools, one at either end of the county and one in the middle which was jointly run with the City of Lexington. There is another small city within the county borders, Buena Vista, that had its own school system and wasn't interested in joining the conversation. These had been the communities' schools for decades. There was a healthy dose of rivalry between the schools, and a not so healthy dose of stereotyping about "those snobby city kids" and "those redneck farm kids'.

As Rockbridge County and Lexington City talked about consolidating the three schools into one, there were concerns about transportation, job security, kids mixing with kids from 'the other side' of the county. How would the kids blend? What about the teachers? How would the bus system work? There were many questions concerns, and adjustments to be made. People were very tentative, yet stayed open through the years of planning and preparation. Moving past the initial resistance, this transformation led to a stronger school which is able to provide many more opportunities to the students, faculty, and diverse communities from Vesuvius to Collierstown.

Our community had united through change in other situations. But often it's been fleeting, like when a movie production comes to town. Or in response to a tragedy, like the floods that hit our area in past decades, or the fatal pile-ups on Interstate 81. But that football season was something that everyone could get behind in a positive way. Some were impacted just a little, through the "How 'bout those 'Cats?" conversations that occurred everywhere. Others joined the "Cat Pack", the roving group of fans that

followed the team to the away games during the regular season, and grew as the team won in the playoffs for the very first time and the season continued. It was a noticeable change; the entire county was claiming this team as their own and joining in the excitement.

The transformation for me became more secure as I watched my son put his heart into practice and thrive on the defensive line. We adjusted to a later dinner and not planning too far ahead for weekend events. I endured the risks and educated myself about offsides, holding calls and other rules. I got to know the fantastic coaching staff, helped cook meals for the team, and eventually transformed from a nervous, hesitant mother to an enthusiastic supporter; complete with clothing, gear, and a decorated van. I was a football mom and a Wildcat fan!

For residents of Rockbridge County and Lexington, our transformation became more cemented as the excitement of the Wildcat winning streak spread and 'our boys' moved on to the playoffs. As we traveled to Winchester, Staunton, Fredericksburg, and finally to the State Championship Game in Lynchburg, I realized a transformation had taken place. Our team lost the State Championship by 1 point in the last minute of the game, but we were no longer from Raphine, Glasgow, Lexington or Goshen. We were from Rockbridge County and we were Wildcat fans!