

Writing Our Lives 2020



Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
at Auburn University

Auburn, Alabama

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Writing Through a Pandemic

2020-2021

Terry C. Ley

For the first time in fifteen years, Writing Our Lives was not a curriculum offering for members of OLLI at Auburn during the Spring 2020 term while we were trying to decide how to carry on with our memoir-writing class during the pandemic.

As instructor, I hoped that the forty or fifty seasoned adults who normally enroll in the class would fill some of their “down time” by writing their life stories. I suggested that they consider keeping journals or diaries during what would undoubtedly be a historic period, and several of them met that challenge. When I invited them to contribute to this packet, several writers submitted the pieces that you can read here. You will see excerpts from journals in several different forms and stand-alone pieces related to the pandemic in a variety of ways. Some wrote nearly every day; others wrote occasionally. One decided to write poems that emerged from ideas springing from her sheltering at home!

Like many others, eventually we turned to Zoom as a means of teaching and learning, and we found it a reasonably productive, but temporary substitute for face-to-face instruction. We look forward to our return to our former home, Pebble Hill in Auburn, where we enjoyed academic and social fellowship that is hard to duplicate on-line. Meanwhile, several members of OLLI at Auburn continue to record their impressions during these unique and challenging times.

COVID Journal Entry

September 19, 2020

Wendy Cleveland

It's interesting to read about people's hobbies during the pandemic. Since it began during the spring and continued through the summer, there have been many opportunities to do projects around the house and yard. In the first few weeks I noticed piles of brush stacked curbside in our neighborhood and around town. Home Depot and Lowe's were doing a booming business as people bought wood and added decks or patios, outdoor spaces where people could safely congregate.

Gardening became a huge hit as people decided to grow their own vegetables, so they built raised beds and planted seeds or seedling plants, similar to what people did in WW II when Victory Gardens became popular. The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reports, "Six months later, many people are admitting defeat" as insects moved on to tomatoes or deer moved in and ate the squash. Using a kiddie pool for a garden spot may have contributed to failure, or perhaps an abundance of clay soil with lousy drainage resulted in wilted output. 'My tomatoes look like a Dr. Suess plant,' said Doni Chamberlain from California. She netted three tomatoes, enough for 'the world's smallest, most pathetic caprese salad.'"

Inside, people took to baking, with banana bread one of the favorites. What better way to use those soggy, overripe bananas. In the early days of the

pandemic there was a 647% spike in yeast sales, but as of August 29 that

number plummeted to only 82%. Women who spent time in the kitchen were also dying their hair roots, working jigsaw puzzles, and knitting scarves. Lately their sewing machines are silent, collecting dust as the predilection for domesticity has waned and/or many of those originally quarantined have returned to the workplace.

With hair salons and barber shops reopened, there's not as much demand for Flowbee, advertised as "the best vacuum haircutting system on the market" (WSJ). This gem allows you to hold a mirror in one hand and cut your hair with a vacuum attachment in the other. Growing hair instead seems to be the better alternative, and at zoom meetings you may not initially recognize someone with long hair of a different color. When a young woman from Idaho was bored staying at home, she decided to dye her blond hair bright pink, but things didn't go as planned. Instead of pink, the dye turned the roots of her hair bright orange. A conditioner turned the tips pink, so then she was two-toned. After three trips to two hair stylists and \$1200, she decided to go with jet black, which doesn't go well with her pale skin. She states, "I honestly look like a vampire" (WSJ). Using boxed hair dye can often turn out poorly, so people often resort to wearing hats while the dye grows out. One woman observed, "My hair is so deep black, it looks like I'm wearing a bowl on my head. I'm going to

have bad hair for at least another year” (WSJ).

In April, puzzle sales rose 370% in April, which is expected to continue as winter temperatures send people back indoors. Interestingly, the most popular puzzle scenes reflect travel destinations or the comforting scenes of “your cottage by the lake, and the ‘she’ shack in the back of the garden” (WSJ).

When the lockdown began the Sunday *New York Times* created a new section called At Home that includes a daily selection of virtual talks, movies, interviews, museum talks for the coming week. Helpful suggestions are given for such topics as preventing chaos in the morning, repairing the car, troubleshooting distance learning, choosing the right yard tools, and maintaining peace in school pods. Each week there are five recipes to try, three crossword puzzles to solve, and one creative paper project to complete.

One of my ways of keeping busy is reading. Since March I’ve read 31 books. I’ve completed a Santa Claus cross stitch and have begun one with an Amish scene depicting the Lancasater County town of Bird in Hand. I’m almost finished with a baby blanket for our niece who’s due in January. During the spring and summer, I wrote several poetry prompts for the OLLI Daily, but my creative juices dried up a bit, and it’s only recently that I’ve managed to produce a few new poems. I’m hoping that resuming OLLI classes will stimulate more writing. For months I was unable to exercise at the gym and began walking outside three miles every day. Then it got blistering hot, so I took a chance and joined a new gym recommended to me by trusted friends. Being physically active has made a big difference in my mental attitude. Just recently I met with friends on the porch of a new coffee shop, where we shared our COVID experiences, book titles, and family news. More than ever, I am grateful for the personal connections that give my world some degree of normalcy once again.



Coronavirus Journal

April 13, 2020

Charlotte LaRoux

Easter Sunday, 2020, will be a holy day we will remember for the rest of our lives. I miss the joyful collaboration of the Flower Guild team working to beautify Holy Trinity Episcopal Church on the Saturday before Easter. I miss the precious children, hands held by loving parents, entering the narthex of the church. Each child carries a blossom picked from their home garden. They approach the chicken wire cross and select a bare spot. They flower the cross, and in the end, it is wrapped in floral profusion. It's a beautiful tradition, a gift from the young children to their elders. I miss the choir at Holy Trinity and the traditional hymns sung in full-throated melody by all of us, the congregation. I miss the readings, the sermon, and unity of love as we share the peace. I miss the triumphant, "Alleluia! Alleluia!" at the end of the service. Most of all, I miss the people. Going to church on Easter Sunday is a communal celebration of hope, love, and faith, and sharing the experience with a community is a joy.

This Easter Sunday, Bill Wilson and I spent the morning in his apartment watching a video of the Easter rites from Holy Trinity on a Smart TV. Watching remotely is certainly a pun. For all their efforts, the clergy and two choir members could not bring the joy of the day to life. Instead of a service resonating in the manner of Handel's *Messiah*, it felt like a 1/64th note: a hemi, demi, semi quaver. After the service was over, Bill accessed a piece of music on his TV he wanted to share. It was the *Adagio for Spring* by Samuel Barber. The piece is hauntingly mournful, a dirge. I wept. I felt as if it were Good Friday, not Easter Sunday. I wept for my loneliness and for the people who are sick and dying. I wept for those who have died and for their families. I wept for our nation and for the world, and I could not stop.



Clover Days

Sandy Halperin

My nose remembered before I saw it. The grassy sweet fragrance floated to me on a gentle breeze. The field of clover was in the Davis Arboretum on AU's campus. I discovered it on the first of many walks there during the coronavirus social distancing mandate. On that mid-March morning I was surprised at every turn by splashes of red, purple, white, and orange strewn among chartreuse leaves poking out of their branches. It was like strolling through an Impressionist painting. A myriad of flower scents was flowing out over the brown gravel paths winding around and through the sanctuary. But it was the large patch of clover that stopped me in my tracks. I just breathed that honey-like smell in, in great big, slow breaths! A smile of recognition brightened my face.

In an instant, time stopped for me. I was whisked away to my grandmother's backyard on a summer afternoon when I am maybe six or seven. She is resting on the patio reading the latest issue of *Readers' Digest*, and I'm sitting in a carpet of green and white clover at the patio's edge. The sun is waning. The temperature is cooling down. And the sweet smell of clover is intense. I am making clover chains: the tips of my little fingers are nimbly encircling the slender green stem of one flower around the little cotton ball bud of another and securing it with a knot; then taking that flower's stem, wrapping it around yet another bud and knotting it. I continue this arduous task carefully—even daintily—creating a chain long enough to go over my head, securing the last stem to the first flower. I make more necklaces, crowns, and bracelets for me, Mama, and my doll. Clover finger rings don't work because the bud always breaks off my finger when I move my hands!

I recall that just before it is time for Mama to go inside to start dinner, I adorn her with a necklace. She wears it with pride as she gingerly places her red apron bib over her head and under her newly minted necklace. Tying the apron around her waist, she winks at me and begins to gather her utensils for making dinner.

Now my life is so very different from those slow and easy days. Aside from the arboretum, there are very few places where clover thrives around where I live. But I think the next time I walk by that clover field, I will stop and sit in it, deeply breathing in the sweet fragrance, and make a clover chain necklace—maybe even a bracelet—to honor those summer afternoons that were filled with peace and simple delights.



Breaking the Silence of the Pandemic

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

My grandmother heard the sounds of silence when her 35-year-old husband died in the flu epidemic of 1918. Her small farmhouse in rural Mississippi echoed with the emptiness and loneliness that she must have felt at being left with two babies who would never know their father. The cries of her babies broke the silence bringing her back to the reality of managing a farm alone and giving her courage to face the future.

The Great Pandemic of 2020 has brought the eerie sounds of silence to our world. The nightly news shows' footage of cities normally bustling with everyday activity look like ghost towns. The traffic jams of metropolitan areas are reduced to only vehicles deemed essential. Sirens of emergency vehicles overpower the remembered street noise of yesterday. No one visits the Eiffel Tower in Paris or listens to the Pope's message in St. Peter's Square. University campuses are empty, graduation ceremonies postponed, and there are no lines to have the requisite graduation photo taken in front of an iconic building. Nursing homes have shut their doors to family members of residents in a futile effort to halt the spread of the virus. A husband's only communication with his wife is throwing her a kiss through the window of the home, and a daughter is forced to wave goodbye to her dying mother instead of comforting her by holding her hand. "Sheltering in place" has resulted in a strange quiet in suburban neighborhoods

without the hurry to get the kids off to school. The world as we knew it suddenly came to a halt.

For us, the silence of the pandemic is being broken by sounds of kindness and compassion. We hear the *ZzzzzZzzzzZzzzz* of sewing machines as face masks are being made for health care workers and other vulnerable people in the community. The local lifelong learning community has distributed more than 6,000 masks. The cheerful chirping of the bluebird, goldfinch, and cardinal serenade us at breakfast and break the monotony of "sheltering in place." A neighbor yells "Hello" at a safe distance from across the street.

My daughters, niece, and nephews broke the silence of separation by staging a Zoom reunion of six cousins from Stuttgart, Germany, to Miyazaki, Japan, and spanning seventeen time zones. Two Red Tail F-16 fighter jets staged a flyover to tell medical personnel at the hospital how much they are appreciated.

All these great, small things give us hope that a return to a more stable lifestyle is on the horizon. Breaking the silence of the pandemic on a personal level may help us weather the storm of predicted economic upheaval.

Thoughts While Sheltering in Place

Terry C. Ley

I have kept an “occasional journal” during our pandemic isolation, which means that I wrote in it only when I had a thought that I wanted to play with and commit to paper. I didn’t date the entries, and sometimes several days drifted by without my finding such a thought! Here are some of those thoughts.

Watching older folks adjust to life-by-Zoom has been both frustrating and entertaining. Sometimes Zoom meetings we were set to attend early-on never got off the ground—postponed, canceled, due to technical difficulties. Even those that did were usually delayed by complications related to volume, muting and unmuting, and strange lighting. I don’t like to sit too close to my computer screen during Zoom meetings—a most unflattering, close-up-and-personal view. On the other hand, I don’t want to sit across the room either. My agemates make me smile when they fiddle with the controls on their computer and come so close to the camera that I can count the hairs in their noses.

Fine arts folks have stepped forward throughout this pandemic to entertain us and to provide healthy diversion for us—and, I think, for themselves. Among them are Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musicals on YouTube, Alabama Shakespeare Festival’s *22 Homes* filmed monologues, filmed concerts by the Atlanta and Boston symphonies, and choral, instrumental, and jazz productions via Zoom from the entertainers’ homes. A favorite: three hundred musicians from fifteen countries performing “You’ll Never Walk Alone.”

I’m drinking too much coffee.

Except for rainy days we have tried to walk outdoors every day. We favor the Town Creek Cemetery, the art museum, the Gogue Center, or the campus. Those are big spaces where we seldom see more than a handful of people and seldom feel it necessary to wear our masks. At the cemetery we get to “visit” quite a few old friends and visit our own condo in the columbarium. We walk around the lake at the museum, sometimes stopping to enjoy the sculptures or say hello to the turtles. We walk less than a mile most days, but that’s pretty good considering that two months ago Mari was using a walker around the house, then a cane, now...nothing. She says she is training for our Road Scholar tour of San Antonio, now rescheduled for next April.

Although I’m turning out to be a conservative where sheltering-in-place is concerned, I went to the Campus Barber Shop at one of my first opportunities. I had not had so much hair on my head in many years, but it was beginning to make me itch and looked, even to me, a little scraggly. Only Carl, Bubba, and one customer were in the shop when I arrived, and Carl’s chair was empty, so I got in. I wore my mask, Carl wore a mask and a plastic shield, and he managed to cut my hair without asking me to remove my mask! Although we both talked during the process, I doubt that we understood very much that

was filtered through our masks. I always tip my barber, but I was especially generous this time, so relieved was I.

Why is it that my face itches so much more than it ever has now that we're not supposed to touch our faces?

Our investment in an online birdwatching course with the Cornell Ornithology Lab Bird Academy has turned out to be a good one. We make our way through lessons together when we choose to. So far, our favorite feature has been The Bird Wall, birds painted on a world map on two walls of the Academy. We click on birds that strike our fancy, read well written "personality sketches" of them, listen to thirty-second recordings of their songs, and click on the next bird. The class and our being here so much of the time have heightened our interest in watching the birds that come to feed in our yard.

I started hanging out suet blocks about six months ago, and they draw larger birds than our hanging bird seed feeder does. We often see three varieties of woodpeckers, thrashers, cardinals, and bluejays...and at least one feisty, persistent (and quite bright) squirrel! Whenever I see him atop the feeder, munching on what should be the woodpeckers' fare, I dash out the patio door, shouting and clapping my hands. I get a lot of my exercise this way! The squirrel goes into exile—until I'm looking the other way.

While folding our week's laundry today it occurred to me how well my wardrobe still reflects my level of activity: seven pair of underwear, seven pairs of white socks, seven pairs of shorts, six tee-shirts, and one short-sleeved, buttoned shirt. I wore the buttoned shirt when I dressed up on Wednesday, when I was to appear in a class on Zoom.

I'm glad that several thousand local folks demonstrated at Toomer's Corner on Saturday ("Black lives matter!")—and was pleased that no windows were broken, no one injured, no one arrested. Peaceful demonstration. Mari would like to have been there, but I cautioned her against it. "It's not a good place for an eighty-year-old woman to be right now," I said. Later (the next day!) she countered, "Who's an eighty-year-old woman?" Technical win for her, until August 12.

We traveled to Italy last week. While we examined the photos that I took while we were there in 2002 we decided it might be fun to reread the journal that we kept there. Chatting about our happiest moments of the trip emerged from those activities and made us want to return. That took us to YouTube, where we did indeed return, virtually, to Rome, Florence, the Amalfi Coast. We hated to say *arrivederci* when it was over. Where will we go next? France? Britain? Nova Scotia? Our invitations await us, in those photo albums on the top shelf in our family room.



A Pandemic of Our Own

Ken Autrey

My mother was born in 1918, the year of what was called “the Spanish Flu,” which eventually killed an estimated 675,000 in the U.S. and fifty million in the world. My father had been born about six months earlier. Until now, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, I had never thought of my parents’ beginnings as simultaneous with the deadly virus that began in spring 1918, waned briefly, and after two resurgences, ended about a year later. I don’t know of anyone in either of their families who died that year, but given that one out of three reportedly caught the flu, surely at least some in their extended families got sick.

The other two global traumas affecting my parents’ lives were The Great Depression and World War II. Mom and Dad were old enough to experience and vividly remember those eras, and the stories they told involved great sacrifice and endurance. Although I don’t know of any men in either of my parents’ families lost or even seriously wounded in World War II, most of the men of fighting age back then became a part of the war effort. That included my father, who served as an Ensign in the Navy near the end of the war in the Pacific. The personal and societal sacrifices during the war were as severe as the economic privation felt during the Depression years.

While those two events challenged and changed American life in dramatic ways, the pandemic of 1918 had cost half again as many deaths among Americans as World War II but does not occupy a prominent place in our cultural memory. This may be partly because those in my grandparents’ generation, who experienced it so directly, died long ago. And those in my parents’ generation, young when the trauma hit, are themselves mostly gone.

We may be a century away from that wrenching pandemic, but still it seems striking that the copious accounts of World War I, which ended in 1918, dwarf the documentary record of the flu pandemic, when worldwide, the virus killed more people than that war. Alfred W. Crosby’s book, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic*, published in 2003, investigates this historical myopia.

I recently watched the Steven Soderbergh film, *Contagion*, which features a roll call of prominent actors: Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow, Lawrence Fishburne, Kate Winslet, Jude Law, and others. It’s an engaging, sometimes gripping account of an imagined pandemic, although I don’t remember hearing much about it when it came out in 2011. It did not make Roger Ebert’s top fifty movies of that year. Clearly, U.S. Government officials attempting to manage the response to our current pandemic also paid little attention to this film, which anticipates so much of what we are now experiencing: the need for social distancing, the societal fatigue with distancing, the desperate quest for a vaccine, an overburdened medical system, the problem of sorting out truth and fiction in possible cures, and so on. Sanjay Gupta, who played himself in the film explaining the medical realities of the virus, these days may be seen filling the same role on actual CNN broadcasts. Life imitates art imitates science.

I wonder whether our collective memory will serve civilization better the next time around. If another pandemic rears its ugly head in 2120, will governments be any better at responding? Or will other traumas (climate change? war? intergalactic conflict?) eclipse any emphasis on pandemic preparedness?

Amid the wrenching medical and economic turmoil recounted in the current news, Janne and I mostly stay comfortably at home, banking our monthly retirement and social security checks and putting on our face masks to go food shopping once a week. We watch a large number of couples, families, and young people walk, run, or cycle by on the street or sidewalk each day. Once or twice a week, we order takeout from a restaurant, doing our small part to keep local businesses alive. I planted a garden, knowing that this year we'll be home instead of traveling when the tomatoes ripen. Occasionally, we Face Time with our daughters and grandkids, whose home schooling is about to give way to summer vacation, whatever that transition might mean this year. We've lost an old friend to coronavirus and have known several others who have come through it. As retirees, we haven't had our lives upended, though we ache for those who are suddenly jobless, hungry, ill, or mourning the loss of a family member.

Surely, even if a vaccine is developed within the year, life here and elsewhere will change permanently in certain ways, though who can say how? Covid-19 is insidious, but there's nothing cinematic or overtly dramatic about it. The damage comes quietly, cloistered inside hospital walls, eating away at shuttered businesses, seeping into homes where the cupboards are all but bare. Any earthshaking that occurs is manufactured: folks gathering to applaud and honk car horns to honor our heroic hospital workers when they change shifts—or a deafening flyover by a couple F16s for the same purpose. Mostly, though, our world is quieter now; we may welcome the decrease in pollution and traffic and savor the long, uncluttered hours for reading or gardening. But tectonic shifts are deep and lasting. The life we're now living may not merit a blockbuster movie, but we need to find ways to let future generations know what we're going through and what we miss about the pre-pandemic life that seems to be slipping away from us.



“Thank You, Dr. Seuss!”

Gail McCullers

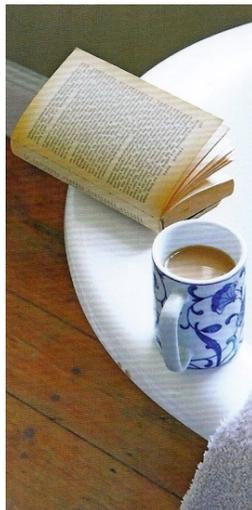
While taking advantage of the current social distancing, Dr. Seuss' book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* has been my focus for the last few months.

I have been to the Olympic National Forest in Washington, to the mountains of North Carolina, to Harper's Ferry, to Charleston and the Georgia mountains. I was there when Lacey inherited the old family homeplace, saw a little girl learn to speak again, spent time with Lauren when she learned how her husband had died, and was surprised when Molly discovered she had been kidnapped as a child.

Then, I found myself across the ocean, knowing again about the terrible horrors of WWII and the rule of Hitler with his power. I was involved in family tragedies, survival stories, destruction of cities with bombs, children being adopted by Americans, and even love stories full of dedication and hope. So, I was in New South Wales, places in Italy, in France, in Bulgaria, and in the Alps of Switzerland. While in Berlin, I traveled in time to the future with a couple and also met Elizabeth, Neven, and Bobby in Bulgaria.

Most recently I have been to Mars and spent several days with Mark as he waited there for the space agencies from Russia and America to come and rescue him. It was cold on Mars, which was covered with barren hills and sandstorms. We ate potatoes that Mark had grown. Coming home, I realized I could never live there. That planet did not have a Dominos, Papa John's, or even a Pizza Palace!

“Thank you, Dr. Seuss! I went to a lot of places, just like you promised!”



The Last Lot in the Cemetery

Betty Corbin

Oh, Jean! I thought you would live a long life like our parents. But when you were only 71, I was in the cemetery sitting a few feet from your flower-covered casket. It was May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, so I sat at least six feet away from other attendees at the graveside service. Due to the pandemic, we had to observe social distancing. I invited only a few close friends and family members to the service. I didn't want people to get sick. There was no service inside the church as we would have had during normal times. There were no hugs at a time when I needed them so much.

Over the previous thirteen months, my purpose in life had been helping Jean. This challenging time began on April 10, 2019, when she had open heart surgery to replace one faulty heart valve and repair a second one. A week later the doctor said she could go home. Only three days after arriving home, we called 911, and she was taken to the emergency room. She was admitted to the hospital in critical condition with fluid around her lungs, making it difficult for her to breathe. As she struggled to survive, she was put on a ventilator and later received a tracheostomy and a feeding tube. In May she transferred to Columbus Specialty Hospital for a month to get weaned from the ventilator, then to Regional Rehabilitation Hospital in Phenix City, then to Capitol Hill Healthcare in Montgomery for more rehabilitation, then in mid-August to the long-term care unit at Arbor Springs in Opelika, where she was closer to home.

During all these changes I visited her almost every day and posted frequent updates on caringbridge.org to keep friends and family up-to-date. Early in her illness we started a daily devotional practice. I would read the day's devotionals from *Upper Room* and *Daily Guideposts*, and then I would pray with her. I would ask for healing and guidance and thank God for the many friends and family who were visiting, praying, sending cards, and calling. We continued these daily devotionals until the day she died.

Since we had many issues with Jean's medical care at Arbor Springs, in March 2020, we decided the best option was to move her to my house with caregivers from a homecare provider. We also had support from the hospital's home health group, which would provide twice a week occupational and physical therapy and a weekly visit from a nurse. With this level of care, we hoped she could get well enough to move back to her own house or to assisted living.

Overall, things went well when Jean moved in. We set up a TV in a bedroom adjacent to the one where she slept. She and her caregiver would spend most of the day there, and I would spend time with her as well. However, Jean was weak and had problems eating and often vomited. She was always tired and would sleep from 6:30 p.m. until 7:30 a.m., take a nap from 1:00-2:00 p.m., and still ask if she could go back to bed. The caregiver helped her bathe and dress, gave medications, and prepared her meals.

Meal preparation was easy since meals mostly consisted of a nutrition drink named Boost, milk, and cheese.

A few days after Jean moved in with me, some of my habits changed due to Jean and due to the pandemic. I decided to quit playing golf. Since Jean's hemoglobin was low and she was so tired, I didn't want to risk bringing home COVID-19. I didn't think she would survive it. I started having my groceries delivered, and I rarely went out except to take walks.

Unfortunately, things changed about six weeks after Jean moved in. On Wednesday, April 22, around 3:30 a.m., I heard Jean wake up and call to me. She was having trouble talking and walking and had fever. I called 911 and followed the ambulance to the hospital, arriving around 5:00 a.m. Although Jean couldn't communicate, due to COVID I couldn't go in with her. I sat alone in my car in the dark and chill until 7:00 when I went to the guard and asked if they were going to keep her. He called the nurse and told me her temperature was 102, her hemoglobin was 6 (down from 7.2 when she moved to my house and much below 11, which is normal). They had tested her for COVID, were checking her into the hospital, and that I should go home. Things seemed better that evening, when a nurse called and told me her temperature was normal and that she was walking fine with her walker.

The next morning, Thursday, the nurse called to tell me they had taken Jean to the ICU. Her blood pressure and heart rates were high and her oxygen saturation was low. Later that day she was moved from the ICU back to a regular room. Then on Friday the doctor phoned me to say she was doing better. The COVID test was negative. They had

determined she had a urinary tract infection, was on two antibiotics, was off oxygen, and might come home sometime over the weekend. Great! I was encouraged.

But she didn't come home then, and on Tuesday, five days later, I was stunned by terrible news. They had done a transesophageal echocardiogram. It showed that Jean had vegetation (an infection) on her prosthetic heart valve that was installed a year prior. Jean was crying as she told me this devastating news, and unlike me, she was a person who rarely cried. They installed a PICC line to give antibiotics, a procedure that she found frightening and painful. When the doctor phoned me that day, he told me this infection could be fatal. My heart was breaking because she had this life-threatening illness, and being unable to visit her added a new level to my grief.

On Saturday, May 2, there was more bad news. The doctor told me she had a plural effusion, fluid between the lungs and chest wall, a sign of heart failure. Her infected mitral valve was getting worse. The antibiotics weren't working. I continued to call her each morning to read the devotionals and pray. If she felt up to it, we would talk some more or I might read an inspiring article from her favorite magazines *Guideposts* and *Angels on Earth*.

On Tuesday, May 5, around noon the nurse called me and told me Jean had been crying a lot that morning. Jean and I had had our morning phone call, and I called her several more times that day. She was so short of breath that it was hard for her to talk.

On Wednesday afternoon, May 6, she was moved to hospice care at Bethany House where I could be with her. I was

there when she arrived in late afternoon. We did the devotionals and visited for a while. When I arrived at 8:00 the next morning and asked if she would like for me to read the devotionals, she said yes. But soon I could tell that she no longer realized I was there. Her breathing was shallow, and they were giving her liquid morphine. I found some traditional church music on my iPhone and played it as I stroked her hand. When the iPhone played, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me home," I knew that her time was close. She died that night at 11:30 p.m.

I had tried so hard to help Jean get better. I had taken her to so many doctors. So many of us were praying for her. But no matter how hard I try, there are some things I can fix, and some things I can't.

The next Monday, May 11, we had a graveside service. Weather was perfect. Our congregational care minister Julie and our senior minister Cory talked about Jean. Julie told how Jean was one of those people who did the work that gets little recognition, like being the treasurer of her Sunday school class and her United Methodist Women's group, and putting up the choir music after Sunday's service. Gary, the choir director, talked about Jean's dedication to the choir, and he sang "Amazing Grace" and "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

It was so hard to lose Jean, my only sibling, whom I affectionately called Baby Sister. When folks would ask us who was older, I would reply, "I was two years older when we were kids, but now that we're grown, we're the same age." Before she got sick, she lived less than ten minutes away in our childhood home, and we saw each other frequently. We would take trips together, go shopping, go out to eat and, best of all, go to all the Auburn

home football games. War Eagle! We were both big fans.

Unfortunately, a month later I would lose another beloved relative, my 102-year-old Aunt Lig. When I would get discouraged over Jean's many ups and downs, I would call Aunt Lig. I knew a conversation with her would make me feel better. She was my mother's baby sister and was like a second mother to me.

I took the speech I had made at Lig's one-hundredth birthday party, turned the present tense into past tense, did a few updates, and read it at her funeral. She had an indoor service at the funeral home in Dothan. Like Jean's service, it was by invitation only, social distancing, no hugging of my many cousins, not what she would have had in ordinary times.

In September, with the pandemic still with us, I went to the cemetery to see if Jean's grave marker had been installed. It had not. I saw where Daddy was buried in 1993 at age 89, Mama in 1999 at age ninety, my husband Carl in 2015 at age seventy, and Jean only four months before at age 71. When my husband and I moved to Auburn in 2009, I never imagined that he and Jean would be gone so soon. Now, at age 74, I saw only one lot left in our family plot, the one for me.

I always thought I would live as long as my parents, but, perhaps like Carl and Jean, I won't. So, I think I should get started on those projects I've been putting off. And I now understand, in a deeper way than ever before, that life is uncertain, life is fragile, and I'm grateful for all my days, however few or many.

Vaccine Advent Calendar

35 Days

Crystal Rogers

...for the 21 days after the first shot and the 14 days after the second shot. These suggestions can be done in any order, or substitutions can be made. The important thing is to remember your good fortune and remember that Christmas (or jailbreak day) is coming, and even though some restrictions still apply, these shots can be thought of as an anxiety reliever.

- 1) Have a celebratory drink. Beer, Coffee, diet drink, wine, cider. Just toast your good fortune.
- 2) Look out the window. See what birds or other wildlife are up to. Check for changes in plants and trees.
- 3) Call your best friend.
- 4) Read the obits, making sure you are not in there. Sometimes it's so lonely.
- 5) Look at funny or cute YouTube videos of animals. To get you started:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6EchXyieos&ab_channel=FunniestAnimalsEver.
- 6) Read the comics and Dear Abby.
- 7) Read a Psalm.
- 8) Go outside and stand barefoot in the grass. Even if it is cold. You won't freeze in a few minutes. It will help you connect to our beautiful planet and perhaps bring memories of childhood.
- 9) Walk up to the mailbox or to the street. Twice. What differences did you see?
- 10) Sort your junk drawer.
- 11) Look through your old jewelry. Remember and enjoy.
- 12) Check in the couch for lost treasures.
- 13) Throw out or start a thrift store pile with at least three articles you do not want or need. Maybe this could become a habit?
- 14) Cook your favorite soup. Or a new one.

- 15) Sit a few minutes in the sunshine and feel its warmth and see the light on your skin (a hand will do).
- 16) Go outside at night and try to see stars, the moon. Notice the shape of the trees in the dark. You may have to wait a few minutes till your eyes adjust.
- 17) Call someone you think might be lonely. It may help you more than them.
- 18) Write a list of ten blessings. (Don't forget that hoarded Snickers bar.)
- 19) Watch church on TV or computer.
- 20) Scatter some breadcrumbs to see if birds or chipmunks find them.
- 21) Send someone you have not contacted in a while an email or card or letter.
- 22) Listen for bird songs.
- 23) Dust that one place where the dust is bothering you. (No need to get carried away.)
- 24) Clean part of the bathroom. (Again, no need to go ballistic unless it inspires you.)
- 25) Read something to your companion or call someone and read them something you find inspiring.
- 26) Sort your books and see if all those are worth keeping.
- 27) Make an arrangement of live material for your bathroom.
- 28) Clean off your refrigerator door. Some of that stuff needs to go.
- 29) Sing a hymn or another song.
- 30) Dream a bit about what you will see in your favorite store when you can safely visit it.
- 31) Pet a dog or cat. It will soothe you more than the animal.
- 32) Pay attention to little things in your day. The world is full of joy. Find some.
- 33) Make up a joke. Share it or not.
- 34) Eat breakfast food for supper, or switch meals around.
- 35) Recite some poems. Nursery rhymes or vulgar limericks. Just so the memory makes you smile.

Superheroes Among Us



Adair Lara, the author of our textbook *Naked, Drunk, and Writing: Shed Your Inhibition and Craft a Compelling Memoir or Personal Essay* (Ten Speed Press, 2010), urges her readers to remember that they should remember that they are the heroes of their memoirs. To that end, I asked Writing Our Lives writers to reveal their alter-identities as superheroes. They revealed as much as they dared, needing (of course, in some cases) to guard certain elements of mystery and secrecy. Here are profiles of some of the most notorious. – Terry Ley

- **The Cat Whisperer** (aka Ralph Womer) has the ability to talk to cats (i.e., to the 1% of cats that are deaf). His partner is the invisible, ineffable cat. (Now retired, but still whispers on occasion.)
- **Word Man** (aka Bill Wilson) is famous for his vast vocabulary. He is easily recognizable in his ink-stained, powder blue smock and his green eyeshade. His nemesis is Deadline Monster.
- **Encourager-woman** (aka Betty Corbin) encourages the sick and advocates for them with healthcare providers. She wears capri pants and a casual shirt. Her nemeses include some doctors and healthcare administrators; personal caregivers are her sidekicks.
- **DogMa** (aka Cathy Buckhalt) is able to read the faces of dogs.
- **Accidental Superhero** (aka Crystal Rogers) usually wears gardening clothes, unless she is headed for a Zoom lesson. The world at large is her nemesis, which “devotes a lot of time and energy trying to thwart me.” At present she has no sidekick but is taking applications. She says, “Sometimes things turn out right in spite of me.”
- **Avian Anne** (aka Wendy Cleveland) feeds every bird in the yard and fights unscrupulous squirrels. Her costume includes scarlet feathers, a gold beak, and Skecher claws. Her sidekick, Hal at Wild Birds Unlimited, helps her minister to 52

cardinals, 36 wrens, 28 chickadees, 120 finches, 6 hummers, 4 towhees, and 2 brown thrashers.

- **Pioneer Man** (aka Ken Autrey) is able to walk through the woods without making a sound. He wears a handwoven shirt, leather breeches, and moccasins. Harsh weather and civilization are his enemies. His pet wolf Howler is his sidekick. Recently he made a blazing fire in damp woods without matches.
- **The Widow Weeds** (aka Charlotte LaRoux) cultivates weeds in her garden. She wears green garden gloves, grubby long pants, long sleeves, and a broad-brimmed hat. Her nemesis is any green lawn, lush as a thick carpet, pasteurized, treated with pesticides, as dead as the moon. Her hose, her clippers, and MiracleGro are her partners. Recently she found Monarch butterfly eggs on her milkweed!
- **Safety Queen** (aka Deb Cunningham) is a champion keeper of the rules, always fully padded, wearing helmet and jet-powered tennis shoes. All bullies are her enemies, a drone her main sidekick.
- **Fantastico** (aka Gabi Darch), who wears purple leggings and a long, flowing purple tunic (with sparkles) encourages others. Her enemies are the demons sloth, irritability, and anger. She reports no recent breakthroughs.
- **Random Prospector** (aka Ellen Sherling) sniffs out nuggets in thrift stores, often resurrecting them to renewed, appreciated purpose. Although her costume varies, she frequently wears a cross-body purse, cropped jeans, and athletic shoes—mask always in place. Shopper's Knee is her nemesis, caused by rapid running from one point to another without moving her feet. Recently she revived a \$5 find, a sad walnut chair, by recaning the seat—a remarkable triumph.
- **Disco Man** (aka Terry Ley) can identify most popular recording artists and song titles from the 40s, 50s, and 60s—and name the record labels for which they recorded. While at work he wears the white sequined jumpsuit bequeathed him by Elvis (Sun label, early, but RCA Victor, predominantly). Among Terry's nemeses are hip hop singers who snicker and roll their eyes at the mention of folks like Frank Sinatra and Rosemary Clooney. Dick Clark is his sidekick when he can get a pass and spare the time. What he hoped would be a triumph backfired a bit: Terry put a whole roomful of elderly people to sleep by playing two LPs by Mantovani's orchestra in succession.



Our Read-Like-A-Writer Scavenger Hunt

After we publish an anthology I often ask Writing Our Lives writers to read the anthology like writers, observing the effective writing practices evident in our classmates' work. Here are some examples from our most recent anthology. – Terry Ley

Titles That Intrigue and Invite Us In

- ❖ The Night I Called the Cops on Santa (Beverly Sandberg)
- ❖ Bruised Angels (Nancy Penaskovic)
- ❖ Mr. Bell and the Pyracantha Berries (Bill Lee)
- ❖ Life in Four Cups of Coffee (Ralph Womer)
- ❖ Night Passage (Bill Squires)
- ❖ Pitch! Save! Give Away! (Sandy Halperin)

Opening Sentences That Pique Our Curiosity and Draw Us In

- ❖ It was pouring rain. The kind of rain that makes you grip the steering wheel and squint through the raindrops. (Joanne Camp)
- ❖ Yeah, I'm a tricked-out craftsman style home looking for a party! (Bill Lee)
- ❖ Sycamore leaves, large as platters, brown, have fallen to the sidewalk where my mother pushes me in my stroller through them. (Charlotte LaRoux)
- ❖ The 1911 Irish census lists my paternal grandmother—Mary Ann Cahill Wilson—as “insane.” (Bill Wilson)
- ❖ Gratitude is the cream in every dish and drink life serves up. (Mary Ann Rygiel)
- ❖ “Do you pray?” I asked my friend while pouring him a fresh cup of coffee as we sat in the back booth of our favorite breakfast place. (Gerald Johnson)



Elimination of Trivium

Muhammad Ali

We are told that education is the panacea for the present-day polarization and resulting strife.

We have to understand what the term “education” means. Nowadays education means schooling for twelve years to complete high school, followed by several years of “higher education.”

What did education consist of from ancient times to the start of the Industrial Revolution? Though the details varied over time, education followed the structure established during the Greek times. It consisted of Trivium, which included logic, rhetoric, and grammar. Those who mastered these subjects could move on to Quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Note that the Trivium/Quadrivium sequence was geared towards preparing well-informed, ethical citizens with critical thinking skills. With the increasing pace of industrialization, the pressure mounted on educational institutions to prepare students ready for industry, that is, be able to “hit the ground running.” Industry did not want to spend time and money to teach skills to incoming employees to be productive. Students were expected to be educated in the skills required by the industry. It was not viable to increase the time allocated for education, since citizens were expected to be wage earners by about age twenty. So the solution was to reduce the contents of Trivium to make space for teaching industrial skills, such as engineering and programming.

Over time, logic and rhetoric were replaced by one subject, called civics, and that too was eliminated about four decades ago. So, in essence, all contents of education meant for developing good citizens were completely eliminated. The weak ethical conduct of present-day graduates has been recognized by industry, and an attempt has been made to redress the problem by adding one course in industry-specific ethics, for example, ethics in engineering and ethics in computing. Industry has also realized the deficiency of critical thinking skills among the fresh graduates entering the work force, and so courses designed for industry interests are being developed, not with the goal of developing well-rounded citizens.

Present-day education, including higher education, cannot be relied upon to produce good ethical, rational citizens even with the inclusion of industry-specific ethics and critical thinking courses. There is need for rethinking the entire education process so that citizens are capable of differentiating between information and misinformation, critically analyzing statements for fallacies, presenting their opinions in a rational manner, and resolving disagreements in a non-confrontational manner.

Dad's Storytelling

Ken Autrey

In my preschool years, my family lived in Hare Apartments, barely adequate post-World War II housing for the flood of Auburn University faculty hires in the late forties. The flimsy one-story units had small front yards. On warm evenings, my dad, a faculty newcomer, settled into a lawn chair and told stories to neighborhood kids sprawled on the patchy grass at his feet. His words rose into the evening like sparks from a popping fire. His voice, nurtured in Louisiana, sharpened by grad school in Iowa, enriched by two years in the Navy, held us enthralled until bedtime.

Dad's stories were always true—or at least we believed they were: how as a kid he once tied a string around a coral snake, dragging it home to show his mother, somehow avoiding its toxic bite; how he and his classmates were nearly kicked out of college for throwing an unpopular professor into a pond; and how his Navy ship was so crowded they had to bunk him in the mental ward. He said that before the ship left the Norfolk harbor, family guests were allowed on board to say their goodbyes. Dad was unpacking his bags in his cramped quarters when some woman saw the "Mental Ward" sign, peered in and exclaimed, "They haven't even left yet, and they've already found a crazy one!"

These evening interludes imprinted me with the transfixing power of stories. Dad's easygoing delivery, the outdoor setting, and the communal listening by kids in the neighborhood left

me with great respect for the power of language and the urge to tell my daughters and grandkids my own stories, some of which are true.

Dad was not usually all that talkative, but embarking on a good story always fired him up. Such was the case when I grew older and he became one of our Boy Scout leaders. When our dinner of spaghetti or stew was over, the dishes scrubbed more or less clean, we gathered around the campfire, threw on another log, and Dad would start in, "Did I ever tell you about the time...?" We leaned into his narrative and drifted off to a Louisiana farm, a fishing trip to the Okefenokee Swamp, or an Asian port where entire families lived on small fishing boats called *sampans*.

"After the war had just ended with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," he once began, "our troop transport ship was anchored in the bay of Sasebo, Japan. We weren't sure what to expect from the Japanese, who had just surrendered after suffering utter devastation from Americans. But several of us brashly took a landing boat to shore. We decided this would be a good opportunity to buy silk outfits for our wives." Something in Dad's tone suggested that this venture would not turn out quite as expected, so we listened intently.

He went on. "There was a language barrier, so one of our guys walked up to a Japanese gentleman and made a curvy motion to suggest clothing for a woman. The gentleman nodded and smiled,

beckoning us to follow. Soon he led us down the war-torn street to a small building.”

Here Dad paused with a little chuckle and then continued. “As soon as we stepped through the door, we realized our new friend thought we were asking for women, rather than women’s clothing. He had taken us to a brothel. We hurriedly signaled that this was not what we had in mind and tried again to ask for silks, this time more successfully. Finally, he took us to the appropriate store, whereupon we tipped him generously.”

We Boy Scouts were pretty callow, but we knew the meaning of “brothel,” or

we quickly figured it out from context. And I then knew the origin of those red silk pajamas that Mom sometimes wore to Halloween costume parties.

I learned plenty from Dad’s stories, and shortly after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease, I videotaped an interview with him, during which he proved unusually lucid. Prompted by me, he recounted a number of his exploits for posterity, and I cherish that record. Still, I long for the sound of his voice and the gestures of his expressive hands on those memorable evenings.



Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story. The first commandment of fiction—Show, Don’t Tell—is not part of the memoirist’s faith. Memoirists must show and tell.

– Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

On a Wing and a Prayer

Wendy Cleveland

I've always been a lover of sky, looking up to find clouds I can reimagine in billowy shapes of animals. I've always loved watching jets write lines of white ink across unblemished blue sky, crisscrossing, their tails spanning thin to vague to gone. And in my younger days I rode roller coasters that turned me upside down and inside out. The closest I've come to flying was hang gliding over the sand dunes at Kitty Hawk.

So when NASA offered teachers the opportunity to apply for the Teacher in Space position, I envisioned the ultimate sky ride: blasting off and upward into a vast sea of blue until the earth below grew smaller, a map of land and sea. My love of NASA and enthusiasm for every launch began in eighth grade when I listened to the live radio broadcast of John Glenn orbiting the earth. When President Kennedy challenged the United States to a Cold War race in space, he created the Apollo program with hopes of landing a man on the moon. It was unfathomable, I thought, for someone to travel that far, land, open the door, and walk around, and then board the spacecraft and fly back to earth.

At thirty-six and the mother of a two-year-old, I had to think long and hard about the possible consequences and weigh the risks of something going wrong with the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to represent my family and school in this historic ride. Before sending for the application form, I discussed with Tom the time commitment, the long days of training, the danger and ever-present possibility of my not coming back. "Go for it," he encouraged me. I talked with my principal and department chair, two colleagues whose friendships I valued and whose support I wanted and graciously received.

The application arrived in a large envelope, and I got chills seeing the NASA seal on the letterhead. There were many pages of questions, essays, and recommendations. I had grown up with the space program, but like many of my students, I was unfamiliar with what it would be like to ride ninety feet up to the launch platform, enter the shuttle, and be strapped in to wait for the rocket boosters to light up. I wanted to observe life on the shuttle and record everything in a daily journal. Prior to the journey I would study the science behind the oxygen and liquid hydrogen that acts like a bomb hundreds of degrees below zero to propel the rocket off its launch pad. I would learn about gravity and lack of gravity. I'd read about each crew member's responsibility and how they all function in a small space. If I were on the *Challenger* I'd try to write answers to my students' questions.

A month later I completed the essays, added my recommendations, sealed the fat NASA envelope, and headed off to the post office. My confidence unexpectedly nosedived as I walked out into the cold winter air. *What if*, I thought. Like the gambler who dreams of hitting the jackpot, I knew the chances were remote, and lurking in the back of my mind behind the excitement of hope was that nagging possibility of never again seeing my husband and daughter. *What was I thinking?*

Months passed. Over 11,000 teachers responded to the challenge, and after many steps of narrowing down the candidates, the committee selected its first Teacher in Space, Sharon Christa McAuliffe, a social studies teacher from New Hampshire.

January 28 arrived, and I was both nervous and excited. I had considered taking a personal day to stay at home and watch, but that would not have been fair to my students, so I followed my normal routine. In 1986 our small high school had only one television in the AV room and there was no way to broadcast the mission into classrooms. I had a full class load all morning so I planned to watch TV during my lunch break. As I headed to the AV room, Scott, one of my senior students, caught up with me. "Mrs. Cleveland, did ya hear?"

"Hear what?" I replied.

"The Challenger blew up. It exploded right after takeoff."

I gasped and the two of us ran to the TV surrounded by other teachers and students. No one spoke. Images of white smoke plumes rose through the blue sky like some invasive Y-shaped worm, an image repeated many times throughout this day and the days to come. Seventy-three seconds into flight, we would learn later, an outside fuel tank exploded when a loose rocket booster ruptured the tank, and debris rained from the sky into the Atlantic Ocean. The shock was unimaginable because the shuttle program was meticulously researched and planned, and this Challenger mission had already been delayed several times to ensure the safety of the shuttle and its crew.

My seniors filed into class after lunch, not sure what to expect. We had a good rapport, and they were mature enough to respond to whatever I wanted to do that day. We postponed our discussion of *Ivan Denisovich* and instead talked about the space program, shared impressions of what it would feel like to lift off and then float around untethered, and how brave Mrs. McAuliffe was to venture into space. My principal stopped by to see how I was doing and said, "I'm sure glad you weren't chosen," which I thought was callous at the time, but later I appreciated his sentiments.

I remember listening to President Reagan, observing the pain in his eyes and voice as he mourned with all of us the tragedy and loss of seven lives. He called the astronauts "daring and brave," hungry "to explore the universe and discover its truths." I was struck by the way he spoke to schoolchildren in particular, saying how important it was to continue the Challenger's mission in the future.

In the weeks that followed I found myself looking at life in new ways. I appreciated my students' genuine concern and was grateful when we resumed our lessons punctuated with their daily banter. I was more tolerant of my toddler daughter's tantrums in her attempts to assert her stubborn personality. I complained less and felt grateful for the daily routines with family and friends. And one evening when the house was quiet, I reread my application essays and decided I wouldn't change a word of my wide-eyed hope to "slip the surly bonds of earth and dance the skies on laughter-silvered wings."

(The final quote is by John Gillespie Magee, Jr., a Royal Canadian Air Force fighter pilot and poet who was killed in an accidental mid-air collision over England in 1941.)

Dandelions and Fruit Flies

Wendy Cleveland

I remember when dandelions bloomed wild in the field behind our house, fluffy tufts by the hundreds standing straight and tall, announcing themselves in crowns of gold. My mother saw them through the kitchen window, her wheels spinning as she paged through cookbooks, looking for that one recipe she had yet to try – dandelion wine.

“Here it is!” she shouted, and before I could disappear she turned and said, “We’re gonna make us some dandy lion wine” stretching the three words like putty. She was good at that, always trying new things – recipes, dress patterns, knitting stitches. There was no tentative hesitation, no second guessing or worries about how something would turn out. Before the phrase was popular, my mother’s mantra was *just do it*.

She gave me two paper grocery bags and commanded me to fill them with the heads of dandelions, but I balked. “I’m too young to drink wine so it’s not fair that I have to stand in the hot sun and pick weeds.”

“But you’ll be my number one assistant, and the two of us will make beautiful bottles of golden wine, maybe even sell some. We’ll split the profit.” There was no mention of *Life’s not fair* in our house because my mother always found a way around the inequity of age, experience, and family roles. I was the youngest, the least experienced, and she was the provider, the one who put meals

on the table and wine in the glass, so I took my bags and headed to the field.

My dad, whose weekend job at home was gardening and lawn maintenance, detested dandelions and dug up each one that arose after winter snow melted. These cheery yellow flowers in his mind were loathsome weeds, and his job was to prevent them from dotting our lush green lawn. Because dandelion seeds can drift on a puff of wind at four miles an hour, and because these little flowering plants can live for several years, they’re able to survive harsh winters and return in the spring. The field behind the house yielded thousands, maybe millions, of tiny seeds that, with the right direction of the wind, could find their way to our backyard. Dad would be pleased with Mom’s attempt to have me pluck hundreds of these despicable interlopers.

I did as I was told, and after an hour in the field I had filled my bags and was ready to assist in the grand experiment. We unloaded the dandelions onto the kitchen table covered with newspaper. The hard part was stripping the flower petals from the heads, as the green part makes the wine taste bitter. Mom used a knife to slice off the bases while I peeled the petals into several bowls.

She propped up the recipe, the simplest one she could find, and gathered the ingredients:

- 1 gallon water
- 3 pounds sugar, roughly 5-6 cups
- 3 quarts dandelion petals
- 2 oranges, juice and zest
- 1 lemon, juice and zest
- 1 package wine or champagne yeast
- 1 pound raisins

She boiled the water and poured it over the petals in her giant cooking pot, which she covered with a tea towel so it could steep for three days. The pot sat on the counter, and I checked on it several times a day, but I could see no noticeable changes.

On the fourth day my job was to grate the citrus and add the zest to the petal mix. She boiled this mixture, strained the solids, then added the sugar and let me stir it. When it was dissolved, we let it cool. Next she added the yeast, sliced citrus, and raisins. Because she didn't have the proper equipment such as a carboy with an airlock, she thought it would be fine to let the mixture ferment in her aluminum pot, which she covered with plastic wrap secured with a rubber band. She punched tiny holes in the top to let the carbon dioxide escape, took the container to the basement, and placed it on her laundry folding table, thinking the dark humid environment would speed up fermentation.

In the 50s, without the help of the internet, my mother had to rely on her cookbooks and magazines for information. This recipe failed to mention that the smell of yeast was attractive to

fruit flies who consume yeast as part of their diet. Flies are also drawn to the smell of rotting fruit with its odor of CO₂ and alcohol. It didn't take long for them to discover the yeasty smell of this liquid banquet, and one morning when I went down to the basement to check our progress, I found the air swarming with fruit flies, some managing to wiggle through the tiny holes and into the sweet pool of swimming fruit.

"Mom!" I yelled, running back up the stairs, "there are thousands of flies down there!"

She pushed aside the morning paper and scurried down to survey the damage. Our basement had wooden rafters from which we hung clothes to dry on rainy or snowy days. Along one wall was the Kenmore washer and dryer and on the other was Mom's old Singer with its cast iron treadle and four-drawer cabinet. This space was her domain, and this invasion raised her ire and her arms, which she swatted in wide circles on her way to the big pot, now dotted with fruit flies.

"Damnit," she whispered. "We'll have to dump it outside. It'll clog up the drain if we pour it in the sink or down the toilet. Open the side door."

She carefully lifted the heavy pot while I propped open the door and watched her step carefully to the far corner of the backyard, fruit flies hovering around her like a black veil, where she removed the plastic wrap and poured out all that potent liquid. I could feel her disappointment as she watched the ground swallow her wine-to-be. When there was nothing left, and not a single fly in the air, she sighed. "So be it. That's one recipe I won't be repeating."

We returned to the basement, cleaned the table and floor, then went up to the kitchen where she washed the pot while I stood by silently with a tea towel, watching her face which revealed no anger, no disappointment. She pulled out her plaid 3x5 recipe box and fingered through the dessert section. “This calls for

something sinful enough to forget the wine that wasn’t.” Her laughter filled our small kitchen as she opened the pantry and lined the counter with ingredients that would blend and bake and melt in our mouths as we later gathered and regaled Dad and my brothers with the tale of dandelions and fruit flies.



Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story. The first commandment of fiction—Show, Don't Tell—is not part of the memoirist's faith. Memoirists must show and tell.

– Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

An Old-fashioned Grandmother

Betty Corbin

Grandmother Martin was an old-fashioned grandmother. We called her Grandmother, not one of those cute modern names like Nana or Gigi or Mimi. In 1930 she married Granddaddy, a widower with nine children, when she was over forty and had never been married. He was a farmer thirteen years older than she. They had two children, Philip and Anne, who were closer to my age than my mother's. Mama, the fifth of the nine children by Granddaddy's first marriage, was 25 when Philip was born. In spite of the age difference, Philip was very close to his older half-siblings.

Grandmother had long silver hair that she braided and put up on her head. I thought she dressed like an old lady in dark dresses with long skirts. A devout Baptist, she taught Sunday school every Sunday at County Line Baptist Church a few miles from their farmhouse south of Enterprise, Ala.

Grandmother was not like the hovering grandparents I see all around me today. My family lived two hours away, and we saw our Martin grandparents twice a year, in June, when we were out of school and the blackberries were ripe in the pastures, and at Christmas, when my mother and all her siblings came to Granddaddy's house for a big family potluck dinner.

Christmas Day at my grandparents' house was quite an event. Their youngest two children still lived at home. The eight surviving children from

Granddaddy's first marriage came with their spouses and children. My oldest aunt, Inez, had grandchildren who were near my age, and they came as well. Our total was usually over forty. Everyone brought food—turkey, dressing, ham, vegetables, breads, and, best of all, desserts. The oldest relatives ate in the dining room. The rest of us ate at folding tables all over the house, including the bedrooms.

Grandmother had a very calm personality, a good thing when you often have a crowd of family members in your house. One Christmas my mother asked me to help Grandmother clean up the kitchen following one of these huge Christmas dinners. I was probably twelve or thirteen years old. My attitude toward cleaning up the kitchen was to do it as quickly as possible and get it over with. But Grandmother was slow and deliberate. She didn't seem to mind the clean-up tasks. She focused on the present task and didn't hurry and chatted with me as we worked. She was like the tortoise in the fable—slow and steady wins the race.

When we spent the night at Grandmother's house, a treat was having homemade biscuits for breakfast to go with the scrambled eggs and bacon. At home we had toast with our eggs and bacon. And for lunch and dinner Grandmother's cornbread was different than our mother's. I guess you would call it corn pone. We called it Granddaddy cornbread. It was thick and dense, where

our mother's had a lighter texture and a dark crunchy crust.

My dad and Grandmother had a warm relationship. He called her Mother. His own mother had died when he was five or six years old, and his father never remarried. I fondly remember one of their conversations in 1960 when Nixon and Kennedy were running for president. Daddy asked Grandmother who she was voting for. She said, "Dewey, I have to vote for Nixon. I just can't vote for a Catholic." At this time Alabama voted Democratic each year. Daddy replied, "Mother, I just can't vote for a Republican." Such was the dilemma in the Deep South in 1960.

When I moved back to Alabama in 2003 after many years in Texas, I started having a group of Martin relatives at my house at Thanksgiving. There are usually 15-20 of us. One year I had 23, too many

to sit in the kitchen and dining room. So I thought of Grandmother and set up a table in a bedroom.

Many might think it a burden to have a large family potluck dinner at their house each Thanksgiving. But after living away from my family for 27 years, the annual Thanksgiving dinner is one of the highlights of my year. I thank Grandmother that having crowds of relatives in my house gives me joy, not anxiety.



Over the years I have found that putting a play, or even one act, into a drawer and not looking at it for at least a few weeks makes wondrous things happen. Its faults suddenly become very clear. As I read it, what's good remains, but what's bad jumps off the page.

– Neil Simon

Echoes from Mama

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

As I walked through the Auburn University Arboretum on a lovely spring day, a delicate pink flower peaked out of a rock wall. Immediately my mother's voice – strong, but gentle – echoed in my head, quoting Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Flower in a Crannied Wall."

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Almost every day the specter of my mother's voice haunts me, enriching my life with her philosophy as seen through the soul of a favorite poet.

Mama loved beauty. She put flowers from her yard in a vase by the kitchen sink so that she could absorb their loveliness as she washed dishes. My mother was partial to pink – light pink Debutante camellias in the winter and darker pink azaleas that surrounded our front walk in the spring. Every year our family celebrated my March birthday with a cake iced in white and decorated with pink azaleas. These days when I sit at the breakfast room table in the spring with our spectacular rhododendron, its dark pink buds opening into lovely delicate light pink blossoms, I hear my mother reciting lines from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Rhodora."

Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing,
Then beauty is its own excuse for Being.

My mother's love of beautiful things led her to accumulate English bone china coffee cups, most of which had pink flowers on them. Every morning my father would ritualistically bring her coffee in one of these cups before she got out of bed. Mama said that coffee tasted better in a bone china cup. She always made time for these moments of tranquility before she crawled out of bed in time to arrive at the English classes she taught at a local community college.

The beauty of poetry itself had a special place in Mama's life. She loved the sounds of onomatopoeic words, alliteration, and the rhythmic nature of poetry. I remember her reciting "Gunga Din" by Rudyard Kipling in as deep a voice as she could muster up.

He was 'Din! Din! Din!
'You limpin' lump o' brick-dust, Gunga Din!

My mother's life, however, was not always filled with beauty. She endured tremendous suffering without complaining. On January 14, 1959, she was in an automobile accident that almost killed her. Mama was crossing a lake bridge in thick fog on her way to administer final exams. Her car was hit by a truck traveling in the opposite direction crushing the driver's side of the car so badly that Mama had to be cut from the wreckage. Medical assessment determined that she had brain and spinal injuries with fractured vertebrae and a crushed leg broken in several places. She was unconscious for a couple of months. Although she never did fully recover from the accident, she resumed her teaching after a couple of years. Thirty years after the car accident Mama developed a brain tumor which affected her balance, resulting in several falls. Although she broke both wrists during one of her falls, she continued to grade English composition papers while both wrists were in casts.

Mama's view of her suffering and determination to keep going was conveyed to my two brothers and me in one of Mama's favorite poems, "Mother to Son," by Langston Hughes, written in 1922 during the Harlem Renaissance.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The echo of these lines continues to offer my brothers and me encouragement during rough times in our adult lives.

At an early age I learned of racial injustice as poignantly described by Black American poets in the early part of the twentieth century. Mama taught me of the disillusion and fatalism expressed by Fenton Johnson in the final lines of his poem, "Tired," published in 1919.

Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many. It is better to die than it is to grow up and find out that you are colored.

Pluck the stars out of the heavens. The stars mark our destiny. The stars marked my destiny.

I am tired of civilization.

In her poem, "My Little Dreams," Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote in 1918 about unrealized dreams and lack of opportunity for African Americans.

I'm folding up my little dreams
Within my heart tonight,
And praying I may soon forget
The torture of their sight.

For time's deft fingers scroll my brow
With fell relentless art—
I'm folding up my little dreams
Tonight, within my heart.

Mama's favorite Bible verses were recited often to her children. One that I particularly liked is Philippians 4:8 (King James Version).

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

My mother's work ethic was strong and her will made of steel. Even her concept of Heaven was that she would be put to work again. This concept of heaven was reflected in Rudyard Kipling's "When Earth's Last Picture Is Painted."

When Earth's last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and dried,
When the oldest colours have faded, and the youngest critic has died,
We shall rest, and faith, we shall need it—lie down for an aeon or two,
Till the Master of All Good Workmen shall put us to work anew....

I cannot escape from the legacy that Mama left me through the poetry she recited. It echoes in my brain on a daily basis, reiterating her values and philosophy. It influences my perspective and enriches my life. My mother's reciting poetry during my childhood has given me a way of seeing the world that I would not forget—an aesthetic "brain washing" that reflected her values. Most importantly, I inherited Mama's love of poetry and the emotions that it arouses deep within me.

The Importance of the U. S. Constitution

Gabi Darch

Essay addressed to middle school students

I am proud to be an American citizen. It is not a status I was born into, but one I was fortunate enough to obtain. I was born in Leverkusen, Germany, and came to the United States with my family as a three-year-old little girl in 1956.

My parents emigrated because they wanted a better life for our family, better opportunities for their children than were available in Europe not long after World War II. So, instead of being born a U.S. citizen I went through a process called “naturalization.”

An English test and a civics test were required before we could take the Oath of Allegiance. My parents went to night school to learn English. My brother and two sisters and I picked up English in school. We had to learn about the Constitution and the U.S. system of government and U.S. history.

When I was eighteen, I took the Oath of Allegiance in a ceremony held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin which was attended by about fifteen people of various nationalities. We were all given a copy of the Constitution and a small American flag. This was the final step and conferred the status of American citizenship. It was one of the proudest moments of my life.

Citizenship carries with it certain rights and responsibilities. Now that I was a newly minted citizen, voting was the most important right I wanted to exercise. The presidential election in 1972 between Richard Nixon and George McGovern was the first election I voted in. I’ve been privileged to vote in every presidential election since.

The 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote in 1920. This occurred a hundred years ago, which seems like ancient history, but in the big scheme of things it’s fairly recent. Before 1920, women had no say in how their government functioned.

I would urge you to talk to your parents about the upcoming presidential election. Talk to them about the pros and cons of the two candidates and urge them to vote.



Interesting People In Arizona

Patty Disque

I had just graduated from Auburn University on December 18, 1963 with a degree in interior design, was in a roommate's wedding on December 23, got married on January 4, 1964. We took a very short two-day honeymoon and then moved across the country to Scottsdale, Ariz., by January 18. I had decided to take a month stay-at-home vacation before I began to look for a job in the interior design field. I was really exhausted. My husband Jim, with a degree in pharmacy, had found a job the first day he went looking for a job so we were not destitute!

I had never had a discussion with any person in the School of Architecture and the Arts regarding what information I might need, how to begin the search for a first job, what a resume would look like, and how important it would be to have some previous design projects to show to a prospective employer! When I think back at how unprepared I was to actually search for a job, I am amazed at how lucky I was.

The day that I began my search, I realized again how lucky I was to have interviewed with three design firms and to have been offered a job by all three. Two of the positions offered me \$400 per month, and one offered me \$300 per month, all without having any concrete evidence that I could do scale drawings or free-hand sketches, or watercolor my design projects.

The persons who talked with me about the two \$400 offers gave me their business cards, didn't ask very pertinent questions, and gave me the impression that

they were furniture salesmen and not interior designers. The \$300 offer was quite the opposite. The two owners asked me quite a few good questions, showed me around their shop, and showed me a few pictures of recent projects.

To better cement my opinion as a "very good" design firm, one current client, Sally Goldwater, Barry Goldwater's sister-in-law, dropped in to give them a deposit check for something she had ordered. Soon after she left, another client, Clare Boothe Luce, Henry Luce's wife, called to ask them a few questions about her current project! I was definitely impressed and felt the \$300 a month salary was not so bad! Fortunately, I had kept up with the newspapers and knew from reading who the women were. I accepted the \$300 offer.

While I did get to know most of the clients fairly well and was happy to be able to either sketch or draw a simple floor plan, I found most of the clients to be very nice, interesting people.

One morning soon after I arrived, Bill asked me if I would be comfortable driving their big white Lincoln Continental convertible to Casa Grande, about an hour from Scottsdale. Since I had never driven a car that large, I said I would like to drive it a little to be sure I was comfortable driving it. Then I asked why.

They were working on a project for a large group home in Casa Grande for children with severe physical disabilities. Mrs. Loyal Davis, Nancy Reagan's mother, was

underwriting a large portion of the project. I had met Mrs. Davis several times, and she insisted that I call her Edith and that it was not necessary that I say “Yes, ma’am” and “No, ma’am” to her. I had a difficult time breaking that habit.

Being from Chicago, Mrs. Davis had become good friends with Leo Durocher, then the coach for the Chicago Cubs. Also, the Cubs stayed in Arizona in the winter months. Mr. Durocher had become interested in Edith Davis’ project and had plans to take over a hundred baseballs, used and autographed by many of the Cubs players, to Casa Grande. Edith had admitted that she did not like to ride with Leo driving because he “talked too much” and looked at her when he was talking instead of watching the road. She also said she just didn’t want to drive.

I managed to drive the Continental to Casa Grande and back without any mishaps while Leo and Edith told interesting stories both going to Casa Grande and returning to Scottsdale! The water fountains were installed, and the swing sets were a big hit that day!

A couple of years later I was in the front part of the shop, trying to move furniture around in order to add a few new pieces, when a young couple came into the store. They were a little different looking and were walking around talking about what pieces would work well and which ones

would not. Of course, I thought they were going to purchase something, so I kept busy trying to get the area looking good, when suddenly the guy asked me, “Does this firm ever rent any furniture for a short period of time?” Not wanting to get into something I knew nothing about, I said that they would have to talk to the owners, who were not there at the moment. They asked when they would be back and I said I was not sure, but I would be glad to give them a message. I also said that they probably would be back in about two hours. They thanked me and said they would return later that day.

When Pat and Bill returned, I told them about the two people who had inquired about renting some of the furniture for some television show. At about the same time the man and woman returned. They talked to the two owners for a few minutes and then I saw Pat listing some furniture on a pad. The guy signed the bottom line and thanked Pat and left. As they left, he gave Pat his business card and said he would look for the furniture delivery tomorrow about 2:00 p.m. He said thanks and disappeared down the street. Pat said he has a funny name. “I wonder if it is his real name or his stage name,” he said. The man had signed the receipt “Sonny Bono.” His business card read “Sonny and Cher”! This happened long before they were famous!

How do I know what I think until I see what I say?

– E. M. Forster

More Interesting Arizona People (Some Stories May Be Difficult to Believe)

Patty Disque

I arrived at my office at almost the same time every day, five days a week. I started the coffee, as I normally did, and went to my desk. A few minutes later my bosses, Bill and Pat, arrived and immediately came to my desk to tell me that they had an important job for me to do that day! Finding that an unusual way to begin the workday, I was curious to learn what my chore would be for that day.

Pat, the calmer of the two, said I needed to go to Clare Boothe Luce's house in the Biltmore Estates. He said, "Henry Luce is out of town for a couple of days, and Mrs. Luce wants to order some new draperies for his bedroom. However, Mr. Luce does not want any new draperies. His secretary has the key to his office and bedroom, but she is not comfortable cutting a 3" x 5" piece from the hem of his draperies. Of course, his wife feels that the draperies in his bedroom suite are very rotten in several places because of the sun. She says they look terrible from the outside. And she also commented that one of her friends showed her how terrible they looked from the outside. Mr. Luce would not want them replaced, no matter how rotted they are!

For some reason (and I did not ask why) he kept his bedroom locked when he was not in the house. His secretary had a key to his bedroom, and Mrs. Luce did not, but she would like the wall to wall draperies replaced because she finds them very embarrassing. My job was to get a small sample of the fabric, measure the width and length of the drapery rod so that the draperies could be replaced without his ever knowing they were new!

I could think of no reliable reason that I should refuse this chore, so I called the secretary, whom I had met several times and liked. We decided on a day and time for me to come to the house. I found my two measuring tapes and my pad and pencil. Off I went to get the correct information in order to complete my responsibilities. I had never been inside the house before, so I was somewhat surprised to find a large, 5' x 5' x 10'-high bird cage in the middle of the living room which was a very large room. Another interesting feature was that there were 3" by 5" cards thumb-tacked to every door that read "Watch out for the birds. Do NOT let them out of this room." While I had met Mrs. Luce several times, I had never met Mr. Luce, and I was somewhat concerned that he would show up while I was there measuring in his bedroom! Little did I know that he spent most of his time in New York City as editor of *Time* magazine or some other well-known magazine.

In visiting their Biltmore Estate house, I was reminded that about two years ago. Mrs. Luce had sold her custom-made desk to Pat and Bill for \$100. She had a

new desk built for her bedroom. She wanted a desk differently configured for her bedroom so that she could easily see her two large black standard poodles playing outside in the yard while she lay in bed reading!

I definitely did not make this information up. Those two black standard poodles were wonderful dogs and very likely lived a more luxurious life than our white standard poodle lived!

Fortunately, I had no problems cutting the sample from the hem and sewing the hem so no one was able to see the missing piece. I was able to take all the measurements (three or four times, to be sure that I was correct), cut that small piece from the existing draperies and take the sample back to the office so that we could begin the search for similar fabric to replace the old draperies. I also discovered that the drapery cords used to open and close the draperies were rotted and the rods also had to be replaced. This was a very stressful project simply because I did not know how either Mr. or Mrs. Luce would react if they were to come home suddenly. Their secretary was very helpful and not the least bit intimidating. She made me just a little more comfortable each time I met her at their house.

Thank goodness, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Luce ever arrived home on the days that I was there. At age 25, I was not very comfortable invading his bedroom. I was also quite concerned about shutting one of the doors when leaving the living room and killing one of their precious birds that appeared to have free rein of their living room.

My experience with some of these well-known, wealthy people gave me a good perspective for thinking about what I really wanted out of life! I definitely wanted a different kind of life than what I saw in some of these very wealthy people!

However, the experience I had in meeting some of the wealthy clients and helping them to complete some project was very rewarding. I have never thought I would enjoy living their lives and never wished that I had their money!

Learn to write by doing it. Read widely and wisely. Increase your word power. Find your own individual voice through practicing constantly. Go through the world with your eyes and ears open and learn to express that experience in words.

– P. D. James

The Right Time to Learn This Lesson

Patty Disque

I graduated from Auburn University on December 18, 1963, after a very eventful fall term. President Kennedy had been assassinated a few days before Thanksgiving, and the days leading up to graduation had been sad, chaotic, and eventful. I had written my senior thesis during the summer quarter and had spent many days and nights during fall quarter drawing and water coloring my five 18" x 36" presentation boards. The only remaining chore was to verbally present my work to an almost all-male jury of professors from the School of Architecture. The only female on the "jury" was the chairman of the Interior Design program. There were only four of us presenting our senior thesis that quarter, two females and two males. One of the males and the other female had failed when they had presented their thesis the previous spring. This was their second time to try to pass this presentation, which was necessary for graduation.

Feeling confident, I had learned a good lesson during the college process in the School of Architecture that was "Take care of yourself and don't worry about others!" Or as my grandmother had often told me, "You just tend to your own little red wagon and let others take care of their own!" We had drawn straws to determine the order in which we would present our thesis. I was to be in the third position. When the four of us had finished our presentations, we had to wait for more than an hour to see the grades posted. I paced the corridors until I saw the secretary post the grades.

Quickly, I went to check the grades and I saw that the two males had received a "B" and the two females had been given a C grade. Since A's were rarely given in the School of Architecture, I had become complacent with a B grade. However, I was not satisfied with my C grade! Quite out of character for me, I rushed into the Dean's Office and insisted that I speak to the dean. The secretary could easily see that I was not happy! She said that I should wait while she went in to speak to the dean. In less than a minute, she stepped out and said that the Dean would see me now!

When I entered his office, he asked me to take a seat and to give him the details of my problem. I was very calm and gave him the details in a concise way. When I had completed my explanation, he calmly said, "If your advisor, who is head of the interior design program, feels that you deserve a higher grade, she has every right to change the grade!"

I thanked him and went to find my professor. When I told her about my conversation with the dean, she said she had never heard of that before, but she would like to speak to the dean. She said, "Patty, please wait here in my office until I return. This should not take long." In less than ten minutes she returned, went to her desk to retrieve the White-Out and left to change my posted grade!

That experience was a turning point in my life, when I finally realized that if I did not speak up and take care of my own situations and problems, it was rare that someone else would step in to help me. That lesson has lasted a lifetime, and I am thankful that I learned this lesson early in my life at age 22!

Confessions of an Ice Cream Glutton

Dennis Drake

Guilty as charged. I am an ice cream glutton. The cardinal sin in my ice cream addiction is the worship of home-cooked custard ice cream churned to creamy perfection in a hand-cranked ice cream bucket.

This dessert is my ultimate choice among the parade of ice cream temptations. Not only is it sinfully delicious, but it is a vivid link to childhood memories when summer was punctuated with endless juvenile adventures and appetites. After all, taste and smell usher us into a cerebral chest of buried treasures.

Cooked custard ice cream unlocks fond memories of my mother, who kept two consistent rules for cooking all her life: no cake mixes and no shortcuts. I don't recall that my mother was particularly fond of ice cream, but my father was a champion among ice cream gluttons. He always requested my mother's custard ice cream as a special treat, especially when our peaches ripened to their full summer glory. Those sweet and juicy sun-ripened peaches were the crown jewels of my mother's custard ice cream. Their syrupy nectar infused the creamy vanilla delicacy with a savory elixir that no artificial flavor can ever duplicate.

As a child I wondered how an ordinary mixture of common sweet milk, sugar, eggs, and vanilla extract could be magically transformed into such a savory concoction. Forget turning water into

wine. Custard ice cream was my miracle of admiration. But this frozen dessert was no easy miracle. It was labor intensive. In addition to a litany of ingredients, it required chipped ice, rock salt, and a seasoned wooden ice cream freezer with a metal handle attached to a metal paddle to whip the liquid contents into a frozen custard. My early contribution to this ritual was to sit atop the ice cream bucket in order to secure the metal crank while a stronger adult male wrestled the handle with swirling rotations. I celebrated a significant rite of passage when I became strong enough to turn the stubborn crank.

Foolishly, I ignored adult advice when the finished product was generously dipped into bowls. "Don't eat your ice cream too fast or it will give you a headache," they warned. My patience was severely limited. I always ate too quickly. This habit earned me a punishing explosion of exquisite pain that the adults called "a brain freeze." Fortunately, the pain vanished as I rushed for a second bowl of the frozen treat.

As an adult, I have tasted a great assortment of desserts in a variety of restaurants from New York to New Orleans. I even devoured gelato in Italy. None of these delicacies could satisfy my longing for my mother's custard ice cream. When I am offered a dessert, I always ask, "Do you serve ice cream?" I am chided to try the cheesecake, the lemon pie, the chocolate mousse, or the chef's dessert of the day. I respond with a

simple question: “Does the chef serve custard ice cream?” Usually I have to explain my request. Disappointed again, I settle for any flavor of commercial ice cream. Recently I have observed that I am not alone in my quest. Many trendy restaurants now serve their version of custard ice cream.

When alone I feed my ice cream craving with a variety of supermarket selections. As a reward for having survived the three score and ten, I boldly indulge my ice cream addiction as I contemplate how truly short life is. Then I smile with anticipation. I throw the lid away and spoon into my frozen passion.

A “Dab” of Sugar

Gail McCullers

Into the big, black cast iron pot goes beef, chicken and pork. Next will be cut-up potatoes, onions, corn, and lima beans. We must also remember the salt and pepper and lots of tomatoes. Each of us will have a shift of stirring. It is Hopkins County Stew Day! This is a tradition with the Yeager family that moved from Paint Rock, Texas, to north Alabama (my mama’s family).

We have worn long dresses and our sunbonnets. The men all have on overalls, brogan boots with their favorite old straw hat. Each one of us MUST take a turn stirring that pot so the stew does not stick to the bottom. We often have to remind someone that their stirring job time has arrived.

Uncle Pat’s farm is the perfect place for our gathering. Two horse-drawn wagons are ready to take the younger children on a bumpy ride through the pasture to see the cows and then to wade in Duck Creek.

We fix the sweet tea, get out crackers, and cut the buttermilk cornbread just the size to fit in your bowl of stew. The guys, plus Lits and Mama Bug, will talk all afternoon, retelling tales we’ve heard a million times. They always remember the day their father died and their mom brought them all back to Alabama.

The original family began with nine people, grew through marriages, births of children, and now with great-grandchildren to 65 and still growing.

Last of all, a “dab,” a spoonful, or a pinch of sugar is stirred into that stew! It is delicious!

Now, my sister-in-law, Rheada, makes Hopkins County Stew for us at Christmas. We are fortunate.

The Right to Vote, Especially the 19th Amendment

Sandy Halperin

Essay addressed to middle school students

I remember when I was five years old following my grandmother into the voting booth at McKenzie Elementary School in St. Louis in 1950. She showed me the lever she pulled that closed the curtain around us for privacy. She explained that the smaller levers on a board before us were ones that she would pull down to register her vote. She said that the curtain was to ensure that no one else could see how she voted. That was for her alone to know. The vote was sacred. I could tell that she was proud to be casting her vote, and she wanted me to understand that it was a serious privilege and honor to do so. She wanted me to understand that when I grew up, I would also need to take on this noble privilege and responsibility.

The 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920 was only six years old when my grandmother cast her first vote. She remembered when women could not vote, had no power or say over how the government was run. I think that was why voting was so important to her and for her desire to educate me on that importance.

A few years later, when I was in the second grade, I remember our class marching single file on our way to lunch. We passed a roped off section of the hallway that enclosed two voting machines and two ladies sitting behind a table checking voters in to vote. One of them was my grandmother. Because she did not work, she volunteered to help at the polls. I was so proud of her, and when my classmates asked me who she was and what she was doing; I could tell them what voting was and why it was important. I explained to them what she had taught me about how our government depends on its citizens –us—to be involved with making important decisions, how things are run. And by voting we people either make the decisions or choose those who will on their behalf.

As I grew up, I learned much more about government in social studies, civics, and government classes in school. I learned exactly how our local, state, and national governments operated and how voting fit into that process. It is essential, for a democracy to work properly, that every citizen of voting age (eighteen years old) to vote, to let their voices be heard. Voting is how we exercise our power! For example, how I cast my vote influences how much money is collected in taxes and who pays those taxes and what that money will be spent on. Will it be building housing for the poor or hiring more teachers or paying for health care? Or will it be divided up between all of these? Or will it be spent on other needs in our community or country? My vote will influence who is allowed in this country and who is not. It will determine if streets are repaired; garbage is picked up, and whether our water is clean. Our votes help determine how our city, state, and country are run. We citizens determine that by our votes. We run the country. That is the heart of a healthy democracy. That is why this right is so important to me. Without it we would not be

a democracy. We might be an autocracy or dictatorship or have a king or queen! Others would decide what is best for us and NOT WE OURSELVES!

So, since I turned 21, 53 years ago, I have never missed voting in an election—whether local, state or national. I want my vote to be counted. I want my voice to be heard. My grandmother would be proud of me; she taught me by her model, and she taught me well!



Contrary to what many of you might imagine, a career in letters is not without its drawbacks—chief among them the unpleasant fact that one is frequently called upon to sit down and write.

– Fran Lebowitz

Remembering Is Hard

Gerald W. Johnson

“Are my parents still alive?” she asked. “Why don’t they come to see me anymore? Don’t they like me?” With a slight turn toward me, she continued. “Are your parents still alive?”

These questions are asked several times a week, sometimes several times a day, sometimes in the middle of the night. She is 79. I am 80. No, our parents are not alive, haven’t been for years.

A good amount of time is spent in our house finding, transporting, and reboxing kleenexes, not *Kleenexes*, but *Puffs*. It’s a kind of fixation, I suppose, a funny one. She, throughout the day, whenever passing a box of *Puffs*, will remove a stack of a half dozen or more, fold each one, and then place them in her pocket (probably already full), purse, dresser drawer or wherever. At some point, unobtrusively, the kleenexes, *Puffs*, are scavenger found, unfolded and returned to the boxes.

The purse. Have you ever noticed that Queen Elizabeth always carries a purse, even in what might appear to be one of her dwelling places? She will come out to greet a visitor in her castle or palace or royal residence, carrying her purse. The Queen has nothing on our dwelling, a real house. In our house, she has an abundant closet with a dresser and full-sized sofa, chair, and small table. On a shelf, just as you exit the closet, sets her purse. Whenever she leaves the closet she gets her purse, whether she is coming to breakfast or going out. Just like the Queen.

Tuesday morning, we, just the two of us, were having breakfast at the kitchen island counter. She now has a cook. Perhaps not the best, but not bad. As breakfast was set before her, this morning consisting of half a raisin bagel with cream cheese, a piece of bacon, a small bowl of Honey Nut *Cheerios* with fresh strawberries, some bottled water, and ice skim milk, she looked at me with a stranger’s eye and asked, “Do you work here?” “Yes, I do,” I responded. “I am the cook.” She said, “Well, I am glad because I like the food.”

Three times last week she asked for a divorce and several times she said, “I would really like to go home tomorrow.” Home is Kentucky. One evening she laid out the items she wanted to pack to go home the next morning--a towel, a small blanket, and a pillow.

These are each brief moments in trying to remember. It’s hard. But, outside of these, and, of course, many more, she is herself. Engaging, enjoying, recognizing, relating, laughing, fussing. She can be serious and thoughtful and reflective. One evening as we were sitting on the back, second story, screened porch, overlooking a beautiful stand of trees and listening to a symphony of bird music followed by a cacophony of cicadas, she became quite serious. She looked at me straight in my eyes, from deep within her being, and said, “I am scared.” What could be scaring her? When asked, she said, “I am afraid I will not be able to recognize you.”

Advice to Dr. Seuss

Gerald W. Johnson

*"I'm sorry to say so
But sadly it's true
That Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you."*

--Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go*

"Advice to Dr. Seuss?" you say. "What advice, pray tell, could you give to Dr. Seuss?"

Well, we all make mistakes, including Dr. Seuss. His big mistake was not extolling making mistakes.

The mistake is in Dr. Seuss' *Oh, the Places You'll Go*, one of my favorite books. Gave, give, or will give one to all of our eighteen "grands" upon graduation. It was Dr. Seuss' last book. Was number one on *The New York Times* Best-Selling Fiction Hardcover list. Its style is interesting—a narrator and reader, second person, in the future tense. The story, in beautiful Seuss style, concerns what's ahead in life's journey.

However, if the graduating "grands" are at all like their "great" grandpa, a title he has long deserved, when he was eighteen, or twenty or thirty or now, they feel some anxiety about Dr. Seuss' super-positive proclamations about one's future. Even now I think:

*"Where will I go?
How will I know?
What will I do?
Who can tell me?
Will you?"*

--Grandpa

"Damn," they might say upon graduation and reading Seuss. Don't blame them. They are entitled to use that enthusiastic word. Seus has complicated, not simplified, their world at a very awkward time, a time when a bit of simplicity would be an elixir for life.

Now I have nothing against dreams and aspirations and positive thinking. All good. So are mistakes.

When my second grandchild, a Johnston, married a Johnson, she became a Johnston Johnson. Her mother, my oldest daughter, a Johnson, had, of course, married a Johnston.

She became a Johnson Johnston. This has led to more than a few mistakes, but, very productive mistakes. Sorting out these names provides limitless fodder for social chatter and learning about Johnsons and Johnstons.

At the pre-wedding dinner, little cards were distributed asking guests to write a word of advice to the newly married couple. I wrote, "Make many mistakes." Sometime later my granddaughter asked me what that was about. I told her, "I mean it. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. If you are afraid to make a mistake you won't venture out, you won't become all that you might be. You can learn a lot from mistakes. Embrace them." Of course there are a few caveats to that advice, but, she got the point.

I then told her a story about how I learned from a mistake. Made the mistake in 1962; remember it well.

"While an undergraduate student at Marshall University, your grandmother and I had very little working capital. That means money. We lived in married student housing that had been WW II barracks. We started in an efficiency apartment. What that means is it was very efficient to get around in because it was only one big room, and not that big. It also provided an efficient way to stay in contact with your neighbors. The walls separating the apartments were so thin and porous you could just talk to them sitting in your easy chair. Like, "Hey, Jim, would you and Patty like to come over for dinner this evening?" "Sure, what time?" That is efficient.

But, not a problem. We were young and on the road to someplace and thinking, "Oh, the places we will go." The barracks apartments were designed with an efficiency on the back end, a one bedroom in the middle, and an apartment on the front end with a bedroom, kitchen and laundry room—a suite. You got to move into one of the grander apartments, at no extra expense, if you painted them before moving in; paint provided by the University. I did, all the way to a suite.

It was the grand suite that taught me a lesson through making a mistake. Specifically, it was the luxury laundry room. We were in the diaper business at that time. I mean real diapers, with diaper pails and cloths that you washed and dried and folded and used over and over until they became great all-purpose rags. The laundromat vacuums money, one time, piggy bank coins. A washer and dryer were thus high on our priority list. The laundry room was an early dream come true. We were on the Dr. Seuss road.

The washer and dryer, used, were delivered to our suite, a WW II barracks apartment, and placed in our small chapel, the laundry room. Upon its consecration, we stood in front of these two icons of progress and delicately and gingerly, almost sensually, ran our hands across the smooth surfaces, not quite ready to spoil them with dirty diapers.

The time came for use as the diapers filled the pail. In the washer they went. We watched and listened. Art, drama, and music. When the ding donged on the washer, it signaled movement to the dryer. In the diapers went. Buttons were pushed and dials were

turned and we stepped back to view the second act. Nothing! No sound! No movement! No lights! Nothing!

We couldn't believe we were sold an impotent dryer. A little feisty, I called the dealer and informed him of our problem. He was very nice and said he would send someone out that afternoon. We rejoiced as we were so ready for the second act and the crescendo that would produce sweet-smelling clothes.

Well, the truth hurts. Not the mistake. The truth. The truth is the delivery folks had plugged in the washer but not the dryer. The truth is the repairman came and plugged in the dryer and charged \$25 that we could ill afford. The truth is, even though "I know" I checked that plug three, twelve, forty times, it was not plugged in. I made a big mistake on our own V-Day in our WW II apartment.

I learned from that mistake--a lesson never forgotten. When something does not work, first thing I do is to check to see if it is plugged in. When the rocking chair quits rocking, I immediately check to see if it is plugged in. When the dog stops barking, I check to see if he is plugged in. When my wife quits talking, I ponder about checking to see if she is plugged in. Whatever, it is always on my mind.

You learn from mistakes. Dr. Seuss, wish you had embraced mistakes to take us to all those places we can go.

"It's OK to make a mistake."



So the writer who breeds more words than he needs is making a chore for the reader who reads.

– Dr. Seuss

The Strawberry Bunny and the Collective Human Spirit

Gerald W. Johnson

Yesterday, Saturday, at 12:57, my computer received an e-mail from a friend with a story about a telephone call he received from an eighty-year-old man who was a “near sixteen-year-old student” in his sixth-grade class, sixty-six years ago in rural Georgia.

At 12:57, I was just picking strawberries, I thought. Later in the day, I read the story. My friend wrote about remembering an exercise in his class in which his students were to write an answer to the question, “What do you want to be when you are grown?” His “near- sixteen”-year-old student wrote, “I want to be a farmer and a good man.” That so impressed my teacher friend that he filed the student’s response. After his telephone conversation, he found the response on a piece of yellowed paper in his files. He plans to meet his former student for lunch soon and give him the yellowed paper to share with his family. My friend called that an experience of the collective human spirit. He said he couldn’t define it, but experienced it.

When I read the story my own sense of the collective human spirit opened, revealing to me that my day was just such a shared experience, not one of just picking strawberries.

My Saturday started at 6:30 a. m. Getting up at 6:30 on a Saturday, for a great-grandpa and an eight-year-old granddaughter, is not usually sublime pleasantry. However, this morning and

day were destined to be different. They were.

We got up early to go to the Dempsey “You Pick Um” Strawberry Farm, just short of Lafayette, Alabama, to beat the crowds. As we traveled north on US 431, the Lafayette mileage sign (17 miles), initiated a discussion. Mackenzie, the granddaughter, rejected my pronunciation of Lafayette. She refused to say Lafayette as locals say it—“LaFatte.” She informed me the correct pronunciation was La Fayette. Hard to explain to her why or why not, especially since the history is convoluted. The town was originally named Chambersville and evolved into LaFayette or La Fayette or Lafayette. The map says La Fayette. The mileage signs do not. She did not accept my explanation. I moved on.

The early morning was overcast, cool and perfect for picking strawberries. The Dempsey Strawberry Farm is a beautiful and immaculate place. Picking is easy. Their other produce, in season, is pecans, acres and acres. There were probably some fifty or so picking in two separate patches, mostly children, parents, and grandparents, so it seemed. Norman Rockwell would have loved it, especially with the masks and physical distancing.

My original intention was to pick two baskets to share with local family. You have to be careful about how many farm strawberry baskets you pick because, if you pick them green, they will

not ripen. If you pick them ripe, you need to do something with them within a day or so. Not like Publix strawberries.

Don't know what Mackenzie was thinking as she quickly filled her basket, but, as I picked, I thought of who was going to get them. The images shaped my picking. For granddaughter Lauren and three of our great-grandchildren, only the best shape, color and ripeness. And, for granddaughter Elizabeth and four more great-grandchildren, the same. And so on. The images governed my picking.

After filling two baskets, easily, that would take care of family, I thought about some others who have recently been important to me and my family. I decided to fill, with Mackenzie's help, two more baskets. Images again shaped my harvesting, nothing random or casual about it. I picked and thought of two dear friends of my youngest daughter, Judie and Karen. I thought of Julia, from Guatemala, my wife's caregiver and friend. I thought of Tom and Jim and Patty, special friends. My intent and calculation was to give half a basket to each. Four baskets would do that. Then, I thought about Kenneth, Gary, Jim, Sonny, David, Christine, Christy, Daphne, Lynda and others. I am blessed. Time, money, logistics, and the realization that I simply could not touch all those who merit touching with perfect strawberries, called a halt to the picking.

The morning spent outdoors with Mackenzie, in a strawberry patch, was

perfect. The best, however, was yet to come. Mackenzie and I returned to the house and proudly displayed our produce. Four baskets of beautiful, full, red, perfect strawberries, that needed to be delivered quickly. So, we texted and called to let everyone know the Strawberry Bunny, since it was Easter time, was on the way to their house—now! Not surprisingly, with the coronavirus “stay at home” guideline, everyone was home and would be waiting.

We drove a complete encompassing circle of Auburn, including Opelika and Bearegard, and delivered strawberries. Every stop was a delight, a homecoming, a reunion, a collective spirit. We maintained appropriate physical distancing. Stood in the parkway (driveway), never entered a house. Weather was blue skies, white puffy clouds and new life of spring everywhere—leaf, flower, grass. We set the half-basket of strawberries, half-distance, and celebrated.

What a day! Hadn't seen some of these folks in days, if not weeks. But, that was not necessarily abnormal. But, something was different. The smiles, the joy, the excitement were different. Over a basket of strawberries? I think not. The strawberries were a medium through which we all, even if only for a few brief moments, escaped isolation and worry and uncertainty and had a tangible touch with the human collective spirit—absolutely real.



An Unforgettable Sunday Drive

Norma Kappelman

At 5:30 on a Sunday morning I was driving my red VW Squareback slowly down a country road until the headlights focused on the leaning mailbox, my landmark. Carefully I turned my car onto a red clay lane and cautiously drove up the dark, narrow pathway while attempting to miss the potholes and tree roots. The dim lights of a small, whitewashed house finally appeared. On the front porch sitting in a rocking chair was a brown-skinned, slightly-built woman wearing her Sunday dress. The grandmother greeted me graciously.

We entered the warm house, passing a smoldering woodburning stove into the living area. From a worn sofa a pair of large brown eyes peered out of the faded quilts. Cecilia, the pretty, tiny, eight-year-old girl, was wearing her blue party dress with lace collar, a matching blue ribbon on top of her thin, softly curled hair, blue anklets, and black patent leather shoes. On her hands were dainty gloves. Cecilia's arms and legs were bound in clean, dry bandages.

Cecilia suffered from a rare genetic skin disease, Epidermolysis Bullosa, sometimes called "Butterfly Disease." Clear blisters form from friction or trauma on the hands, trunk, extremities, mouth, and throat. The blisters rupture and seep until scabs finally form. Medications, lotions and salves are gently applied to the skin and ruptured areas to keep the skin soft and free from scarring and sepsis. Adequate nutrition and hydration presented additional challenges in their care. In

1968, rarely did the afflicted children reach adulthood.

Cecilia was an excellent example of the time-consuming, loving care her grandmother had given. Her small body had a limited number of permanent scars. While Cecilia was still an infant, her biological mother, unable to cope, had left the infant in the care of her grandmother.

I was a passive observer as the grandmother took charge of loading the child into the car. She insisted they sit in the back seat. As I drove the four-hour trip on the two-lane highway to Birmingham, Ala., a magnificent sunrise contributed to a pleasant trip. We arrived at the University Hospitals and soon found ourselves in the offices of a highly respected physician who was presenting Cecilia as a case study at the International Conference of Dermatologists.

After several hours of being stared at, clothing and dressings removed and reapplied, the brave little girl with large, silent tears rolling down her face was dismissed. For the first time, Cecilia was smiling as we loaded her back into the car. She knew that she was going to get a special treat, lunch at the Dairy Queen in Childersburg.

As I pulled into the Dairy Queen parking lot, the grandmother pointed to a shady spot under a tree, away from the other cars. Cecilia enjoyed the food she wanted, a hamburger, French fries, and a chocolate milkshake. Cecilia was still picking at her food as we left the parking

lot. Her grandmother packed up the remains for later. The monotonous rhythm of tires on the highway and the warm sun soon had child and woman nodding off and finally asleep.

I had noticed a black pickup truck with two teenage males pointing and staring at us first in the Dairy Queen parking lot, then again at a stoplight. Traveling through the town of Sylacauga they pulled up beside me, staring, pointing, and laughing. I suddenly became aware of the rare sight, a white woman driving a new 4 Speed VW, purchasing and sharing food with a black woman and child on a Sunday afternoon.

As the automobile and truck entered an isolated part of the two-lane highway with dense woods on both sides of the road blocking the sun, I was becoming more apprehensive. The black truck came up behind me so rapidly, I knew they were going to rear-end me, and then they did. They pulled up beside me making ugly gestures and yelling. Growing brave, they pulled off the highway, and as I passed by they pulled out again, tail-ending my car then bumping it several times. The truck again pulled into the parallel lane. We traveled side by side down the highway with the truck attempting to force me off the road. Finally a string of traffic came toward us from the other direction. With a pounding heart, I whispered a prayer of thanksgiving. However, once again as the ongoing traffic disappeared, the truck appeared behind me again, bumping my car several more times.

Each time they passed my vehicle, the assault of debris became more persistent— paper, napkins, boxes, cups,

cigarette butts, and partially full beer cans splashing on my new car. Through Goodwater and Alexander City the pickup truck followed closely behind, never touching the car, only threatening to. After what seemed like hours I had as much as I could tolerate. My body was rigid and damp with perspiration. I knew if the grandmother and child woke up they would be very afraid, and Cecile would start whimpering and crying. A terrified black woman and child would reinforce the behavior of the teenagers.

Shaking, I pulled off the highway into an open gas station in Dadeville with the intent of calling the police for assistance. I realized it was my story against the boys' and my story would not be believed. A white woman driving a car reeking with the odor of beer with a black family in the back seat would receive no sympathy in 1968 Alabama.

Sitting in the car waiting for my trembling to subside, I spotted the black truck driving north on the highway. I was going south. Reassuring my awakening passengers, I slowly pulled out of the gas station, constantly checking the rearview mirrors. When we arrived in Auburn, my hometown, I breathed a prayer of thanksgiving as my tense body began to relax. I felt safe on familiar grounds. As the sunset began to glow in the sky, I headed my car south toward the county's rural roads that I had joyfully traveled twelve hours earlier, to safely deliver my passengers home.



A Chance Encounter

Charlotte LaRoux

By chance one late afternoon I remembered to get the mail. Walking to the mailbox past Len's Ford van parked in front of our house, I heard the ticking of the cooling radiator. He had just returned from running errands around Auburn and had gone inside the house moments before. But there was a second sound, a kind of rustling. Returning from the mailbox, I heard the rustling again, though louder. Curious, I followed the sound and found myself looking into the grill of Len's van where I saw an amber, reptilian eye staring out at me. I realized in alarm that a bird was caught between the grill and the radiator. I opened the hood. In an instant, the bird rocketed upward past me and landed on a low branch in a yellow pine in the front yard. As the bird rested only six feet above me, its relief was palpable. The bird was motionless, even as I studied it up close. One of its legs looked crooked and the bird was missing every one of its tail feathers. From the beautiful, speckled breast and cinnamon color on its back, I identified the bird as a wood thrush. I pulled its tail feathers out of the hot radiator and marveled that the bird had not baked to death. Dusk was coming on now, and I hurried to freshen the water in the bird bath directly beneath the bird's roost. In the thirty minutes I spent with it, the bird never moved, and I feared it would not survive the night.

At sunrise the following morning, I ran outside to check on the thrush. It was gone, but at least its body was not on the ground. I worried about it. The bird had escaped a catastrophe and perhaps averted death, but only just. By sheer luck, my trip to the mailbox saved its life. Several weeks passed until one morning I looked out of a window and watched a thrush collecting a beak full of dry grass from my yard. He flew to the top of a tree in our yard. Moments later another thrush launched from the roof above my head and, diving in a graceful parabola, joined her mate in the tree. I saw her clearly: she had no tail feathers. It thrilled me to think that she survived to join her mate in founding a dynasty of Auburn wood thrushes.

It struck me, watching my wood thrush, that she and I are the products of untold millions of generations of fortunate life forms that survived to adulthood long enough to breed the next generation. Richard Powers, in his book, *The Overstory*, informs us that we share 20% of our DNA with trees. Certainly, the wood thrush, the yellow pine, and I all have a common ancestor who scraped by and survived long enough to bear young. From the first single cell life forms emerging in the Archean Eon 3.5 billion years ago, till today, we each are the product of an unbroken chain of life successfully surviving to adulthood and living long enough to produce the next generation. It's a miracle any of us are here. To Charles Darwin, it is not a miracle so much as a winnowing of chaff. It is the survival of the fittest when a small primordial fish is perceptive and agile enough to evade a predator's maw by a mere nanosecond. Such is nature's scheme, that each generation of adults passes on its wit and physical attributes to its young, to us. Darwin sees waste in such a system. He writes, "What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel work of nature!" But I ascribe our existence, yours and mine, as

much to good fortune as to evolution's pruning care. I owe my very life to my father's whim not to reenlist in the U.S. Navy months ahead of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. What other coincidences echo through the billions of generations, squared, to find us: you, me, the pine, the thrush living today? Might we not have been more likely to have been the broken twig at the end of evolution's tree?

My grandfather, Pop Hunt, used to joke that it was an accident each time a boy lives to the age of 21. He might have agreed with FDR, who said, "I think we consider too much the luck of the early bird and not enough the bad luck of the early worm." Humans survived to ponder the abstract concepts of evolution and chance in the circle of life and death. Wood thrushes don't know about such things. They sleuth for soil invertebrates, occasional seeds and fruits, and are unmindful of their good fortune to be alive.

Several days ago, I stood in the very spot where Len's Ford van parked all those years ago. Len, the van, and the pine are all gone, but a wood thrush now clung to my birdfeeder and amber-eyed me, warily assessing my intentions. Little did he know that he owed his existence to a lucky break when his eighteen times great grandmother bolted out of a Ford van radiator and landed on a yellow pine branch, passing on her genes to future generations of lovely Auburn wood thrushes.



Growing old is one of the ways the soul nudges itself into attention to the spiritual aspect of life. The body's changes teach us about fate, time, nature, mortality, and character. Aging forces us to decide what is important in life.

- Thomas Moore, Care of the Soul

All My Great Loves Are Bald

Charlotte LaRoux

Len, my artist husband of forty years, had thinning hair when we met. I fell in love with his aquamarine eyes, the gemstones of his smile. My son, Aaron, talented like his father, sports the same hair style as Michael Jordan. His thick brown hair fell out in his early thirties, but the architecture of his handsome face remains attractive. Mr. Springer, my high school art teacher, was as wide in girth as he was tall. The shiny crown of his smooth head looked waxed. But I loved his *joie-de-vivre*. Uncle Norman, the engineer, was avuncular. I always felt at home in the care of his affection. Now, Bill, my fiancé, is also bald. His mind is an attic, full of relic facts and clever stories. Bill, a talented wordsmith, came late to my life. He was worth the wait. Each of these men has loved me freely and openly. It seems such a coincidence that they were all bald.

My father was not like them. He was neither open with his affection nor what one would describe as bald. As a child, I loved to play with his hair on Sunday afternoons as he napped in the big chair in our living room. His mane was black, wavy, and as finely textured as a child's. His thinning hair was only apparent from behind where he sported a monk's tonsure. As he aged, his hair became silver, the color of a newly minted quarter.

Dad finally lost his hair after he had endured years of chemo and

radiation therapies. He was into his mid-80s by then, and the battle with cancer was lost. For thirty years, Dad had warded off heart disease by taking 30-minute walks around our subdivision every day. His cardiologist had told him he would die of a heart attack long before the cancer took him. But he was wrong.

I had gone home to Maryland to visit Dad, to say my final goodbye. It was unspoken between us, but we both knew why I was there. He only lived another three months, but he continued his walks to the end. One day I asked if I could join him. "I walk really slowly," he apologized. "I just walk around two cul de sacs."

"That's fine," I answered, "I just want the company."

As we began our figure-eight circuit, Dad began to talk, and I did not interrupt. He was never open about his feelings, but on this day, his regrets were the point of what he wanted to say. Dad had been an absent parent; he left nurturing and discipline to our mother. Mostly, he was gone, working six days a week. He slept away most Sundays. I always wondered if he would have been more attentive if we had been three sons rather than three daughters. I envied my girlfriends whose dads were involved in their lives.

During our walk, my father carefully laid out his reasons for parenting the way he did. In his mind, he

was not neglectful. It was hard for him, trying to support his family on a tenth-grade education. To make ends meet, he needed to work sixty-hour weeks until we were all through college. There were other explanations of how he lived his life and how it unintentionally harmed us. Though he did not expressly apologize, that was clearly his intent. Each confession seared my heart. He had been carrying this guilt his entire adult life.

Dad's head was slick by age 87. His pate was as devoid of hair as Mr. Clean's. The color of his exposed scalp was greenish from chemo's poisonous regimen and from disease. He had finally atoned, waiting until the last minute of his life to clear his conscience and make amends.

That he was bald at this late date was a good omen to me. Like my darling Bill, my beloved husband and son, my favorite uncle and teacher, my father was totally bald. His cancer finally made him vulnerable enough to share his feelings with me. Dad's baldness and his confession coincided at the very moment I needed to hear about and understand his love for me. We reconciled at the end of his life, just in time. There is a saying, "We win by losing." It was synchronicity that brought us to that moment of intimacy and love. As Dr. Bertram Beitman has written, "There are no coincidences." It can finally be said: All my great loves are bald.



If every day is an awakening, you will never grow old. You will just keep growing.

– Gail Sheehy, *New Passages*

Yes, I'm Racist

Bill Lee

My name is Bill and, at times, I'm racist. Five years ago, if you asked, "Bill, are you a racist?" My reply would have been, "Of course not, I'm not a racist." However, I've been reading, watching movies and YouTube videos, and listening to podcasts to educate myself.

Merriam Webster definition: *racist – a person who believes in racism, the doctrine that one's own racial group is superior or that a particular racial group is inferior to others. And, racism is prejudice combined with both social and institutional power. It is a system of advantage based on skin color.*

In 1948, I was born a white child in Fort Deposit, Ala., a small rural town in Lowndes County in the heart of the Black Belt, between Selma and Montgomery. The population was 80% black and 20% white. Although, I wasn't raised to be racist, almost everything about my white culture resulted in me being influenced by my white advantage.

From 1954 through 1966, I completed grades 1-12 at Lowndes County High School, a segregated school. Black children did not get a quality education. I was a member of a segregated church, Bethel Baptist. And in 1959, I joined a segregated Boy Scout Troop. Looking back on my childhood, I hurt for blacks who missed a good education, who were not offered the opportunity to attend church with me, and who were not allowed to join my scout troop.

Most blacks in my town lived in the "quarter" or other areas of town in little more than shacks. I was very familiar with those neighborhoods because, for six years, I delivered papers and collected from my customers each Saturday. It now grieves me that the economic system made it so difficult for blacks to live in good homes with heat and air and indoor plumbing.

Annie Bell "Bell" Stiner, our black housekeeper, used the outhouse behind our home, and she rode in the backseat of our car when we gave her a ride home. Dad had separate waiting rooms and dental chairs for blacks and whites. And, Dad owned and operated separate black and white laundromats in Fort Deposit. Although I didn't question these things, I now hurt when I think about how discouraged black people must have been.

I saw my parents treated Bell with respect and even built a home for her. However, they conformed to the cultural norms of segregation for fear of violence from vigilante groups.

In 1960, I was given a pamphlet at church touting "scientific" research that all races are not created equal, that whites are more intelligent and superior to blacks. It angers me to learn that the research was bogus, just to foster lies about white supremacy.

In 1965, I was sixteen years old at the time of the "Bloody Sunday" attack on peaceful protestors at the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., only fifty miles from my home. Also in 1965, Viola Liuzzo, a Michigan mother of five who was working to register voters, was

shot and killed by Klansmen as she drove down Hwy. 80 through Lowndes County with a black civil rights worker.

In 1966, in Hayneville, the county seat of Lowndes County, Tom Coleman, the uncle of one of my classmates, murdered Jonathan Daniels, a white Episcopal seminary student. Jonathan and three others, who were working to register voters, were simply asking to enter a small store to purchase a Coca-Cola.

“Bloody Sunday” and the murders of Viola Liuzzo, and Jonathan Daniels trigger rage and fear in me even today, over fifty years later.

Even as late as 1966, only whites could eat at the City Café in Fort Deposit and “white only” and “colored only” water fountains were still in place in public buildings. Also, 1966 was the first year that blacks could vote, serve on a jury, or testify against whites in a trial in Lowndes County. And, it was not until 1967 when the U.S. Supreme Court made it legal for blacks and whites to marry.

In 1966, when I enrolled, Auburn University had been integrated for only two years. And, Lambda Chi Alpha at Auburn was a segregated fraternity when I joined. I proposed Pete Peterson, a black student from my R.O.T.C. class, to be a member, but he was voted down. I was disappointed, but I’m encouraged that my fraternity is now integrated and Jacari Holt, one of our black members, was a top candidate for SGA president this year.

During the last few years, I’ve learned more about black history and the struggle for justice and reconciliation. Most of this history was missing from my high school textbooks. The message I hear from many sources is that I must seek out opportunities to develop not just acquaintances, but friendships with people of color. I must move from “sad for them” to “empathy for their anger and fear.” They fear for their safety from whites, law enforcement officers, and the criminal justice system.

The time I’ve spent educating myself is helping me see just how many aspects of the cultural environment of my childhood and adult life place me squarely in the middle of racist policies and systems. Each time I learn something about how black people are harmed simply because of the color of their skin, I tend to breathe deeply and my eyes start to water. My sadness motivates me to want to learn more and help other white people educate themselves.

In his book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi wrote, “Nobody, regardless of race, is simply racist or antiracist in a static way. What we say and do about race in each moment determines what, not who we are. We all have the ability to change our behavior as we gain awareness—and we have the ability to admit when we’ve made mistakes. Essentially, to be antiracist is to admit when we’re being racist.”



Black Citizens Vote in Lowndes County, Alabama

Bill Lee

As early as the late 1800s, in several Southern and Western states, payment of poll taxes and passing of literacy tests were required to register to vote. However, grandfather clauses exempted whites from these requirements. Thus, the vote was denied to Black, Latino, and Native American citizens while illiterate white citizens were allowed to vote.

The 24th Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibits both Congress and the states from conditioning the right to vote in federal elections on payment of a poll tax or other types of tax. The amendment was proposed by Congress to the states on Aug. 27, 1962 and was ratified by the states on Jan. 23, 1964.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended the use of literacy tests in all states in which less than 50 percent of the voting-age residents were registered to vote as of Nov. 1, 1964, or had voted in the 1964 presidential election. In a series of cases, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld the legislation and restricted the use of literacy test to non-English-speaking citizens.

In 1965, Stokely Carmichael and other Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members came to educate and register voters in Lowndes County, Alabama, which included my hometown of Fort Deposit. The county population was 15,000, 80% Black. SNCC, along with local citizens, formed the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. And, they created the Black Panther political party and helped candidates file for election.

With the abolishment of the poll tax, grandfather clauses, and literacy tests, white citizens resorted to other measures to discourage Black voters from registering to vote. Black citizens were fired from their jobs and evicted if they rented their homes. If they owned their homes, they experienced gunfire into their homes at night from Ku Klux Klan members.

Despite all of these forms of intimidation and violence, during the summer of 1965, the number of registered Black voters increased from 70 to 2,600, 300 more than the number of registered white voters. This is in a county with fourteen documented lynchings of African Americans from 1877 to 1950, the largest number of lynchings per capita of any county in Alabama.

In the 1966 general election, Black Panther Party candidates ran for each county office but lost. In 1970, several of these candidates won their first offices in the county. Today, almost all of the officials in Lowndes County are Black. I'm pleased that all citizens of my home county are now able to vote and elect officials that represent the racial makeup of the county.

A Wedding to Remember

Bill Lee

The invitation arrived in the mail for the November 20, 1993, wedding of my brother-in-law, Gregory Thomas Mobley, and April Leigh Ludlow. I wiped my eyes and took a second look at the invitation. Then, I thought, "No one in their right mind schedules their wedding on the day of the Iron Bowl, the annual Auburn vs. Alabama rivalry game." But they did.

The 1993 Iron Bowl was one of the most unusual matchups in the history of the rivalry. The defending national champion, Alabama, was 8-1-1 and heading into a matchup with 10-0 Auburn. But since Auburn was on probation, the game at Jordan-Hare Stadium would become the only battle between the Tide and the Tigers not shown on national television since 1981.

So, I thought to myself, "The game is not going to be televised, and I'm not willing to pay the \$500 going price for a ticket, even if I didn't have a wedding to attend. So the only thing left to do is to figure out a way to listen to the game on the radio."

Auburn announcer Jim Fyffe started the broadcast by saying, "At a remote outpost in frozen South Korea, an Army sergeant tunes his radio to the Armed Forces Network to listen as he pulls guard duty along the DMZ. A Selma native in Fairbanks, Alaska, is hosting a listening party today with his friends, who will hear the game via telephone, all decked out in orange and blue. A sellout crowd of 85,000 will watch in person, while 44,000 more who scarfed up all the available tickets, will view a closed-circuit telecast in Tuscaloosa, making this the only game to sell out two stadiums at one time."

"It impacts the lives of just about everyone who lives here or ever has," Fyffe continued. "If your team wins, seashells and balloons. But losing means a whole year of pure agony. It's the annual Auburn-Alabama game. Hello again, everybody, War Eagle! From Jordan-Hare Stadium."

When the game started on November 20, 1993, you would have found me in LaGrange, Ga., on the back row of a church wearing a dark suit with an earphone in my ear connected to a transistor radio in my pocket by a wire hidden under my coat. And, you would have found my brother-in-law, Benji Brumbeloe, decked out in similar fashion, standing next to me. All we needed were hats and sunglasses and we would have passed for the Blues Brothers.

With 6:33 left in the third quarter, with Alabama leading 14-5, Auburn quarterback Patrick Nix came off the bench when Stan White was injured. It was fourth-and-16 when the minister said, "Does anyone object to this man and this woman getting married?" At the same time, Nix threw a touchdown pass to Frank Sanders. Benji and I threw up our hands, giving the touchdown signal, and yelled, "Yes, yes, yes!" in our excitement.

When the crowd in the church turned and stared at us, we quickly removed our earphones and said, "No, no, no," we have no objection." Auburn went on to win 22-14. It's difficult to remember all of the weddings I've attended, but this was a wedding I'll never forget.

Rooms with Class

Terry C. Ley

The classrooms where I have taught—my classrooms!—have nearly always been happy places for me. Maybe it's because I had fantasized about having my own real classroom since I was a young child and taught imagined students in our basement—students whose names I had drawn from our phone directory. My curriculum relied chiefly on leftover pages from my own reading and arithmetic workbooks and the previous week's edition of *My Weekly Reader*. I kept my students' grades in a handcrafted grade book. We went to recess or enjoyed a school holiday when my mother came down to wash or iron.

At 21 I borrowed the classrooms of Howard VanderBeek and Margaret Divelbess when I did my student teaching at the Price Laboratory School on the campus of Iowa State Teachers College. There, the students were real, and they brought challenges I could never have imagined while teaching in my basement classroom. My supervisors determined the curriculum, but I found challenge in translating their goals into daily lessons that brought both satisfaction and reminders of how far I had yet to go. My supervisors and other student teachers could eavesdrop on my teaching from the conference room at the back of the classroom, and, after I had been teaching for two or three weeks, underclassmen in education visited my classes to observe a neophyte in action.

Excited to begin my first paid position at a large high school in Cedar Rapids, I earnestly hoped that I would have my own classroom. There was a good chance that I would not, for Russia's launching of Sputnik had affected American education in dramatic ways. At Jefferson High School, to accommodate new emphases on science and foreign languages, classrooms that were designed for home economics or art classes were repurposed as chemistry and foreign language labs. I thought I had won the lottery when I learned that Room 144 would be the home for me and four classes of juniors and one of sophomores that first year. Several of the other new teachers would be traveling from classroom to classroom. I still considered myself lucky when I discovered that Room 144 had been designed as a home economics kitchen, a narrow room outfitted with counters, cupboards, stovetops, and vacant spaces for refrigerators. Thirty desks arranged closely together in four rows and a portable blackboard left just enough room for my desk at the front. On the other side of a vinyl accordion door—originally the sewing half of the suite—geography teacher Jaroslava Wheatley held sway, her shouted instructions for coloring maps often drowning out lessons on poetry and punctuation on offer in 144. Visitors sat in the only space large enough for another chair, at the front of the room, next to my desk. The chairman of the College Entrance Examination Board, visiting one winter afternoon, fell sound asleep there while I tried my best to stir up excitement in my sophomores for *A Tale of Two Cities*, his light snoring not a strong positive endorsement of either Charles Dickens or my teaching.

Two years later, when a classroom in the English area became vacant, I moved to 208, a conventional classroom with adequate space for thirty desks and with a blackboard the full length of one wall, a bulletin board the length of another. There, I took advantage of adequate space for rearranging the furniture from time to time, experimenting with placement of my desk—front, side, rear. Windows the full length of the outside wall afforded a panoramic view of the grassy hill on which the school rested and the town below, a comforting semi-pastoral scene on hectic days. Those windows also provided the only air-conditioning available. By this time, I had become sponsor of the bookstore, a wee room across the hall from my classroom where students could choose from hundreds of paperback books before and after every school day. Moving to the second floor also meant that all of the other English teachers were close neighbors who provided positive models and generous professional support for me.

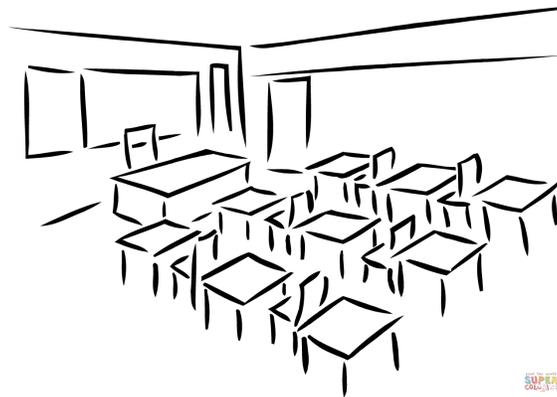
During my fifth year at Jefferson I was invited to become the English Department chair at Kennedy High School, a state-of-the-art school that was to open the next fall. During spring break, I ordered all the fiction for the instructional materials center; before the end of that school year, I ordered all the English-related textbooks for about a thousand students. I spent a lot of time in the book room that summer, processing and shelving those textbooks. Half of the eight classrooms in the English suite had a single window to the outside; half, none. I assumed that I would get to choose my classroom, and I had my eye on one with a window. However, because the principal wanted me on the hallway, close to his office, he assigned me to 108, a windowless room that shared a folding wall with 107. Because the sunshine did not find its way into that room, I had to find ways of brightening it through thematic décor and displays of student work and compelling books. Because the building was air-conditioned, 108 was almost always comfortable—and we were five steps from the media center, twenty steps from the lobby, the lockers, and the main office.

Following a year of sabbatical leave for doctoral studies, because I wanted experience teaching junior high students, I chose to move from the district's newest building to one of its oldest, McKinley Junior High, close to downtown Cedar Rapids. My classroom there, 222, was gigantic compared to my classroom at Kennedy, but was very tired. I could arrange seating for my seventh and ninth grade students as our needs required, and there was plenty of room to move about, but where I fastened posters to the wall was often determined by where the paint was peeling. Open windows provided our only air-conditioning, a real challenge during my first spring there, when heat and a construction project just outside my room competed for being our greatest distraction.

I began my fourteenth year of teaching at Auburn University, anticipating the need to move from classroom to classroom in a five-story building where I sometimes got lost. Although I taught in three different classrooms during the next 27 years, generally I shared the same classroom with two English education colleagues who tolerated my need to create a welcoming and inspiring classroom environment and allowed me to arrange and decorate it pretty much as I desired.

I retired in 2001 after teaching for forty years. Then, I figured that forty years was long enough to do anything. But, after reading some books, joining my church's choir, and touring New England, I missed teaching—not committee meetings or publish-or-perish existence, but teaching. With a former student I organized a memoir-writing class for seasoned adults who have many stories to tell. During the fifteen years that we have met, we have written and shared our stories in an auditorium, a meeting room at a senior residence, a motel ballroom, and a newly built site with all the bells and whistles. None of those places were mine in any real sense. I was a lord of the manor for only ninety minutes each week. The coffeepot was the only thing that was mine that I left behind each week.

Now, in the midst of a pandemic, I am back on familiar territory. Not in my basement this time, I am instead teaching from my home office, now my Zoom Room, seated in front of my computer, surrounded by part of my personal library. My students are real. Their names appear on my official class roll from our lifelong learning institute and in the corners of their respective Zoom niches. They appear in my office every Monday morning, themselves surrounded by their books, their personal décor, sometimes in their bedrooms. I can hear them when they remember to unmute themselves. I am (literally) at home in this classroom.



Child of The Depression

Terry C. Ley

The Great Depression had nearly passed by the time I was born in 1939, but the melody lingered on. I am still a product of the Depression because it affected my parents' values and behaviors, many of which I inherited or grew into. Lessons they learned from the Depression comprise a continuing theme in my book of life.

Two notebooks document how frugal my parents were, how careful they were of the resources they had. My mother kept a tiny red notebook throughout her marriage. It was her single-entry bookkeeping system: income in one column (for most of those years, one entry each week: my father's salary) and every expenditure in the others: \$3.23 for groceries, \$1.10 for fabric, \$2.63 for gasoline, \$1.25 for Dad's haircut, and appropriate amounts for seasonal purchases, like a crate of Bing cherries and Ball jars in June or July and school clothes for me in August. At the end of each week, she balanced her books without benefit of a calculator, subtracting the long line of expenditures from the single income figure, hoping to carry over a small remainder to the new week. If she owned a red pen, she seldom needed it. Her book was red; the ink was not.

My father resisted buying anything he could not pay for with cash. He too kept a ledger of sorts when he built our modest family home in the late 1940s. He carried the tiny notebook in the pocket of his blue chambray shirt whenever we went to Townsend and Merrill Lumber Yard to purchase whatever he must have

for the task at hand. For a gallon of paint (\$2.29) or a supply of nails (\$.78) he paid cash out of his pocket. Townsend and Merrill allowed him to charge some larger purchases, but he did so reluctantly—the Rheem hot water tank (\$16.75) and the laths required for plastered walls, for instance—but Mom's records show that she paid for those in full at the end of each month. When a new cemetery opened near our home, Mom had to convince Dad to purchase burial plots on credit, and they paid \$220 for four plots with a small down payment and \$5.00 payments each month.

Although we pretty much measured our lives from paycheck to paycheck, my parents learned the value of savings from their experiences during the Depression. Their habit of buying war bonds during World War II continued long after the war was over. Savings permitted Dad to pay cash for the used cars that he bought every eight or ten years, the only way he would buy a car.

Mom's records from the late 1940s also document my allowance: one quarter each Saturday, which I usually spent at the Regent Theater, where I bought a ticket to see whatever western or musical comedy was playing for fifteen cents and debated whether to spend a nickel on a box of popcorn or a roll of Necco candy wafers. That left me a nickel to spend at Mrs. Curtis's neighborhood store on candy or ice cream during the next week. With occasional rewards from my parents for good report cards or extra duty around the house and from the tooth fairy for discarded baby teeth I bought

luxuries, often books and games. My parents helped me to open a savings account before I was eight, and, after that, I saved portions of cash that I received for special occasions, like my birthdays and, later, my high school graduation.

Throughout high school and college, I worked at a job that I loved, at the local music store. At first, my salary was fifty cents an hour, and because I was in school, I did not work many hours, but I walked to the First National Bank every Saturday during my lunch break to deposit a good portion of it in that savings account. That nest egg eventually paid for my college tuition—\$100 a semester at Iowa State Teachers College—and for my textbooks. Before I started my first year of teaching, my parents introduced me to their Investors Diversified advisor, who opened an account for me. Although Investors Diversified has become Ameriprise since then, I have contributed to that account every month since 1961.

My mother adapted to the times after credit cards became readily available in the early 1950s. By then, she had gone to work for the first time outside of our home—was in charge of accounts receivable for a small manufacturer in a nearby town—and times were better for us. If she charged something at Black's Department Store, she paid it off in full when the bill came. Because my father was still reluctant to go out on a financial limb, Mom and I would gang up on him occasionally, to convince him to buy something he could not pay for in cash, to take a vacation outside of Iowa, perhaps to brick the front

of the house even though he could not pay for it within thirty days. How my mother did it, I do not know, but she convinced him to buy his first new car when he was nearly sixty. Even then he insisted on paying cash.

Many years later, with access to credit cards, technology, and easy credit, unlike my father, I do purchase items that I cannot or choose not to pay for with cash. Our house has been our largest credit purchase, of course. Because Dad built our home over several years, he could pay for it as he went. Committing to thirty years of house payments made me uncomfortable, of course, but I saw it as a wise alternative to paying rent, as I had done for thirteen years before we bought our first house. And indeed, I regard my Visa and Discover cards as valuable financial resources that provide pleasure now, consequence later; but I insist on paying off whatever balance we have accrued each month first, and I keep a careful accounting of our resources and our expenses.

By setting good examples of their stewardship that arose, in part, out of necessity, my parents taught me the value of economy, patience, and careful, conservative planning in my use of financial resources. The lessons they learned from The Great Depression are reflected today not only in my bank register and balance sheets but also in my satisfaction that I am managing my resources responsibly.



My Most Memorable Christmas: The Christmas of the Flaming Orb

Becca Little

Surprised by my subtle shift toward optimism, I busied myself with packing and helping Jimmy with the last-minute details for the trip to his parents in China Grove for Christmas. Our children, Rachel and Tyler, were four and two the Christmas of 1995. Despite the challenges, I enjoyed these ages. These were tender times, especially at Christmas. I was not going to let this past horrendous year rob me of the opportunity to experience some joy.

We had moved from Montgomery to Auburn in March. We hadn't even unpacked the boxes when my stepfather called to let me know my mother was nearing the end. Rachel and I flew to Vegas to be with my mother. While away, Jimmy endured a tax audit with a toddler. My mother passed from lung cancer in April. Six months later, in October, my youngest brother Stephen, 25, died in a car accident. It had been two months now since his death.

The phone rang. It was my brother John in Birmingham. His plans for Christmas had changed. He and his girlfriend had broken up. I was sad to hear it, but I wasn't surprised. Stephen's death had been particularly hard on John, and his drinking had escalated to new levels, and hence the breakup. He was going to be alone for Christmas now, unless...

I called my sweet mother-in-law Susann and ran it by her. There was a pause after I made my request, yet, gracious as ever, she responded with "Of

course, he's always welcome. We'd love to have John join us!"

Early Christmas morning with our children and family turned out to be as tender and magical as possible, under the circumstances. I missed my mother and Stephen terribly, yet in spite of the sting I thoroughly enjoyed the family I still had with me, and I was more thankful than ever for each one of them.

Then it was time to get busy preparing Christmas dinner. I always enjoyed helping Susann in the kitchen. I cherished our talks. She was an exceptional listener, and I could see where my husband Jimmy learned so many of the qualities I treasured about him.

Jimmy, John, and my father-in-law, Cliff, were asked to watch Rachel and Tyler while Susann and I cooked. Watching the little ones could be a fun role when they were happy, and the men had them outnumbered, but there was a football game on television. While the men were watching the football game, and in spite of all his new toys, Tyler explored Susann's oil paints in one of the guest bedrooms where she had them set up. He emerged from the bedroom elated and covered in cadmium red. Paint was in the carpet and on a quilt as well.

After we cleaned Tyler up, we tried to salvage the damage, both of us silently realizing that neither the carpet nor the quilt was ever going to be the same. Still true to form, Susann handled it graciously. We admonished the men to watch the children this time and went back to our cooking. Then Tyler got into

Susann's paints again. Susann didn't handle it as well the second time. It was only one of three times I'd ever seen her get irritable.

"I'll cook, you watch the children!" she said. I was glad to do so. I knew who she was really mad at. When the dinner was almost ready, Susann recovered her gracious demeanor and began taking pictures of the food, the lit candles with plaid bows around them, the fire crackling in the contemporary fireplace. I'd never seen her take photos of such before. It had always been photos of people or views, but she had already taken a plethora of photos of the children and family that morning. Her home and her dinner had never been in finer form for Christmas. *Southern Living* would have been proud, with the exception of one bedroom. The aroma of roasted turkey, along with the apples and cinnamon from the pie still in the oven, even distracted the men from their game.

Polly, Cliff's mother, arrived. Polly was usually in good spirits. When she laughed her whole body shook, and we were often afraid she would lose her balance. But she was not herself today, and she was pale. She was joining us late because she hadn't been feeling well and wanted to sleep in. She smiled upon greeting us but said little except "Merry Christmas!"

Dinner was now ready and on the table. Susann took one last photo to get the entire candlelit table. We each stood at our places, Polly at one end of the table and Cliff at the other. Then while still standing at the head of the table, Polly projectile vomited down the full length of the table set for eight. Not only did it get all over the food, it blew the candles out.

While I tended to Polly, Susann, Cliff and Jimmy cleared and cleaned the table. John watched the children. At least

it was half-time now. Fortunately, the turkey had been carved after the photo session and placed as slices on the serving platter, so there was still a little turkey in the kitchen as well as some vegetables in pots on the oven and the hot apple pie.

Susann relit all the candles, and at last we all sat down to say grace and eat what had been left from the kitchen. Rachel and Tyler were unaffected by what had transpired and carried the conversation initially. We were grateful for their banter, but we didn't know what to say in the aftermath. As the children focused more on eating, it grew quiet at the table.

After a long silence, Cliff started in on John, asking him personal questions about his relationship and drinking. Cliff had been sober and involved in AA himself for thirteen years at that point. I suspect Cliff was trying to help John in a tough love sort of way, but the conversation ended up evolving into a humiliating public interrogation. John sat looking at the table while answering all of Cliff's probing questions. I tried to defend my brother without offending Cliff. I knew better than to offend him. My efforts were not effective at getting Cliff to lay off of John. Jimmy could not tolerate it any longer. He defended John and reminded Cliff of his own past and that he was in no position to be critical of John. Cliff's response escalated the situation into the worst argument I've ever witnessed between the two of them. Jimmy rose from the table and asked that I help him pack. We were leaving.

Thirty minutes later, the car loaded save our suitcases at the door, we

started to say our good-byes. Cliff made an attempt at an apology. He reminded us that Tom, Susann's brother and his wife Shrynn were coming. They were due to arrive shortly from Huntsville in their motor home. We'd miss them if we left now, and Jimmy did want to see his uncle. He accepted Cliff's efforts at reconciliation. We would stay, at least long enough to see Tom and Shrynn. Susann relit the candles. We left our suitcases at the door.

Tom and Shrynn's arrival lightened the mood. I had wrapped many individual gifts for Tom and Shrynn with tissue paper and with plenty of extra for padding into the largest gift bag I had ever seen. The delight in Tom's eyes and his grin as he was exploring its depths, tossing copious amounts tissue paper behind him is still vivid, as vivid as the consequence of his innocent and inspired actions. Initially obscured from our view, the cascade of tissue paper had been landing on the burning candles behind him, which eventually ignited into a huge floating flame. It quickly coalesced into a floating orb of fire between two and three feet in diameter. We stood in silence and awe, we'd never seen a fire ball before. Who knew fire could coalesce into a sphere? Fear set in as the air from the vent set the fire ball in motion. No one moved. It wasn't my house, but these were my children! I thought of Jimmy's extensive scars from third degree burns when he was a child and how he'd almost died. If no one else was going to take action, then I would!

I didn't remember ever seeing a fire extinguisher at Cliff and Susann's home. I seriously considered the cashmere blanket on the couch, but that was an expensive option, it wasn't mine, and it might ignite. However, there was a pail full of ashes from the fireplace on the

hearth. I opted for the ashes. I did not ask permission. I grabbed the pail and had it lifted to my side taking aim at the fire ball when Cliff yelled "No!" He attacked the fire ball with his bare hands and arms. He cried out in pain and turned his grimaced face away from the flame to protect his face and eyes, but he didn't stop his assault on the flaming orb. You could smell the burnt hair from his arms.

Cliff's courage and sacrifice eventually succeeded in extinguishing the flame. Both Cliff's hands and arms were bright red and rapidly developed blisters, especially on the tender medial aspects of his arms. Now he was swearing and shouting that this was all Tom's fault. I ran cold water run over Cliff's hands and arms as I assessed his burns. I saw no evidence of third-degree burns, but as an RN I knew the extent of blisters did warrant a visit to a physician, if only to avoid risk of infection and decrease the inflammation and pain. He insisted he had no intention of waiting to see a physician in the ER on Christmas.

When we realized there was nothing left, we could do, we decided it was time to go home. Even though Tom and Shrynn had driven four hours to get there, and they had only been there a little over an hour, they decided it was time for them to go home too. They were heading out the door as we headed out the driveway. We had left before Tom realized he had backed their fine motor home into the septic tank. It had sunk up to its axles. We almost wished we could be a fly on the motor home to see both Tom's and Cliff's reactions!

Later we heard both versions, which were fairly consistent. Tom and Shrynn waited for the wrecker in their motor home. Evidently it can take quite a while to find a wrecker capable of removing a motor home from a septic

tank on Christmas Day, and it can also take quite a lot of money.

We laugh about it now. It feels like a Christmas comedy looking back on it, but it all felt overwhelming and tragic at the time. Funny how time and intention can change our

perspectives: how grief, fear, anger and sacrifice can coalesce into a sphere of insight, courage, forgiveness and comedy even when we've been burned.

The Closet Speaks

Gail McCullers

The closet in the den is full. Who, besides me, keeps everything? Sacred to me are all the birthday cards, get well wishes, clippings from newspapers, and all the letters from my mom, before she died in 1985. Letters from Aunt Lits and Mama Haynes are there too.

A slide projector is on the shelf. We have slides from each one of the Carpenter for Christ trips that Richard made and even a few slides from my, Christy's and Jiggs's childhood days. Along with the slide projector is a plastic model c-130 airplane, just like the one Steve, my son-in-law flew during his military assignments.

Puzzles await for someone to love again, as well as a Barbie game with Ken as a possible date to choose.

Picture albums exist, already put together, with shoe boxes full of pictures yet to use in another one. Some of these pictures will have to remain "nameless," for I don't remember who they might be or when they went into a shoebox.

This small file cabinet surprises me. It has papers I brought home with me the day I retired in 2002. I have eighteen years of appointment calendars, listings of all my phone calls and the meetings I attended. I guess they are there to use when I write my book.

I can hear that closet. It is calling my name.



“Coffee Spoons” – The Lost Poem

Charles Julian McDonald

This is about the writer, my friend Perry Williams, and his poem “Coffee Spoons.”

In 1963 Perry and I were college students, and I was selected to represent Troy at the Southern Literary Festival at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. Times were difficult in the ‘60s regarding civil rights and government.

Perry was a veteran who had been in the navy for six years and was going to school on the GI bill. The war in Viet Nam was raging, and the war was very unpopular. I had managed to stay out of the regular army because I was in the national guard, and as long as I made my grades, I avoided the draft.

Perry wrote a poem, “Coffee Spoons,” in Creative Writing. At the time, frankly, I didn’t understand the complex ties to T. S. Eliot’s famous poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The seventh stanza of Eliot’s poem reads:

*For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.*

“Coffee spoons” may refer to a middle-aged man’s anxiety and other complexities.

It’s been sixty years since the poem was written. I recall Perry’s poem was not as dark and poorly lit about mankind as Eliot’s. I sometimes wondered if Perry was stirring his coffee cup to see what symbolism he could muster in the bottom of *his* cup.

Sometimes we wound up at Jimmy’s Tavern so we could have a few cold ones and listen to the juke box. Jim Reeves, Patsy Cline, Buddy Holly, Hank Williams, and others could help while away the afternoon. It was said that Eliot’s poem is an examination of the tortured psyche of the modern man—overeducated, eloquent, neurotic and emotionally stilted, and more. It didn’t have a place at Jimmy’s.

The poem was submitted in competition to the Southern Literary Festival at Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963 as competition. It was selected as one of the best poems, but they didn’t have a copy of the poem either.

That year two important Southern writers spoke at the festival: Eudora Welty and Shelby Foote. Ms. Welty said she would not speak unless students from the all-black

Tougaloo College were invited. The blacks were permitted for the first time that year at the request of Miss Welty. This was the first that blacks were invited to Millsaps. Ms. Welty spoke about her autobiographical essays, *One Writer's Beginnings*, and Shelby Foote's presentation was about Faulkner.

The last time I saw Perry at school was when I graduated. I was glad to see him but did not expect to see him there. I introduced him to my parents and my fiancée. It was a pleasant time for all of us.

After graduation I went to work for a contractor in Montgomery, and I lost contact with Perry for several years. Sally and I were married in July 1964, and my company sent us to Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. We were there for about three years, and following that assignment we were transferred back to the home office in Montgomery, Ala. Our daughter was born in 1968.

Four years passed, and one day I received a call from Perry. He was working for a wholesale grocery company. At lunch one day, he told me he had volunteered with the Red Cross and had been in Viet Nam for a couple of years. I noticed there was something unusual about him and later found that while serving in Viet Nam he had become addicted to opioids in the form of pills. Not much later, I heard that Perry had died, and I had not found the poem. I don't know why I didn't ask him about it the day we had lunch together, but I had forgotten about it.

Some time had passed when I decided to call Perry's wife and get a little more information about my friend. She told me after Perry returned from overseas, and after she learned of his addiction, he agreed to enter a drug rehab program at the VA hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama. She said he was there for the period of time required but was still addicted when he was released. I learned that Perry had worked his pills into the elastic around the waist of his pants so he had a supply of pills while in the hospital. Curiosity had led me to ask Perry's wife about his writing, particularly the poem "Coffee Spoons." She was no help, so I let the inquiry alone.

The next summer I was driving in south Alabama near the Pea River swamp in Barbour County. I knew a black woman there named Mahalia, a fortuneteller and psychic. Some people said she could find things that were lost. She had read my fortune before and told me interesting things. I decided to see her.

I drove up in the yard where I found her rocking in her chair. I greeted her saying, "Hello, Mahalia! Do you remember me?" She giggled when saying, "Sho' nuf, child. You is that McDonald boy from over yonder in Clayton. You is done growed up, boy. Land alive Jesus. I is glad to see you." There were chickens in the yard and on the porch, along with two sleeping, flop-eared hound dogs. I had to be careful where I walked on the porch because the chicken mess was everywhere, but this was all part of visiting Mahalia.

I told her I had been searching for "Coffee Spoons," a poem written by my friend Perry, who was dead. After thirty minutes or so, she took a few puffs on her pipe, looked

like she was in deep thought for a while, and then said she could help me. I think this is what she told everybody; however, I didn't have anything to lose.

We went into her house, and I sat down at a table. There were several items on the table, including a few tarot cards, a crystal ball, and a tattered Ouija board. There was also a wooden box that she called her *haint away* box. I learned when I was a boy that haints were spooks, ghosts, or spirits. I saw a piece of paper with lyrics on it, among other things. She opened the box and, after muttering some mumbo jumbo, she dumped the items on the table. I saw rattle snake rattles, some crystals, a bottle of liquid, a bird beak, a black widow spider, a petrified coon's unmentionable, the ace of spades, and other things.

She appeared to be in a trance. Her eyes rolled back. She said some things that didn't make sense, but I sat there in that spooky room being observant and quiet.

An hour passed, and she was still sitting there looking just like she started, when suddenly she came to and said, "Chile, I see Mr. Perry. He's dead and in the ground, and his poem is down there with him!" I took a few minutes, thanked her, and got up, paid her \$5.00, and left. I was saddened that she didn't tell me anything about the poem other than it was down there in the ground with Perry.

*I drove out of Mahalia's yard, and, after a few minutes, I was on I-65 heading back to Montgomery. The radio was on with the volume very low, but I could hear the music. The song "American Pie" was playing, a very long song by Don McLean.
Cause the players tried to take the field,
The marching band refused to yield.
Do you recall what was revealed
The day the music died?*

*We started singin' "Bye, bye, Miss American Pie."
Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry.
Them good ole boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye,
Singin', "This'll be the day that I die,
This'll be the day that I die."*

Perry died.

I got what I thought was an answer to my and Mahalia's question.

I gunned my Chevy and drove on up toward Montgomery and home. The matter was settled. I would let the poem settle in the ground with Perry.

Dental Work

Scott Melville

I've a dentist appointment coming up, my biannual Cleaning and checkup, they've been keeping a close Watch on one of my old crowns.

If it wasn't the 19th century yet, and I had a toothache, I likely would've gone to a barber-surgeon or maybe the blacksmith to have it pulled. I've never actually known a blacksmith. I have a hard time seeing myself heading down to a stable, to a big burly guy in a leather apron, with his hammer, chisel, and 16-inch jaw tongs.

Throughout my early years I had three basic barbers. There was Charlie, Hermy, and Bud. I'm visualizing them getting a pair of pliers out of the drawer and coming over to me. I'm not sure which one of the three I would have preferred doing the deed.

Charlie would have been the most jovial about it, would have had some droll anecdote. Bud would've been most likely to offer a swig of whiskey to help things go more smoothly. I can see myself throwing my head back and taking a mouthful gulp, just like it's done in the movies. And then I'd have leaned back and got a good grip on the arms of the chair.

I'm not sure what I would have done regarding replacements. I understand that they could cost a fair number of guineas. If I still had half of my teeth or so, I probably would have left well enough alone, planned on eating more gruel and mush, less venison and jerky.

I understand that cadaver teeth were the most common option. Whether they were readily available or not depended upon having an active grave robber in the vicinity, or if there had been a fairly recent battle and one of the locals had gone out and procured what were called "Waterloo" teeth. Hopefully he had been diligent and had a nice supply of different sized molars and incisors, moderately yellowed ones to match mine.

I also understand that going the cadaver route carried a very real risk of contracting tuberculosis or syphilis. I probably wouldn't have been informed of that. The Charlies, Hermys, and Buds that I knew wouldn't have been reading those kinds of professional journals. They had subscriptions to *Field and Stream*, *Man's Adventure*, and *Stag*.



Frog Kicks and Friends

Debbie Cunningham

Lesley was a strong and highly motivated swimmer. At eight years old, she struggled with her breaststroke kick. Instructional and practice times were of the essence. As the swim team's coach, I scrambled in the midafternoon to Lesley's back yard to employ the picnic table as an educational tool for kick mastery. With her torso on top of the table and her frog legs dangling off the end, I grasped Lesley's ankles, flexed her knees, and whipped her kick into regulation.

A gasped giggle arose from the garden gate. Lesley's tickled mother, Wannah, tried to maintain a composed, behind-the-scene support. Our adult eyes connected--her hands cupped over her mouth, my hands cupped over Lesley's ankles. We immediately shared a trust, a respect, and a sense of humor that grew into a lifelong sisterhood of love and joy.

Our Cherrywood Stereo System

Scott Melville

Getting it was a big deal.
I remember going to town,
being in the store.
The music came out
of two giant speakers,
high as my head.
You could adjust the bass,
feel it pulse and vibrate your bones.
It played both LPs and 45s
(there was a center cap
that could be clicked in place for
the bigger holes).

Mom had a place for it
at the base of the stairs,
next to the front door.
Thereafter, for some time,
Andy Williams crooned
about his most unusual coloring book,
Pat Boone about writing love letters
in the sand.

And to this day
I can't help but hear
ukuleles strumming
and Annette Funicello,
the pineapple princess,
singing huki hukilau.



Judy, Judy, Judy, and Getting Jiggy

Scott Melville

I was excited. The young man was going to do impersonations. They've always been a favorite with me. For sure he'd be doing Jimmy Stewart's slow, tongue-tied drawl, that's an easy winner.

How about Jack Benny—arms folded, looking off with that put-off look of his, with that soft “Well” of his. It'd be interesting to see if this guy is able to stretch out, hold the pregnant pause in his hand for the perfect length of time.

I hoped he would do Humphrey Bogart's tough guy voice, that dry and tired voice of Sam Spade and Philip Marlow.

I always like it when they do Jimmy Durante, do him in perfect “puy-son,” capture that gravelly growl, make reference to his schnozzola as he exposes it in lifted profile. Maybe he'd give us a bit of “As Time Goes By,” or raise and shake his head and hat and sing “Inka Dinka Doo.”

And what about Rodney Dangerfield— that “I don't get no respect” deadpan of his? Will he be pulling at his collar and somehow mimic that bulging-eyed look? It would be great if he'd include a few of Dangerfield's one-liners, they never get old, always make me laugh.

“When I was born I was so ugly the doctor slapped my mother.”
“I told my dentist my are getting yellow.
He told me to wear a brown tie.”
“My psychiatrist told me I was crazy and I said
I want a second opinion. He said okay, you're ugly too.”

Or how about:

“I was so ugly my mother used to feed me
with a slingshot.”

“My parents hated me. My bath toys were
a toaster and a radio.”
What a dog I got, his favorite bone is in my arm.”

No, no, but of course there was none of them
or that, no one I knew. There was Snoop Dogg,
Ice Cube, Kid Cudi and Jay-Z.
The audience clapped and cheered.
The jokes on me.



Trip to the Airport

Gabriele Darch

I remember a trip to the airport after visiting my parents in Wisconsin. I was riding in the back seat with my father. My brother was driving; my mother sat in the front passenger seat. My father and I were alone in the back seat. There was little conversation in the car. As we rode along, my father took my hand and held it in his. We sat that way for thirty minutes all the way to the Milwaukee airport. I remember thinking that this “handholding” could have felt awkward or uncomfortable, but it did not. It felt warm and reassuring and gave me a sense of comfort and being loved.

Late Apologies

Charlene Redick

It got to the point that it was day-by-day.

Friends heaped concern.

My husband made apologies for his neglect of me during our fifty years:

Sleep apnea, forgetting his phone, burning the toast, not giving me orgasms, driving too fast.

I had recently come to turning away from cruelty from my children

And making of my survival what Alice Walker calls *a parka for the soul*.

Their gifts were nice but it was time with them I wanted. They didn't have time for me.

On the day before the wedding, when we were getting our nails done

And I didn't get the right Another Broken Egg restaurant out of the three located at the beach

I endured their screams and waited patiently under the water tower at Destin so that they could find me.

She's not part of the inner family, they said of me, as though I were an afterthought,

As though their jealousy of my passion for art and writing justified their exclusion of me.

I can't stand the way they talk about you, one daughter said of her two sisters.

They are tight, my son said. *Not that I need to be on them. I was mean, too.*

I had used *The Four Agreements* with them for years:

Be Impeccable in Your Word.

Expect Nothing.

Don't Take Anything Personally.

Give Your Very Best.

Don't correct her, my son-in-law offered regarding his wife, and of his sister-in-law, he said.

She's a savant.

I abided their slaps: *I don't have time to talk on the phone. Don't bring that cake mess in here.*

I'll block you.

I let their father answer the phone and interpret me to them, grieving for the lost opportunities to forgive one another,

I prayed over their cruelties as Christ on the cross prayed: *Father forgive them; they know not what they are doing.*

And their rudeness: Art work, ingredients for a cake, curiosity about their career challenges, hopes for a grandchild? *I'm not dropping a baby so you can make up for your crappy life.*

I learned to ask for nil.

We've got a family problem, my husband said as he climbed into the hospital bed after my surgery.

Erica Jong said that brilliant families always have an insane member. We have several.

When the diagnoses came, they came running with apologies.

I'm sorry, I said. But I feel nothing.

My lips were chapped, my throat burned, the word **metastatic** echoed in my spirit.

I could have really used this when I was in the dark and needed to be assured that I was a pretty good mother

But I'm dying now and dying is hard work.

Time, which under normal circumstances I would gladly give you, has run out.



I wrote stories from the time I was a little girl, but I didn't want to be a writer. I wanted to be an actress. I didn't realize then that it's the same impulse. It's make-believe. It's performance.

– Joan Didion

Election Day at Dawn

Charlene Redick

Occasionally, like tonight, before Election Day, I rise at black dark and turn on the radio
To the channel that serves those late-middle-age hippies who grow dope and forage for
mushrooms

In that enclave, on the way to the lake, sprinkled with one-room shacks and mansions
And populated by subversive hobos and millionaires at crowded boogie weekends in the
spring and fall.

Most of them, by hiding out, are working agendas related to holding on or giving up:
There are the greed guys whose service to the truth involves designating others as angry
orphans—"the have-nots,"

Then there are the county philosophers, artists, writers, living-off-the-land organics, and
yogis who follow tantric tracks,

Then the strict Constitutionals who believe that a profit can be made off desperation,
poverty, and illness,

And, then, fearful of the multi-ethnic future, there are the *MAGAs*, who place signs on their
lawn:

*THE WHITE FAMILY SUPPORTS TRUMP/PENCE. Let's make America great for four more
years.*

I'm a pioneer woman—a vegetarian on most days who takes no medicine, drinks no
alcohol, and toques no mood-altering plant substances—so I'm more a participant-
observer in this community than a true believer.

As each day dawns, I build focus regarding the best and worst in humankind's truth and
consequence game

And note the parade of avarice on display at churches, golf clubs, and social gatherings.

I study the money games, the private greed that people are ashamed of but cannot give up,
And currently the COVID infections at theaters, ball games, weddings, funerals, and bars
because we were heedless.

The songs on the radio at this dawn hour mark signature times and events of history.

I ponder what will happen if the infected air keeps killing us like the nuclear fallout that we
feared in the Fifties,

And why "Stand by Me" and "You've Got a Friend" bring tears.

As dawn breaks, this poetry from these troubadours of bygone times speaks of what we
hoped for

From a lover, our country, its future: *May you never love in vain, Let's hear it for the boy, All I
need.*

As bright day dawns, I drive to the polls, pondering the question: Will these white, Anglo Saxon, GOP geezers
Take an inventory at the polls today of what we've lost these last four years before a civil war between the left and the right
Under this present administration squanders America's future?
These are the men that I danced with at fraternity parties, who learned how to haul a baby in a backpack when I was promoted.
Now they tremble with Parkinson's, struggle with Obstructive Lung Disease, and ignore the need for health insurance.

This just cannot be—Would they really rather have a hang glider, a golf championship, or a 52-foot yacht
Than for everybody to be able to go to the doctor?
Are they really going to keep this man in the White House who wrought a world of contagion, lockdowns, and layoffs?
Where New York is a ghost town, schools are virtual, public transportation is dangerous, and we cannot celebrate the festivals, trek to Paris, the Himalayas, or to our loved ones' arms on their deathbeds?

Ah, Poetry, save me: You are the harbinger when doom is on the horizon; our moral certainty written on our monuments, our peace and fight songs set to music. When we've lost our way, you are the flagship of our armada out of our delusions.
Be my comforter, Poetry. Pray, tell me, how do we redeem our sins that have brought upon us this havoc?



Tomorrow we will write, write and not waste time. We will make dark marks on the page, the gift to which we have been given, the gift that has been given to us.

– Robert Benson, Dancing on the Head of a Pen

Defying Gravity

Charlene Redick

From Victoria, Canada, compliments of United Airlines, a charming widower who found me through my photo and poetry four years ago is finally here with me. A conservative economist from McGill University, with two grown, accomplished sons, a man who was floored during the election when the video “*I grab them by the p...y*” was trivialized by the Fox evangelicals.

Look at the Christians selling out. He said back then. Unbelievable. I mean if you're a person of faith this speaks to how superficial your faith is, and how you are for sale.

Tonight, he says: *He's conceding.*

We are setting the table.

No, he isn't. There will be havoc. It's his brand. I place the glasses. In trauma the aftermath is the killer.

He pours the wine.

My husband was with me and our four children in the big house at the noon holiday dinner today.

Fifteen serving dishes piled high with beautiful food made from scratch.

We prayed, ate, and enjoyed our children and their mates. A huge table. Seating twelve. All crazy for the sentimental food—these masked, grown-up, middle-agers, yearning and in charge.

There are days when I would die for a slice of this cheesecake. The writer says.

I'm not dropping a baby so that you two can feel better about your life. The physician says.

Bipolar with a drug addiction is a dual diagnosis. Suicide rates are terrible. The engineer says.

The fourth one is on the phone with his roommate who is with her parents and reporting that their dog—an Italian Mastiff—dug a hole under the fence but has been found.

They leave in stages by 3:00 o'clock back to their naps, ball games, drinks with friends--two grandsons, both in college, family intimacy a strain on this day, all of them bewildered by our terrible fight. My husband takes a nap. I pack a smaller feast into a picnic basket and drive to the beach, to the house on concrete stilts that my family has owned since before I was born, a crab shack that has survived five hurricanes and sheltered much heartache. It is mine now. I'm the last one standing. I stay here a lot, nowadays, unbothered, at my request, working on my novel and forgiveness.

I place the turkey, dressing, and cranberry sauce on the table. We serve our plates. The wine is good.

How is it that you're here with me, finally? I smile across the table.

There is a pause.

I like the way you think and write. You sparkle. And we're just having Thanksgiving Dinner on the Gulf of Mexico at your family's house at Pensacola Beach. What harm can come?

You've crossed the border and flown across the country during a pandemic.

I was a good boy. I tested negative three times, quarantined, wore hazmat with a full face shield as I was arriving at the Fort Walton airport this afternoon. I did it all because you are so compelling.

I'll bet you were quite a show, all in white, like you were going to Mars.

Venus, dear, not Mars. Was it tough getting away?

I shake my head. I've never lied to him, but he doesn't ask a lot of me nowadays.

There is a pause and then he speaks:

Thanksgiving must be the loneliest day of the year.

The meal finished, the sun hits the water on the horizon. I light candles. It's easy between us out here on the deck with cognac by candlelight, talking about our work, the election, and heartache.

I'm sure you're a full-time job but what a payoff.

I smile at his rhetoric. Is everything a transaction? I've been stuck on that notion for four years.

Things cost. He shrugs his shoulders. Worth is worth pursuing.

The cognac has mellowed us. Leaning into the night he recites *Invictus*. His voice redolent and deep.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
for my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning's of chance
my head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
and yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

The Gulf ebbs. The last of the cognac swirls in our glasses. In the stillness, the flames flicker. The moon rises as the sun sets on a world of masked travelers keeping distance yet seeking hope.

I rise and give him the keys to the house and to the spare car.

I'll be back early tomorrow morning.

He nods.

You're lovely. Thank you for a stellar evening. Look forward to you.

Engineering Stinks

Jim C. Rose

I've been holding off saying this about my former career for a long time, but it's true. Engineering stinks. When I was in school at Auburn University, nobody alerted me to that. We were shown beautiful photographs of monumental structures. Buildings and bridges that any designer would be proud of. They didn't tell us about the rest.

So I graduated with great expectations. Even stayed long enough to pick up a master's. I wanted to be absolutely sure I was qualified to design the most complex structures man could envision. With slide rule in hand, I knew I was ready. After interviewing several national firms, I settled on Rust Engineering in Birmingham. It was close to home, and I knew they were designing the launch gantry for the Saturn 5 moon rocket. What could possibly be more glorious than that?

They hired me without fanfare, and I was on my way. It didn't exactly pan out like I expected. Instead of assigning me to the launch vehicle, they put me in the paper mill division. The office work was okay, but soon it was necessary to spend several weeks on-site at Kimberly Clark in Childersburg.

I bet you think paper mills smell bad from ten miles away. Well, let me assure you, that smell is of no importance. Try spending your days at a mill. The stench gets in your clothing, your hair, your shoes. It is insidious. Once on you, it refuses to leave. Bathing only moderates it. It never fully leaves until you have been away from the mill for at least two weeks.

After spending several years at Rust with intermittent trips to paper mills, it dawned on me that there must be less odoriferous ways to make a living in engineering. So, I changed course. I went into independent design consulting. Which meant I would be doing almost anything, as long as it wasn't a paper mill. That worked out well. I learned how to do building structures for architects and picked up extensive work from civil engineering firms.

The years went by, children grew up, puppies grew old, and I plied my trade with great fervor. Never did get to do a Sears Tower, nor a Superdome, but if you take your magnifying glass with you and look closely at the Auburn Alumni Association building cornerstone plate, you might see my name. The same could be said for the Florida State University College of Engineering and the Florida A&M School of Business.

Suddenly, I was sixty years old and thinking about retirement. Just wasn't having that much fun anymore. Too many incompetent contractors and hungry trial lawyers. But my ultimate decision was made once again, because engineering stinks.

One of my civil engineer clients called to say they had been given the contract to renovate the sewage treatment plant at Fort Rucker. They wanted me involved on an as-

needed basis for evaluating old structures. You don't turn down good people. I told them to count me in.

The project went well for a long time, no great challenges, and no particular unforeseen problems. But then they called and requested a structural inspection of a concrete sewage holding tank built in the 1940s. I was informed that the tank would be pumped dry prior to my arrival on-site. Have you ever noticed that "pumped dry" never is?

I arrived on site to find a 20-foot square by 20-foot deep concrete basin with a ladder to the bottom. And in the bottom was approximately eighteen inches of raw sewage. The plant manager naturally informed me that they could not get any more of the stuff out. He then unceremoniously left, leaving me on my own. Powering up my lantern, I crept through the hatch in the tank top and proceeded down the ladder carefully, studying the condition of the walls as I went. The smell was, shall we say, overwhelming. Toward the bottom, I took great care to keep my new leather boots clear of the goop. However, there were a number of large pipes in my way, and there was one wall I needed to see better. I saw an 8" diameter cast iron pipe I could perhaps stand on to get a better view, but I would need to brace myself off the ladder while holding the lantern with the other hand. The pipe was only about six inches above the sewage surface. I was dubious of the whole thing, but I had to see that wall.

Summoning my courage, I stepped away from the ladder and placed my left foot on the pipe. Something happened I have never seen nor heard of. The pipe vaporized into nothingness. I am not talking about breaking. I am not talking about shattering. I am talking about something was there, and then it was not there, being replaced with nothing more than a small blue cloud of dust.

It seemed the next 1/10 of a second lasted half an hour. There was a sickening awareness of my right hand losing its grip on the ladder, of my right foot sliding off the bottom rung, of gravity doing its inexorable thing. And then reality came crashing back to real time. I dropped some 24 inches to the tank bottom. Ladies and gentlemen, I was literally "in deep shit." I was submerged up to my knees, with splatters up to my waist.

Being totally alone, I had no need to scream or call for help. I just stood there staring at the wall, which by the way, looked fine. Slowly, a coherent, persistent thought reverberated through my head. I had started off my career in stench, and by God, I was ending it in stench.

I made my way over to the ladder and slowly climbed out. Making my way toward the plant control building, I heard the laughter coming from the workers. Despite their guffaws, they helped me strip down and proceeded to pressure wash me from head to foot. When finished they gave me some coveralls to wear home and I solemnly placed my brand new Timberline boots and Levi jeans in the trash.

I told my client the story the next day and informed him I was officially retiring. After all, I had been to the first level of Hell. I had no desire to go further.

As I said, engineering stinks.

Writing Our Lives, Slowly

Jim Rose

I am well into my second semester of “Writing Our Lives,” which is a lifelong learning class. It deals with how to put words on paper such that potential readers can stay awake past the second sentence.

It has recently become clear that our instructors believe that we should write daily in order to hone our skills. This is a real problem for a retired engineer who only shaves once a week.

I tried scheduling writing in the morning, but breakfast and coffee are not finished until 10:30. If I am lucky, a productive trip to the toilet follows. With great relief and lighter feet, I then catch up with daily news and sports, which takes another hour. Mornings are just out of the question.

What about afternoons? Well, that would be fine except that I have to play golf at least three times per week. And there is grocery shopping, house cleaning, laundry, and so on. My wife used to do these things, but Helen Reddy emancipated her with the song, “I Am Woman, I Can Do Anything.” Glenda was never the same after that. Afternoons just don’t work.

I attempted writing a few times in the evening. But I found myself reproducing numerous scripts of *Blue Bloods* and *FBI*. Apparently, I cannot write while the TV is on. Also, my fingers become very uncooperative with my second glass of port.

In addition to the scheduling problem, our instructors request that we come up with something to write about. Having read many of my classmates’ submittals, it is now obvious that I have led a very dull life. That was not accidental. I am very fond of dull. Dull means no surprises. Surprises can be good or bad, which means you have a fifty-fifty chance of being whacked by bad. No thanks. I prefer good old predictable dull. But here is the conundrum. How does one take dull and turn it into interesting? I don’t know.

What you are reading here is my interim solution until I can find a better one. I am writing this at midnight as the neighbor’s idiot dog fights off imaginary intruders. Because I have no subject, I am writing about the art of writing, which is something I know absolutely nothing about.

Maybe I should do like Tuberville and go into politics, where ignorance of the matter at hand is truly appreciated.

The Girl Who Loved Horses

Mary Ann Rygiel

Both of my parents were key people in encouraging my love of reading. When I was a preschooler, my dad read to me as I sat on his lap, leaning against his woolen shirt. He read nursery rhymes and whatever else I asked for. When I began grade school, I loved reading the newspaper, especially the funnies. I went uptown in the late afternoon after school to buy the daily newspaper. Back home, I would lie on the floor with my elbows propping up my upper body. Since my elbows were on the heavily inked funnies, my mother, looking crisp and neat with bobby pins in her hair and wearing one of her homemade aprons while fixing supper, sometimes had to tell me, "Wash your elbows. They have news ink on them." Too much exposure to Li'l Abner and Brenda Starr, Reporter. The beautiful redhead with actual stars in her blue eyes.

By the time I was in third grade, I was reading horse books. Some were illustrated, the Marguerite Henry books, illustrated by Wesley Dennis, like *Album of Horses* and *Misty of Chincoteague*. I began to acquire knowledge of many different types of horses, like American thoroughbred racing horses, Tennessee Walking Horses, Lipizzaner, Shetland ponies, Arabian horses, and mustangs. I also read Walter Farley horse stories, fiction in which a horse played a central part.

My favorite book from this time in my life was *Black Beauty*, by Anna Sewell. The horses in the story had good and then bad owners. The bad owners treated

them cruelly. I was so gripped by the story that I sat in cold bath water reading. When I got to the part where the chestnut horse died, I sobbed. My mother rushed in to see if I had somehow hurt myself, perhaps by falling. This was my inauguration into reader response theory, without calling it that. I felt compassion and sorrow for a fictional animal character that was such an intense emotion that it transported me outside myself and into the realm of the knowledge of innocent suffering. To this day I have the same response of compassionate grief when I learn of someone, human or animal, who is suffering.

In the future I put my love of horses to work by becoming very knowledgeable about American racing, concentrating on the Triple Crown. I could recite the first eight winners, up through Citation in 1948. The other five would come later in my life, when I was not so intensely engaged by horses. I knew statistics about speed for the 1 ¼ mile race, the 1 3/16 race, and the grueling mile and a half. I understood what the quarter pole and eighth pole were, the far turn, and the home stretch. I knew of thrilling stretch duels, and that losses could come by photo finish, noses, heads, and lengths. My favorite jockeys were Eddie Arcaro and Willie Shoemaker, the shoe. I knew the weight the jockeys were required to be and occasionally recognized the silks as the horses rushed around the track. Calumet and Claiborne Farm were familiar

breeding and training grounds. Race horses came in beautiful colors: chestnut, gray, bay, black, palomino, white, and shades of bay like mahogany/bay. They could have white socks or a blaze on their face, which made them more recognizable. My favorite horse of the first eight winners of the Triple Crown was Citation, and my favorite of the next five was Secretariat, also known as Big Red because of his chestnut color. There were near misses, too, like Native Dancer. Large photographs of them prancing were displayed on the walls at Arlington Park in northern Illinois, a place we went occasionally for the nine races held in a Saturday afternoon. A sentimental favorite horse from Triple Crown competition was Silky Sullivan, the come-from-behind horse that became legendary for the victories he did manage to get, and whose name has become synonymous with slow starters who end up winning, at least sometimes.

Native Dancer's loss in the Kentucky Derby illustrates the burden jockeys carry. One sportswriter wrote critically of the jockey when Native Dancer finished second by a head: "he took that colt everywhere on the track except the ladies' room." He also illustrates the affection horses inspire. When the horse lost, people cried. They sent him cards and letters and formed fan clubs. When the popular Silky Sullivan died, his owner, himself recovering from heart surgery, said of the beloved horse, "Silky was a person, a unique person, and

I miss him." He also labeled the horse "a gentleman."

Far in my future with horses was the way D.H. Lawrence described his characters and their relationship to horses and to their own families, as in the strange tale "The Rocking Horse Winner," the story about the child who rode a horse to try to predict to his gambling family which horse to bet on. At my young age, I had no idea of the symbolic meaning Lawrence would give to women as dominating women or to children who rode rocking horses, using a mysterious and suggestive method to gain specialized knowledge about a race's outcome. I simply knew that the beautiful neighbor who had a horse in her barn was named Dolly, wore red lipstick and black riding pants, and was lucky to have that horse, which she let me come close to and look at once.

Little would my senior British Literature classes suspect as I led them through a discussion of "The Rocking Horse Winner" that the path I took to becoming an English teacher originated with dirty elbows from Fearless Fosdick newsprint, transitioned to a love of horses and horse lore, and ultimately a love of reading, theories about reading, and ways of engendering in students a love of reading with the concomitant virtues of compassion and feeling with another in their triumphs and heartaches.



The Color of Blue

Mary Ann Rygiel

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the monks in Ireland saved Western Civilization after the collapse of the Roman Empire brought on by internal Empire corruption and the invasion of waves of barbarian tribes from the Germanic and Scandinavian North, a wintry nadir for Western Civilization. And that they did so by quiet, studious copying of manuscripts and the illustration of them, many so beautiful that they have their own name, as in Lindisfarne Gospels. What, then, to make of an anthropological/archaeological oddity—the discovery of female skeletons from the Middle Ages with Lapis Lazuli in their teeth.

Lapis Lazuli was an expensive, rare coloring from Afghanistan that traveled along the Silk Road from China to the West, and which was used in manuscript illustration, especially for the Virgin's blue mantle. How would women have had access to this pigment? What were they doing with it? Researchers concluded that these women, too, were involved in manuscript illustration.

This was a happy discovery for me. You are wondering why. Fast forward in time to the pandemic shutdown and the collapse of the world economy upon the worldwide invasion of the virus. The pandemic has made me think more clearly about what I can and can't do, what I need to do, what remains to me in time, and what I won't be able to do. It has made clear to me how important writing is as a way of preserving the past and special memories related to it.

In thought, I travel to a women's monastery in Dalheim, Germany, in the period around the time of William the Conqueror. I am working on book illustration. I've been commissioned to make a special manuscript, using a mixture of parchment and silk. Sometimes I lick the hairs of my small paint brush to make it come to a point. I don't use my teeth to grind the pigment into small particles. I use a mortar and pestle, familiar to me from using herbs to season my cooking dishes, too.

In making my color, I need to locate the precise shade, just as the modern paint company, Behr, has many soothing shades of blue, from charismatic sky, to yacht blue, to skinny jeans. These in turn have complementary spinoff colors, like first rain, to blue suede, to sailor's knot, to Rhodes, too garish for the effect I am seeking.

I want something that will be the color of blue roses or blue chrysanthemums, if the Scriptural verse suggests that Our Lady herself performed a miracle of having flowers tumble from her mantle, stained by her mantle and her goodness. Probably she did not within Scriptural time, but perhaps shortly afterwards, when she talked to St. Luke about what she was an eye witness to not so long ago, and still alive in her mother's heart, or when she was taken to Ephesus by St. John. Yes, there would be miracles over time for

those who came to her house, whether they were Greeks who believed in many gods, or Moslems, who sought Mariam's intervention. When time tumbled out of the ancient world to the Medieval and early Modern world, we read in disparate ages of Mary's miraculous apparitions, with roses falling from her mantle, springs of healing water arising, the sun dancing in the sky, all for the purpose of inspiring devotion and healing.

Writing and everything related to it, from scribes at court and religious scribes to women novelists, is significant to Western civilization. Women secretaries, especially those who were trained to use shorthand and take shorthand dictation, are not just machines or calculators, as the women earlier in the twentieth century were called, the ones who did mathematical calculations in support of scientific projects. Women secretaries are human beings with thoughts and realizations and relationships they treasure.

In Jane Austen's autumnal novel *Persuasion*, central figure Anne Elliot is able to resolve her romantic heartache by talking persuasively to Captain Harville about women's constancy in love, while being overheard by her one-time and still much loved Captain Wentworth, who sits silently writing a letter, ostensibly a naval letter, but in reality a letter to Anne, declaring his continuing love for her.

What verse am I illustrating? And Mary said, "Be it done unto me according to thy word." Out of her blue mantle falls a blessing unto those who seek, not the rhetorical violence of the invaders, but mercy and love, steadfastness and devotion.



I have long recognized the power of other people's stories to help us to see our own lives in new ways. One story may speak to a yearning or discontent you may be familiar with; another may help focus your rising sense of optimism and wellbeing.

– Jane Pauley, *Your Life is Calling*

Favorite Flavors

Mary Ann Rygiel

Vanilla. Coffee. Chocolate. Rosemary. Lemon/Citrus. Raspberry. Strawberry. Blueberry. Brown Sugar. Nuts. Mushrooms. Onion. Garlic. Cream Reduction. Wine Reduction. All of these are flavors or ingredients I have worked with in the kitchen. Or they are ways of concentrating flavors. Of these, my favorites are the first two.

Vanilla has gotten an unwarranted bad reputation as something plain, dull, uninflected. From the Internet we read that “when a person is described as vanilla, it means he or she “adds nothing to the party, or the office, from a personality perspective.” In a G-rated essay (would that be called vanilla, too?), I can’t even quote what the Urban Dictionary says about vanilla. Haagen-Dazs vanilla ice cream, made with just five ingredients, is a fine accompaniment to any cake, cookie, pie, fruit crisp, or brownie. It can be blended into a smoothie. It can stand by itself in proud isolation in a low sherbet glass. It can sit nestled by a half banana on each side, chocolate syrup, and whipping cream in a banana split. It can make the base of a Black and White or a root beer float. A teaspoon—or more—of vanilla is a necessary flavoring in many recipes. Imagine the Mexican Wedding Cake cookie recipe by King Arthur flour found online without vanilla flavoring. In the place of one teaspoon, I use a hearty tablespoon in the recipe, reduce the almond flavoring to a negligible ¼ teaspoon, and roll the little baked balls in fine grain powdered sugar three times instead of the mandated one or two times, and they are a delectable treat with a cup of coffee.

Coffee, which has been waiting for its cue to make an entrance, may now safely do so, with no fear of spilling it. Think of the many ways you can drink coffee, from morning to evening. In the morning, you may prefer a light breakfast blend. I can remember my parents opening cans of Maxwell House coffee, with the aluminum lid, so many times. When the can was opened, an aromatic burst of concentrated coffee smell filled our small kitchen and made the scene more joyous. Its slogan was as memorable as the G.E. slogan of “Progress Is Our Only Product.” Maxwell House’s slogan was “Good to the Last Drop.” Could it be possible that this slogan originated with Teddy Roosevelt? At one time, the company claimed him as the originator of the statement. Later in the day, you may want a darker roast, with its energy impact tempered by cream and sugar. If you are having company in the evening, you may want an Irish coffee or its cousin, a Kahlua coffee.

Whenever we traveled, we always had a breakfast, whether the hotel offered a free breakfast, or, as was the case with some lodgings in France, Spain, or Italy, we would walk down the block to a brasserie for a café, a fresh-squeezed orange juice, and a croissant, which would be buttery and flakey at the same time, or other pastry. We made sure we stood at the counter rather than sitting down, because of the difference in price. We often saw one young man or another, whose form was perfect for European fit shirt and pants, order a small alcoholic drink and an espresso, drink down both quickly, and turn and leave on shoes with pointed toes and an elevated heel. We were always recognizable as tourists

because of our own non-European fit forms and our rounded shoe toes. The coffee was our fuel for a day of touring, walking, talking, eating, and sight-seeing, crowding onto buses, and running down steps to catch a metro.

In a recent *60 Minutes* interview, Dr. Anthony Fauci was shown in film from a 2016 interview cooking rigatoni and Italian sausage and toasting his wife “Salut!” I have not even had a chance to discuss the wonderful concentration of flavors that results from a cream or wine reduction—that can come in a future essay on flavors—for now I take my lead from Dr. Fauci, my most trusted TV doctor. “Salut” to Denny Rygiel, “Salut” to Terry Ley, and “Salut” to members of OLLI Writing Our Lives Fall 2020. Merry Fall, and a good evening to all!



Writers live twice. They go along with their regular life...But there's another part of them that they have been training. The one that lives everything a second time. That sits down and sees their life again and goes over it. Looks at the texture and details.

– Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

Sad Mourning Doves

Steve Schmidt

“The mourning doves sure sound sad this morning,” my mother said as she poured coffee for the branding crew on our cattle ranch in Idaho.

I remember the morning very vividly every time I hear the sound of a mourning dove. I was fifteen years old. It was early May—branding time on the ranch. A crew from the Home Ranch came up to the 8-Mile Ranch to help with the branding. They arrived early in the morning, around 7:00 a.m., and Mom had breakfast ready for them when they finished setting up the branding equipment.

We had ranch hands at two ranches that were about twenty miles apart in east-central Idaho in the Beaverhead mountains near the Idaho/Montana border. Everyone referred to the lower ranch (lower elevation) as the “Home Ranch” because it was the original homestead place, and the upper ranch (6,000 feet elevation) where I grew up was called “Little 8-Mile” in reference to the name of the creek and canyon where it was situated. The Home Ranch was operated by my mother’s brother, Uncle Steve, and 8-Mile by my parents.

Spring was a busy time on the ranch. Calving season was just over; the calves needed to be branded before being trailed to the summer range; and cows and calves needed to be fed hay every day. Selected fields needed to be plowed and grain planted as part of crop rotation; irrigation ditches needed maintenance and headgates repaired before irrigation season started. Fences that were damaged by heavy winter snow needed to be fixed. Ranch hands at both ranches were busy with these spring jobs.

Snow still was clearly visible in the upper elevations of the surrounding mountains. It was a beautiful, sunny spring morning. Only a light jacket was needed. Birds were singing everywhere, flowers were starting to bloom, and the air had a fresh, clean smell. Spring had arrived.

It was normal that the Home Ranch branding would be done first, and three of its crew, including my uncle, then would bring the branding equipment to 8-Mile to help brand our calves. On this morning, the 8-Mile crew had herded the cows and calves into the corrals before breakfast and separated the calves into the branding pen so we could get an early start.

The Home Ranch crew joined our 8-Mile crew for breakfast. The men were exchanging tales and talking about the day ahead. Mom was busy pouring coffee, keeping dishes filled, and occasionally joining in the conversation. Out of nowhere, Mom said, “The mourning doves sure sound sad this morning.”

A few minutes later Mom reiterated, “The doves are so sad today.”

The crew continued their lively conversation, and then again Mom said in a distressed voice, “I can’t get over how sad the doves are.”

“OK, Mom, we heard you,” I’m thinking. “That’s why they are called *mourning* doves.”

Less than an hour after branding started, I looked up and saw Dr. Blackadar, our family doctor, standing on the gate looking into the corral. My uncle went over to greet Dr. Blackadar. He had driven over an hour from town to the ranch to tell us that my grandmother had passed away unexpectedly in Oakland where she was visiting her sister. She was only 59 years old.

Mom was right. The doves were sad that morning.



When you sell a person a book you don't just sell twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell a whole new life. Love and friendship and humor and ships at sea by night—there's all heaven and earth in a book, a real book.

– Christopher Morley, *The Haunted Bookshop*

What Things Do You Think You Cannot Live Without?

Char Warren

Hmm. What do I think I cannot live without? Good question! To me these four F- words come to mind: first, faith; second, family; third, friends; and fourth, food.

First, I put my faith in God, as I think that that is where He belongs, regardless of one's religious preference.

Second is my family, starting with my unbelievable parents and three sisters; but Toby, my soulmate for 55 years of marriage, our three kids and four grandkids are way up there in my heart!

Third are my amazing close friends. I don't know how anybody lives without friends! Through my 23 years of eight back surgeries, four hip surgeries, and two eye surgeries, I don't know what we would have done without our precious friends!

Poor Toby has had to lift me up out of bed, sit me up, and support me to get me to the bathroom and back, even holding me up in the shower, showering me, while I held on to him, removing my bandages, drying me off, putting on fresh bandages, and putting a clean nightgown on me, bandaging up my stitches, and getting me back into bed and covering me up. I don't know who was more exhausted after that routine—him or me!

Three of our close friends—Kathy Smith, Sally Ingalls, and Mary O'Connell—were all RN's and would take turns coming to sit with me, to make sure I was

keeping track of my meds (which I always wrote down on a pad); answer the phones; record all calls, the names of visitors, and the meals brought to us while those darn meds knocked me out in a deep sleep. As soon as they or Toby would get me up to walk a few steps with my walker, the bandages that poor Toby put on my back would fall off, leaving a trail that Little Red Riding Hood could follow to find me! They offered to do the bandages for him, and I think he and I were both relieved!

Dora James, Alicia Gimenez, my Cursillo sisters, and many other devoted friends who are all like family to us, came and offered to sit with me. Our children live in Louisiana and DC, and are all working, and two have children and can't be here, but for short visits. All three of our kids, Emma, our oldest granddaughter, and Monty, our first-born, slipped in for a surprise visit on Mother's Day Weekend! I thought I would go into shock!

Stef, our daughter, and Takashi, our son-in-law, flew in from DC one weekend and walked in, to my complete surprise! Tucker, our youngest son, flew in from working in Seattle, and I couldn't stop crying and laughing and hugging him, until Toby said, "Would you two stop crying, laughing, and hugging before Tuck has to fly back to Seattle before I get to visit with him, too?" All three visits were SUPER and therapeutic! Each wanted to take us to dinner or order dinner for us, but I couldn't go anywhere, and I couldn't eat more than two or three bites, as I had

no appetite, and meds nauseated me. All of them are excellent cooks (Takashi is a trained chef), so they cooked for us—fantastic meals!

My fourth favorite, food, may seem a funny choice, but if you know me, you know that there is no place where I am happier than in my kitchen, as cooking and entertaining are my passions! Toby calls my kitchen my Laboratory, as I like to make up recipes and try them out on friends and family. I am happiest in my kitchen, with country music blaring on

the computer, me dancing with my mop or broom, and the scent of onions and garlic cooking on the stove getting ready for my “creation” of the day! My outfit in the kitchen is very important to me, so when I get up in the morning, I grab one apron from the dozens in my apron collection and put it on over my nightgown, whether I am cooking or not!

Considering all of the above, and the love expressed by so many in so many ways, I LOVE MY LIFE!!



Rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in light of her current knowledge.

– Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir*

What Famous or Well-Known People Have I Encountered in Real Life?

Char Warren

I have met several famous people in the entertainment world, but I don't really know them. I have met baseball manager Tony LaRussa several times, and Sam Elliott, one of my favorite actors, who was my lunch partner at Fort Benning. I have also spoken on the phone to him and his actress wife, Katherine Ross, known for her role in the movie *The Graduate*. I have met Mel Gibson, Joe Galloway, Sgt. Major Bennie Atkins, and several survivors of the Viet Nam War. My favorite is Lt. General Hal G. Moore, best known as the author of several books and for his time in Ia Drang, the first major battle of the war in Viet Nam.

After his wife Julie died, Hal Moore felt lost, and was depressed, as he felt he should have been the first to go. Toby told him that God wasn't finished with him yet, and he would help him fulfill whatever life dealt him. We took care of him for eight years. He became our closest friend, and we were blest to know him.

Every afternoon at 5:30, he called for us to go over and have a cocktail with him, as he was missing Julie so much. Toby went over, sat at his feet, and talked about his successful military life after graduating from West Point. I sent dinner to him every night for eight years, or he came over to eat dinner here. He had Toby make all of his travel plans and help him write all of his speeches. He wouldn't make a move without Toby with him. Toby had to take him to all doctor appointments, eye appointments, and anywhere he had to go. He was a stern but loving person once you got to know him.

The first time he agreed to come over to dinner, I asked him what time he preferred to come over. He chose 5:00 p.m. I had his wine poured and hors d'oeuvres ready, and the three of us were having a great time. All of a sudden, he said, "Char, we have to eat now, as my family has a conference call every Sunday night at 6:00 p.m." (or 1800 hours, as he said). I put my hand on my hip and said, to Toby's horror, "Gen. Moore, you may be a three-star general to everyone, but in my house, I am a four-star general! You didn't tell me that we would have to scarf down our dinner for a phone call. You have a choice to make. You can call your family and schedule your call later, or you can go home hungry. The rice won't be ready until 6:00, and I have to finish the salad." While Toby was probably hyperventilating, Hal calmly called each child and set the call up for later. I poured him another glass of wine, and I went about my business while he and Toby visited.

Toby apologized for my directness, and Gen. Moore laughed and said I was refreshing, as everyone does what he tells them to do, and nobody has ever challenged him! I guess I was the first, but I did what I needed to do. He was amused, and I am still not sorry!

Toby has written a small book, *A General's Spiritual Journey*, which sold over 10,000 copies, from which all profits were given to a fund for Hal's soldiers and survivors or

families of the Viet Nam Battle in Ia Drang.

A couple of years later, Toby wrote *A Tender Warrior*, telling of Hal's letters and battles written during that time. We had a special 87th birthday party for Hal at St. Michael's Parish Hall. I did all of the cooking! What a job! I must have been crazy, but everyone seemed to enjoy the party, especially Hal, as Toby invited a lot of very influential people who flew in for the event. Unfortunately, Mel Gibson and Sam Elliott both were making movies and couldn't attend. Hal's whole family, including grandchildren were invited. It was quite a night!



Memory is selective and by nature faulty. That statement is probably doubly true for my memory. Add to that my penchant for exaggeration and the fact that I have changed some of the names for obvious reasons, and you have a memoir that may not stand up to close historical scrutiny. So be it.

– Chris Crutcher, King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography

My Favorite High School Teacher

Charlotte Warren

At Opelousas High School, I had a wonderful teacher, Mr. Michael Genovese, who was either loved or hated by his students. Mr. G was a very strict teacher, one who expected you to do your best, complete your homework, and be prepared to pay attention. If you interrupted his class, he would send you to the principal's office, and nobody wanted to go there! He was from New York, and we all wondered if he was related to the Genovese Mafia family. Although he denied it, we never knew for sure.

He had always wanted to be a medical doctor, but he had to drop out of med school because of back-and-related health problems. He was a genius at science, one of my favorite subjects. I was always an overachiever and was never satisfied if I didn't set the curve on tests, or got only an A, and not an A-plus! Many of my fellow students thought I was his "pet," because if someone that he called on couldn't answer the question, he'd turn to me and say, "Chox [short for my name, Charlotte Cox], you answer it." That was uncomfortable to me, as I am sure the other students were jealous of my special relationship with him and thought I was his "pet."

Some of the guys called him "Donut," as he was losing his hair in the back and on top, with just a fringe of hair around the top of his head, rather like a proverbial monk.

He had an incredible singing voice and put together a choir to sing patriotic songs before our assemblies. I love to sing, and I usually remember the words to every song I have ever loved for the last seventy years, but I sing like a croaking frog! Once after Mass, our kids told me I should not be singing aloud at church with the congregation but should just lip-sync! I said, "All singing is beautiful noise to the Lord." They said, "No, Mom. Yours is just noise!"

He had promised Toby and me to sing at our wedding in 1965, but he had a heart attack the week before and had to back out. We were so disappointed.

When we went home for a visit after Monty was born, Mr. G held him lovingly and seemed so pleased that I wanted to show him our first-born.

Every teacher should be as caring, inspirational, and encouraging to their students as he was to me. He made me feel like I could do anything, should never quit, and should believe in myself. What an incredible man, role model, and teacher he was! Everyone should be as blest as I was to have him!

Piano Lessons

Bill Wilson

There are two versions of why I never got piano lessons. I didn't know that until about sixty years after the fact. That's a long time between chromatic scales! My version, obviously the correct one, went like this:

I was a little kid in maybe the second or third grade. We had moved into a house on Riverside Drive in Wantagh, Long Island. Much to my surprise, a battle-scarred upright piano graced the living room. This awesome instrument was still playable after a manner, although some of the strings seemed badly out of tune.

The youngest child and only boy in the family, I often amused myself with picking out notes on the piano. Some of my plinkings even resembled tunes. My sisters must have heard that piano lessons were a possibility. I certainly hadn't until they told me. Young as I was, my fascination with music had blossomed early. When I understood that someone might be willing to turn my plinking into melodies, my interest perked up. If one can salivate in the key of C major, that was me—ready and willing to have one of the nuns at St. Barnabas school introduce me to the mystical world of sharps, flats, keys, and tempos. I was ready. I was willing. I was prepared to find how able I might be.

Dad, a recently retired New York City detective, and the sole breadwinner at the point in our lives, would be the final arbiter, the decision-maker, the custodian of the keys to the musical kingdom. He was not parsimonious. But the tail-end of what we later called the Great Depression did not afford civil servants my by way of disposable income. Things would improve in a year or two, as the War increased family earnings by putting battalions of Rosie the Riveters on the assembly lines. My mom was one such new earner heading off to her job painting Republic Thunderbolts silver as they poured off the assembly lines to head for the war in the Pacific. That, however, is another tale that had nothing to do with my musical aspirations.

I broached the idea of lessons to Mom. She broached the topic to Dad. The next day I entered the living room in horror to see my father chopping my precious musical instrument into firewood. So ended my burgeoning journey into the world of Chopin, Liszt, and Hoagy Charmichael.

That was my story. It was not the version my older sister, Marguerite, served up sixty years later when I flew to Los Angeles so she and I could share a birthday. At a local bistro, sharing a pizza to the tunes of a piano bar, when I happened to mention my regrets that I never got to learn the piano because Dad had demolished my prized instrument, my big sister immediately contradicted me. The subordinate status of kid brothers dies hard, although I did make a feeble attempt to assert the validity of my claim on the piano those many years ago.

"Not so," Margie reiterated. "That's not at all how it happened." With all the vigor and overlordship siblings possess by being higher in the genetic pecking order, she

proceeded to tout her “correct” version of the tale. True, we had moved into a house with a piano. True, I liked to pick out notes and an occasional tune, if only by accident. True, Dad did turn the piano into kindling after I had requested lessons. That is the point at which my account diverged from Marguerite’s.

My big sister made it quite clear that post hoc is not always propter hoc: That the demise of the piano followed my asking for lessons did not mean that the request had precipitated the axeman’s visit. The two events were mere coincidences, not cause and effect.

Secondly, this bossy older sibling explained in the simplest terms to her still idiot kid brother, that it was we kids—my two older sisters and I—who had demurred at the thought of piano lessons. “The sisters at the school offered to give us lessons,” she explained to the youngest sibling whom she obviously still considered a certified dolt. “I think they were offering the lessons for free, since we didn’t have much money at the time. It was we three kids who turned the offer down. I don’t remember why.”

Scout’s honor, I had never heard that version of the story before. Being a lover of creative non-fiction and the American short story, I rejected Margie’s version out of hand. I made the huge mental shift most folks make when confronted with unacceptable facts. I flatly denied her version. Since my sister passed to her eternal reward not too long after my visit, I alone am left to tell the tale. Being literally the last man standing, I own the franchise. True, revised and expanded, or dead false, my version is the only version. As the Bard of Margaritaville so ably sang: “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

After all, who can gainsay my tale?



Annie's Piano Room

Bill Wilson

Since moving to Auburn in November 2016, my living arrangements have been totally pedestrian. Unless one lives in the Dakota, as did John and Yoko, or in Trump Tower with its solid gold faucets, most apartments offer little to excite the imagination. So, for this essay, I will revert to my home in West Virginia. There, my piano room—the beautiful space in which I housed my prized possession—was something else indeed. I owe it all to my late wife, Annie.

Annie liked to build. Our retirement home in West Virginia's The Woods golf community grew from 1600 square feet to 3200 square feet over the course of fourteen years. Maybe Annie had been a pharaoh in an earlier life. Maybe she was channeling Percival Christopher Wren. Whatever her motives, Annie liked to build.

Each time I challenged her ability to pay for her expansionist inclinations, she shut me down with, "Don't worry. I already have the money." Before her personal quest for *lebensraum* was half done, I learned to stop challenging my wife, the aspiring developer. To survive and thrive in a marriage, one learns not to pick wars one cannot win.

A two-car garage was followed by a porch that became a TV room that necessitated a new porch. When that porch became a TV room so that the former TV room could mutate into a dining room, we built our third and final porch before the next summer solstice brightened the night. We had finally run

out of room to grow. I heaved a sigh of relief.

Then, the walls came tumbling down—or up, in this case. And it was my fault. At retirement (somewhere between porch number two and porch number three) I acquired a beautiful baby grand piano and started lessons. In six years, I had proudly advanced to about the skill level of a ten-year-old. It was this skill—or lack thereof—that did me in. Initially, the piano sat grandly in our great room within sight and earshot of Annie, whose customary perch was at the kitchen counter in one corner of the room. (The kitchen area had undergone its own metamorphosis, but thereon hangs another tale.)

As I dutifully practiced the tremolo portion of the "Star Spangled Banner," Annie's minimal taste for music and even more minimal tolerance for bad music finally gave out. "That's it!" she suggested at dinner one evening. "We're going to build a room for your piano. I need to get you and that thing as far away from me as possible!"

The saving grace in all this was that I got to work with the builder on the design of the new music room. As the *piece de resistance* of our building program evolved, we learned that the plat's footprint could not accommodate the dimensions I had requested. Our house had grown so large that we could no longer fit an additional room on our half-acre lot.

"What will we do?" I asked Ed, our contractor.

“We need to make the TV room (originally porch number two) shorter. I’ll take ten feet off that room,” he replied with his usual aplomb.

“How?”

“I’ll do it with this,” he said, hefting an industrial-grade sabre saw. And he did.

Months and many dollars later, the 30-by-18-foot music salon was completed. My shiny Baldwin baby grand, in all its mahogany glory, perched serenely in its new quarters. Even the builder, who had done so much work for us that he was almost a family member, declared that this was the nicest room he had ever built. He proudly asked our permission to show prospective clients the piano’s new digs.

Annie, the fiscal watchdog in our domestic partnership, swallowed hard when the final reckoning came due. The

cost was large enough to cover the bill for at least a couple of Defense Department toilet seats.

“Why was this room so expensive?” asked Annie, who had not previously batted an eye over the price tag of three screened porches, a garage, a renovated guest bathroom, new windows and a roof full of thirty-five-year, architectural-grade shingles. To her credit, neither did Annie lay the blame at my door, although she well might have. After all, it was I who specified the dimensions of my new odeon.

Ed smiled down on Annie from his six-foot-four height. His only reply, when he made it, did not attempt to justify the cost by reviewing each line item in his multi-page proposal. He simply smiled and said, “Anne, people build houses this size.”



But the author does not only write when he is at his desk; he writes all day long, when he is thinking, when he is reading, when he is experiencing; everything he sees and feels is significant to his purpose and, consciously or unconsciously, he is...storing and making over his impressions.

– W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*

Ann Gephart—Who Lifted Me Up

Bill Wilson

My wife Annie had already been medevaced to the trauma center in Morgantown when my friend Ann Gephart entered the picture. Annie was badly injured. I was numb. I needed to get from Martinsburg to Ruby Memorial Hospital in Morgantown, two hours away. My thoughts were muddled, my emotions scrambled. What to do? Who could help?

One friend would have taken me, but he was dealing with his own wife's serious medical condition. He could not leave her side. Two other friends lived too far away—one, in Arlington, Virginia; the other, in Charlottesville. Then I thought of Ann. She was my wife's close friend as well as mine. Her husband, undergoing radiation treatment for throat cancer, was also a close friend, but he was in no shape for a grueling, emotion-loaded drive through the hills of Maryland and West Virginia.

Ann was the choice. An experienced nurse, like my own Annie, Ann Gephart had managed the neonatal critical-care unit at Sibley Hospital in Washington, D. C. In retirement, Ann was a rock in any storm, the go-to friend in any crisis for the residents at The Woods retirement community, as was my own Annie. I had seen both women deal with more than one emergency competently, efficiently, and effectively.

I hate to ask for favors, but I needed a big assist in a crisis beyond my strength or wisdom. I couldn't hesitate. I didn't give even a thought to what Ann's response might be. I never doubted that she would say yes.

"Annie's been in an accident. I need to get to Morgantown, and I don't trust myself to drive. Can you take me?"

Within minutes, Ann's Subaru Outback pulled into my driveway. I climbed aboard, and we headed west through the beautiful West Virginia and Maryland countryside. The added blessing in having Ann with me was that she understood medical jargon; she was comfortable in hospitals and with medical personnel; beeping machines and blinking lights didn't scare her. I was out of my depth. She was my lifejacket.

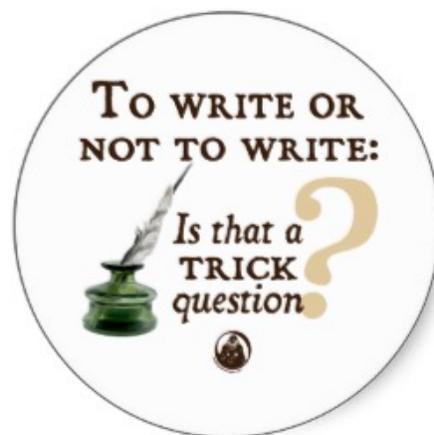
Four times, Ann hauled me back and forth to Morgantown. I was slowly deteriorating into numbness and pain such as I had never felt. Ann was a rock. Only months later, after Annie's funeral, did I realize the price Ann had paid for those trips. When I would suddenly begin weeping uncontrollably, my friend stoically eyed the road, guiding us safely to and from our sad destination.

When the ordeal was over, I asked Ann how she had managed to get us both through this catastrophe while dealing with her own emotions about Annie's fatal accident and Ron's cancer treatments. "I just kept on doing what I was doing," she said in her laconic Kansas farm girl's voice.

No words, no act of gratitude can describe the gift of friendship Ann Gephart had given me during the most painful period of my life. No words or acts of gratitude will ever convey my appreciation of the friendship I was given.

Sometimes, words cannot capture the gift of kindness a true friend bestows on us. Writer Henri Nouwen put it this way: “The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing...not healing, not curing...that is a friend who cares.”

In my darkest hour, I was blessed to have such a friend.



Memoirists who lack empathy produce flat, self-heralding stuff....They demonstrate no skill for listening, no eye for nuance, no tolerance for opposing points of view....They fail to speak to the ceaseless tug and release, tug and release that lives at the biological, philosophical, and relational heart of life itself. To write without empathy is to drone; it is to lecture; it is to be the only person talking in a crowded room. It is to accuse, and it is, therefore, not memoir.

– Beth Kephart, *Handling the Truth*

A Fantastical Story

Ralph Womer, Jr.

Many years ago in a small village in southeast Alabama, it came to the attention of the town's folk that the method of exterminating stray dogs was to have them captured and taken to the city pound, where, after the seven days that were allotted for the potential owners to claim them, they would be eliminated. It seems that the story got out that the method of elimination was to have them used as target practice by the police officers, thus serving two purposes, the decrease in the stray dog population and the increase in the ballistic accuracy of the police force. It seemed a logical, if not at all humane, solution to the problem.

I don't know just how true this story was, but it served to put the city on notice that this solution was unacceptable to the general populace of the town. The city decided to enlist the help of the local veterinarians, who numbered three at the time, to devise a better solution to the stray dog population. I tell you this backstory as I was one in the veterinary trio enlisted for this task, and so you will understand how I became involved in the truly fantastical story I am about to relate.

It was decided that each veterinarian would be on call for euthanasia of the strays for one week at a time and would go to the impoundment area and administer a lethal dose of an approved barbiturate solution to each animal while a handler would gently restrain and calm the animal. You must understand that while a veterinarian is the best suited for the task, it is one which they find extremely distasteful. Ending the suffering of a terminally ill pet is one thing, but administering death to a healthy, sentient being is quite another. Each time I would do this procedure, I would silently curse the dogs' owners and wish that they were here to witness this travesty, but my feelings on pet overpopulation is not within the scope of this tale.

On one such occasion, I was called to the holding area of the local pound to help capture a black cocker spaniel mix, appropriately named Blackie, that kept eluding the attendants. He was housed in an indoor pen which had an outdoor run. He would not go inside where it would have been easier to corner him, and every time they got close enough to him in the run, he would snarl and attack them. They asked me to bring a tranquilizer gun to sedate him, but I had another plan.

At this point, I have to say that it is difficult for a man of science to admit the following. Indeed, it is difficult to believe in anything that has no basis in scientific fact, God excepted. However, I had been toying with visualization techniques for some time. I knew that to hit a good golf shot it always helped to visualize the outcome of the shot and by some means that would transfer to the body to produce it. I had even used this to "see" the outcome of surgeries and medical treatments, and it seemed to work. These were all

successes that could be explained by perhaps giving me confidence and thereby influencing the outcome, but now I was about to put this theory to a test over which I had no control.

I asked the attendants to leave me alone inside the building with the cage door open, while the cocker was in the run. I sat, partially inside the cage, and meditated. In my mind, I saw Blackie coming inside and placing his head on my lap. I never said a word to him, but in my mind, I promised that no harm would come to him if he came inside and let me put a leash on him. After a few minutes with my eyes shut, I opened them to see him standing in the doorway to the run. I closed my eyes again and continued to visualize him in my lap, and I repeated my promise to him. In another several minutes I felt his warm head in my lap. I gently stroked his ears and opened my eyes to see a beautiful pair of sad, but expectant, brown eyes staring back at me. I placed the blue ski rope leash over his head and asked him if he wanted to go with me. He allowed me to rise, and we walked to my car, leaving behind a group of open-mouthed attendants standing in the doorway. I found him a home where he lived out his life being loved and cared for, and I was privileged to visit him on many occasions.

I don't attempt to explain how this worked. Some have said that being excited around animals will excite them and the reverse may be true that being calm tends to calm them. We may exude pheromones during meditation similar to, but opposite of, the "fear" pheromones released during anxiety. Whatever happened that day made me a firm believer in the ability to communicate with animals in a "silent" manner, and I have used it for many years.

I am reminded of the old saying that "seeing is believing," but I am now inclined to think that perhaps the reverse is true, and you need to believe it to see it!



The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence...I urge you not to count on the reader to stick around. He is a fidgety fellow who wants to know—very soon—what's in it for him.

– William Zinsser, On Writing Well

Take Your Lessons in Life Where You Find Them

Ralph Womer, Jr.

When I bought the two recap tires from the now defunct OK Rubber Welders store in my Birmingham suburb of Center Point, I fully planned on making the four monthly payments that the store owner had graciously extended to me. However, being a high school senior who, through a series of unfortunate events, had just lost his job as a stock boy at the local V. J. Elmore Variety Store and who currently had no viable source of income, I had fallen in arrears on those payments.

Needless to say, I was embarrassed by my current situation and found ways not to drive by their store. I parked my car in a nearby lot and rode the school bus to and from school each day. On a Friday afternoon, I was anxious to get home after school and start the weekend I had been looking forward to all week. I would sleep in Saturday morning, have a late breakfast, and watch football games on TV in the afternoon. However, when I arrived at my parked car, my plans took a sudden detour. The front end was jacked up and sitting on concrete blocks, and my new front tires, wheels included, were missing. Fortunately, I saw all of this before I tried to back the car out of its space. There was a piece of notebook paper stuck under the windshield wiper on the driver's side.

With a sense of foreboding, I slowly unfolded the paper and read the handwritten note. A simple one-line message greeted me: "If you'd like your wheels back, come see me at the shop." It was unsigned, but I pretty much knew who had written it and the "shop" was

only a block away. As there were few other options, I proceeded, virtually "hat in hand" to meet my "executioner."

Mr. Jones, the owner of the store, was a man in his mid- to late forties as estimated by a seventeen-year-old. He had thinning hair and a bit of a belly, but he had a warm and friendly face.

"Did you have a good week at school?" he asked rhetorically, as he saw me come around the corner of the building.

"Hmm," I mumbled, "I, uh, I got your note," I continued, too embarrassed to say anything else.

"I have a deal for you," he said. "I know that you had planned to pay for those tires, but something must have come up in the meantime."

"I, uh, lost my job," I whimpered.

"So I heard," he went on without an explanation of how he had come by that information. "Here is what I have in mind. I could use some help around here this weekend and maybe next. If you can put in enough hours working for me, I'll consider the tires paid in full."

With little recourse, I watched my sleep-in and ball games drop by the wayside, and I agreed to start immediately if he needed me now.

"In the morning will be soon enough," he said. "Be here at 8:00 and we'll start you off learning about the tire business."

“Yes sir, thank you, sir.” I said and quickly walked out the door, but before the door could hit me in the butt, I heard him ask, “How do you plan to get home?”

“Walk, I guess.”

“That won’t be necessary. Your wheels are inside the bay door and I left the lug nuts on the bolts. Let’s go get them and I’ll help you.” With that he led me to the tires and picking up one, said, “Grab the other one and we’ll get started on your first lesson.” I picked it up and started toward the car, but I had to disagree with him. I think I had already learned my first lesson.

Bright and early the next morning, I was at the garage, wearing old blue jeans and a pretty worn tee shirt I had been advised to wear as I would be getting soiled during the day. I quickly learned how to use a pneumatic torque wrench to rapidly remove lug nuts, unlike the manual one I had used the day before to reattach my own wheels. I was then introduced to a tire changer that pulled first one side of the tire and then the other loose from the rim. The new tires were replaced in reverse order with the innertube inserted and the inflation valve lines up with the hole in the wheel hub. Air was slowly put into the innertube until the tire popped into place. Then the tire was inflated to its proper pressure. Tubeless tires had been introduced by then, but since all our work was with recaps, I never saw any.

This procedure was repeated all morning with very little time to take a break. By lunch time my back was beginning to show the strain. My new boss hadn’t said much after he showed me how to do the first couple of tires, but around twelve o’clock, he asked me, “Do

you like pickle and pimento loaf sandwiches?” I could have eaten a horse by then and answered that I did. He sent one of the other workers out for the food and when he came back and handed me the sandwich and a Dr. Pepper he had retrieved from a machine he had in the waiting room, I asked him how much I owed him. “You have already earned it,” he said. It was one of the best sandwiches I have ever eaten, even if I did still have some grease and the smell of waterless soap on my hands.

The remainder of the day went about the same as the morning, and by quitting time I was ready to go home, shower, and get the sleep I had missed that morning.

The next Saturday I arrived even earlier, ready to get started. We were even busier than the previous Saturday, but I didn’t mind. The hard work was enjoyable and self-affirming. At lunch I was looking forward to another pickle and pimento loaf sandwich, but Mr. Jones arrived with a piece of paper in his hand and handed it to me. It was the note I had signed with a Paid in Full stamp on it.

“You don’t need to work the rest of the day,” he said. “Why don’t you go enjoy the rest of the weekend?”

With some reluctance, I took the paper, thanked him, and started to turn to leave. “One more thing,” he interrupted, “if you ever find yourself in this fix again, remember to go and explain your situation. I think you will find that most people are understanding and will give you a chance to make things right.”

“I will,” I said and thanked him again for everything he had given me. As the year unfolded, I was able to go by the shop several more times and volunteer

some help in the afternoons, but after I graduated and went off to college I never saw Mr. Jones again, and on one trip home several years later I noticed that the old shop had closed and a new store was being built there.

I can only hope that he knew that his life lesson lived on in me and that on more than one occasion, I was able to pay

it forward to others who found themselves in that same situation. I still shudder a bit when I smell the rubber of new tires, and I have one other regret from that episode in my life.

I never did get that second pimento loaf sandwich.



Hymn Book: A Collection of Hymns

Gail McCullers

My hymn book tells my secrets,
Beginning with Larry, Kenneth, Jeffrey, Jim;
Then, Bill, Wayne, Bucky and Jack.
Next came Carl, Dale, Harlin, Charlie.
Don't forget Red, Curtis, Kerry, George!
1960, got married, hymn book disappears.